PRESIDENTIAL POLICYMAKING

AN END-OF-CENTURY ASSESSMENT

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Presidential Constraints and Transitions

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The traditional serenity prayer goes: Lord, give me the courage to change those things that I can change, to accept those things that I cannot change, and the wisdom to know the difference. Upon taking office, newly elected presidents are faced with the dilemmas implied in this formulation. The main challenge for a president-elect before inauguration is to prepare to take office so that the first few months in office are successful. First impressions are important and, if negative, hard to overcome. Ronald Reagan benefited from his early successes, whereas Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton suffered from their early mistakes, despite significant improvements in each of their administrations.

From among the many things that presidents-elect must do, this chapter examines three areas that are crucial to the success of each new president: organizing the administration, making political appointments, and pursuing a policy agenda. In each of these areas the range of presidential discretion is examined. The paper distinguishes among those areas where a new president has the most leeway to make decisions based on (1) personal preference and contrasts to those areas that are relatively constrained by (2) organizational dynamics or ruled out by (3) environmental determinants.[1]

The presidency in many ways is a personal office and has been shaped in important ways by the personality of those who have held the office. Many people believe the president can do whatever he wants, but as Richard Neustadt pointed out in *Presidential Power*, the president is in a weak position constitutionally.[2] Some things are at the president's discretion, but many are impossible or possible only at a high price. The key to presidential wisdom is choosing those areas where presidential action will have the greatest effect. This chapter takes up the range of presidential choice in three areas crucial to a successful transition into office: organization, political appointments, and policy. In some aspects of each of these areas a new president can do broadly what he or she chooses, and in other dimensions of these areas a new president is constrained in important ways.

For instance, in *organizing a new administration* a new president is free to choose new processes and structures (personal preference), but cannot operate effectively without a chief of staff (organizational constraints), and cannot decide to adopt a "cabinet government" approach to running the executive branch (environmental determinants). For instance, in *selecting political appointees* a new president is able to select individual candidates for many of the White House, cabinet, and subcabinet positions (personal preference), but cannot centralize too much in the White House without serious costs in time (organizational constraints), and cannot begin an administration without a substantial personnel operation to organize political recruitment (environmental determinants). For instance, in pursuing the new administration's *policy agenda,* a new president can choose some pet projects based on personal preference or campaign promises. But he cannot expect to achieve significant agenda items without substantial planning (organizational constraints) and must limit the ambition of the policy agenda to the political capital available (environmental determinants).

Organizing the Administration

On the surface, a new president has complete discretion to organize the White House and administration in accord with personal preference. After all, the executive branch works for the president, and the White House staff was created specifically to help the president perform his duties. But as the size and policy duties of the White House have increased, the range of discretion of the president has decreased. Hugh Heclo has written about the "deep structure" of the White House that is determined by other people's expectations about what the White House staff will do for them.[3] Because of this, "cabinet government" is no longer a viable option for presidents.

Personal Preference: White House Personnel and Advisory Structure

Because of months of intense teamwork and sometimes years of service to the candidate, most presidents bring with them into office members of their

campaigns. Once the election has been won, the president-elect will naturally want to keep those who have proven their loyalty and competence in the crucible of the campaign, and there is insufficient time to revamp completely a personal staff.

Often new White Houses are staffed by young people who are ambitious, hard working, competitive, and devoted to the candidate.[4] And often these former campaigners turn into effective White House staffers. But campaigning is not the same as governing, and the failure to distinguish which aides have talent in one but not the other may lead to trouble. For instance, Hamilton Jordan was a brilliant campaign strategist but was much less effective when he was later appointed chief of staff. Care must be taken to ensure that campaigners are also suited for governance. David Livingstone was an effective advance man for candidate Bill Clinton in the 1992 campaign. But when he was put in charge of personnel security in the Clinton White House his talents as an advance person came to be drawbacks when he obtained sensitive FBI background files on former Republican White House staffers.

The White House Office has about 400 staffers, all of whom serve at the pleasure of the president, and the EOP has several hundred others. Here presidents have the leeway to choose whomever they want to serve. There is no requirement for Senate confirmation, and no one can second-guess the president. Here it is especially important for presidents to have staffers they feel comfortable with and who possess the combination of skills that the president feels is most important.

But a new president is not entirely free to choose whomever he or she pleases. Although the White House staff is most often filled with young campaigners, presidents also need experts who were not necessarily in the campaign, for example in the national security area.[5] But just as the cabinet came to be seen as a symbolic representation of the diversity of the nation (ideological, geographical, religious, ethnic, gender), so now the White House staff is being scrutinized for diversity (ideological within the party, gender, race, etc.). The consequence is that presidents are no longer entirely free to choose their own staffs without the second-guessing from outsiders. What used to be almost entirely at the personal discretion of the president is now more constrained by the expectations of others. So despite broad flexibility, *presidents are not free to choose whomever they want for their staffs* without reference to their electoral and governing coalitions.

Organizational Constraints: White House Organization

Presidents are relatively free to set up advisory structures to suit their own preferences. President Truman came to use the National Security Council

(NSC) to advise him weekly during the Korean War. President Eisenhower institutionalized the NSC staff processes, and Kennedy discarded Eisenhower's processes. President Ford used his Economic Policy Board to advise him on his policy priorities. Ronald Reagan set up seven cabinet councils to structure White House staff-cabinet interactions in his first term. Bill Clinton introduced a National Economic Council and added members to the National Security Council.

Thus some organizational issues are subject to the personal preferences of the president, but the broader issue of running the White House without a chief of staff is no longer a viable option for presidents. Eisenhower introduced the office of chief of staff to the White House, and used the office as the center of a very effectively organized administration.[6] During the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies of the 1960s having a chief of staff was still optional, and each ran an effective administration without one. Richard Nixon began his administration with H.R. Haldeman as his chief of staff, and during his administration the White House staff was increased in size to such an extent that operating without a chief of staff was no longer a viable option.

This was proven when President Ford, trying to distinguish his administration from the discredited Nixon, tried to run the White House as the "knights of the round table." Within several months he gave up and asked Donald Rumsfeld to act as his chief of staff. Similarly, Jimmy Carter began his administration with promises not to have a chief of staff. But after two years of trying to run his administration without one, he gave up and appointed Hamilton Jordan and then Jack Watson to be chiefs of staff. Presidents Reagan and Bush both used a chief of staff from the beginning.

This point was reinforced in the 1990s. President Clinton realized intellectually that he would need a chief of staff, and he was the first Democrat to begin his administration with one. But viscerally Clinton did not want anyone in charge but him; he did not want to delegate. Thus his first chief of staff, Mack McLarty, had a tough time; and he did not try to play the role of a traditional chief of staff. His personality was low-key, he spent most of his time as a personal counselor to Clinton and as an emissary to the business community and to conservative Democrats in Congress. These are important functions, but someone needs to be running the White House. It is more than a full-time job.

Clinton finally recognized this and replaced McLarty with Leon Panetta, who took charge and canceled staffers' right to walk into the Oval Office without checking with him first. All paperwork had to flow through him, and he took control of White House staff appointments. He tightened up meetings so that there were fewer people and brought closure to issues.

Basically, he installed more discipline into White House operations. When Erskine Bowles took over from Panetta, he continued the same, orderly approach. Thus Clinton finally admitted that he needed a more traditional chief of staff, though he would never allow a chief of staff the authority that Haldeman had.[7]

But the corollary to the need for a chief of staff is that if the person takes too domineering an approach to the job, the administration is in for trouble. The domineering chiefs of staff tried to control too much, and asserted personal control to the point where it became counterproductive. There have been four domineering chiefs of staff in the presidency—Sherman Adams for Eisenhower, H.R. Haldeman for Nixon, Donald Regan for Reagan, and John Sununu for Bush. Each of these domineering chiefs, in seeking to control all aspects of the White House, alienated members of their administration, members of Congress, and the press; and each of them ended by resigning in disgrace after doing serious harm to their presidents.[8]

So with respect to organizational matters *presidents are no longer free to run the White House without a chief of staff, and if that chief takes too domineering a role, there will be trouble.*

Environmental Determinants: White House Centralization and "Cabinet Government"

Cabinet government American style, that is with the separation of powers structure rather than a parliamentary system, was practiced in the modern era most effectively by President Eisenhower. That is, Eisenhower delegated a reasonable amount of leeway in policy development to his cabinet secretaries, and he used his cabinet as a deliberative body to advise him on the major issues of his administration.

While Kennedy did not think that the cabinet was of much use, aside from the individuals in it, and Johnson was afraid of leaks from his cabinet, subsequent presidents sought to return to the Eisenhower ideal. Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan each promised cabinet government. But each was forced to admit that their original ideals of delegation to cabinet secretaries along with a relatively weak White House staff was unachievable, and each of them abandoned their early ideals and opted for strong White House staffs.[9]

The reality of the modern presidency is that the White House staff dominates the administration, and cabinet secretaries inevitably play a secondary role. The reasons for this are several. In contrast to cabinet secretaries, White House staffers have no institutional turf to protect and perceive issues from a presidential perspective. If they are to be effective, cabinet members must worry about their programs, people, and turf. White House staffers are chosen more for their loyalty than for the symbolic reasons that affect cabinet selection. Staffers also have the advantage of proximity to the president and can drop all other matters in order to respond immediately to presidential needs.

But the most important reason that a large and dominant White House staff is necessary in the contemporary presidency is that the White House has taken over a number of functions that used to be performed by cabinet departments and political parties. Even if presidents wanted to, it would be difficult to push these functions out of the White House. As the presidency has grown, the size and reach of the White House has extended deeper into the executive branch. Just as executive branch departments and agencies have become more presidentialized (with political appointees and White House control), the presidency has become more bureaucratized (with more specialized units and hierarchical organization).[10]

National security policymaking has become centralized in the assistant to the president for National Security Affairs and the *NSC staff,* which often overshadow the secretaries of the State and Defense Departments. Domestic policy used to be the bailiwick of domestic departments and agencies but is now dominated by the *Office of Policy Development.* Legal advice to the president that used to be provided by the attorney general is now supplied by the *Counsel's Office* in the White House. Trade policy used to be developed in the Departments of State, Commerce, Agriculture, and so on, but now the *Office of U.S. Trade Representative* in the EOP is the president's agent to coordinate trade policy.

Political parties used to be the source of many of the presidential and other political appointees that would lead the administration. Now the *Office of Presidential Personnel* is the president's recruiter of political appointees. Coalitions on the Hill to pass the president's agenda were built with the help of the political parties, but the *Office of Congressional Liaison* does the job now. OCR is often aided by the *Office of Public Liaison,* which mobilizes interest groups to support the president's agenda, a function that parties used to perform. Partisan political strategy and activities used to be centered in the Democratic and Republican national committees. Now the *Office of Political Affairs* in the White House Office dominates political strategy.

Thus *presidents are not free to choose a "cabinet government" approach* to their administrations, as Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan found out. Nor are presidents free to abolish or delegate White House functions without outcries from those who think that the function is being downgraded.[11]

The Recruitment of Political Appointees

Making political appointments to the executive branch is one of the major authorities granted to the president in the Constitution. This is an area where presidents are free to use their own judgment, subject only to Senate confirmation, which though occasionally assertive, is in the vast majority of cases perfunctory. It would seem on the surface that presidents have virtually complete discretion in their choice of people who will make up the administration. But the size of the cohort that must be chosen imposes organizational imperatives if the task is to be accomplished with any dispatch at all. The broader political environment also imposes constraints that make it impossible for presidents to pursue only their own personal preferences in making appointments. This section examines the range of flexibility that presidents have in making political appointments.

The Development of Presidential Control

In the 1930s and 1940s political parties dominated the recruitment of political appointments, which were seen as patronage. As the government grew in size and scope after the New Deal and World War II, the need for policy expertise began to assert itself over the mere needs of patronage.[12] The qualifications of political operatives were no longer up to the demands of the highly technical programs the government now managed. In addition, with the increase in the importance of primary elections, presidents were no longer tied so closely to their political parties, and they began to want to control their appointments by their own political organizations rather than through the parties.

Thus the political recruitment function developed in the White House and became institutionalized. Harry Truman put one staffer in charge of political appointments. John Kennedy had a three person "talent hunt." By the end of his first term Richard Nixon had thirty-five people working on political recruitment; Ronald Reagan had 100 people in the personnel operation at the beginning of his administration, and Bill Clinton had even more.[13]

The centralization of control of political appointments in the White House was possible only because the institutional apparatus was created to handle the volume of appointments that each new administration has to make. The institutional development of a White House personnel recruitment capacity in theory gave the president the ability to make personal choices for appointments. The problem is that the number of candidates seeking a job with a new administration is enormous, and if the president does not deflect the entreaties, he will become inundated with applicants.

Thus while new presidents have the constitutional authority to pick whomever they choose for the administration (subject to Senate confirmation), the practical reality is that *they must set up a sizable personnel operations* to do it for them. And once that organization is set up, there are certain organizational imperatives that must be met if the task is to be accomplished effectively.

Organizational Constraints: Organizing for Political Recruitment

The first problem that becomes obvious to a new administration is the tremendous volume of jobs that must be filled. The total number of executive branch appointments available to a new president totals over 5,500. About 2,000 of these are part-time, and thus less important appointments, but that leaves about 1,000 appointments requiring Senate confirmation in the executive branch (PAS, including executives and commissioners, ambassadors, and United States attorneys and marshals) and more than 400 in the White House who do not need to be confirmed (PA). In addition, there are about 700 noncareer Senior Executive Service appointments available and about 1,700 Schedule C appointments (at the GS-15 and below level).[14] With this volume to handle, a professional personnel operation is a necessity, and such an operation has developed in the White House, though it must be created again for each new president, since there is little institutional memory in the White House, especially for such a sensitive matter as political appointments.

In the 1950s and 1960s presidents tended to delegate the selection of the subcabinet appointments (associate, deputy, and assistant secretaries, etc.) to their cabinet secretaries, and Presidents Nixon and Carter initially delegated broad personnel leeway to their cabinet heads. But after some experience, each of them felt that they had given away too much and tried to pull back the authority into the White House. The Reagan administration decided to avoid these problems by centralizing all political appointments in the White House. The result was the most centralized and tightly controlled personnel operation in the modern presidency.

The price paid for this centralization and thoroughness was time. The Reagan administration was the slowest recruitment effort to that time, with many complaints from departments and agencies that essential leadership was missing until late in the first year of the administration. The Clinton administration decided to use Reagan as a model and centralize appointments, rather than delegate some discretion to cabinet secretaries. The driving criterion, however, changed from ideology to diversity. The White House played the dominant role in recruitment and President Clinton along with the first lady played an active role in personnel selection. Again, the price was paid in time. The Clinton personnel effort was even slower than Reagan's. According to Calvin Mackenzie's calculations, Kennedy averaged 2.4 months, Nixon 3.4, Carter 4.6, Reagan 5.3, Bush 8.1, and Clinton 8.5.[15]

Thus, with the growing number of political appointees and the felt need of presidents to control all appointments in the White House, an elaborate and professional personnel operation is necessary. Presidents can in theory choose whomever they want in their administration, but there is no way that any individual can know the best people for the thousands of positions available, and a high price in time will be extracted if the president tries personally to oversee appointments to any great extent. *The personnel recruitment function must be delegated to a professional operation that has been carefully planned and organized.*

Environmental Determinants: The Politics of Constituency

To put things into perspective, any appointments that are personally important are at the president's discretion (subject to Senate ratification), and most of the very top layers of an administration will be determined by the president personally. The president should also set the tone for the entire personnel recruitment operation by communicating to the directors of the personnel search his own values, the priorities of the administration, and his personal preferences in building the administration team. But a president cannot become too deeply involved in the process of recruitment, or it will become bogged down. The president will be kept from the many other priorities to which he must attend, and the personnel process will become slowed down waiting for presidential decisions.

In any new administration the onslaught of applications for positions is voluminous and sudden. In the 1970s and 1980s in the first weeks of a new administration résumés poured in at 1,500 per day. In 1989 before the inauguration 16,000 résumés had been accumulated by the transition personnel operation. By the end of May 1989 more than 70,000 applications and recommendations had been received, though 25,000 were duplicates. One official likened separating the wheat from the chaff to "trying to take a sip from a fire hydrant." After the Clinton election 3,000 job requests had arrived within one week of the election, and by February 1993 they were receiving 2,000 résumés a day.[16]

In subsequent administrations the pressures for patronage remained as strong, but the source of the pressures began to shift. Political parties continued to exert what pressure they could, but their influence waned as presidential candidates began to organize their campaign organizations independently of the parties. Because of the declining influence of parties, presidents could ignore their demands with impunity. But as the influence of political parties decreased in electoral politics, their pressures were replaced by constituency and interest groups which supported candidates and expected that their support would be rewarded with appointments of their representatives.

In the Reagan administration these were "movement conservatives," those ideologically committed to the Reagan agenda and who had campaigned for his election. The Clinton administration's commitment to diversity reflected the coalition of groups that had campaigned for his election. The personnel operation had special recruitment staffers to act as liaison to its important supporting groups: African Americans, women, Hispanics, gays, and disability groups.[17]

Political appointments are seen as symbols of the direction of the new administration and its commitment to various priorities and constituent groups. Thus *new presidents do not have a free hand to choose whomever they please to serve in their administrations.* The challenge is to satisfy the inevitable (and legitimate in the context of American political history) demands for patronage without jeopardizing loyalty to the president or the competence necessary to run the government.

Pursuing a Policy Agenda

In deciding an initial policy agenda presidents possess a range of options, and understanding the constraints on policy possibilities will enable a new administration to make wise choices about where to place its limited energies. Presidents usually have the option of pushing their own "pet projects" if the policy is not very costly or far reaching. For more extensive programmatic proposals presidents can also be successful, but must be aware of the need for planning the concrete details of programs and the need to limit the range of their initial policy agendas. Finally, the likelihood of achieving broad changes in policy direction, though it can be enhanced by presidential skills, is often determined by broad environmental factors over which the president has little control.

Personal Preference: Campaign Promises and Pet Projects

Presidents often come to office with a psychological commitment to certain projects based on idealism or campaign promises. John Kennedy moved quickly to establish the Peace Corps. Jimmy Carter wanted to eliminate what he considered to be wasteful water projects from the agenda of the Army Corps of Engineers. Richard Nixon wanted to eliminate the Office of Economic

Opportunity created in the Great Society push of Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan wanted to "zero out" its successor, the Community Services Administration. Bill Clinton hoped to create a National Service Corps and make college loans more accessible to students of varying backgrounds.

It was not until very late in the campaign that Kennedy actually proposed a Peace Corps, but once in office Kennedy decided to act quickly and signaled his seriousness about establishing it by making his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, its director. Shriver succeeded in lobbying Congress sufficiently to win congressional backing and sufficient funding. Kennedy later took great pride in the Peace Corps, and it is remembered as one of the programs that symbolized Kennedy's youthful idealism.[18]

At the beginning of his administration, Jimmy Carter wanted to eliminate the pet water projects of many members of Congress by canceling Army Corps of Engineer projects that he considered wasteful and environmentally unsound. Despite warnings from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) about the importance of these projects to members of Congress, Carter went ahead with his proposal. Legislators became very upset and attached funding for the projects to an economic stimulus bill that Carter felt he had to sign.[19] In his first budget Ronald Reagan wanted to "zero out" the Community Services Administration. CSA was the successor to the Office of Economic Opportunity created in the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. Reagan succeeded where Nixon had failed in a similar effort because he convinced Congress to approve the shutdown in a package with other budget cuts.[20]

In his campaign for the presidency Bill Clinton had emphasized the theme of "putting people first." The day after the election, he held a press conference in which he said that national service would be one of the important initiatives of his administration, in addition to economic recovery, health care, and deficit reduction. His choice of a successful businessman and his friend of many years, Eli Segal, to head the project signaled his commitment to this agenda priority. As his proposal made its way through the administration's deliberations and the legislative process, significant cuts in the initial size of the program were made. But in the end, the symbolic, legislative, and programmatic statement was made. Clinton won approval of a relatively small, though important to him personally and symbolically, part of his initial policy agenda.[21]

The lesson here is that *pet projects can be pursued and won, but they require effort and compromises*; and they are not a sure thing.

Organizational Dynamics: Issues, Alternatives, and Choice

In considering a policy agenda a new president must do two things: translate general issues and campaign proposals into concrete programmatic proposals and decide among competing priorities in the agenda. John Kingdon argues that in the policy process there is an important distinction between agenda items and policy alternatives.[22] Presidents have the ability to set the agenda in the sense of raising issues to a level of visibility, for instance energy policy, welfare reform, tax simplification, deficit reduction, or health-care reform. But taking these general policy issues and generating a small set of concrete alternatives is another matter. The kind of broad societal problems that these policies are intended to deal with are so complex and the implications so far-reaching that only policy experts can meaningfully lay out concrete alternative approaches to deal with them. If a president wants to undertake major policy change, general issues will need quickly to be translated into specific policy alternatives, and those alternatives will have to be narrowed down to one legislative proposal.

Victory in the election gives a president a narrow window of opportunity for policy change. The longer a president waits to introduce key parts of the agenda, the less likely it is that the proposals will be enacted. Presidents can take advantage of relatively high public approval that will surely decline over the first several months in office. Congress is relatively open to cooperation with the new president. The election is fresh in the minds of Congress and the people, and a mandate can be claimed. Mistakes and policy choices will not yet have been made, and opportunity is at its greatest.

Lyndon Johnson's landslide in 1964 brought into office large Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress. Johnson's Great Society and War on Poverty legislative victories are legendary, but much of the specific planning for the policy initiatives had been circulating in Democratic policy circles for years, and transforming them into specific legislative proposals was not a major problem.[23] Johnson pushed his domestic agenda relentlessly, believing that his window of opportunity would soon close.

Richard Nixon did not have Johnson's luxury of a large legislative victory or partisan majorities in Congress; instead, he faced an opposition-controlled Congress and had a narrow margin of victory over Hubert Humphrey in 1968. Nixon proposed his Family Assistance Plan to replace the welfare system's several programs with a negative income tax early in his administration. But his White House staff did not have a fully formulated proposal until August 1969.[24] The problems in timing were that welfare was a contentious area, and it took time for the administration itself to agree on one reform proposal. The plan was eventually defeated; the proposal may have been doomed in any case because of the deep value disagreements between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. But it may have had a better chance if it had been ready to go earlier in Nixon's first term.

Jimmy Carter decided to pursue a national energy policy that would make the United States more independent of foreign oil. He put James Schlesinger in charge of the policy and charged him with coming up with a plan within ninety days of the inauguration. This was a tight time frame, given the technical complexity of the issues, and Schlesinger compounded other difficulties by working in secret without vetting his plans with Democrats on the Hill or even members of the Carter administration. The deadline for the proposal was met, but over the next year it was significantly changed in Congress due to the political failure to work with members but also because of disagreements over the substance of the policy. It eventually passed, but not in the form Carter had originally proposed. Carter's original proposal may have been doomed in any event, but there is little doubt that the chances would have been better had it been ready to go shortly after inauguration.

Ronald Reagan's major budget priorities were passed, virtually intact, within six months of his taking office. It helped that Reagan had a perceived mandate, but the victories were also due to careful planning on the part of his team. The priorities of domestic budget cuts, tax cuts, and increased military spending were clear during the campaign. And the work of translating these general policy directions into concrete proposals was begun well before the election by David Stockman, a member of Congress who became Reagan's OMB director. This advance planning and early decision on the part of the Reagan administration enabled them to achieve unprecedented budget changes within months of taking office. If the proposals had been delayed significantly, it is doubtful that they would have been successful.[25]

One of Bill Clinton's top policy priorities in 1993 was health-care reform. In addition to his decision to attack the budget deficit, he wanted to move quickly on reforming the health-care system to provide universal coverage for health insurance. Clinton understood that this was a complex issue and that there was not a problem of lack of preparing specific alternatives. A health-care planning group had been set up in the fall of 1991 in Washington to lay out alternatives. Once in office, President Clinton decided that the planning group's efforts were not acceptable and created a task force headed by Hillary Clinton and Ira Magaziner to come up with the administration's proposal, but the actual proposal did not get to Congress until late fall of 1993. The delay turned out to be one of the reasons for the failure to enact health-care reform.

The problem with the timing of the Clinton health-care plan was not lack of preparation but the president's refusal to make an early choice of which alternative to select. There were a number of elements that Clinton could back, but he wanted a comprehensive proposal that would achieve universal coverage and cost neutrality. Perhaps any proposal that could achieve both of those virtually incompatible goals would have been unacceptable to the public, but whatever proposal they had would have had a better chance if it had been ready to go earlier in the administration.[26]

A similar problem faced Clinton on his deficit-reduction package. Even though he made his budget speech on February 17, a day before Reagan had in 1981, the final decisions on how to deal with the budget were not made until mid-February. Again, it was not due to lack of planning; Clinton had held an economic "summit" in Little Rock in December in which all alternatives had been explored, and his OMB director, Leon Panetta, was intimately familiar with the budget details from his years as chair of the House Budget Committee. Whereas Reagan's budget direction was clear from the time of the election, Clinton's was not clear until mid-February. The delay was not due to lack of planning but to Clinton's delay in deciding. The economy was changing and it was not clear to Clinton whether the economy was still in recession and thus needing stimulus or coming out of the recession and thus able to take the restraint of deficit reduction. Delay meant a better policy, but a tougher time getting it through Congress.[27]

Thus, *if presidents want early policy success, it helps to have concrete proposals ready to go* early in their administrations. This necessarily entails early planning and a decision on specific alternatives during the transition. This may not provide the necessary time for deliberation and time for wise policy choice, but it will maximize the chance of passage.

Environmental Determinants: The Limits of Political Capital

President's have most control over small pet projects that they personally identify with and push early in their administrations. Presidents have some control over planning their major policy proposals, choosing specific alternatives, and deciding on how broad their initial policy agendas should be. But the overall success of the policy agenda is often determined by factors in the political environment beyond presidential control. These factors include most importantly the partisan margins in each house of Congress, the president's electoral margin of victory, and the "mood of the times."[28]

In considering presidential policy success with Congress much of the popular press dwells on the force of personality and the tactical details of winning votes, but the consensus of scholars is that presidential success with Congress depends on factors over which presidents have little control. For instance, George Edwards argues that presidential skills—that is, the ability to effectively lobby members of Congress, do favors, and make threats—are effective only "at the margins."[29] Paul Light argues that political capital—partisan seats in Congress, electoral margin, and public approval—is most likely to determine success with Congress, not presidential personality, skills, or energy.[30]

Charles O. Jones in *The Presidency in a Separated System* argues that the U.S. Constitution did not set up a presidential system and takes issue with those who judge our system by whether or not presidents can get their way with Congress.[31] Jones argues that we should change our criteria of evaluating presidents from implicit comparisons with FDR, LBJ, and Ronald Reagan. We should, instead, judge presidential accomplishment in relative terms. "What can a president reasonably be expected to accomplish?"[32]

In his warning he echoes Richard Neustadt, who warns about the high expectations implied in the "100 days syndrome" and urges caution to new presidents lest they make mistakes due to the ignorance, arrogance, or hubris engendered by election victory. In contrast, Roger Porter, veteran White House staffer, argues that despite these legitimate cautions, optimism ought to prevail. Transitions are a time of opportunity, and much can be accomplished in transforming "a limited electoral mandate into a capacity to govern."[33]

From this perspective we should not be surprised that Bill Clinton did not achieve all that he had hoped to early in his administration, but we should be surprised that he did as well as he did. Despite unified government with Democrats in control of Congress, Clinton suffered from the narrowness of his 43 percent electoral victory and his relatively low approval ratings in the spring of 1993.[34] With the Democrats divided, he had no natural coalition of support in Congress, and the Republicans were able to use filibusters effectively in the Senate. Clinton's high presidential support scores and high party unity scores in his first year were misleading, indicating more support in Congress than he had in reality. Emblematic of Clinton's optimism was his health-care initiative, which proposed a much larger change than Americans were willing to accept (there were also, of course, many other factors that contributed to the defeat of the health-care initiative).

Given this analysis, what should new presidents do? They are caught in a dilemma: either take the time to develop a carefully thought out policy or move quickly with a less-well-formed option. The main point is to *be aware of the likely range of opportunities for a new administration and choose carefully.* Jones, Neustadt, and others rightly argue for caution and care not to overreach. But I, along with Porter, would argue for optimism and urge new administrations to hit the ground running with well-thought-out policy initiatives. If a new president does have a policy agenda, regardless of size, the best chance to achieve that agenda is at the beginning of an administration. And the better prepared a new administration is to go after its policy goals, the better chance they have of achieving them.

Conclusion

What stands out in the above analysis is the wide range of challenges facing a new president. This chapter has chosen only several of the top priorities each new administration must face: organizing the executive branch, selecting presidential personnel, and choosing a policy agenda. Other priorities and demands must also be faced: formulating a foreign policy, dealing with the press, symbolic and rhetorical appeals to the nation, and so on. And what is worse, all of these things must be done at the same time immediately after the election.

No wonder that presidential staffs feel that there is never enough time between election and inauguration. Yet the early weeks and months of a new administration can be crucial to its overall success. Early mistakes hurt, as Carter and Clinton found out, even if the lessons are learned and performance improves. Early victories also set a tone out of proportion to the overall performance of the administration. Most of the major policy changes of the Reagan administration were accomplished in a very successful first year.

While not addressing the wisdom of the policies, the model for hitting the ground running remains the Reagan administration. Through careful and conscious planning and focus of energy, the administration was able to accomplish much of what it wanted to in the first year. The White House was effectively organized, political appointments were used effectively, and the policy agenda was closely focused and pursued systematically. Admittedly, Reagan had a politically plausible mandate. Neither Presidents Bush nor Clinton had the same opportunity that Reagan had in 1981, but neither was as organized or as strategically oriented as was the Reagan administration in 1981. Political accomplishment depends upon both opportunity and the ability to take advantage of that opportunity.

The lessons of recent presidential transitions are these:

1. With respect to *organization,* the general rules of transition are fairly evident. A strong White House staff is necessary, and a nondomineering chief of staff must be in charge.
2. With respect to *political appointments,* there is no way to do the job well. The inherent difficulty of pleasing all factions is now aggravated by the huge volume of appointments to be made. Regardless of how well a personnel operation is organized, it will take well into the first year to get a majority of political appointments in place. But planning can mitigate the extent of the inevitable problems.
3. With respect to the *policy agenda,* much will depend on the historical circumstances of the election and the margin of victory. Is there enough public consensus that major issues are ripe for action? Can a president bent upon bold policy changes hold strong enough public support throughout the policy process?

But regardless of the constraints and opportunities faced by each new president, the range of possibilities will be enhanced by careful planning, coherent organization, and a focused agenda. And careful attention to the lessons of past transitions.

Notes

1. In their fine book Walcott and Hult distinguish three factors that affect presidential control over White House organization: personal preference, organizational dynamics, and environmental factors. See Charles Walcott and Karen Hult, *Governing the White House* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).
2. Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: Wiley, 1980).
3. See Hugh Heclo, "The Presidential Office," in James P. Pfiffner, ed., *The Managerial Presidency* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1991).
4. See Patrick Anderson, *The President's Men* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969); Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *Madhouse* (New York: Times Books, 1996).
5. For an analysis of the types of aides a president needs, see Matthew Holden Jr., "Why Entourage Politics is Volatile," in Pfiffner, ed., *The Managerial Presidency.*
6. On Eisenhower's approach to organization, see Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and Phillip G. Henderson, *Managing the Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988).
7. For an analysis of Clinton's White House organization, see James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running,* 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 151–62.
8. For a detailed elaboration of this argument, see James P. Pfiffner, "The President's Chief of Staff: Lessons Learned," *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* Winter 1993, 88–102.
9. See Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* ch. 2, "The Holy Grail of 'True' Cabinet Government." See also Shirley Anne Warshaw, *Powersharing: White House-Cabinet Relations in the Modern Presidency* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996).
10. See Francis Rourke, "Presidentializing the Bureaucracy: From Kennedy to Reagan," in Pfiffner, *The Managerial Presidency,* 123–34.
11. Both Presidents Carter and Clinton tried to remove the Council on Environmental Quality from the EOP, but each was defeated by those who insisted that this would symbolize the downgrading of environmental priorities. The concentration of these functions in the White House is also why presidents have a hard time fulfilling campaign promises to cut the White House staff. Both Clinton and Carter had to resort to creative accounting and box shuffling in order to claim to have accomplished their goals. For analyses of Clinton's White House staff cuts, see Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* 154–55; and "Cutting Staff No Easy Task for Clinton," *Maine Sunday Telegram,* December 12, 1993. See also John Hart, "The Politics of Symbolism: President Clinton's White House Staff Reductions," paper presented at the American Political Science Convention, New York City, September 1, 1994.

12. See Calvin Mackenzie, "Partisan Presidential Leadership: The President's Appointees," in L. Sandy Maisel, ed., *The Parties Respond* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1990).

13. For the development of the political recruitment capacity in the White House, see Thomas Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

14. PAS data provided to the author in 1992 by the executive clerk to the president. For details, see James P. Pfiffner, *The Modern Presidency* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 123; and Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* 194.

15. Data compiled by Calvin Mackenzie; see Paul Light, *Thickening Government* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1995), 68. See also Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* 168–72, 190–99.

16. See Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* 56–58, 137–41, 163–72; see also Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency,* 100. Even President Eisenhower, who did not want patronage issues in the White House, ended up with many patronage issues run by Sherman Adams. The pressures from the Republican Party after twenty years of Democratic rule were too strong for even the president to resist. For a detailed analysis and documentation of the Eisenhower patronage operation, see Charles Walcott and Karen Hult, *Governing the White House* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 83–84. See also Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency,* 35–39.

17. Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency,* 100–101.

18. See the analysis by James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 152–58.

19. See Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* 120–22.

20. For the Nixon actions, see James P. Pfiffner, *The President, the Budget, and Congress: Impoundment and the 1974 Budget Act* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 30, 116; for the Reagan action, see Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency,* 84.

21. For an account of the development and passage of the legislation, see Steven Waldman, *The Bill: How the Adventures of Clinton's National Service Bill Reveal What Is Corrupt, Comic, Cynical—and Noble—About Washington* (New York: Viking, 1995).

22. John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (New York: Little, Brown, 1984).

23. See Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice from Kennedy to Carter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 50.

24. See Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 115–37.

25. For a detailed analysis, see James P. Pfiffner, "The Reagan Budget Juggernaut," in Pfiffner, ed., *The President and Economic Policy* (Philadelphia: ISHI Press, 1986), 108–34.

26. Haynes Johnson and David Broder, *The System: The American Way of Politics at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), 70–109.

27. For an analysis of Clinton's first year agenda, see James P. Pfiffner, "President Clinton and the 103rd Congress: Winning Battles and Losing Wars," in James Thurber, ed., *Rivals for Power* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1996).

28. For the importance of the mood of the times in major legislative eras, see David Mayhew, *Divided We Govern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

29. George C. Edwards, *At the Margins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher, *The President in the Legislative Arena* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Mark A. Peterson, *Legislating Together: The White House and Capitol Hill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Lance T. LeLoup and Steven A. Shull, *The President and Congress* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1999).

30. Paul Light, *The President's Agenda* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 26.

31. Charles O. Jones, *The Presidency in a Separated System* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994).

32. Ibid., 50.

33. Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: Wiley, 1980), 220–25. See also Roger Porter, "Of Hazards and Opportunities: Transitions and the Modern Presidency," paper prepared for the Conference on Presidential Power revisited, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, June 13, 1996. Forthcoming a festschrift for Richard Neustadt, edited by Roger Porter.

34. For an elaboration of this point, see Pfiffner, "President Clinton and the 103rd Congress," in Thurber, *Rivals for Power.*