

PART III

PRECURSORS TO
GOVERNANCE

CHAPTER 5

PRESIDENTIAL
TRANSITIONS

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TRANSITIONS of the presidency in the United States involve the legitimacy of the change in leadership as well as effectiveness of the government, particularly when one political party takes control from the opposing party. Thus, most scholarship on presidential transitions focuses on the test of democratic succession during party turnover transitions. This essay first examines the development and increasing complexity of the transition of the presidency in the second half of the twentieth century. The following section analyzes the key elements of a successful transition and suggests questions that future scholars might address. The final section offers possible directions for future scholars.

In order to study presidential transitions, one must first define them, and different scholars have used different criteria. In the narrowest sense, President Eisenhower held that there was really not a transition between administrations, but merely a transfer of power at noon on inauguration day (Henry 1961, 213). The more conventional narrow definition holds that a transition begins when the outcome of the election is determined and ends at noon on January 20, when the new president takes the oath of office. Charles O. Jones takes perhaps the most expansive approach, arguing that “the transition begins when a person decides to seek the presidency” (Jones 1998, 5). Although the conduct of a transition depends importantly, as Jones maintains, upon the candidate, transitions are also affected by the anticipation of a possible change of administration by both political appointees and members of the career services.

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Most scholars adopt the widely accepted bounds of transition as extending from about six months before the election to six months after inauguration. The governmental dynamics of a possible change in government begin well before election day. In the last few months before an election, new policy initiatives in the federal bureaucracy begin to decrease, as political appointees start to think about their careers after government, should the incumbent not be returned to office, and high-level career public servants calculate how their potential new masters will perceive them. Harrison Wellford, who worked on President Carter's transitions in 1976–7 and 1980–1, characterized the political power of a lame-duck president “as if it were a large balloon with a slow leak . . . the leak will initially be small. . . . By the end of the year, he will have lost the attention of the permanent government and can accomplish very little” (Brauer 1986, xiv; Henry 1960, 708; Pfiffner 1996, 5). This diminution of power does not mean that a lame-duck president is without the means to exercise executive authority, but the lame-duck president's power tends to be limited to unilateral executive tools of power (e.g. presidential pardons and executive orders) rather than policy initiatives that involve Congress or broad public support (Cooper 2002; Howell 2003; Mayer 2001). Howell and Mayer (2005) have found that the use of unilateral tools peaks during the last days of an administration. This governmental dynamic, along with the preelection preparations of presidential candidates, extends the study of transitions to several months before the election itself.

The inauguration of a newly elected president does not guarantee full control of the government or policy success. Authority is transferred; power must be seized. So the study of transitions must also extend several months into the new administration. In order to gain control and put their own stamps on the government, new presidents must designate a White House staff, form a cabinet, nominate political appointees, get control of the bureaucracies in the executive branch, publicly announce a policy agenda, establish relations with Congress, worry about the budget—and throughout all of this maintain an effective public outreach/media capacity. A new administration will not have effective control of the government until all of these functions have been accomplished. The challenge confronting a new president is that all of this must be done simultaneously, making the conduct of transitions so difficult for presidents elect and fascinating to scholars.

Although scholars have explained much about transitions that we did not know several decades ago, future scholars can make further progress in several directions. Conceptually, scholars still need to address more fully the crucial linkages between transitions and governance. Some work has been done here in terms of management (Burke 2000, 2004) and the policy agenda (Edwards 2003a; Mosher, Clinton, and Lang 1987; Pfiffner 1996), but more needs to be done. Empirically, although we know a lot about recruitment of political appointees (Mackenzie 1981, 1987, 2001, 2002, 2003; Patterson and Pfiffner 2001; Weko 1995), much more can be learned about the backgrounds of nominees and how they perform once in office.

THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

The study of presidential transitions as such has come relatively recently in political science scholarship. Certainly transitions have always been important and sometimes crucial to presidencies, but scholars did not analyze them as a distinct issue until the second half of the twentieth century. This lacuna in presidential scholarship occurred largely because the presidency itself did not become large and bureaucratized until the mid-twentieth century. When the US government was smaller, transitions were simpler, but as the functions and structures of government have grown more complex over the second half of the twentieth century, transferring governmental authority has become more elaborate. Thus the interaction between incoming and outgoing administrations has become more important to the smooth function of the United States government. In addition, the Twentieth Amendment, which moved inauguration from March 4 up to January 20, has compressed the time frame within which transitions must take place. With more to do and less time within which to do it, transitions have become more challenging.

Part of the reason that scholarship had not focused on transitions was that presidents elect themselves did not organize their coming to office in any elaborate way. Often they took vacations to rest from the rigors of campaigning. For instance, shortly after the election of 1912, President Elect Woodrow Wilson left for the island of Bermuda for a rest. Before leaving, he announced that he would stay on as New Jersey's governor in January to try to finish his reform agenda. When in Bermuda, he wrote an introduction to his new book, and when the communications cable with the mainland went out for five days, he was pleased for the respite it provided (Henry 1960, 29–31). Presidents Wilson and Harding each took a month off after their election victories before preparing in earnest for taking office.

By the 1950s, the government had grown considerably, and Dwight Eisenhower took only two weeks as a working vacation in Georgia before returning to work full time on his transition. The Twentieth Amendment drastically reduced the time for transition preparation, and Eisenhower's inauguration would be the first to take place on January 20 rather than on March 4, as it had occurred since the time of George Washington. Eisenhower ran his transition from the Commodore Hotel in New York City and had the largest staff operation of any president elect before him (Henry 1960, 488–9).

In the late summer of 1960, John Kennedy asked Richard Neustadt and Clark Clifford to prepare for him memoranda on a possible transition because, "If I am elected, I do not want to wake up on the morning of November 9 and have to ask myself, 'What in the world do I do now?'" (Neustadt 2000a, 4). During the 1960–1 transition, Kennedy spent more than \$300,000 of his personal resources in addition to funds from the Democratic National Committee on transition operations. As a result, he established a commission on transitions that recommended that they be

publicly financed so that a president elect could support staffers to work on preparations for taking office. In response to the recommendations, Congress passed the Presidential Transition Act of 1963. In 1968, Richard Nixon used the publicly provided funds and raised another million privately to fund his transition, although Nixon needed less preparation than most newly elected presidents because he had been vice president for eight years in the 1950s.

Jimmy Carter, who had little experience in Washington or the national government, was the first president to invest significant resources before the election to begin preparations for a possible transition. In the summer of 1976, he set aside \$150,000 from his campaign to prepare for a possible transition, including a "Talent Inventory Program" to review possible nominations for offices, should he win the election. Frictions in the Carter transition organization between the campaign director (Hamilton Jordan) and transition director (Jack Watson) hindered Carter's initial months in office.

For the next party-turnover transition four years later, transition planning began even earlier, when in April 1980 Edwin Meese asked Pendleton James to quietly begin a personnel recruitment operation in Alexandria, Virginia, in preparation for a possible Reagan election victory. After Reagan won the election, his transition operation was the most elaborate in history, with 588 listings in the transition telephone directory and multiple task forces preparing policy recommendations. Transition teams spread throughout the government to prepare departmental and agency transitions. The earliest preparations began when Governor George W. Bush asked Clay Johnson to begin transition planning in the spring of 1999 (Johnson 2002). The comparative success of the Reagan transition, which "hit the ground running," turned scholarly attention to the importance of transitions to a new presidency.

The Clinton and George W. Bush transitions into office were similarly elaborate, though not equally successful. President Elect Clinton ran his transition from Little Rock, Arkansas, complicating coordination with his transition team in Washington. He personally conducted a review of economic policy alternatives that brought various economists who presented their judgements on the best direction for economic policy, and he interviewed potential nominees for cabinet positions. The lack of firm control of the transition operation presaged the lack of discipline in the early months of the Clinton administration. George W. Bush, because of the uncertain outcome of the 2000 election, had less time to work with, but the previous governmental experience of his transition team, particularly Vice President Elect Cheney, gave him an advantage. The decision to act as if they had won the election and conduct their transition operations accordingly made a big difference, and the decision to designate a chief of staff before the election helped provide discipline and control for the transition.

Thus presidential transitions grew into elaborate operations and now play a significant role in the beginning of a new presidency. In the past, when the government was smaller and affected a smaller portion of the economy and society, less preparation for gaining control of the government was necessary. But with the scope and

reach of the federal government so much greater since the mid-twentieth century, the coordination of the transfer of power across a much larger and more complex government makes transitions more important to the continuity and smooth functioning of the government.

The continuity of government, its effectiveness, and the success of a new president will all be affected by the new president's transition into office. Good planning during the transition can greatly improve the efficiency of the recruitment of political appointees and the likelihood of success with the president's policy agenda. Experience has shown that mistakes during transition will hurt a new administration and that tensions in the transition will carry over into the White House. The next section will take up the factors that affect the relative success of transitions.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

Most transition scholarship addresses the key factors that affect the success of transitions into office. This section examines what scholars have found to be the most important dimensions of presidential transitions, and it will address how performance during transitions affects the ability of a new president to get off to a successful start in governing. The keys to a successful transition entail mastering the following elements: early planning, White House staff, cabinet, presidential personnel, media relations, the policy agenda, and finally the overall shift from campaigning to governing. Some of these elements of success have been effectively addressed by scholars, but I note gaps in scholarship and point out potential new directions for research.

Planning Affects Success

Scholars of transitions and practitioners alike urge that planning for a possible transition begin early, that is, well before the election (e.g., Burke 2000, 377; Brauer 1986, xiv; Kumar and Sullivan 2003, xi; Pfiffner 1996, 6–15). A newly elected president needs to make a good first impression, and an effective transition can set a positive tone for a new administration. The candidate should undertake this planning with some care, however. If it is visible to the public, it will attract press attention, and opponents will charge that the candidate is measuring White House drapes before winning the election. Those in the presidential campaign will resent the planners and will see them as dividing the spoils of victory before the battle has been won. Thus, candidates must do this crucial planning discreetly.

Certain precautions can preclude unnecessary conflict. Someone with authority in the campaign as well as transition planning must clearly be in charge. This will help keep transition planners from exceeding their warrants, and it will reassure the

campaigners that they will not be bypassed after the election. The Carter transition and early personnel recruitment suffered because of conflict between the staffs of transition chief Jack Watson and campaign chief Hamilton Jordan (Burke 2000, 20–40, 398–400; Pfiffner 1996, 60–1). The leadership of transition planning should include some people with governmental experience, preferably those who have participated in previous transitions. Transition planners should initiate liaison with the General Services Administration, scout out office space, and establish mechanisms for receiving funds provided by the Presidential Transitions Act. Once the election has been won, the transition operation must ramp up quickly in order to manage the tasks that need to be completed before inauguration. The most important tasks that must be undertaken correspond to the major functions and offices of the presidency: White House staff, cabinet, personnel, media relations, Congress, and policy agenda.

The need for advanced planning stems from our electoral system. In a parliamentary democracy such as Britain's, a shadow government of ministers in the opposition party in Parliament is experienced in national policy and ready to take over the government, should they become the majority party. Permanent career civil servants extending to the top levels of government in parliamentary systems can facilitate a change in party control of the government. In the United States, however, the layering of politically appointed positions extends much further down into the bureaucracy and entails the replacement of thousands of appointees by a new administration in order to gain control of the government (Light 1995; Richardson and Pfiffner 1999). Recruitment, screening, and nomination of these appointees take considerable time, and involve extensive planning.

One of the consequences of this deep penetration of political appointees is the relative dearth of institutional memory in the White House. Although the executive clerk to the president and several military aides usually remain from one administration to the next, each new administration replaces virtually all White House staffers (often including secretaries and clerical assistants). According to Kumar and Sullivan, a new administration on inauguration day is faced with “no institutional memory, no predetermined organizational structure, no adopted policies, no outline of their responsibilities, and no manual to show how the palace works. In short, they arrive to an empty shell” (2003, xi). This exaggerates the situation somewhat, but not too much.

Some continuity resides in the departments and agencies, Congress, and the memories of those in the new administration who have served in previous White Houses, but the fundamental point is important. Richard Neustadt, in bemoaning the lack of institutional memory in the White House, advises newcomers to listen to their predecessors: “I [want to] make the point . . . as forcefully as possible, the sheer dependence of incomers on what outgoers can tell them” (Neustadt 2000a, 167). That is, much institutional memory is passed on by the outgoing administration rather than in permanent personnel (of which there are few) or White House files, most of which depart with the exiting president and remain under proprietary control for some time.

Neustadt illustrates the consequences of this lacuna of memory by recalling the Carter administration's "discovery" of a Soviet brigade in Cuba. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reacted to this news with public statements about the secrecy with which the Soviets had acted and the dire implications of the new development. The problem (for the Carter administration) was that the Soviet brigade had been there since before the Cuban missile crisis of 1962; Kennedy had tried to convince the Soviets to remove the soldiers, but they had refused, and the United States had accepted their presence. This discovery embarrassed the administration and caused the Soviets to suspect the United States of artificially trumping up a crisis; the Soviets could not believe that President Carter was not aware of this very basic fact. Although this mini-crisis did not occur during the transition, it well illustrates the lack of institutional memory in the White House that Neustadt termed "typical" (Neustadt 2000a, 163–4; Neustadt and May 1986, 92–6).

The George W. Bush transition seems to have confirmed most of the conventional scholarly wisdom about the importance of planning. It was carried out quite successfully, despite the narrow time frame resulting from the litigation that eventually made Bush the president elect (Burke 2004). The dispute over the election outcome did not stop transition operations and planning from continuing unabated. The Bush transition was effective in part because the candidate had asked his friend and personnel chief from his governorship, Clay Johnson, to begin planning a transition in the spring of 1999. Johnson did not raise any jealousy from the campaign, because everyone knew that he was a close friend of Governor Bush (Burke 2004, 23). After consulting with Republicans with previous transition experience and examining the scholarly literature, Johnson drew up a list of transition priorities that echoed many of the scholarly prescriptions for successful transitions (Johnson 2002; Burke 2004, 16–17). Overall, the Bush transition preparation and success in establishing a disciplined and organized White House was impressive, proving that preparation and experience can make an important difference in a new administration.

Future scholarship might address the need for planning and what type of planning is most effective. How do presidents elect with little Washington experience operate differently than "outsiders"? Are there systematic differences in the types of personnel recruited by the two different types of presidents elect? What is the best mix of governmental experience and personal loyalty for the transition team?

Transitions Shape the White House Staff

Once the election is over, factions within the winning campaign, centered around personalities, policy, or ideology, inevitably arise. Thus, the president elect needs to designate a single person who can manage the transition with the authority of the president elect (Burke 2000, 286–8). Edwin Meese performed this function for President Elect Reagan in 1980–1 (Burke 2000, 97–100; Pfiffner 1996, 25). Preferably, this person will move into the White House as chief of staff on January 20. He or she,

in consultation with the president elect, should designate people to take charge of different policy and administrative areas, and these people will need to put together their own staffs (Burke 2000, 381–9; Kumar et al. 2000).

If the White House is to be functioning on inauguration day, the top layers of the White House staff must be preparing their areas of responsibility well before January 20. The chief of staff position, now essential to each White House, needs to be one of the first offices the new president fills, since he or she will be central to organizing the White House and selecting staffers (Burke 2000, 116–27; Walcott, Warsaw, and Wayne 2001; Pfiffner 1993). The Reagan administration benefited from settling on the chief of staff issue early during the transition, and the Clinton transition suffered because the president did not designate the White House staff until the weeks immediately preceding the inauguration. President George W. Bush's transition staff convinced the president to designate a chief of staff (Andrew Card) even before the election.

In addition to choosing the top staff, the chief of staff must organize the White House and adapt it to the new president's preferences. The current scholarly consensus holds that the collegial and spokes-of-the-wheel models of White House organization, which had been successful earlier in the twentieth century, are no longer feasible. Consensus has settled on a modified chief of staff system. Although a chief of staff is necessary, some of the "strong" chiefs of staff have caused problems for their presidents: Adams (Eisenhower), Haldeman (Nixon), Regan (Reagan), and Sununu (Bush). Nevertheless, there must be a hierarchy of responsibility in the White House (Hult and Walcott 2004; Walcott and Hult 1995; Pfiffner 1993). Before inauguration, the chief of staff, in consultation with the president elect, must establish the paper flow and decide how to control access to the president (Hult and Tenpas 2001; Arnold, Patterson, and Walcott 2001; Burke 2000, 381–9).

Future scholarship on transitions might look for patterns in the ways that transition personnel and organization affect the organization of the White House. How are rivalries within transitions settled, and do the winners include or exclude the losers once an administration is under way? Does planning for how the White House should be organized take place? What is the role of those with previous White House experience in transitions? Do presidents take the advice of their advisers on White House organization? How do the talents of individuals affect the formal organization of a new White House? Do those prominent in the campaign make good White House staffers?

Transitions Establish the Role of Cabinet

The most visible public decisions a president elect must make include selecting his or her cabinet secretaries. These choices send out strong signals about the direction and composition of the new administration and may unite a divided party. President Elect Clinton spent much time on the selection of his cabinet, but in doing so he set aside making decisions about his White House staff, a mistake that marred the

effectiveness of his first weeks in office. Instead of immediately taking on the policy, personnel, and administrative tasks of the new administration, new White House staffers were jockeying for position, and lines of authority had to be established. With earlier decisions about who would play what role in the White House, the administration could have focused more quickly on its initial policy agenda (Burke 2000, 290–5). Delays in coming to final decisions on the White House staff can lead to unfavorable press attention as well as delays in pursuing policy initiatives. Drawing up lists of potential cabinet nominees before the election can help a new president elect, but if some of the names leak, it will distract from the effectiveness of the campaign. Preferably, the president can nominate cabinet secretaries and send them to the Senate for confirmation during the first week of the new administration.

In order to reduce conflict and debilitating fights over turf and access, the president or chief of staff must establish clear “ground rules” for the role of cabinet secretaries and their relation to the White House staff. Conflict between staffers and secretaries is natural, because staffers are usually younger, have worked in the campaign, and have regular access to the president. Cabinet secretaries are usually older, have some independent political stature, and have large departments to run and turf to protect. Pressures from Congress, interest groups, and their own civil servants often pull cabinet secretaries in different directions than White House staffers, with their single constituent, would choose. As Presidents Nixon and Carter found out to their dismay, once authority is delegated to cabinet secretaries, for instance in choosing their immediate subordinates, pulling it back into the White House is (in John Ehrlichman’s simile) like trying to put toothpaste back into the tube. Attempts to establish “cabinet government,” with significant delegation of policy initiative and personnel selection to cabinet secretaries, are no longer viable (Pfiffner 1996, 34–55).

We do not know enough about how the role of the cabinet has changed in the presidency and how that has affected the recruitment of cabinet secretaries. At what point in the transition should presidents elect focus on cabinet choices? Is it important to choose the top levels of the White House staff before cabinet recruitment, as the Clinton transition experience seemed to indicate? When presidents recruit potential cabinet nominees, how do they explain the role of cabinet secretaries and how they interact with the White House staff? Are cabinet members disappointed in their new roles as were some of President Nixon’s cabinet appointees? How do White House staffers learn how to relate to members of the cabinet, and how does that affect the smoothness with which a White House operates?

Presidential Personnel Affect Policy

Cabinet secretaries comprise a subset of a much larger group of leaders of the new administration, and a secretary alone cannot effectively manage a cabinet department. Selecting the people who receive the political “plums” of presidential appointments to the new administration would seem to be an attractive job. However, the

reality is that personnel recruitment is one of the most vexing jobs of a transition, in part because of the sheer volume of the job seekers and in part because of the political sensitivity of the choices the president makes. The skeleton of the personnel operation must be set up before the election in order to organize the flood of applicants and to focus energy on those policy areas that the new president will want to emphasize. Pendleton James, who ran political recruitment for President Reagan, said that “Presidential Personnel has to be functional on the first day, the first minute of the first hour” (Kumar and Sullivan 2003, 8; Burke 2000, 129; Patterson and Pfiffner 2001; Weko 1995). Presidents elect want to place their personal loyalists in executive branch positions, and presidents planning significant policy change will want to appoint ideological allies. “People are policy” was the mantra of the Reagan transition teams.

The president should designate the person heading the personnel operation the Director of Presidential Personnel in the new administration. When President Clinton designated Richard Riley, who had been in charge of personnel recruitment, as his nominee to be Secretary of Education, it significantly set back the transition personnel operation (Burke 2000, 295; Pfiffner 1996, 164). Transition leaders should take care that those who worked in the candidate’s campaign do not feel that they have been given short shrift in consideration for positions in the administration, as happened with the Carter transition. At the same time, the new administration needs the most competent people for the job (Burke 2000, 406; Edwards 2001; Pfiffner 1996, 164–72). As with cabinet nominees, the dilemma facing the personnel operation is preparing lists of possible nominees for higher-level positions (assistant secretaries and above) and the danger of those lists leaking to the press or the campaign. The personnel operation must quickly establish a process for clearing potential nominees with those whom they must consult and for narrowing the number of possibilities to a manageable number for final decision.

Only top presidential appointees can make authoritative decisions for the new administration, and vacancies at the sub-cabinet level can impede the policy agenda. Thus the president and the personnel operation must settle disputes with dispatch and act quickly to make the top appointments. But the huge volume of applications for positions can drown the personnel operation in paper (or electrons), and FBI background checks and Senate confirmation hearings can cause considerable delays. Chase Untermeyer estimated that when he headed personnel recruitment for President George H. W. Bush’s transition, the personnel operation received more than 70,000 résumés and applications (although some were duplicates) by the end of May 1989 (Pfiffner 1996, 138).

As a result, the appointment process gets slower each year. Calvin Mackenzie calculated that it took President Kennedy an average of 2.4 months (from inauguration to confirmation) to get an appointee into a position; by the Clinton administration it took an average of 8.5 months. Mackenzie judged that the Bush 2000–1 transition was the slowest yet in getting its political appointees on board (2003). Despite efforts to streamline the personnel process, future administrations cannot expect much improvement in the time it takes to place their appointees. Mackenzie

summed up the challenges: “Staffing the highest levels of government has become a nightmare for contemporary presidents” (2003, 332).

A number of dimensions of personnel recruitment could be better understood with further research. Does previous White House or transition experience help create a more effective transition operation? Are private sector professional recruiters effective in the political context of a transition? Does more sophisticated electronic capacity affect the type of people who apply for jobs in the new administration? Where do most appointees come from: inside the beltway or further out in the country? How does this vary with the level of positions? Are there systematic differences in the types of nominees recruited by different parties? How can the quality of appointees be measured? Do the types of personnel recruited differ with whether presidents elect have had previous Washington experience? How are personnel winnowed from campaign to transition and from transition to White House staff and presidential appointment? How important is early liaison with the Senate in confirmation hearings? How can appointees’ relations with career civil servants be smoothed (Maranto 2005)?

The Media can Make or Break a Transition

The nation will perceive the competence of the president elect and the new administration primarily from what the press says about them. Therefore, the transition team must organize an effective press operation in order to set the tone for the new administration. During the transition, the press swarms over the whole transition operation, so it is crucial that one authoritative source of substantive information speaks for the transition. Because the press follows the transition with such intense interest, the transition headquarters must manage the news so that reporters have something of substance about which to write. If significant lulls occur without newsworthy stories from the transition, the press will ferret out their own stories, which may not portray the transition operation in a kind light, as happened with the Clinton transition in Little Rock in 1992.

In contrast to some of the other major areas of the campaign, media and press relations will benefit from continuity in personnel. Presumably campaign spokespersons will step into the top jobs in the press and communications offices after the president’s inauguration. The press must perceive that the spokesperson for the president elect, and later the president, actually speaks for the president, or they will develop back channels that will distort the new administration’s message (Kumar 2001a, 2003).

Kumar’s work has brought a new appreciation of the need for professional communications and press strategies for transitions. She maintains that the public perception of a new administration is crucial to its success, and consequently to its success with Congress (2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2003). She argues that the press secretary provides most of the official information about the transition and that concern for how events will play in the press pervades every transition and White House. Her

“lessons learned” (2001a) summarize the hard-won experience of the many communications aides that she interviewed. As the Clinton transition demonstrated, if the transition does not provide the press with substantive issues about which to write, reporters will focus on personalities and internal transitions tensions; this will not help the president elect. Jones’s scholarship argues that in representing the president the media relations personnel also represent the United States (Jones 1998, 133–73). Thus an effective press operation must exude competence and authority.

Future scholarship might explore how the organization and function of communications operations change from campaigns to transitions to the White House. What is the best type of experience for those working in the Office of the Press Secretary and Office of Communications? Do some communication strategies work better than others? How are the new media affecting the types of communications personnel that will be important to transitions and White Houses of the future?

The Initial Policy Agenda can Set the Tone

A quick start on a policy agenda can help a new president because the beginning of an administration provides the greatest opportunity to get important policy proposals through Congress (aside from national emergencies, such as 9/11). Executive orders and other unilateral actions by a new president can change policies and attract press coverage, and so some of these should be ready for the president’s signature shortly after inauguration (Cooper 2002; Howell 2003; Mayer 2001). The broader policy agenda, however, usually involves Congress, and that is where the real policy challenges lie. A new Congress often seeks an accommodation with a new president, though it will not give him or her a free ride (Neustadt and May 1986, 72).

As new presidents move into their terms, they will have made choices that will inevitably alienate some members of Congress. Thus, in order to take maximum advantage of this narrow window of opportunity, presidents must get policy proposals to Congress quickly (Edwards 2003a; Light 1999). Early legislative victories can set the tone for a new administration, and so early action is necessary, but congressional capacity to handle a wide range of issues is limited. FDR’s famous 100 days cannot easily be duplicated, except in extraordinary circumstances (Neustadt 1990, 230; 2000a, 21; 2000b).

Public opinion polls indicate that voters want presidents to keep their campaign promises, and most recent presidents have a reasonably good record of promise keeping (Fishel 1985; Pfiffner 2004, 99–116). But a narrow focus on promise keeping can hurt a new president. President Carter had his White House staff make a list of his campaign promises, and he tried to keep many of them. The result, however, was a long list of policy initiatives that diluted his early agenda. He fell foul of Congress early in his administration by refusing to limit his efforts to a narrow set of priorities that he would pursue in Congress. In contrast Ronald Reagan, who had articulated a wide range of policy preferences during his campaign, was much more successful

with the narrowly focused set of priorities that he pursued vigorously in the first months of his presidency (Pfiffner 1996, 122–7).

The new president's legislative liaison staff will be most intimately involved in pushing the policy agenda on the Hill. Thus, it is important to designate the head of the Office of Legislative Liaison as early in the transition as possible. This person will ideally have had extensive experience with both houses of Congress and will have friendly relationships with both sides of the aisle (Bowles 1987). President Carter's relationships with Congress suffered from the lack of Hill experience of his first legislative liaison chief, and President Reagan benefited from the experience and reputation of Max Friedersdorf, his head of congressional relations (Jones 1983; Pfiffner 1996, 111–27). President George W. Bush concentrated his energies on his tax cut priority and a few other initiatives, and despite the Republicans' narrow margins in Congress, he achieved several early victories, though not the broad success of Reagan's first months in office (Edwards 2003a; Ornstein and Fortier 2003).

What is the relationship between the policy priorities presidents emphasize in their campaigns and the policies they pursue as presidents? What is the role of the transition in translating campaign promises into early administration policy initiatives? Can the perception of a policy mandate be created? Does the perception of a mandate make any difference in what a new president can accomplish? Do the margins in Congress affect the type of policy agenda that can be effectively pursued? Does the presence or absence of divided government make any difference? Does the polarization of Congress affect the policy agenda of a new president? How much liaison with members of Congress do presidents elect attempt? Does it make any difference in relations with Congress?

Shifting from Campaigning to Governing

The broadest and most important challenges that new presidents face entail the shift from campaigning to governing. Campaigns demand that you distinguish yourself from your opponent and draw sharp differences (or wedges) between you and the opposition. In contrast, governing calls for uniting the country and being president of "all the people." The time frame shifts from a short-term focus culminating in the election to longer-term concerns about implementing policies and developing institutions.

Effective campaigners do not necessarily possess the skills or talents that are essential to governing. Some people can do both well, but many cannot. William Galston, who worked in the Clinton campaign and White House, recalled the difficulty of telling some campaigners that in a campaign "your youthful zeal, your take-no-prisoners political skills, were just what we needed then, but this is something different. That's enormously difficult to do" (Kumar 2003, xiii). One of the emotionally most difficult jobs of a winning presidential campaign is telling many loyal campaigners that, despite their very hard work throughout the campaign and demonstrated loyalty to the candidate, they will not be moving with the new

president into the government. Some campaigners understand this, but others see no reason why, since they helped the candidate get elected, they are not also qualified to help implement the campaign promises.

Some scholars argue that recent presidents have begun to erode the traditional normative distinction between campaigning and governing and that the two functions have increasingly overlapped. Hugh Hecló points out how governing now more closely resembles campaigning. Presidents and their staffs tend to make public appeals for their policy initiatives (even if these tactics are not effective; Edwards 2003b), and they pay less attention to deliberation and close cooperation with Congress. Interest groups are highly skilled and continually attempt to affect policy, and presidents respond to and use these external actors to attempt to influence congressional behavior. But, Hecló argues, this tendency ignores important differences between the functions of campaigning and governing: (1) campaigning is about the clear end point of election, whereas governing must concern itself with the ongoing nature of the government; (2) campaigning is a zero-sum game, and thus adversarial, whereas governing must be inclusive if it is to be successful; and (3) campaigning is about persuasion, whereas governing should be about deliberation for a shared future (Hecló 2000, 11–12). He warns that “the permanent campaign” has superseded these important normative distinctions. As a result, “our politics will become more hostile than needed, more foolhardy in disregarding the long-term, and more benighted in mistaking persuasions for realities” (Hecló 2000, 33).

Charles O. Jones also argues that the distinction between campaigning and governing has become increasingly blurred. Technicians skilled in the use of campaign techniques for polling, fund raising, focus groups, and communications have come to dominate campaigns (Jones 1998, 52–82). After the election, the winning technicians often shift their skills to the effective pursuit of presidential policy agendas. Thus, argues Jones, “campaigning for elections” shifts to “campaigning for policy” (1998, 3). The link between campaigning and governing has not been fully explored, yet it is central to the significance of transitions. Future scholars might analyze more systematically the way that campaigns are conducted and how this affects the behavior and success of presidents when they come into office. Are transitions of the future more likely to resemble extensions of campaigns rather than preparation for governing?

SCHOLARLY ADMONITIONS

The elements of successful transitions just noted reflect scholars’ interviews with participants in transitions, archival research, and close observation. Most participants in transitions would agree on the lessons reflected above. But scholars of transitions have also come to some conclusions that the staffs of new presidents

elect will not necessarily heed. Scholars have made a number of “good government” types of recommendations, which they judge will improve governance, but which presidents elect are not likely to follow.

Hubris

Richard Neustadt has pointed out the dangers of hubris for a new administration: “the transition hazards that afflict a President-to-be and his immediate associates are born of haste, hubris, and the unfamiliarity native to newness” (Neustadt 2000a, 157). Often those who have served in transitions will later admit that hubris is a danger. It is a danger that is easily understood—the winning campaigners have just defeated the “enemy;” they may have thrown “the bums” out of office; they have beaten the odds and won the most powerful prize in the world; they are thus competent and very smart—how could they not be tempted to believe in their own infallibility? The dangers of this hubris are: they may try to do too much; they may fail to listen to the outgoing administration; they may reject the good as well as the bad policies of the preceding administration; and they may needlessly alienate members of Congress or the career services in the executive branch with their arrogance (Neustadt 2000a, 161–3).

Hasty Decisions and Overreactions

Incoming administrations often go overboard in rejecting any policy connected with the previous administration of the other party and make early policy mistakes in doing so. Kennedy, overreacting against Eisenhower’s seemingly cumbersome national security policy process, abolished much of Ike’s apparatus, assuming it would be replaced. He did not establish a new systematic policy process, however, and arguably might have avoided his failure with the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba if he had had a more systematic national security policy process (Neustadt 2000a, 152–3). More broadly, Kennedy rejected Eisenhower’s cabinet system in part just to distinguish himself from his predecessor (Neustadt 2000a, 83). President Carter, reacting against Nixon’s White House-centered administration, began with hopes of establishing “cabinet government,” but he soon changed his mind after cabinet secretaries did not seem to embrace presidential priorities. President George W. Bush rejected the Clinton administration’s policy toward North Korea early in his term, but was not more successful and eventually had to return to similar policies.

Neustadt cautions new administrations to undertake new policies deliberately so as not to make mistakes born of haste. Jimmy Carter’s broad policy agenda overestimated what was possible and consequently undermined how successful he would be with Congress. Presidents Ford and Carter, wanting to distinguish themselves from the Nixon administration and its notorious chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, initially refused to designate a chief of staff. But acting as their own chiefs of staff, they became overwhelmed, and each designated a chief of staff for the remainder of their

terms (Pfiffner 1993). In the spring of 1981, Ronald Reagan had to quickly reverse his proposal to reduce social security spending by shaving some benefits. Bill Clinton's "gays in the military" proposals slowed his transition into office, and his initial designees for Attorney General diverted the administration from its policy agenda. All of these incidents hurt the new administrations; they may have been inevitable, but taking Neustadt's advice might have helped them avoid the negative fallout from them.

Listening to Predecessors

The outgoing administration is likely to want to be helpful to a new administration, even of the opposite party. The White House staff is experienced and wants the United States government to be run effectively, even if they disagree with the policies of the incoming administration. Of course, the new administration does not need to take the advice, but listening to or soliciting suggestions from those who have occupied the positions into which new staffers will step can elicit valuable insights about the beginnings of a presidency. James A. Baker demonstrated his wisdom when, after Ronald Reagan designated him as his chief of staff, he went to visit and ask the advice of every living previous incumbent of the office.

The tendency of a new administration is to demand that all previous political appointees submit their resignations by January 20. Scholars, however, are likely to advise the transition teams to hold over some members of the previous administration in key positions for which continuity is important. The administration's appointees cannot make authoritative decisions or sign documents before the Senate confirms them, so it may be necessary to keep a high-level appointee from the previous administration on board until the new team gets confirmed.

Similarly, some administrations come to government believing that the career services will try to undermine new policies by dragging their feet or sabotaging them. Top-level career civil servants (and military leaders) are more likely to want to serve the new administration (and their own careers) by being as helpful as they can be. Ignoring or shutting out career civil servants can lead to early mistakes, redundant studies, delay of the new administration's policy agenda.

What civil servants *do* need is respect and clear policy direction from the new administration. Career civil servants possess much of the institutional memory that can save wheel spinning and facilitate the new administration's priorities. Political appointees are often competent and experienced; but several levels down from the top, it is possible that a new administration may try to reward its campaign supporters with important positions in the executive branch. Consequently, some important positions will likely be filled with less than competent appointees. Thus, scholars often recommend an overall reduction of the number of political appointees (Edwards 2001; Mackenzie 1987; Richardson 1987; Richardson and Pfiffner 1999).

In summary, scholars treat transitions as an essential part of the conduct of the presidency, and thus their approaches and analyses blend into the broader concerns

of presidential scholarship. This survey of the most important scholarship on presidential transitions reveals a scholarly consensus on several points:

1. Transitions since the second half of the twentieth century have become more elaborate.
2. As the presidency and the government have become larger and more institutionalized, transitions have become more important to the success of a presidency.
3. It is thus important for candidates for the presidency to devote time and resources to transition planning, even before the campaign has been won.
4. The effectiveness of the government and the new presidency depend in important ways on the smooth transfer of authority from one administration to the next, whether the transition emphasizes change or continuity.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO TRANSITION SCHOLARSHIP

The first few scholars to study transitions approached them from a historical perspective. The “grandfather” of the scholarly analysis of presidential transitions was Lauren Henry, a scholar at the Brookings Institution who wrote the definitive (and only) study of party-turnover transitions from Taft–Wilson through Truman–Eisenhower, *Presidential Transitions* (1960). Henry’s approach was explicitly historical and his scope extensive. Historian Carl Brauer followed Henry’s historical/chronological approach in his book *Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower through Reagan*, published in 1986. Brauer examined the presidential campaigns and placed the transitions into the context of the political history of the elections and the early months of the presidencies that he examined.

In contrast to the historical approach, most political scientists have chosen to examine transitions analytically, that is, by taking up the different challenges faced by each new president and analyzing them separately. Pfiffner, in *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running* (1988, 1996) devoted chapters to key factors essential to gaining control of the government: White House staff, cabinet, political appointments, the bureaucracy, the budget, and relations with Congress. John P. Burke examined transitions from Carter through Clinton in *Presidential Transitions: From Politics to Practice* (2000). In each of these cases he separated five key tasks for analysis: the preelection effort, the post-election effort, filling the cabinet, crafting a policy agenda, and shaping the White House staff.

Other political scientists have approached transitions by examining the generic challenges that each new administration must face and presenting lessons learned that would be relevant to a new administration. Charles O. Jones, in *Passages to the Presidency* (1998), interviewed many transition veterans, and his book reflects their

advice. Burke followed his book on the Carter through Clinton transitions with *Becoming President: The Bush Transition, 2000–2003* (2004) that drew lessons from the shortened Bush transition.

Since the incumbent could not run for the presidency in 2000, a group of political scientists, led by Martha Kumar, undertook the largest and most organized, non-partisan effort to prepare the next administration (Republican or Democratic) for transition into office. Kumar and Terry Sullivan published the results of the project in *The White House World: Transitions, Organization, and Office Operation* (2003). This work included sections on transitions themselves, the White House environment and operations, seven White House offices that are key to successful transitions, and analyses of the Bush 2000–1 transition. Their book summarized much of the research that they undertook in the White House 2001 Project, which was comprised of systematic, in-depth interviews with seventy-five former incumbents of key White House staff offices. The project made the interviews and briefing books for each of the key White House offices available to the transition teams of the two candidates, Vice President Gore and George W. Bush.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP

Within several decades, the professional scholarship on presidential transitions has contributed significant insights into the operation of the presidency as well as to the practice of organizing transitions and the White House. What began as academic exercises (in the best sense of the term) has developed into sources of sound advice to new administrations coming into office. Transition teams, at least from the 1988–9 transition on, have consulted transitions scholars as well as their books and articles for guidance on how to make their own transitions more effective. In turn, transition participants have contributed their own time to provide interviews with scholars, both for the historical record and as advice for future transitions.

Transition research suffers from some inherent drawbacks. Scholars can measure some data objectively, such as the number of days to get cabinet secretaries confirmed, the number of days to make presidential appointments, the number of people in transition teams, and the amount of public and private money a transition spends. Nevertheless, these useful indicators do not capture what is most important about transitions, which is how effectively the incoming administration manages the shift from campaigning to governing.

The best scholarship on presidential transitions has exploited primary sources in some depth. The major works have made use of extensive interviewing of those who have personally participated in transitions (e.g., Burke 2000, 2003; Jones 1998; Kumar 2003; Pfiffner 1996). These same scholars have also done archival research in presidential libraries and in the private papers of former transition participants. More of

these unpublished plans, memoranda, and reports undoubtedly exist, and ferreting them out presents challenges to scholars of future transitions.

Kumar's recorded and transcribed interviews constitute a rich vein of primary source recollections of transitions veterans that have not yet been fully mined. They will be available to scholars through the National Archives and Records Administration. Richard Neustadt worked in the Truman administration and advised every subsequent Democratic (and one Republican) administration as it came into office. Fortunately, scholars do not have to dig these memoranda out of archives, because Charles O. Jones has collected Neustadt's transition memoranda into one volume, *Preparing to be President: The Memos of Richard Neustadt* (2000). His memos to Kennedy exemplify Neustadt's concern with seeing the challenges of transitions from the perspective of the president. Jones places the memos in context with an introduction and a very useful, annotated essay on the scholarship of presidential transitions (2000a, 173–80). Jones also mentions in his bibliography a number of memoranda not publicly available but of potential use to scholars.

Most transition scholarship has focused on the incoming administration and what the president elect must do to get control of the government. Much less attention has been paid to lame-duck administrations and what they do before leaving office. Presidential pardons have received some attention, and some high-visibility cases have called end-of-presidency pardons to public attention. Howell and Mayer (2005), however, have explored the use of unilateral powers at the end of administrations and found that they differ from periods earlier in presidential terms. In addition, the number of pages in the *Federal Register* increases in the last months of an administration facing a party-turnover transition. Future scholars might replicate these suggestive findings and pay more attention to the final months of administrations. Lame-duck presidents may try to accomplish unfinished business or limit the flexibility of their successor administrations. Similarly, career civil servants may alter their behavior in anticipation of a new set of political appointees.

Although some scholars have examined within-party transitions (Burke 2003; Pfiffner 1990), they remain under-studied. Ironically, transitions to a president of the same party may entail more bitterness than party-turnover transitions. The challenge of a new president of the same party is to differentiate him- or herself from the previous president and put a unique stamp on the office. Bad feelings may arise when the newly elected president encourages contrasts with the previous leader, and loyal presidential appointees may resent being replaced with the new president's personal loyalists.

The conventional wisdom of transition scholars holds that there is insufficient time and resources to accomplish well all that must be done in the eleven weeks between election and inauguration. The Bush 2000–1 transition accomplished much in a shorter period of time. Future scholars might explore whether successful transitions can be accomplished in a shorter period of time and with fewer resources.

One major challenge that has not been fully met is scholarship connecting campaigns, elections, transitions, and the performance of presidents. John Burke has addressed the effect of transitions on the early performance of presidents, but

more needs to be done in order to more fully understand this key linkage. What process and preparation will best prepare the candidate to become president? Are there systematic differences between Democratic and Republican transitions? How can we assess the effectiveness of governance in a new presidency? Can an effective transition lead to poor performance once a president is in office? Do those nominees who conduct the most effective campaigns and transitions make the best presidents? Is the “permanent campaign” inevitable, or can a president govern effectively without treating each important issue as a new campaign. How do divided government and the polarization of Congress affect transitions and presidencies?

Continuity of governance is crucial to the security of the United States, particularly during time of war. The war on terror will probably be with us for the foreseeable future, so continuity will be especially important. Examining previous incoming transitions during wartime (e.g. Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon) may shed light on how future transitions might minimize the danger during these perilous transitions.

Personnel recruitment presents a major organizational challenge in every transition. Research on different approaches to organization for personnel operations, the type of backgrounds of nominees and appointees, and evaluating the quality of appointees would fill important gaps in our understanding of transitions. In short, the fundamentals of presidential transitions have been analyzed in a rich, scholarly literature. Perhaps the broadest and most important questions that future scholars can address concern how transitions affect governance.

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