

## Academic–Practitioner Exchange: Planning an Effective Presidential Transition in 2008–2009

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## Preparing to Be President on Day One

*Nearly 50 years ago, John F. Kennedy asked Clark Clifford to handle his transition planning; the day after the election, Clifford handed Kennedy a single memorandum. Transition for today's president-elect is much more complex. Managing the shift from campaigning to governing is the president-elect's greatest challenge and biggest opportunity. According to Martha Joynt Kumar in her foregoing essay, the newly elected would do well to learn from the successes and failures of their predecessors. In short, the risks rooted in the inexperience and hubris of new presidents may be mitigated or avoided by knowledge gained from analysis of transition precedents. In this essay, the author provides a practitioner's checklist of dos and don'ts drawn from his experience as a manager and advisor in presidential transitions.*

Over the last decade, Martha Joynt Kumar has become the institutional memory of the modern presidency in transition. When the new president's team enters the White House, they find it, as Kumar has said, swept “whistle clean” of all written and electronic records of the previous administration (Kumar et al. 2003, 5). The information that the outgoing president makes available to the incoming is entirely discretionary. Kumar fills the gap. For those men or women who accomplish what Richard E. Neustadt has called “this impossible, terrible and awful thing” (1994, 7)—getting nominated and elected president of the United States—Kumar is the Baedeker, the indispensable tour guide, to the hazards, pitfalls, and hairpin turns that must be traversed between election day and the inaugural. As director of the White House Interview Program, she has enjoyed the respect and confidence of incoming and outgoing White House staffs, maintaining her distance as a scholar while still conveying a profound empathy for the burdens of office shouldered by her interviewees.

Kumar believes that transitions matter and that the newly elected

can learn from the successes and mistakes of their predecessors. The complexity of the management, policy, personnel, and organization issues increases with every transition. Neustadt, the foremost analyst and historian of the modern presidency and my mentor in the practice of transitions, liked to say that all new presidents are vulnerable to “arrogance in ignorance, their own and that of their associates” (2000, 143). He believed, like Kumar, that the risks to the nation rooted in the inexperience and hubris of new presidents might be mitigated or avoided by knowledge gained from analysis of what has gone right and wrong in past transitions. Good planning, organization, focus, and discipline, taking their cues from the best practices of past transitions, strongly supported by the nominee/president-elect, blessed with a little luck, can greatly increase the odds of success. In her foregoing essay, Kumar has identified those pitfalls and opportunities that, if avoided or seized, respectively, will help the new president, as promised by both parties in the 2008 campaign, be ready to lead the nation on day one.

### Pitfalls and Opportunities

The following is a checklist of dos and don'ts for managers of a successful transition. It is derived from advice I have given to presidents-elect and presidential nominees since 1976 as transition advisor both before and after elections.

***Transition planning needs to be begin not only before the election but also before the***

***conventions.*** Most candidates for president have been reluctant to begin planning for transition before the election for fear that they will be considered presumptuous or arrogant. Some are just plain superstitious. They also fear that pre-election planning may fuel speculation about who will be

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appointed to top jobs, causing tension between planners and campaign staff about the division of the spoils. Kumar strongly recommends that transition planning begin long before the conventions when the presumptive nominee is identified early in the election cycle. Taking her cues from the pre-convention transition planning coordinated by Clay Johnson for Governor George W. Bush, which was both discrete and successful, she advises that a person trusted by the candidate be assigned to gather information on key offices essential to the candidate's policies, including the sequencing of critical appointments; to study transition precedents; to review executive orders, proclamations, regulatory initiatives, and other opportunities for early policy signals; and to calendar the most effective use of the president-elect's time during the transition.

To be successful, the leaders of the pre-convention and preelection planning must have the following attributes:

- **Close relationship with the candidate.** The candidate must have enough trust in the leader's loyalty, discretion, political savvy, and management skills to feel comfortable delegating most of the preelection planning decisions. Edwin Meese was in place for Ronald Reagan before the nomination; Dick Cheney took command of transition planning in August for George W. Bush. Both had the complete confidence of their candidates, a fact well known by everyone in the campaign.
- **Mr. Inside/Mr. Outside.** There are two key functions of transition leadership. The first, Mr. Inside, handles the information gathering on personnel and transition planning issues and keeps a low profile before and after the election. The second, Mr. Outside, becomes the transition's public face after the election, working with the chief of staff and dealing with Congress and the outside world. Johnson played the inside role for George W. Bush, and Cheney was the public face of the transition. The same roles were played by Pendleton James and Edwin Meese, respectively, in the Reagan transition.
- **Trust by the campaign.** While the day-to-day preelection transition director should not have a campaign role, he or she should coordinate with the campaign leadership on a regular basis. Regularly scheduled meetings with key members of the campaign and, less frequently, with the nominee, are essential. The message must be clear that the preelection team's mandate is to focus on planning and information gathering, not on preempting key personnel or policy choices before the election. Suspicion between campaign and preelection transition planners in both the Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton transitions embarrassed the president-elect, amused the press corps, and delayed key transition decisions (Wellford 2007, 61–62).

**Make personnel planning the first preelection priority.** Failure to establish an efficient, thorough appointments methodology will doom a transition. As Kumar points out, the new president has to make more than 1,100 political appointments requiring Senate confirmation. He or she will also have to appoint nearly 800 White House staff members. Unless the transition team takes control of the process, the flood of job seekers and advice givers can overwhelm a transition effort and cause nightmares for the president-elect.

**Identify the top 200 positions that are most critical to implementing policies and executive orders reflective of campaign priorities.** While the focus should be on 200, unfortunately, all the system can handle is around 100 nominations at a time. In the case of the Reagan administration, James Baker, who was coming in as chief of staff, believed it would be crucial for the administration to control the levers of economic policy. Baker chose 87 positions that were key to getting hold of the economy and focused first on them.

**Establish a framework for processing appointees.** Before the election, the transition team should establish (1) a means of processing applications and recommendations for appointments, (2) a framework for evaluating potential appointees, (3) a method for vetting potential appointees, and (4) procedures for briefing and interfacing with selected appointees. President Clinton's transition team was unprepared for the tidal wave of applicants and paid a heavy price for mismanaging it.

**Begin gathering information about possible key appointees.** While the preelection transition personnel effort is driven primarily by fact gathering and establishing a process, more advanced work should be done on the selection of key appointees (e.g., the chief of staff; press secretary; directors of the Office of Management and Budget, Central Intelligence Agency, Homeland Security Council, and National Security Council; and the secretaries of state, defense, and treasury) who must be in place very soon after the election. This requires highly confidential consultation with campaign leaders and the nominee as election day approaches.

**Clear campaign themes and policy agendas are the mother's milk of successful transitions.** To borrow Isaiah Berlin's simile, successful transitions are more like hedgehogs than foxes: They focus on one or two big things—a compelling thematic message—rather than skip nimbly among many small ones. The greatest gift the campaign can give to the transition is to clearly articulate the themes that will become its mandate. This mantra can be an indispensable guide to the work of transition teams, the preparation of the

budget, the selection of key appointees, the organization of priorities, and communications with the press.

If the incoming president does not have a well-formed agenda for the first few months in office, others will fill the space with their own wish lists. For example, when it became clear that President Carter did not have a clearly articulated agenda coming into office, a feeding frenzy of policy wonks from interest groups, think tanks, and Congress swarmed the White House. Raised expectations inevitably led to frustration and disappointment, leaving the president looking weak and indecisive. Republicans are very good at crafting their message, shaping an agenda to reflect it, and sticking to it. Democrats should try to do the same.

***Marry the policy agenda to a detailed “178 calendar,” anticipating all the things the president must do or cannot avoid during the transition and the first 100 days.*** Such a calendar, covering the 78 days between the election and the inauguration and the 100 days after, which is maintained and refreshed daily by the White House chief of staff, is essential to planning the president’s time and the rollout of key initiatives. James Baker took personal charge of developing a carefully calendared strategic plan for President Reagan, drawing on precedents back to the Harry Truman era. At the end of the first 100 days after the inauguration, the news organizations will grade the new president on the progress of appointments, executive orders advancing campaign promises and reversing the predecessor’s, foreign policy and national security initiatives, budget and economic priorities, the number of legislative proposals, and more generally on down payments on executing the themes of the campaign. The 178 calendar gives the White House a tracking device to see where the president is as this deadline approaches. A first cut of the calendar should be prepared during the preelection period and updated and enhanced during the transition.

***Avoid campaign promises that restrict a president’s ability to organize his or her White House staff and attract the best people to the new administration.*** Avoid promises to cut the White House staff or reduce the size of the Executive Office of the President or other government agencies. Both President Carter and President Clinton promised to cut the size of the White House staff by 25 percent or more. President Carter went further and promised to cut the number of federal agencies by 30 percent and promised a reorganization plan to do it in the first 100 days. Reorganization plans devour political capital and almost always promise more than they deliver. The press was relentless in holding the new presidents to

their promises. It makes no sense to promise to cut the staff of agencies before you have had the chance to study them and mold them to your priorities.

***Don’t make promises about the ethical standards, gender, race, or ethnicity of your appointees that you can’t control.*** President Clinton was saddled with his promise to create the most ethical administration ever. This made the president hostage to any false information provided by a nominee who abused his trust. Extending postemployment restrictions to five years also discouraged many qualified people from entering the government. The expectations of interest groups and the press will be raised by promises about the gender or race of appointees. These promises, with their zero-sum metrics, are very difficult to meet in the rush to fill key jobs and set the new president up to fail. The president-elect should let his or her actions speak to any commitments to diversity. In the end, that’s all that counts anyway.

***Avoid musical chairs in transition leadership after the election.*** Continuity between the leadership of the pre- and postelection transition teams is very important. For example, it is usually a mistake to install transition leaders who will end up in the cabinet. The Clinton transition was crippled by the departure in mid-transition of two key leaders: Warren Christopher, who went from codirector of the transition to secretary of state, and Dick Riley, who went from director of personnel planning to secretary of education. The ideal transition leader is an experienced veteran, such as Clark Clifford for John F. Kennedy, who can act as an honest broker among the competing interests of the faithful because he or she has no design on higher office.

***Announce the White House chief of staff within days of the election.*** Transitions cry out for clear designation of authority and organizational structure. Without it, unchecked ambitions cause chaos and inefficiency and squander the most precious resource of the transition—the time of the president-elect. Ideally, the president-elect should be prepared to announce the chief of staff the day after the election, along with the head of the transition. Clinton did not announce his chief of staff until mid-December, and most senior staff were not on board until just prior to the inauguration. As a result, not only were White House staffing selections delayed, but also coordination of policy initiatives was severely hampered. By comparison, Dick Cheney became the leader of preelection transition planning right after the convention and continued as transition chief after the election. George W. Bush designated Andrew Card to be his chief of staff before the Florida

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results were in, and by the inauguration, the White House staff was in place and working, down to the second and third tier.

***Schedule rest time for the president-elect out of the public eye.*** The most sincere vote of confidence that a president-elect can give preelection transition planners is to take a few days off right after the election. This retreat telegraphs confidence in them, making clear the belief that key appointments—transition leadership, White House chief of staff, and press secretary—are in place and that other action-forcing processes and deadlines are under control. Both Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush rested in seclusion and benefited from it. President Clinton did not and wished he had. A resting period both invigorates the president-elect and allows a certain amount of political protection. A rested, energized president-elect reemerging as the inauguration nears projects a powerful image of a confident, vigorous leader who is ready to lead the country.

***Never forget that the Constitution allows only one president at a time.*** While the president-elect has no official power until January 20, the anticipation of the power shift by the winning campaign team, high officials in the outgoing administration, and political leaders worldwide is intense and creates the threat of a power vacuum unless carefully managed. The outgoing president's key advisors begin to fade away, in spirit if not in body, within weeks of the election, and little political capital remains to launch new initiatives. The president-elect, on the other hand, is pressured by many forces to signal changes to come. This can be done legitimately with new appointments, but the president-elect should resist all temptation to interfere in government decisions before January 20.

This is particularly true in foreign policy and national security affairs. The outgoing president will offer to brief the president-elect on important national security matters, and senior members of the national security and foreign policy transition teams (with the right clearances) can seek additional information as needed. Their role is to gather information about decisions, not to make them. In return, the outgoing president should refrain from making new commitments—except in a crisis—that preempt opportunities for the new administration (Wellford 2007, 54).

One way in which president-elects have avoided conflict about who is in charge is by keeping a low profile during the transition. They usually stay away from Washington and surface only for big events, such as the ceremonial meeting between the president and the president-elect, the tour of the White House by the first lady, and the announcement of key appointments. President-Elect Clinton conducted an

economic policy summit in Little Rock during the transition, but as a fact-gathering and agenda-setting exercise.

***Appoint key White House and Executive Office staff and the economic policy and national security/foreign policy team by Thanksgiving.*** The most urgent issues and tasks facing a president-elect are (1) foreign and national security affairs, (2) the preparation of the budget and economic policy, (3) cabinet selection, (4) White House organization, and (5) communications with Congress and the outside world. To demonstrate dramatically the priority given by the president-elect to economic policy, foreign affairs, and national security, the key cabinet members in these areas should be appointed by Thanksgiving, or sooner if possible. No recent president-elect has made these appointments this early. Getting this team in place is critical to allowing the new president to act quickly on economic policy, foreign policy, and security agendas after the inaugural and will, by itself, go a long way toward making the transition a success in the eyes of the media.

***Include experienced Washington insiders on the transition team and White House staff.*** In the transition leadership and the White House staff, it is essential to create a blend of trusted leaders from the campaign and experienced Washington insiders who know how transitions and the government works. Successful transition teams and White House staffs—such as those of Ronald Reagan in 1980—are led by people trusted by the campaign who also have federal government experience, especially experience in the White House and Executive Office of the President, Congress, and past transitions. The 78 days between the election and the inauguration require the transition team to work at a frenetic pace. Therefore, it is important that the transition team involve people who have both the savvy and the energy to immediately jump on the tasks that must be done. Many people fresh off the campaign are exhausted and need time to recharge their batteries. Both the Carter and Clinton White House staffs were initially stacked with campaign veterans who had little Washington experience, and their on-the-job training was sometimes painful to watch. For example, Hamilton Jordan's refusal to give Tip O'Neill additional inaugural tickets soured their relationship for the next four years.

***Avoid transition team bloat—make the transition serve the president-elect's priorities first.*** The primary goal of the transition is to help the president-elect negotiate the passage from getting elected to governing. Although the size of some transition teams might suggest the contrary, transition should not become a summer camp to reward the party faithful. Large agency transition teams are opportunities for

mischievous and should be resisted (Wellford 2007, 63). The pressure from interest groups, contributors, campaign workers, members of Congress, and other Democratic officeholders to place people on these teams is overwhelming. The president-elect should make clear when announcing the leaders of the transition that he intends to run a lean transition that is laser-focused on key priorities. A proactive personnel team that reaches out to these constituencies immediately after the election with information on the appointment process can also help ease the pressure. The planning for the inaugural can also absorb many campaign workers and contributors.

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***Establish a relationship of mutual respect and cooperation with the outgoing administration.*** The world does not stop spinning during a presidential transition. The American people want to be reassured that the president-elect will cooperate effectively with the outgoing president to ensure a safe and successful transfer of power. A wise president-elect should emulate President Kennedy and use the transition as a time for healing, for binding the nation together after a divisive campaign. The president-elect's relationship with the outgoing president is heavily symbolic in this regard. Setting the right tone of cooperation and mutual respect is not easy. There is some inevitable tension and awkwardness in the relationship between the incoming and outgoing transition teams, fueled by a volatile mix of euphoria and humiliation if the election is seen as a repudiation of the previous regime. This is particularly true when the election is very close. In both the 1992 and 2000 transitions, bad blood developed between the transition teams that proved mutually embarrassing, highlighted by Vice President-Elect Cheney's complaints about lack of cooperation in a press conference on November 27, 2000, and angry rebuttals from the Clinton staff. Most of the time, however, the transition teams work well together.

The president and president-elect and their transition teams traditionally have a meeting at the end of the second week after the election. This is often a missed opportunity for the president-elect. Rarely does the president leave the meeting feeling that the successor listened to what was said. The president-elect can set the right tone of cooperation by asking questions about the president's experience in key areas and providing a list of requests to facilitate cooperation between the transition team and the outgoing government. President-Elect Reagan suggested a hotline be established between two senior members of the transitions (Harrison Wellford and Bill Timmons) to deal immediately with incidents or rumors of incidents (more likely) of conflict between the two teams before they got out of hand. President Carter asked for early

access to key Office of Management and Budget staff to help prepare budget amendments. Presidents Carter and Clinton agreed to requests that they write letters terminating all political appointees to save the new president from having to do so. A good relationship between the outgoing and incoming White House chiefs of staff can also go a long way toward reducing tension and creating an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect.

***Learn from institutional memory of the outgoing teams and senior career staff.*** The institutional memory of the outgoing team is a priceless asset that often is overlooked or undervalued. Usually, the outgoing team is very anxious to cooperate with the incoming team and share their institutional knowledge. The incoming team, puffed up with the winner's hubris, is often not very interested. This is a mistake that the president-elect can avoid by giving clear signals to the transition team that he or she wants them to cooperate and learn from the outgoing team. This is particularly important for the White House. The new White House staff will find that their offices have no files, no rolodexes, and no career staff waiting to explain the ropes. All key White House staff and the heads of agencies in the Executive Office of the President should be thoroughly debriefed before they depart, if they are willing. Most will welcome the opportunity.

***Complete cabinet selections by mid-December.*** The remaining cabinet appointees should be announced prior to Christmas. This is traditionally the benchmark the press has used to evaluate whether the transition is on track or behind that of prior presidents. From a practical perspective, meeting this deadline is also important because the nominees will need time to be briefed on their new positions, prepare for Senate confirmation hearings, and begin selecting, in coordination with the president-elect, their senior staff.

## Conclusion

More than 40 years ago, John F. Kennedy asked Clark Clifford to handle the transition for him, and the day after the election, Clifford handed Kennedy a single memorandum. Transition for today's president-elect is much more complex. The work should begin before the conventions and run flat out until the inauguration. Managing the shift from campaigning to governing is the president-elect's greatest challenge and biggest opportunity. Getting him or her ready to do this is the transition team's only objective. Good preelection planning should allow the president-elect to make a good and lasting first impression as a national, not a factional, leader who can govern as well as campaign.

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