



Surviving the Presidential Transition June 26, 2008

The federal government has not experienced a presidential transition in eight years. As a result, many “young to government” professionals have not worked through a change in leadership and are curious about what a presidential transition entails. In particular, they are interested in how the upcoming presidential transition will affect them, how to successfully manage the transition, and what challenges face the next administration. To help answer these questions, the Partnership for Public Service and Young Government Leaders asked John Kamensky and Martha Joynt Kumar to discuss their experiences and perspectives on managing the next transition.

Mr. Kamensky is a Senior Fellow with the IBM Center for The Business of Government and an Associate Partner with IBM's Global Business Services. During 24 years of public service, he had a significant role in helping pioneer the federal government's performance and results orientation. He currently focuses on management challenges associated with the upcoming presidential transition and blogs on it at: transition2008.wordpress.com. Dr. Kumar is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at Towson University. From 1998 to 2001 she directed the White House 2001 Project, which was designed to build an institutional memory for seven White House offices to provide the information to new staff coming into the selected positions in 2001. She currently works with presidency scholars preparing information for the 2009 presidential transition. The group's work is available at: whitehousetransitionproject.org.

This document summarizes their presentation and the ensuing discussion.

OVERVIEW

Approximately 90 federal employees attended the “Surviving the Transition” forum to discuss the following:

- What does a presidential transition entail?
- What are the unique challenges facing the next administration's transition?
- How will this presidential transition affect me and how can I best manage this process?

A PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION SUMMARY: FOUR PHASES

Transitioning Out: Outgoing administrations often attempt to institutionalize their initiatives. The current administration, for example, embedded its performance improvement initiatives by creating Performance Improvement Officers in all executive agencies (“Executive Order: Improving Government Program Performance,” November 2007). Just before the inauguration, the outgoing president typically asks his appointees to resign, if this is the incoming administration's wish. If presidential appointees remain when a new administration arrives, it forces an incoming leader and his Cabinet secretaries to fire staff upon taking office. Outgoing presidents do their successors a great service by asking political appointees to leave with them and enforcing the order in the final days by firing them if they don't resign.

Pre-Election Transition: During this second phase, which may begin as early as the end of the primary season, candidates begin assembling small, privately-funded transition teams. These teams begin the research process necessary to prepare for taking the helm. This effort typically focuses on planning the 77-day transition timetable, identifying priorities for appointments, and developing a decision-making process. In President George W. Bush's case, planning began earlier than traditionally done. In 1999, Governor Bush asked Clay Johnson, then his chief of staff, to gather information on past transitions and speak with knowledgeable people.

Post-Election Transition: Since the 1933 ratification of the 20th Amendment, which shortened the official transition by two months, presidents have enjoyed only seventy-plus days between their election and inauguration. This period is managed by a transition team whose size and specific charge varies with each transition. Research continues during this phase, with teams studying agency programs and personnel and creating briefing books for the main transition team. It can be difficult to predict a transition's success from its earliest days: Carter's early efforts fell apart due to in-fighting, while George W. Bush's late-starting effort is widely considered among the best in recent times.

Inauguration and Beyond: Starting after the inauguration, the president formally submits his nominations for key posts. He generally names his picks before Christmas; Senate committees then begin their confirmation work, so that most nominees can be in office in the first few weeks. Behind the scenes, applications are solicited for the many other appointed positions that the new president must fill. Generally, the transition ends about six months after the inauguration.

BRIDGING THE GAP: MANAGING TENSION BETWEEN CAMPAIGN AND TRANSITION

Tension between transition teams and campaign staff seems inevitable. Successful transitions adequately manage those tensions. Both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton saw their transitions sidetracked when campaign staff lobbied intensely for status in the post-election hierarchy. Bush's 2000 transition director, Clay Johnson, met key campaign staff over dinner to keep them informed about transition and hiring progress. Personal relationships between campaign and transition staff help to avert potential problems. It is also beneficial to have a transition director whom the president can trust to keep his or her own interests out of the process. The long-time friendship between George W. Bush and Johnson contributed to that transition's success, as did the fact that all knew Johnson is a management – not a political – person.

At the same time, transition staff must be cognizant of coordinating their operations with those of the campaign. For example, during the Reagan presidential campaign, campaign chief Ed Meese coordinated daily with Pendleton James, who led a small team that gathered transition information. In their planning, the transition staff must be alert to fulfilling campaign promises and governing needs. President Ronald Reagan's Chief of Staff, James Baker, contributed to a seamless transition by first hiring high-level economic advisers to follow through with campaign promises related to the economy.

HIRING AND APPOINTMENTS

Incoming administrations must manage the appointment and hiring of thousands of staff members. By some estimates, new presidents must fill over 4,000 jobs – including over 1,100 requiring Senate confirmation. For practical reasons, it can be especially difficult to get senior leadership in place quickly, and only a select few offices can receive immediate attention. George W. Bush focused initially on filling about one hundred appointments, hiring the secretary, deputy secretary, legislative affairs director, and communication director in each major agency. His goal was to strengthen relationships with the White House from the outset and provide each cabinet secretary with a support structure. Still, by September 11th 2001, the Bush administration had filled less than half of its 508 top political appointments.

Onboarding of new appointees is often slowed by an archaic vetting process. The Intelligence Reform Bill, which allows the FBI to begin vetting thirty to forty positions before Election Day for both candidates, offers some relief from the enormous vetting backlog during the seventy-seven days of transition. Still, the modern vetting process is often viewed as a Cold War relic that warrants a facelift.

Modern administrations varied in how much latitude they offered agency heads to fill their top jobs. Carter gave them full freedom to pick their subordinates; others favored more control. The current President Bush chose a middle path, seeking agreement with agency heads on subcabinet appointments. Differences also emerge in the order of appointments; one recommendation is to fill White House staff roles before cabinet positions, to provide a decision-making structure to address cabinet staffing issues.

Transition teams must also tackle the task of soliciting resumes and potential names for the thousands of open jobs. Bush's team implemented a computer program capable of handling 75,000 resumes in a short period of time. Like many others, this process has benefitted from the advent of the Internet. Previous transition teams were faced with halls stacked with boxes of resumes.

TRANSITION IN FEDERAL AGENCIES

Executive agencies will be faced with a great deal of uncertainty during the transition. During the first phase, many agency functions – such as procurement, promotion, and hiring – may grind to a near halt. As the new president takes office, many agencies will operate without appointed leaders, a time John Kamensky likens to "Home Alone." While appointees get acquainted with their new jobs, they are likely to institute a hiring freeze that often lasts for several months. For many, the last two transition phases promise to be chaotic.

Kamensky and Kumar offered the following advice to professionals experiencing their first transition:

- Since agency management may lack clarity early on, look to Office of Management and Budget analysts for a sense of where things are headed in the new administration.
- During the transition, catch up on policy and prepare to be a resource to the newly appointed leadership.
- Put together a traditional resume to give new leaders a snapshot of your background and skills.
- Gather information from campaigns about your policy area to prepare for potential changes in direction.