

WHITE HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT

Interview of

Joshua Bolten
Chief of Staff to President George W. Bush

Conducted by

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P R O C E E D I N G S

PARTICIPANT: (In progress) previously mentioned (inaudible) plenary keynote discussions here, led by the very esteemed Martha Kumar, who really is the guru among gurus on White House and presidential transitions. And she, in turn, will be leading us in a conversation with Josh Bolten, who, as I mentioned earlier, oversaw, was the architect and crafted what (inaudible) scholars would agree was the most successful and well-run transition thus far, of 2008 to 2009.

So please join me in welcoming Dr. Martha Kumar.

(Applause.)

MS. KUMAR: Josh, it's a pleasure to have a conversation with you about transition. You all set the standard. You, as chief of staff, had talked with President Bush, and I'll ask you about how your conversation went. But you were the one that directed it and coordinated the various parts, and you knew the administration well because you had worked as director of OMB and the deputy and chief and had been in the campaign, and you had been in the White House previously. So you were somebody who knew a White House and knew transitions well, coming in and coming out.

And so, can you tell us, first, in looking at a transition, that when somebody comes in to the presidency, it is a job they've never had and don't know much about, and not in the way they're going to know it very, very soon. And so one of the things that's very difficult with the national security transition is how do you learn about it. I mean, how do you know what's ahead of you? And how do you assemble a team, for example, a national security team? Because you really don't know a lot about what's going to be ahead of you in the national security area. It's going to be one area where there's not a lot that's out there, and you're going to be -- so you have to put a team together for something that you don't know what it is, for a job the President's never had.

MR. BOLTEN: Yeah, it's easy. (Laughter.) Well, first, Martha, thank you for having me. It's an honor to share the stage with the dean of transition -- presidential transition scholars. And (inaudible), thank you for your hospitality and for putting on a great show. It really is very, very impressive what happens here.

You're right, Martha, nobody -- nobody can come into office knowing what they need to know to handle the office, and that's why the transitions are so important because you can either be relatively ill-informed or you can be extremely ill-informed. (Laughter.) Those are the choices on January 20th every four years, or sometimes eight years. And it's a very significant moment in the nation's history, which you've been studying for some time, but which in the pre-9/11 era was not taken particularly seriously. I've participated in the transition in for 41, Bush 41, which was about as friendly a takeover as happens in administrations.

I was on the way out for 41 and then I was on the way in and out for 43, and there was a dramatic change beginning with 43's administration because of 9/11, that there was a recognition beginning with the President that the country could

not afford that period of vulnerability around the moment of transition with the homeland actually under threat.

So credit President Bush for seeing that and for giving me the instructions to exercise the best possible, most robust transition we could. But don't discredit the predecessors because they -- every previous transition, I think, had been relative -- done in a relatively relaxed way because people thought, well, you've got time to learn the job and you've got time to get your people in place, and it was nobody's responsibility really to see that the President, the new President, is seated in good stead.

You don't know what you don't know, but I think every transition has recognized that national security is the area on which -- that needs the most focus on the way in. President Bush came into office in January of 2001 expecting to be the education President. That he viewed himself as the education governor here in Texas. He campaigned on education and tax cuts, and a slightly tougher foreign policy, but the foreign policy element of his campaign was, while important, definitely not what he thought the people elected him to come to Washington to do. He wanted to be focused on the economy and on our educational systems.

But even in that transition we knew that education -- you can give it a little time. I mean, it's not like the charter school coalition is going to rise up and attack the public schools and create a moment of crisis in the early months of the administration. You've got time to work on your legislation and so on. You want to get moving quickly, but there is rarely an education crisis that comes from around the corner and blindsides you.

Foreign policy, national security is different. The only thing that comes close is in the area of natural disasters.

So the Bush 43 administration came into office with recognition that we needed to do our national security transition well, but without the sense of urgency that exists since 9/11.

MS. KUMAR: What did you think you knew coming in in 2001, and what did you find that you did not know that was important to you?

MR. BOLTEN: You know, I don't remember what I thought I knew. (Laughter.) I came in as deputy chief of staff for policy. I mean, having served, as Martha mentioned, as the policy director of the Bush campaign, I basically had the same job in the White House. So I had some overview of everything that was going on on the policy side. And I think most of us came in thinking that we knew a little bit about most things that we needed to know about, and then were prepared to deal with the inbox as it arose. What we didn't know was that the homeland itself was under threat.

Now, fortunately, there was another deputy chief of staff in the White House named Joe Hagin, and he was -- I had the policy portfolio; he had the operations portfolio. And he had the responsibility to make sure that the White House operated properly, and that the Marine One and Air Force One, security, all

that sort of stuff, operated properly. And Joe had the foresight to, in the early weeks of the Bush administration, to give us all a bit of a primer together on what would happen in the event of a major national security crisis.

And so we -- in the early weeks of 2001, and I don't remember when the exact date is. You probably know, but don't say it because I should know. But in the early weeks of 2001, Joe Hagin assembled the key senior staff at the White House and he took us to the bunker that is underneath the White House grounds to at least show us where it was, and from which the White House would operate in the event of a national security crisis that made it impossible to occupy the White House.

I have to be honest and say I didn't think much of it. It is complicated how you get to the bunker, which at the time was classified; since 9/11, the existence of the bunker has not been classified but its location is, but I will now reveal that it's complicated to get there. (Laughter.)

MS. KUMAR: You need arrows on the floor?

MR. BOLTEN: And yeah, and there are no arrows on the floor. (Laughter.) And I realized on 9/11 that, in fact, I did not remember how to get there. (Laughter.) But at least we knew, and I'll give you one vignette, which is that I was the acting chief of staff in the White House on 9/11. The chief of staff, Andy Card, was traveling with President Bush in Florida, and when the events started to unfold he was soon airborne on Air Force One leaving Florida with President Bush.

So I was back at the White House with Condi Rice and Vice President Cheney, and as the events -- as events were becoming clearer, I went back to my office and the inside line on my desk was ringing, and I think I may have been unaware that I had an inside line. I'd certainly never given it out to anybody. And so I thought, well, I better answer this. I answer the phone, and it was my predecessor in that office as deputy chief of staff, Steve Ricchetti, who now, I think, is the vice president's chief of staff.

MS. KUMAR: Chief of staff, yeah.

Mr. BOLTEN: A really nice guy who had been very kind to me in the transition. And he just -- he didn't say hello or anything. He said, "Are you watching TV?" And I said, "Yes, I know what's going on." He said, "Do you know about the bunker?" And I said, "Yes, thank you." I didn't have the wit to say, "Can you refresh me?" (Laughter.) "Can you refresh me on how to get there?" But he said, "That's all I wanted," and then he hung up. And he later told me that as deputy chief of staff, he had not known about the bunker for many months in the Clinton administration. And no, I'm not suggesting the Clinton administration was particularly negligent. It was just that that was there for nuclear war with Russia. It was not there because anybody thought there might be an attack, a terrorist attack in the United States that would (inaudible) the White House.

Anyway, I went from my office over to the Vice President's office, where Condi Rice was already there, and we discussed what the Vice President -- what we should be doing and so on, and all of a sudden a Secret Service agent rushed

in -- a big woman rushed in and said to the Vice President, "Mr. Vice President, we have to go now." And presumably this was when they thought that that plane might actually -- the plane that ultimately hit the Pentagon might actually be headed back toward the White House.

And the Secret Service agent went around behind the Vice President, picked him up, and started running with him, and left Condi and me standing there. (Laughter.) And we were in the Vice President's office. And all I can say is, fortunately, Condi knew how to find the bunker. (Laughter.) Otherwise I'd probably still be wandering around.

I mean, I tell that with lightness, but it just -- just to underscore the point that it was very easy at the time to take the national security threats casually. All of that changed after 9/11. That completely changed the mindset of the Bush administration, and I think every administration to come. And well, thank you for the suggestion that the Bush transition to Obama was the best ever. I would say it's probably the best so far, and I'm assuming that every one subsequently is going to get better and better because of the recognition of the seriousness involved.

MS. KUMAR: Do you think that the presidents feel a special responsibility in the national security area because there's such a differential between what they know and what the president-elect knows, that they're going to focus on that -- not just 9/11, but because of that? Did the Clinton people give you all extra attention on the area of national security as you were building your team?

MR. BOLTEN: Yes, I would say so, and in particular because there is at least still some tradition in this country of continuity in foreign policy. And so on most matters of domestic policy, pretty sharp differences between the Clinton and the Bush administrations, so they didn't -- they would not naturally have made much effort to try to tell us how best to implement the policies with which they disagreed.

But on the foreign policy side, I think even today there is a much greater sense of both continuity and responsibility to make sure that the people coming in are able -- from the standpoint of the outgoing people -- hopefully to carry forward whatever successes and good prospects there are that have occurred in the outgoing administration, and also prepare them to deal with the challenges to come.

MS. KUMAR: When you're coming in in 2001 and building a team, did you think that it was particularly important because you were going to be lacking information and you'd have to do extra work building a national security team?

MR. BOLTEN: I don't think --

MS. KUMAR: Was it (inaudible)?

MR. BOLTEN: Well, it probably is more difficult. In the Bush campaign, we were blessed with a very elaborate and highly expert set of outside advisors on foreign policy for the President. Part of that was a necessity, a political necessity, because Governor Bush had no foreign policy experience, so it was a political weakness of his. And so it wasn't just substantively important, it was politically important to the campaign. And by the way, in a campaign, politics beats

substance. I know you'll be shocked by that. (Laughter.) But it was politically important in the campaign to demonstrate a -- not only that the candidate could master the intricacies of foreign policy, but had mastered the important elements, and had surrounded himself with a very high-quality set of advisors.

So we pretty ostentatiously worked with and advertised a really terrific bunch of foreign policy advisors, led by Condi Rice, with whom the President had developed a close relationship of great confidence, which was critical. So she was the organizer of it, but she pulled in many of the great and good in the Republican foreign policy establishment: Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, Steve Hadley and Bob Zoellick, and all sorts of names, some of which were not yet household names in the foreign policy community in 1999, many of which were -- almost all of which became household names during the Bush administration, because it was relatively to take that group that had been a real advisory council for the President during the campaign and translate most of them into government.

The new actors were Cheney, Rumsfeld and Powell, all of whom had sort of hovered around the outskirts of the advisory group, but none of whom was intimately involved with it in the way that they were. They had conference calls every week. The President would have at minimum a phone call with Condi, and often Paul Wolfowitz, once a week. I say "the President," I mean the candidate. So they were a very integral part of the campaign so that when we got to governing, there was a team with whom the President was comfortable, whose capabilities and expertise he had been able to assess, and who were ready to take over the jobs in running the foreign policy apparatus of the administration.

So we -- I think we were exceptionally well-positioned to take an inexperienced president and have him step into the Oval Office and be able to manage a foreign policy crisis.

And that's one of the things that concerns me about a Trump campaign, and possibly a Trump presidency. However you might feel about the candidate or the policies, what you want to see is a coherent group of experienced advisors who can -- in whom the president-elect will have confidence and with whom the president-elect knows how to work coming in. And although Mr. Trump seems to have made a virtue out of putting aside that kind of advice, I think it's a serious (inaudible) on the national security side, thinking about what a transition in the early stages of a presidency might be.

MS. KUMAR: Was President George H. W. Bush helpful in putting together, say, for example, the intelligence part of it? Was he involved at all?

MR. BOLTEN: You know, he was involved with moral support, but not particularly the substantive support. And especially early on in the campaign, Bush 43, I think, correctly calculated that it was a significant political mistake to be seen to rely too heavily on his dad. If you look at that collection of advisors, not just in the foreign policy area but in -- across all areas, you saw very few people associated closely with his dad as the advisors. Bush pretty ostentatiously reached back to the

Ford and Reagan administrations for the experienced advisors on whom he relied most heavily.

The person who convened -- well, Condi Rice was the -- sort of the executive director of the group of foreign policy advisors. The person who first convened the group and whose blessing George W. Bush sought most assiduously was George Shultz. And so the effort was to say, this ain't the dad's administration, that he's his own person. So I'm sure 41 had good advice in private, and you won't find a father and a son with a closer, more loving relationship than 41 and 43. But 43 was pretty careful to make sure that he was not heavily reliant on 41 as to how he (inaudible) his presidency.

MS. KUMAR: In looking at the 2008 transition, one of the things that we really haven't discussed in the last couple of days here was the threat on the inauguration in 2008, when Obama came in. And I wonder if you could tell us about that and the work that you all did that really helped prepare to deal with that crisis.

MR. BOLTEN: That was a presence in all of our principal anxiety for the period of transition, was that our terrorist enemies would see this as a particular moment of vulnerability -- correctly see it as a particular moment of vulnerability for the U.S. government. And so we put some effort into trying to make sure that the handover from the Bush Homeland Security people to the Obama Homeland Security people was as well done as it could be.

I think field [exercises] now have advanced to a much higher level of sophistication, but one of the things we did in the period of transition was that we held a table-top exercise designed to simulate an attack on the homeland. I don't -- Steve [Hadley] may remember. I don't remember the details of the -- of what the attack was. I think it was a simultaneous biological attack in subway systems around the United States.

And we assembled the key senior outgoing officials with the key senior incoming officials, so there was one spot at this big table in the Old Executive Office Building, where we had one of the big rooms there. We had seated at the same station: we had outgoing Homeland Security secretary and incoming Homeland Security secretary; we had outgoing Defense, we had incoming Defense; and so on.

And it wasn't a particularly good exercise, I recall. It's sort of hard to bring people cold into that sort of thing. But --- in a four-hour session; you're not going to teach people enough about their -- about everybody's capabilities and their jobs to really make that much of a difference. But I think it was significant just to get all of those people in the same room together. Some of the Obama officials had not yet met each other. It was the first occasion that they had to lay eyes on each other. And I think most of them had never laid eyes on key people like FBI Director [Robert] Mueller, who straddled the two administrations, who was obviously a key official in the -- and would be -- is a key official in the sort of attack on the homeland.

And so just the laying-on of eyes, a sense of, okay, my job in this circumstance is these things -- I think that was a useful exercise to undertake. And I

had -- I got Rahm Emanuel's [incoming Chief of Staff] very close cooperation. By the way, he and I had a very good relationship in the course of the transition. He was extremely cooperative, and it didn't -- the cooperation did not prompt him to improve his language. (Laughter.) But -- so everything was a mess, but he was terrific in the transition.

And I had to rely on him to lean on some of the incoming Obama officials to take this seriously. He did. Incoming President Obama took it seriously. Some of the other people were either wrapping up their jobs, they -- the family needs to move, and then so on, and they don't want to come to Washington on January 9th to spend the day (inaudible). And so I had to rely on Rahm to call them up and say, "The President wants you there," and I think all of them are glad they did.

You mentioned the Inauguration Day. As we approached Inauguration Day, at all times there's some buzz of threat, an undercurrent. But as we got within about two days of Inauguration Day, we -- intelligence regarding a potential attack at the inauguration ceremony ramped up and became increasingly credible. I think it was -- Martha, I think it was -- the intelligence was of a potential IED that would be planted somewhere farther back in the crowd at the inaugural celebration -- very hard to get close to the president with anything dangerous, but probably a lot easier to have something happen farther back in the crowd. And the intelligence was viewed as -- increasingly over the few days before the inauguration was viewed as credible.

I had -- I went and asked outgoing Homeland Secretary Chertoff, who had months before made plans to depart Washington after noon on January 20th with his wife, somewhere in the Caribbean, and they had it all set. And I made the request of him that he delay those plans by a day, and he prepared to sit with incoming Secretary Napolitano, I think it was.

And so that even as authority passed at the stroke of noon from Chertoff to Napolitano, he would at least be there to offer advice and (inaudible) and so on. And so they were -- on the inauguration, they were sent to an offsite command center and were sitting next to each other, evaluating intelligence and so on, and making sort of (inaudible).

On the morning of Inauguration Day, there is a lovely coffee event that the president hosts for the incoming president and vice president and their families, and the outgoing and incoming chiefs of staff get to go to that. I went to that at 10:00 a.m. in the morning, 9:30, something like that. And so I -- Rahm and I mingled with the other guests, and then I pulled Rahm aside and we walked through the -- underneath the White House, where the bunker is. (Laughter.)

But I did make sure Rahm knew where the bunker was, and we walked underneath the residence, over to the West Wing, and then to the Situation Room, where the incoming Homeland director for President Obama, which I think was John Brennan at the time, was with our outgoing assistant to the president for homeland security. They were sitting in the same room and they were on a videoconference screen with key officials who were monitoring the event, making contingency

planning, and so on.

We stumbled our way into having a mechanism, and I'm confident that the mechanisms now are much smoother and more sophisticated. But that's -- that needs to be done unfortunately, for every transition in the future.

MS. KUMAR: What did the President tell you about the transition, what he wanted to accomplish in a transition, and when did he talk to you about it? What directions did he give you?

MR. BOLTEN: President Bush talked to me about a year before the election. It was on his mind already. And he gave me a pretty simple and clear instruction, which was that the country is under threat; make sure whoever wins this election is as well prepared as we can possibly make them to take over the responsibility of power, especially in the homeland and national security area. And that was the simple direction. He didn't need to get heavily involved in the table-top exercises or anything like that. So he didn't intervene in the day-to-day planning, but he did ask me to report to him periodically on how it was going.

And -- during the course of 2008 -- well, in the middle of 2008, he took it upon himself to mention, I think at two successive cabinet meetings, that he took this seriously and he expected everybody in his administration to take it seriously. And that's about all you need a president to do, is send a message that it's important, that he cares, and he's going to hold people responsible for treating their responsibilities as well as they could.

MS. KUMAR: One of the factors about a transition is that the things that have happened before, the experiences that you've had before, often affect how you see what you're going to do. So how did the transition coming into office affect how you all prepared going out?

MR. BOLTEN: I think for most of us coming in, it was a blur, and so we didn't really remember much coming in. We did remember how little it turned out we knew, even those of us who had experience in the White House, how little we know about how to do the jobs we were supposed to do well. So I think everybody in the outgoing team approached their successors with a fair amount of charity and sympathy, and I think we were treated well by the outgoing Clinton people. There was a lot of press about taking the W's off of the computers and so on, and there were a few isolated pranks like that.

But I think those were the -- those were isolated episodes from sort of young, immature Clinton staffers. By and large, the Clinton people reached out to their opposite numbers and, as Steve Ricchetti did with me, treated us with a lot of kindness and compassion. And so I think the people who had had that experience coming in did the same for their successors, and I'm confident that the same sort of thing will apply regardless of who wins the election from the outgoing Obama team.

MS. KUMAR: One of the principles that has been discussed here, and that we've discussed, is "one president at a time," and what modifications one needs to make. And I'm thinking of even in normal times that -- and not like the financial

collapse, which we can talk about -- but I was thinking of it in relation to Austin, and that Governor Clinton had met with President Carlos Salinas of Mexico to talk about trade deals, and he did that in January of 1993 -- January, I think it was January 3rd. No, January 9th. And he came here to Austin -- [Governor] Ann Richards put the meeting together -- and was discussing what was going to be ultimately what would become NAFTA. And I remember at the time that it surprised me because I thought you wouldn't do that until you became president.

But I know in -- you all experienced going out that you had to deal with the Obama people about issues that you thought just couldn't wait, and where they might have more muscle than you did because they had to pull some Democrats together. Can you talk about the auto bailout, for example, and TARP [Troubled Asset Relief Project], and the principle of one president at a time?

MR. BOLTEN: Yeah, and I'll say something first about the principle of one president at a time because I had a searing experience as the incoming deputy chief of staff in the Bush White House in 2001, and John Podesta was then chief of staff to President Clinton and he was running the handoff. He and Andy Card had a good working relationship, and we had an all-hands meeting where there were about a dozen of us folks whom he had into his office in the White House in early January of 2001.

And I -- as the policy guy, I had things that we wanted to work on right away, and there were things that -- we were concerned that the Clinton administration might do that we didn't want them to do, and so on. And so I don't remember exactly what it was. One of the top things on my list was I think we didn't want them to conclude a particular agreement on their way out the door, and so when it came my turn to talk with Podesta I said, "You know, we would really like that you not move forward on this agreement pending the arrival of the new president." And Podesta said, "Yeah, no." (Laughter.) And then moved on it. (Laughter.) And that was my lesson in one president at a time.

And Podesta was right. The incoming team has no right to make any request of the outgoing president to not do what the president has full power to do while the president has full power, until noon on January 20th. They had an agenda. They were pursuing it, and we were entitled to do whatever President Bush had the power to do to unwind it afterwards. But they -- there is one president at a time, and that was my lesson in that. It was -- and it was a lesson that we spread on the Bush team, which is be extremely -- as cooperative as we possibly can be with the Obama administration, but leave no one in any doubt as to who has full -- the full, plenary authority of the presidency until noon on January 20th. So that was my early, searing experience.

We had an unusual situation on the outgoing transition because we were in the midst of the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression, which, as of the time of the transition, most economists would look back and say it was over -- the financial system had stabilized by January of 2009 -- but we didn't

know that. We didn't know what shoe was going to drop, or so on.

And so we were handing off a very serious economic crisis in which we were quite keen and the Obama folks were quite keen to have some continuity in the measures that had created some confidence and stability.

Now, it's actually an example -- you mentioned the auto bailout, and that's actually an example of incomplete cooperation. And here's what happened, which is that the auto companies had come to us and said, "We're about to go bankrupt. We need a bailout." And we had gotten from the Congress \$750 billion -- that's billion with a B -- of money to spend, but to spend only on bailing out the people who caused the crisis in the first place, which, if you want to be in a nasty political situation, try that sometime.

But 750 billion wasn't to bail out the auto industry or anybody else; it was to shore up the financial sector. So there was great tension over whether we could, in fact, use the mechanisms of the TARP money to rescue the auto industry, and whether we should, because that's not what we said we were going to do. We said we were going to stabilize the financial system.

The Republicans on the Hill -- the President ultimately determined that yes, we did need to do our best to stabilize the auto industry. Republicans on the Hill strenuously objected. We planned to proceed forward, but we planned to proceed forward only providing support to the auto industry, only with some very strict conditions and supervision of the auto industry in how they used the money, what sort of rationalization was necessary in the auto industry to ensure that we weren't going to be in a position of throwing good money after bad, and large dollar amounts at that.

And so we came up with a plan under which we would -- we in the Bush administration would appoint an auto czar to supervise the passage of support to the auto industry and supervise the commitments that the auto industry would make to justify the taxpayer bailout. And what we proposed to the Obama people was that, let's agree on who the czar is and let's agree on the terms that we will provide to the auto industry, so that they don't try to wait us out for the better terms they're likely to get from you, and so there was consistency in U.S. policy.

We made that proposal Thanksgiving weekend, in Secretary Paulson's office. It should have been a hint to me that Rahm Emanuel declined to attend the meeting, and they sent their legislative person and Larry Summers was there, as I recall. But they never -- they never took us up on that offer. We never got an answer on that offer.

And I'm raising it because it's an example of a bridge too far, that it was too hard at that moment for the Obama administration to find itself in condominium with the Bush administration on what the policies were going to be going forward. I think they struggled with the decision internally, whether or not to cooperate with us. They ultimately just decided to remain silent and in not exactly a -- what was it, a Truman-Eisenhower moment, which Martha can give the history of that much better

than I.

But it was too much for them politically to be seen to be in such close cooperation with the administration that President Obama had vigorously and effectively run against to win the presidency in the first place.

So we ended up doing what we could. They ended up picking it up in the end, and I think it all worked out reasonably well for the auto industry. But it would have gone much more smoothly had they not felt the political impediment of the difficulty of the cooperation.

MS. KUMAR: Well, I've got one more question, and that is with the National Security Council, the growth of White House influence throughout an administration, of pulling power into the White House. And one of the things I like to do is count, and count noses, which is very difficult to do in a White House because of there are many different sets of figures. So what I've done is pulled together figures on the number of assistants to the president, deputy assistants, special assistants, the commissioned officers in the White House, and look at the growth in -- with the NSC.

So, for example, in 1993, you had -- in the NSC, you had one assistant to the president, one deputy, 14 special assistants, and there were 11 separate units. In 2016, in this year, there are four assistants to the president, five deputy assistants, 21 SAPs or special assistants, and 18 units.

So you have -- no matter how many people are there, you have that many commissioned officers going out, working with people in the departments and agencies with the authority, the commissioned authority of the White House. And how do you think that's come about, and do you think that policy is any better for it?

MR. BOLTEN: I mean, it comes about by a process of just steady accretion where you see more problems and you can put more bodies on the problem, and White Houses just tend to do that. Every White House starts out as assuring all the cabinet officers that this will be cabinet governance, that you get to run your own show and you are the principal adviser to the president on this issue, and then discovers that it's a lot nicer and easier just to run the show yourself. (Laughter.)

And I think my own perspective is that on issues that are truly presidential, it makes sense to have very centralized and clear authority in the White House to manage those issues. On issues that require a lot of coordination among different agencies, it makes sense to have that authority centralized in the White House and in the presidency.

The problem is that what happens is that you build a big enough staff and you end up with the capacity basically to manage every issue in (inaudible) or in the national security apparatus, many of which aren't of a truly presidential nature, and because you can, you do. And I think overall, it's a mistake, and it tends to, if anything, to reduce the effectiveness of the presidency and reduce the -- actually the authority of the president when the White House is not of an appropriate size to

focus only on those issues that are truly presidential.

So my advice to any incoming administration would be, cut it back as far as you can and cut all the staffs back as far as you can and make sure you have enough to deal with the issues that the president is actually going to have to deal with personally, and then appoint people in the cabinet to -- in whom you have confidence and with whom you have a good relationship and empower them and rely on them to do their jobs properly.

MS. KUMAR: What issues would you see as just being presidential issues, that should come out of the White House?

MR. BOLTEN: Well, I mean, that's sort of pornography. You know it when you see it. (Laughter.) But --

MS. KUMAR: Like, war would be one.

MR. BOLTEN: War, yes. War would be one. But that is the essence of the job of the chief of staff. That's what I viewed as my principal function, which was to make sure that those issues that were truly presidential, in which the president needed to act, had a tough issue to resolve, to make sure that those issues got to the president in a time and in a way that allowed him to make an informed decision. And for the 98 percent of the other stuff, try to keep it away from the president and force consensus.

So you -- I found myself as chief of staff with an interest in dichotomy in the job. For the issues that we determined were not presidential, you're trying to force people to agree apart from the president. For issues that are presidential, I found myself often trying to force people to disagree in front of the president so that he -- so that the edges of the problems were not shaved off before they got to the president.

Because if it's really a presidential issue and it's really hard, you don't do the president any favors by trying to make it easy for him by compromising the issues out beforehand. The job of the staff at that point is to make the president's job as tough as possible so that he experiences all the difficulties of the decision and can feel the weight of the arguments and then make a decision based on his or her own instincts and judgment and principle. That's why they're there. George W. Bush was terrific at it, and never minded that role.

He did mind if non-presidential issues got to him, and I -- when I was chief of staff, I told every cabinet officer, "I will never block you from getting to see the president on any issue on which you want to see the president. You have access to the president as often as you want. However, you and I will talk first about whether this is truly a presidential issue. If I do not believe it's a presidential issue, I will tell you so and I will tell you that I'm also telling the president so. And if you take that issue to the president and he agrees with me, he's going to be damn mad and he's not going to want to see you next time." And I never had a problem with any cabinet officer not getting to see the president. (Laughter.) They made requests, and we could always determine together whether it was worth taking the president's time.

MS. KUMAR: That's very good. Now let's take some questions. We'll take a couple. We're running a little bit late.

Yes, we have a microphone that's going to come out.

QUESTION: Thank you. Mark Jacobson, formerly of the Department of Defense and Capitol Hill. I have a question for you, Josh, about something that's outside the executive branch. We've spoken a lot over the last two days about transition within the executive branch, but what about the issue of congressional relations? I was trying to think of things that really a presidency in its first year, and it would seem to me that Congress is one of those things. And it's a bit different than the transition, but given that you've been in and seen so many of these, I'd be curious as to your thoughts on how any administration, or the next administration, should handle that.

MR. BOLTEN: Absolutely crucial, and I think it's one area where the Obama administration does not get as high marks as I think they would -- they might deserve in other areas, and that is the care and feeding of the relationship between the new president and the Congress. You set the tone early, at the outset. George W. Bush had a good sense of that, spent a fair amount and was willing to give a fair amount of his time to just the socialization of meeting the key members of Congress, getting to know the ones he didn't know already, and important to reach out to the other party as well as your own as you do that.

There is -- and you know, in the 73 days between the election and the inauguration, the most valuable commodity of all in the whole transition, as it is during the presidency, is the president's time -- in this case, the president-elect's time. And so how you decide in a transition to allocate that time is a very delicate, delicate matter because the president-elect has more decisions to make in those 73 days than he or she has probably had to make during the entirety of the rest of their career -- more decisions of consequence in personnel, in direction, and so on.

And so to take two hours every day to schmooze with people on Capitol Hill, that can easily be regarded as a luxury, Mark, but I think you know that it's one of the best investments that an incoming president can make, is on the -- take the soft side and trying to establish those relationships early on so that you're having a conversation with people with whom you may end up in deep confrontation, or you're likely to be asking them to do you a favor, and the first conversation you want -- the first few conversations you want to have with them should be about something else.

MS. KUMAR: Another question?

QUESTION: I don't remember which international agreement was at issue when you had that conversation with Podesta, but it strikes me that there are appropriate times for the incoming administration to ask the outgoing administration to hold off on something, particularly in the foreign policy side, because of the importance of continuity and reliability of the U.S. as a partner. And I've been thinking about this in connection with the Obama administration's apparent intention

to declare a no-first-use policy with respect to nuclear weapons. And if the outcome of that is that the incoming administration is in the position of having to reverse the policy and declare a first-use policy, that strikes me that that would be -- yeah, that would be sort of irresponsible.

So in any case, I guess it's only to raise that it's no real compromise to the principle of one president at a time to say that sometimes the outgoing administration ought to exercise its power in a way that increases the odds that the next administration will succeed.

MR. BOLTEN: Yeah, that's a very good point, and I told my story not to suggest that you can't ask, but that it ought to be clear that the incoming people are making a request that doesn't have to be accepted by the outgoing president. And I mean, in the case you mentioned, a very strong argument to be made that, in fact, not only would the objective not be -- that the Obama administration is trying to pursue not be achieved, but that it would be set back and the position of the United States would be set back by the action.

And I think the example you raise underscores the importance of the serious dialogue between the two during the transition period, especially on issues of foreign policy and national security. So, thank you for raising that. Kristen [Silverberg] always raises the best issues. (Laughter.) And the last one was (inaudible).

MS. KUMAR: Thank you. Thank you very much. (Applause.)
(Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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