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Benchmarks for Measuring Successful Transition

Every Presidential transition—defined here as the period from election day to the end of the first hundred days after the Inauguration—is measured carefully by the press and public, pundits and public officials alike. Each of these groups will judge the new administration by a time-honored set of quantitative and qualitative standards, assessing the strength, wisdom, and effectiveness of the new President and his team. An incoming administration can manage expectations by framing the expectations itself. The new team does so by defining the benchmarks by which it expects to be measured, communicating them in advance to the public, the media, the Congress and other key constituencies, and competing the transition's success as the benchmarks are met.

Based on a review of transitions since Kennedy, six key measuring-sticks will be applied to an incoming team:

1. Are appointments timely and well-chosen? Has the administration set a standard for excellence in appointments that reaches beyond the constraints of party and patronage?
2. Has the administration set (and achieved) clear legislative priorities?
3. Has the incoming President created a structure for efficient governing? Does the structure inspire loyalty, reward competence, and abhor leaks and infighting?
4. Does the administration have a consistent coherent message?
5. Is Congress on board with the administration? Have positive working relationships been established with Members of Congress?
6. Is the administration prepared to meet the immediate demands of governing? Will the administration, for instance, be able to submit its first budget on time?

Define Your Own Benchmarks

The transition is a time of great possibility—a “honeymoon” when the president's influence is arguably at its strongest and opposition is arguably at its weakest, a time when the world assesses how he will lead as opposed to how he can campaign. But is also a time of great potential peril - when inexperience, overconfidence, and bad judgment can greatly damage the chances for a successful four years, and even (though it might seem far too early to consider it) re-election.

There is no universal definition for what constitutes a successful transition. Most historians agree that the most important factors are intangibles—the president-elect's intellectual and emotional quotient, the tone created by his personal leadership style, the quality of legislation advanced by the incoming team, or the ability of the transition to stay “on message” and accomplish campaign promises. More objective, tangible measuring sticks include the makeup and speed of appointments, and the saliency of legislation pushed through Congress to the new President's paramount goals.

Benchmarks are, notably, influenced by the experiences of the new President's predecessor. For example, following the chaos of the Clinton Administration's transition, the Bush (43) Administration was applauded for its comparative organization, discipline, and professionalism. President-elect Obama's transition will, in turn, be measured against the efficiency and discipline Bush showed in his. The new administration's transition will also be measured by its contrasts with the closing legacy of Bush, a deeply unpopular President. The public will ask: How pronounced are the new administration's transparency and inclusiveness? Does it live up to its emphasis on the politics of hope not fear? Can President Obama continue to communicate his message with intelligence and eloquence? A new President can begin to demonstrate his control over his own administration by very simply establishing himself the benchmarks he expects to meet, before the press and public can create their own

Arguably the two most successful transitions were those of President Ronald Reagan and President George W. Bush (43), each of whom entered the White House with detailed plans for how to influence the press, pundits, and the public. Specific legislative goals were defined early and public events were orchestrated both to build support for the underlying legislation and to keep focus on the goals the Administration established and the steps being taken towards achieving them.

The President-elect must, however, be careful not to establish quantitative benchmarks which make it too easy for the bean counters in the press to compare promises with performance. Jimmy Carter promised to reduce the White House staff by 25 and to consolidate many federal agencies into only a few. Bill Clinton set goals for diversity in hiring defined by percentages which were unrealistic. In both cases, they were hammered by the press at the end of the transition period for failing to meet these promises, even though both had achieved more in these areas than their predecessors.

MEASURING STICKS

1. Appointments

Nothing defines a new Administration more indelibly than the quality and efficiency of its appointments. Delays and false starts (e.g., going to bat three times before you get a hit on a confirmable Attorney General, as happened with Clinton) create an impression of poor management and shaky judgment from which it is hard to recover.

Note that the sequencing of appointments is key; there is an order that should be followed. Setting up the White House staff is important because it represents the decision making system that you need to have in place before deciding on Cabinet appointments. Similarly the order of policymaking appointments implies a hierarchy of policy priorities; in a time of economic crisis, for instance, it is fitting if economic positions are filled first, and so on.

The key, generally-accepted objective benchmarks for appointments are as follows:

- Chief of Staff chosen within first few days
- Senior White House staff chosen within first few weeks
- Key members of economic policy and national security team designated by Thanksgiving
- Cabinet chosen by Christmas
- Key Cabinet members ready for confirmation hearings by January 10
- 100 key personnel nominated and confirmed by April 1. (This is an aspirational benchmark; the previous record is 25 personnel confirmed by April 1.)
- 400 key personnel (Cabinet and sub-Cabinet) nominated and confirmed by August 1. (This, too, is aspirational; the previous record is 240.)

The 1980 Reagan transition, which is normally considered one of the most successful, will also serve as a comparison point. For reference purposes, the schedule of the pre-Inauguration Reagan appointments was as follows:

- Nov. 4 Election Day
- Nov. 6 Transition Managers (Chairman, Director, and Personnel Director) named
- Nov. 12 Five transition sub-coordinators announced
- Nov. 14 Baker named Chief of Staff; Meese named as Counselor to the President
- Nov. 15 Two named to lead Inauguration planning
- Dec. 11 Eight Cabinet-level choices named: Treasury, Defense, Justice, Commerce, HHS, Transportation, OMB, CIA
- Dec. 16 State, Labor choices named
- Dec. 17 Deaver named Deputy Chief; WH legislative Affairs chief named
- Dec. 20 Elizabeth Dole named to run WH Public Liaison
- Dec. 22 HLID, UN Ambassador, Interior, Energy, Agriculture named
- Dec. 23 State and Defense transition teams closed down early
- Jan. 6 Press Secretary and Deputy named
- Jan. 7 Education Secretary named, US Ambassador to Japan (Mansfield) kept on
- Jan. 8 Deputy Director of OMB named
- Jan. 10 Deputy Secretary of Defense named; Press Secretary to First Lady named

- Jan. 13 WH Personnel chief named
- Jan. 14 Political and policy deputies to CoS, Staff Secretary, personal photographer named
- Jan. 15 USTR named
- Jan. 16 IRS chief, Deputy Treasury Secretary, 3 other top treasury (tax) officials named

More subjective questions normally posed on appointments concern how diverse, experienced, qualified, competent, bipartisan, and compelling the first selections are (and, of course, whether they are acceptable to the Senate).

2. Legislative Priorities

Even the most highly organized transition can lead to a “failure” in the first 100 days if realistic legislative priorities are not set and clearly explained. The most successful first 100-day plans have focused on two or three legislative priorities and put all of the Administration’s political capitol behind those initiatives.

This has not been an easy task for Democratic administrations. For example, President Carter overloaded Congress by sending up a wide range of legislation on unrelated issues including energy proposals, income tax reform, hospital cost control, and welfare reform. To make matters worse, he refused to prioritize them, leading people with the impression that Carter “seems to stand for everything and believe in nothing.” Clinton made a similar mistake, proposing legislation on an economic stimulus and deficit reduction, comprehensive health care reform, Vice President Gore’s reinventing government effort, anti-crime legislation, welfare reform, Americorps, and much more. Because Clinton failed to set strategic priorities, his message was confused and his Administration appeared unmanageable and disorganized. Not enough time or energy was devoted to setting a policy agenda during the transition. “It’s the economy, stupid” was an effective campaign tool but failed to provide a road map for economic policy.

Reagan, by contrast, had a clear legislative strategy emphasizing speed and focus. He presented a limited set of thematic policy outlines, not a potpourri of narrow programs. Speed was important so the Administration could take advantage of its “mandate” and get started before the opposition could organize. Focus was important because it showed the press and the public that the Administration was constantly moving forward and making progress towards its three main goals: improving the economy, achieving budget priorities (increasing defense spending and cutting social spending), and lowering taxes. Within these broad yet easy-to-define principles, Reagan was able to address many complex issues.

3. Structure for Efficient Governing

Before January 20, serious thought must be given to how decisions will be made and what level of involvement the President will have. A well-functioning structure is little-noticed, but ensures the success of efforts to meet benchmarks across the board. A poorly-functioning structure acts like a jalopy’s dying engine, emitting smoke and coughing noise to attract attention to every minor error the transition makes.

President Carter’s failures were caused, in part by the lack of a workable governing structure. His “spoke and wheel” organizational model meant that there was no gatekeeper to prioritize the President’s time. Nor was there a clear chain of command to allow decision making without presidential involvement. As a result, important phone calls were not returned, high-level administrative jobs were not filled, and the perception—and reality—was that the White House could not get anything done. Carter’s organizational problems were compounded by the fact that staff was compartmentalized into policy and politics groups, so there was no single staffer whom Carter could trust to follow a piece of legislation through from development to execution. Even worse, policy decisions were made without giving sufficient thought to their political ramifications. To keep policy options from being watered down before they reached him, Carter was famous for saying to his staff: “You worry about the substance, I’ll worry about the politics.” Unfortunately his political instincts and staff support were not up to the challenge.

President Clinton had similar organizational problems. His stemmed largely from the fact that he did not begin to get his White House staff in place until after he appointed Mack McLarty Chief of Staff in mid-December. Instead, Clinton got mired down in cabinet appointments, agonizing over each choice and letting the process drag on too long. When he did begin to hire White House staff, he drew primarily from his campaign staff, rather than hiring people with Washington experience who could guide him through the transition. Like President Carter, Clinton did not have an organizational structure that allowed for effective decision making. Because over a dozen aides had direct access to the Oval Office, they were constantly jockeying for position and trying to be the last one to speak to him so that their opinions carried the day.

By contrast, Bush (41) entered office with a very efficient and streamlined operation. His Staff Secretary spent a lot of time determining what Bush wanted to see personally, and observing what his work habits were. (Long policy memos, for instance, were submitted to the president on Fridays when Bush had more time to review them.) Bush also benefited greatly from the discipline imposed by his Chief of Staff regarding who had access to the President and for how long. And Sununu's discipline allowed Bush to be the "genial, likeable leader."

Reagan similarly created a "smooth-flowing system of staffing and paperwork" which ensured that Reagan never received a memo that had not been reviewed by the right people at the right time. Reagan was also helped immensely by the appointment of James Baker as Chief of Staff. To an even greater extent than Cheney with George W. Bush, Baker reassured the public, the press and Congress that a highly respected professional was ready to keep an untested and (to Washington insiders) largely unknown Chief Executive from going off the rails in his first months in office. Also, Reagan's transition team gave significant thought to how to involve cabinet members in the Administration's policy, creating a formal system for their interaction with the White House. This prevented any cabinet members from making their own, non-vetted policy proposals and reduced the risk of complaints to the press when they failed to get their way. Some questions typically asked of transition structure and management include:

- Is there internal dissension between campaign and transition staff (or within either group)?
- Are there leaks? Are the leaks damaging?
- Are there reports of personnel team being swamped, unable to process resumes?
- Does the transition website work? Have the transition's computers crashed?
- Is transition spending keeping pace with transition budget? Is transition spending exorbitant?
- Are the President's people managing the agenda, or is the agenda being foisted on the incoming team by outside groups?
- Is the transition managing relations with key endorsers, financial backers, volunteers, and outside advisors in a respectful and professional way?
- Is the president-elect emerging from the transition refreshed and relaxed?

4. Consistent and Coherent Message

As David Gergen has observed, "history teaches us that almost nothing a leader says is heard if spoken only once." Thus, one key to a successful transition is repetition of the administration's priorities. (These will presumably be those already emphasized during the campaign.)

President Reagan's communications team created a formal 100-Day Plan that was implemented immediately after inauguration. A central part of that plan was to put Reagan on the offensive by taking back the television bully pulpit which his team believed recent presidents had abandoned. By repeatedly emphasizing Reagan's economic program, pressure on Congress intensified; when he managed to get the plan through Congress, Reagan's stature as a leader soared.

President Bush (43) had a similarly aggressive communications strategy for the first 100 days of his administration. Karl Rove's office developed a strategic plan to roll out Bush's policy agenda for the maximum political benefit. Part of that plan put Bush on the road to sell his agenda, and he visited far more states in the first 100 days than any of his predecessors. His first 100 days were run like a second campaign.

By contrast, Bush (41) had problems getting his message out because neither the President nor his Chief of Staff had much interest in or gave much thought to a communications strategy. President Clinton's administration made even bigger errors than not having a communications strategy—it actually alienated the press by denying the White House Press Corps access to the White House Press office. Thus the media's portrayal of the Clinton administration was tainted from the very beginning.

Among the message-related questions asked of the transition:

- Is the president-elect articulating clear priorities for the first days of his administration? Do those priorities mesh with (a) his campaign statements, and (b) actions of the transition?
- Are relations with the outgoing administration reasonably friendly? Are the outgoing and incoming transition teams cooperating? Does the President-elect express empathy towards the outgoing President?
- Does the President-elect express a willingness to work with Republicans and learn from the outgoing team,

or is the incoming team gloating over its victory? Andy Card struck the right note in a meeting of 150 prospective White House aides on January 8, 2001, advising them to tuck away their

- White House security passes when they left the grounds and “be among the most humble people in ‘Washington.’”
- Does the transition’s fundraising undermine the campaign’s message?
- Does Inaugural planning strike the right balance between rewards to high-roller contributors and self-sacrificing campaign staff?
- Do the optics of the Inaugural Balls appear to repeat the “wretched excess” of 2001 when adverse press embarrassed the Bush 43 transition? (Tolerance for this triumphalism will be even lower in January 2009.)

5. Congressional Relations

Another key to a successful transition is establishing relationships with Members of Congress. Legislative accomplishments can only occur with Congressional support. A happy Congress that respects the responsiveness and follow through of the White House will create a positive buzz in the media about the new Administration. Reagan, for example, began wooing Congress even before he was elected. Once he won, he held a series of dinners with Members of Congress, eventually holding 69 meetings with 467 Members. In these meetings, he spoke to general issues, leaving his aides to do the actual negotiations. The meetings established the basis for teamwork in moving the President’s legislative agenda through within those first 100 days.

Carter initially held onto his role as an “outsider” and did not engage the Washington establishment to the same degree. As a result, he failed to develop relationships with key Congressional players, notably the House Speaker Tip O’Neill. Clinton tried to avoid Carter’s mistake by calling in Democratic Congressional leaders for an early pow-wow, but because Clinton was so quick to put some of his most touted legislative items on the back burner when he encountered resistance, the meeting left the Congressional delegation feeling that he could be rolled. It was not the start of a productive relationship.

Some questions asked of Congressional relations include:

- Has the transition reached out to prominent Congressional supporters to keep them happy?
- Is the transition treating Congress with respect?
- Do Members complain about transition responsiveness?
- Is the President holding his own with Congress?

6. Preparation for Immediate Demands of Governing

A critical benchmark, of course, is a successful Inaugural Speech which despite hard economic times captures the spirit of “Morning in America” (Reagan’s famous line), an America which promises once again to be a beacon of hope and justice in the world, a country where miracles happen.

Even more important is how the President-elect shows engagement in the key policy areas of economics and national security. Appointments are the leading edge but the challenge is to show he is coming to grips with problems and exploring solutions in these areas without crossing the line of taking responsibility for decisions he cannot control. As we have said ad nauseum in these memos, and as the campaign has noted, too, there is only one President at a time.

Reaching out to the armed services and intelligence community early is essential, a task made much easier if the incoming Secretary of Defense and Director of National Intelligence are experienced old hands trusted by this community. False notes struck by the incoming team, whether forced by outside events or not (e.g., Clinton’s premature focus on gays in the military), can generate an angry buzz in this community which leaks to the media. This is especially damaging if the new appointees or the agency review teams give an impression of amateur hour.

In the national security area, pressures will be intense for the President-elect to signal major departures from the outgoing Administration’s policies. Some early action will make sense. Generally the wiser course for new Presidents is to show some humility in reviewing the foreign policy legacy of the outgoing President and not rush to repudiate hard-fought and long term agreements for short term political gain. George W. Bush embraced as benchmarks of success his early repudiation of the Kyoto Protocol and other forms of cooperation on global warming; the nuclear non-proliferation agreement with North Korea; mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and a world tribunal on war crimes. The scornful, paranoid tone of these announcements in the transition period had boomerang effects later.

Finally, each new Administration must put its stamp on the federal budget in a short time frame. This is particularly difficult because the outgoing president will leave a lame duck budget representing a year of negotiations between OMB and different federal agencies. To compensate, the incoming administration must begin its budget work at the earliest possible moment during the transition if it plans to implement its economic policies within the first 100 days. To do this, top budget personnel should be selected quickly, budget priorities should be identified early, future implications of present budget choices should be examined. OMB staff should be consulted, and cabinet officials should be brought on board.

Some questions relating to immediate governing demands include:

- Are the key National Security personnel in place on January 20?
- Does the President appear to have the right instincts necessary to respond quickly, decisively, and correctly to international events?
- Do the President and his advisors avoid statements that unduly rattle the financial markets?
- Is the budget development process moving (i.e., on target for budget to be submitted in February)?

CONCLUSION

Press reports on the transition this week indicate that we are already on track in responding to these benchmarks. Stay as you go with rigorous follow through and the president elect should have a transition he can be proud of which will jump start his new Administration. One final recommendation: there is a small community of scholars such as Paul Light, Steve Hess, Martha Kumar, John Burke, and others who specialize in transition studies and influence the media's assessment of transition success. I suggest a meeting with this community either as a small group or one on one later in the transition cycle (but before the end of the year) to brief them on our progress in meeting the benchmarks outlined above.



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