



# BEFORE THE OATH

HOW GEORGE W. BUSH  
AND BARACK OBAMA MANAGED  
A TRANSFER OF POWER



MARTHA JOYNT KUMAR

© 2015 Johns Hopkins University Press  
All rights reserved. Published 2015  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Johns Hopkins University Press  
2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363  
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kumar, Martha Joynt.

Before the oath : how George W. Bush and Barack Obama managed a transfer  
of power / Martha Joynt Kumar.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4214-1659-5 (paperback) — ISBN 978-1-4214-1660-1 (electronic) —

ISBN 1-4214-1659-X (paperback) — ISBN 1-4214-1660-3 (electronic)

1. Presidents—United States—Transition periods.
2. Presidents—United States—Transition periods—Planning.
3. Administrative procedure—United States.
4. Executive departments—United States—Management.
5. Presidents—United States—Election—2008.
6. Bush, George W. (George Walker), 1946–
7. Obama, Barack.
8. United States—Politics and government—2001–2009. I. Title.

JK516.K85 2015

973.931—dc23

2014029355

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information,  
please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or [specialsales@press.jhu.edu](mailto:specialsales@press.jhu.edu).*

Johns Hopkins University Press uses environmentally friendly book materials,  
including recycled text paper that is composed of at least 30 percent  
post-consumer waste, whenever possible.

To

*the women on whose shoulders I stand:*

*May Lepley Joynt (1907–1995)*

*Jean Cunnian Lepley (1887–1948)*

*Minnie Lee Spencer Ward (1875–1957)*

*the men whose love and support inspires me every day:*

*Vijayendra Kumar*

*Zal Alexander Kumar*

*V. Cameron Kumar*

*Kiran Zal Kumar*



*Acknowledgments* ix

Introduction	The Presidential Transition of 2008–2009	1
1	A Time of Opportunity and Hazard	8
2	Transition Foundations	35
3	The Transition Out of Office	68
4	Coming into the Presidency	98
5	Transition Plans and Campaign Promises	132
6	The National Security Council Transition: Providing Continuity in a Bipartisan Environment	171
7	Presidential Appointments	208
8	The 2008 Transition: <i>Lessons and Challenges for Future Transitions</i>	249
	<i>Glossary of People, Terms, and Institutions</i>	269
	<i>Notes</i>	275
	<i>Works Cited</i>	293
	<i>Index</i>	305

## *A Time of Opportunity and Hazard*

---

The approximately seventy-five days between a presidential election and the inauguration of the new chief executive are a time of opportunity and hazard for an incoming administration—and for an outgoing one as well. For the president-elect, the ability to begin his administration with a productive start is on the line. There are no constitutional requirements or guidelines for the shape of the transition nor the actions that the incoming and outgoing administrations should take during this period. There is legislation dating back to 1963 with several amendments through the years that provide resources—monies and agency help—but it does not address what needs to be done between the presidential election and the inauguration. The legislation originally provided for a transition appropriation of \$900,000 to cover both the incoming and outgoing presidents but without any explicit instruction on how the money was to be divided. In 2012 the funds for an incoming president (had there been a transition) stood at \$5.6 million, with the outgoing president getting \$2.35 million. Even adjusting for inflation, the funding has increased as a result of an understanding of how important this period is for the quality of the beginning of a president's tenure in office.

Instead, what happens during this period depends on what the winning presidential candidate does to prepare for office and what the incumbent president chooses to do as he leaves office. There isn't a template for the plans a candidate should make, and the same is true for what a retiring chief executive should provide to his successor and his team. It is up to those departing and entering the White House to determine how they want to prepare to leave or come into office. Yet as amorphous as the legal requirements of a transition are, the 2008–2009 transition demonstrated productive ways for those leaving the White House and those coming in to gather and process information for the newcomers as they prepare to staff up and organize their administration, develop their policy pro-

posals, and establish their priorities. Although there is flexibility in how the transition takes shape, some ways of handling transitions are more effective than others. Political scientists and others studying transitions have focused on management, personnel, policy, coordination, and timing issues that make a difference in the ways in which a president prepares for office.<sup>1</sup>

The 2008–2009 transition provides future presidents and their staffs with an institutional memory of a transition that worked, a timetable for what actions need to be taken and when, and a prescription of how to bring together people who have amassed considerable experience on executive branch programs, operations, and institutions and those coming into office when the new administration takes office. Also included in the 2008 transition was a commitment from Congress to support transition planning with resources and early, though not sustained, attention to the appointments and priorities of the new administration. The transition left behind a well-informed group of people in both parties and in the incoming and outgoing administrations who know transitions well.

One of the distinguishing features of the transition was the series of templates used by President George W. Bush's staff and administration officials as well as by members of the transition team working for President-elect Barack Obama. On both sides and independent of one another, staff created a series of templates for acquiring what information they would need and when they should begin gathering it. The templates covered such diverse functions and institutions as national security memoranda, contingency plans gathered by the National Security Council, and information gathered by the President's Management Council on department and agency programs and operations. The templates also addressed the requirements and demands for the approximately twelve hundred executive branch positions a chief executive has to fill and the process of gathering information by the Obama transition agency review teams. President Bush and his White House team left behind a solid outline for the steps future administrations can take to provide a productive start for their successors.

Additionally, the Bush and Obama teams made certain that those leaving the administration and those taking over the same positions supplemented the printed material they left behind with one-on-one meetings in which the sitting official held frank discussions about the nature of the position the newcomer was about to assume. Both the printed record and the personal discussions were key to the successful preparation for office of the White House staff members brought in by President Obama. Initially through memoranda and later in sessions with those holding the posts, incoming and outgoing officials discussed what worked in their jobs and what did not.

The work the Obama team did to prepare for office and the Bush staff did to make sure the incoming president had the information he needed made a difference in how ready President Obama and his team were that first day. It was important because the incoming president faced at least one important decision within hours of his taking office. The familiarity of President Obama's leadership team with the cabinet and White House team members involved in the transition made a difference in how smooth and effective the meeting described below was. So too did the familiarity of the new team with the issues, programs, and people they would be dealing with.

### **Terror Alert on Inauguration Day 2009**

The day before the inauguration, President-elect Obama first received news about the threat from his national security team. The threat had an impact on his plans. David Axelrod noted that Obama canceled the session he had scheduled with aides to practice his inaugural address. Axelrod told Peter Baker of the *New York Times* that Obama "seemed more subdued than he had been. . . . It's not as if you don't know what you're getting into," Axelrod said. "But when the reality comes and the baton is being passed and you're now dealing with real terrorism threats, it's a very sobering moment."<sup>2</sup> The following day, national security advisors for President Bush and President-elect Obama discussed the unfolding threat at a meeting in the Situation Room.

The threat did not provide national security teams on either side much time to process and plan for the situation. It surfaced "about 96 hours before," said Hadley. "For the first 48 hours, it didn't seem serious, and then maybe 36 hours before, we got something suggesting it was more serious. At that point, we ramped up quite a bit."<sup>3</sup> Part of that ramping up was to prepare cabinet officials coming into the administration. The preparation was done at the White House that morning.

Cabinet members and designees felt sufficiently comfortable with one another to discuss responses the incoming president could have. "Senator [Hillary] Clinton really showed . . . the sense of both a politician and also [was] able to see things from the president's perspective," said Hadley.<sup>4</sup> "And she asked the best question of the meeting, which was 'So what should Barack Obama do if he's in the middle of his inaugural address, and a bomb goes off way in the back of the crowd somewhere on the Mall? What does he do? Is the Secret Service going to whisk him off the program—or the podium, so the American people see their incoming president disappear in the middle of the inaugural address? I don't think so.'" While there was no certainty what shape the attack would take, "people were pretty confident that it would be pretty far back," said Hadley. With the



amount of security on the Mall that day, Hadley added that “it clearly wasn’t going to be a vehicle so it would have been something somebody would have had on themselves. It would have killed people.”<sup>5</sup>

The Obama officials present “then went back and talked with President-elect Obama and walked him through what they thought he should do, so he could think about what he decided he would do in that situation.”<sup>6</sup> Mercifully, Hadley said, the threat “melted away” in those minutes before the new president took office. With the inauguration ceremony soon to begin, the situation was a dramatic one, and everyone needed to be at top performance. The only way for the new team to be in a position to handle such a situation was for incoming officials to be well briefed on the offices they were to hold in the coming days as well as on the programs and people associated with their positions. Fortunately, President-elect Obama assembled his team early enough for them to learn about the operations of their offices, and the outgoing Bush team brought together information that would get them quickly up to speed. Then the Obama team went to the president-elect and discussed the issue with him. “There wasn’t a recommended response,” said Hadley. “I mean, the outgoing administration was not in a position to make a recommendation to the new President, but it was discussed among the representatives of the old team and the new team, and I think the view was you couldn’t have him duck and cover, you couldn’t have him pulled off the stage; he needed to stay and finish his speech, as long as it was not an immediate threat to him. That was just not the right visual of a new presidency. But the bottom line was . . . this will be a decision for the president-elect to make.”<sup>7</sup> The situation did not require a final decision because the threat evaporated as quickly as it arose.

The threat discussion with all of the principal officials in the outgoing and incoming administrations allowed everyone to work through a potential crisis event on the first day for Barack Obama as president and the last one for George Bush. It also demonstrated how well people were able to work together. Joshua Bolten commented about the handling of the situation: “Rahm was well informed, and he had informed Obama about what was going on. So at that moment I was proud of the way that we had managed to integrate the incoming folks into the management of a potential crisis.”<sup>8</sup> That important and effective discussion could not have taken place if both sides had not dedicated a significant amount of staff time and resources preparing for President Obama’s entry into office. At the same time, it remained unclear just what would have happened if the assault had occurred during the point of transition. “They were jointly making judgments about that and I guess technically the authority was still with the Bush administration.

But it's an interesting question about how you would handle an event that happened literally at the moment of transition," said Bolten.<sup>9</sup>

President Bush has described the contrast between the coffee he and Laura Bush had with President-elect Obama and Michelle Obama in the Blue Room and what was then going on in the Situation Room. "The Obamas were in good spirits and excited about the journey ahead. Meanwhile, in the Situation Room, homeland security aides from both our teams monitored intelligence on a terrorist threat to the Inauguration," he wrote in his memoir *Decision Points*.<sup>10</sup> "It was a stark reminder that evil men still want to harm our country, no matter who is serving as president."

How serious was the threat on the inauguration of President Obama from the Somalia-based group, al-Shabaab? On February 25, 2012, when a new president, Mansour Hadi, was sworn into office in Sanaa, Yemen, a car bomb exploded outside a presidential complex, killing 25 people. Authorities blamed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, an organization with a close relationship with al-Shabaab. Hours before the attack, President Hadi vowed in his inaugural address to "fight al-Qaeda" and "restore stability" to his nation with its violent recent history.<sup>11</sup> Terrorist groups wanted to challenge that stability before the new president could come into office and have subsequently continued its bombing campaign against the president.

### **President Truman and Modern Presidential Transitions**

In the period since the first formal presidential transition from the Truman to Eisenhower administrations in which the incumbent and the president-elect worked to prepare information for the incoming chief executive, transitions have varied greatly in the types of preparation presidents and their staffs have made and the success they have had in setting the direction of their tenure in office in the days after the election through their first three months in office. Since President Truman first reached out to his successor to provide him with information on administration programs and activities, presidential transitions have become more formal and complex, as have the office of the presidency and the scope of what the chief executive is responsible for handling. Beginning in 1963, there is a formal government structure to provide assistance to the president-elect that comes with funds to support such an operation. Yet there is a great deal of flexibility on the part of the incumbent president and the incoming one as to how and when they structure their part of the transition of power from one chief executive to the next. Incumbent presidents can choose how much information they want

to provide the president-elect, and the incoming chief executive can decide how interested he or she is in what the sitting president has to offer.

Whatever they do, early planning is a must for both candidates, even at the risk of charges of hubris leveled by the other side or by reporters covering the election. No matter their level of preparation, at one time presidents and their staffs were reluctant to admit advance planning even while they were doing it. They feared a public perception of arrogance on their part. By 2000, the perception of the wisdom of early planning began to take hold. In June 2000, *Washington Post* columnist and reporter David Broder discussed the good judgment of early planning and quoted officials from all recent administrations in calling for preparation for governing. "In fact, such advance planning has been done in many past campaigns but covertly, to avoid conveying a sense of smug overconfidence to the voters. . . . The reality is that when a new president moves in, his top aides find bare desks, empty filing cabinets and disconnected computers. They need help."<sup>12</sup>

Yet when Senator Obama let it be known in late July 2008 that he was assigning former Clinton chief of staff John Podesta to head his transition planning operation, he faced criticism in some quarters for his early planning. MSNBC anchor David Shuster criticized Senator Obama for the move. "That does seem a little bit premature, right?" Shuster said to veteran White House correspondent Ken Walsh of *U.S. News and World Report*. Walsh replied: "But this is very early, and it plays into this notion that the Republicans are talking about, about Obama being too arrogant, that . . . a sense of inevitability has set in there. And Americans don't like the idea that . . . a candidate thinks that he's got the thing won without really pushing at it and trying really hard, and so I think that that's a danger. Putting out this transition statement, I think, was not a smart thing to do."<sup>13</sup>

Criticism did not impact John Podesta's operation, as he felt little pressure. When asked if the criticism of their early planning had an impact on what he was doing or how he did it, Podesta answered "No."<sup>14</sup> He knew that the public understood the need to prepare for a presidential change in power. He also credited President Bush for making it clear that transition planning was important. "I welcome their willingness to stand up in public and say both sides should be planning for a transition. . . . Hopefully that lesson will be followed by future presidents," Podesta commented. Indeed it was. In 2012, when former George W. Bush cabinet secretary and Utah Governor Michael Leavitt was announced as Republican candidate Mitt Romney's transition team leader for what was dubbed the "Readiness Project," there was no criticism from the press or his opponents. With the example of the success of early planning in 2008 and the passage of the

Pre-Election Presidential Transition Act of 2010, early planning is now an accepted part of the passage of power between administrations. Then too in 2008, President Bush was the first chief executive since President Truman was in office whose vice president did not become his party's candidate to succeed him in the presidency. That meant that President Bush was in the unusual position of having no official ties to his party's candidate and could therefore step back from the presidential race in a way that his predecessors could not.

With the exceptions of President Kennedy's assassination and President Nixon's resignation, there have been nine planned transitions between elected presidents since the transition period was shortened in 1933 from the original approximately 120 days between the November election and March 4 to the roughly 75 days currently scheduled from the election in the first week in November to January 20. With the original long stretch between the election and the inauguration, presidents were not pressed for time to prepare for office in the same way they are today. The first transition scheduled to come under the umbrella of the January inauguration date was the 1953 one between Presidents Harry S Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower. In that first shortened transition period, President Truman reflected a new concern for planning out the information-gathering and -dissemination processes. In an effort to accommodate the abbreviated schedule as well as the rapidly accumulating national security, budget, and policy information that should be exchanged between the incumbent administration and the presidential candidates, President Truman wanted to lengthen the information exchange period beyond the restricted 75-day schedule to well before the election.

President Truman began his preparations for the change of power during the spring of 1952, many months before the presidential election in November. Truman's plans included providing domestic, foreign policy, and national security policy information to the presidential candidates in the summer of 1952. That early dissemination of information to both major-party candidates following their nomination did not take place in the manner he planned, however. Nor did his successors work with the major-party candidates before the presidential election. It took until 2008 for an incumbent president to work successfully with both party candidates prior to the election. Through his work and that of people in his administration, President George W. Bush completed the transition preparation model first outlined by President Truman. Indeed, early planning had important payoffs for President Obama, payoffs that would have served Senator McCain equally as well if he had been elected.

In part, President Truman was moved to early transition planning by the cir-

cumstances of his own ascendancy to power. He entered the office in 1945 as a result of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death with little knowledge of what was going on in government, including the planning for the atomic bomb. Ken Hechler, White House assistant to President Truman, commented that the president brought his staff together the day after his speech to Democratic party members at the annual Jefferson-Jackson dinner on March 29, 1952. At that dinner, Truman had announced that he would not be running for reelection in the coming year. He promptly began his planning in earnest for his transition out of power, which relied heavily on preparing the next president. "He called us all together and said, 'Now, whoever's elected this fall, whether he be a Republican or a Democrat, I don't want him to face the kind of thing that I faced when I came into office in 1945, completely unbriefed and unprepared.'"<sup>15</sup> Truman continued: "I want this to be a smooth transition. . . . I want everybody to work hard on it between now and next January."<sup>16</sup>

President Truman's preparations covered the areas of central planning currently required of a president to effectively assume power: budget, foreign and intelligence policy, and domestic programs. The president turned to the Bureau of the Budget as his first line of preparations because of the broad reach of the agency as an information-gathering unit and the experience he had using the Bureau to prepare for a possible 1948 transition. Roger Jones, who worked at the Bureau of the Budget during Truman's term, described the president's efforts: "In the last year or so of Mr. Truman's administration, he looked to the Bureau to provide most of the tissue for transition to the next administration since he knew there was going to be a new president."<sup>17</sup> Truman also relied on the Bureau because he had done so in 1948 when he was running for election, though that effort was a very low-key one. Roger Jones observed that the president "said it was essential for the Budget Bureau as the chief on-going piece of presidential machinery be prepared for a new president in case a new president was elected. . . . But he did ask that we very carefully analyze the party platforms, that we watch the statements made by the party candidates and that we be prepared to give briefings on where the government stood on these issues."<sup>18</sup> The same kinds of preparations were taken in 2008, with Clay Johnson, deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, organizing administrative agencies in the information-gathering process. They too followed the party platforms and the statements by candidates on their policy intentions.

Both Truman's experience and the new inauguration date for an incoming president led Truman to plan in a way his predecessors had not. While the gathering of information on programs and positions was important as a precedent to

be followed by all of his successors, one aspect of his transition planning was not adopted by his successor: preelection transfer of information to both of the major-party candidates. Adlai Stevenson accepted Truman's information offer, but Dwight Eisenhower did not. President Truman's idea of preelection planning was not adopted in 1952 but became an important consideration for those planning the 2008 transition.

The transition of 2008 was notable for closing a circle on transition planning that began with President Truman's early efforts in the modern transition period to bring about pre- as well as postelection preparation of candidates for the presidency. While Truman and those chief executives who followed him all provided some information to the president-elect and his team, the same was not true in the days before the November election, except in the area of intelligence information. Even after the election, there is no previous transition where there was a more systematic effort by the outgoing president and his White House staff to gather information administration-wide for the new team coming in.

Truman wanted to have the two major-party presidential candidates knowledgeable on government operations before the election, including White House and departmental operations. He wanted the candidates to be able to interact with the White House on issues other than national security policy. In 2008, representatives of the major-party candidates did work with White House staff on a variety of issues that went beyond candidate intelligence briefings, such as personnel and transition process issues. While not exactly what Truman was seeking, the 2008 transition caught the spirit of what Truman wanted to do. Through Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten and his staff, President Bush kept the major-party candidates well informed before the election about White House operations and any transition plans that were under way and the clearance process for nominees and also provided them with lists of positions a president can fill. Bolten brought together the candidates' representatives and let them know what information the president-elect and his team would get following the election and brought the two sides together to plan for the appointments process.

In 2008, the president and the White House staff involved in transition operations were able to get beyond the partisan suspicions that had crippled President Truman's 1952 efforts. During the summer after the two party nominating conventions, President Truman offered the party candidates, Adlai Stevenson and Dwight Eisenhower, meetings with members of his cabinet. Truman wanted the candidates to get briefings from the secretaries on the departmental issues they had been dealing with. Truman offered the candidates other briefings as well. In a letter to Eisenhower dated August 13, 1952, the president wrote to the candi-

date: "I'll have General [Walter Bedell] Smith and the Central Intelligence Agency give you a complete briefing on the foreign situation."<sup>19</sup> Following the briefing with the director and other members of the Central Intelligence Agency, Eisenhower and Truman would have lunch with the cabinet. President Truman also indicated to Eisenhower that the CIA would provide him with information on the "world situation" on a weekly basis. After his initial CIA briefing, "we will have luncheon with the Cabinet and after that if you like I'll have my entire staff report to you on the situation in the White House and in that way you will be entirely briefed on what takes place."<sup>20</sup>

Dwight Eisenhower was reluctant to take advantage of President Truman's offers. He viewed the offer with a high level of suspicion. In his response to President Truman, Eisenhower wrote: "In my current position as standard bearer of the Republican Party and of other Americans who want to bring about a change in the National Government, it is my duty to remain free to analyze publicly the policies and acts of the present administration whenever it appears to me to be proper and in the country's interests. . . . I believe our communications should be only those which are known to all the American people. Consequently I think it would be unwise and result in confusion in the public mind if I were to attend the meeting in the White House to which you have invited me."<sup>21</sup> Feeling slighted by Eisenhower's brusque turndown, President Truman wrote a heated handwritten response to him. "I am extremely sorry that you have allowed a bunch of screwballs to come between us. You have made a bad mistake and I'm hoping it won't injure this great Republic."<sup>22</sup>

The exchanges between the two men colored the remainder of their transition; although President Truman offered his plane to Eisenhower for the president-elect's trip to Korea, Eisenhower made his own arrangements, which included travel by military transport and by ship over a 15-day period. During his campaign, Eisenhower said that he would go to Korea to see the conditions for himself and work at finding a solution for the conflict. Truman offered to facilitate his journey, but Eisenhower demurred. The suspicion between opposing party presidents and their teams remains an issue, but today the need to cooperate in preparing for office is deemed more important by both sides than are the points that divide them. Deputy Chief of Staff Joel Kaplan, who worked on domestic policy issues in the final year of the George W. Bush administration, spoke about the need to cooperate that brought the Bush and Obama teams together. "What I think is great about it was there was just a recognition on both sides that there was just a lot at stake and we had to get it right," he said.<sup>23</sup> "We took it from the president and Josh [Bolten] and Blake [Gottesman, deputy chief of staff for oper-

ations] and Steve [Hadley] really took it incredibly seriously, and to their credit so did the incoming team.” The party divisions that stopped earlier administrations from cooperating with one another did not prevent the two sides from working together. “Even though we are from different parties and obviously they spent the year beating us up and all of that, everyone put that aside, and I thought it was really terrific.” Transitions have so many benefits for governing that presidential candidates and their teams now view planning as a central part of the passage from the campaign to the presidency, no matter which party is in office or coming in.

### **Ten Ways an Effective Transition Benefits a President**

The preparations of the Bush and Obama national security teams set the stage for them to consider in an informed manner a very important issue arising as the new president prepared to take office. This benefit alone justifies the kind of work both sides did in holding principal-to-principal meetings and preparing templates to gather the information each side regarded as important to understanding the issues the incoming president would soon have to deal with. In a broader sense, an effective transition buys a new administration the chance to take advantage of the opportunities that exist at the beginning of an administration and to reduce the hazards that inevitably lie in wait. The benefits range from the direction of government to the reputation a president establishes in his early days.

#### **1. Continuity in Government**

Personnel, knowledge, and programs are in a volatile state when experienced people are leaving an administration and new ones are coming in. Continuity in government programs and decisions as well as crisis contingency plans are important in such a vulnerable time. The threat on the 2009 inauguration is a good example of the difference a transition can make to a president’s effective handling of a potential crisis early in his presidency. “At a time of war, you don’t want there to be any gaps, but particularly any extended gaps in having knowledgeable people [in office],” said Joe Hagin, deputy chief of staff in the George W. Bush administration.<sup>24</sup> Hagin was the White House staff member responsible for overseeing emergency preparations. Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten explained the importance of what Hagin was doing in terms of continuity of government. “Joe spent a lot of time trying to make sure that, before we left, we had in place the best possible emergency procedures and that we had mechanisms to make sure that people were trained and that there would be continuity between the administrations,” Bolten said. “He worked a lot with the military office as well as on the



infrastructure, the physical and technological infrastructure that goes with responding to an emergency.”<sup>25</sup>

Recent examples of attacks on democratic governments provide a sense of the vulnerabilities that exist at election and transition times. On June 30, 2007, three days after Prime Minister Gordon Brown took office in the United Kingdom, there was a terrorist attack at Glasgow International Airport. A day and a half earlier two bombs had failed to go off in London. The March 2004 Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people came three days before that country’s general election. With war in Afghanistan and Iraq under way in 2008, continuity in governing was essential to make sure the nation was protected during a vulnerable time.

Continuity in government is important in more than a national security sense. With few guidelines for how personnel and programs are to make a transition from one chief executive to another as well as from one department secretary to another, presidents need to take action when they leave government that assure continuity in programs and in the personnel assigned to carry on staff functions. The number of positions an incoming president will fill during his tenure is too large to fill in the first month in office or even the first year. Bradley Patterson, who once served in the White House and today studies its organization, estimated in 2008 that the president and his White House staff have an estimated 7,854 positions they can fill.<sup>26</sup> These include approximately 1,200 presidential appointees requiring Senate confirmation; about 1,500 part-time appointees for boards and commissions; 154 commissioned White House staff members; 2,300 non-career Senior Executive Service and Schedule C positions; and another 900 people who fill the White House staff offices as well as executive residence staff.<sup>27</sup> With so many positions to fill, a president and his staff need to set priorities.

In order to assure continuity in government programs, a president sets up a transition team focused on the budget as a priority. The president is called upon by law to present a budget to the Congress in February, less than a month after he comes into office. He must consider as well how the executive branch departments and agencies are going to implement the programs in operation and ones that may be coming online. With a budget of \$3.8 trillion in spending for FY 2013 and 2.1 million civilian employees in the federal government, it is not easy to establish direction of government.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Direction of Government

The presidential transition is an important element in establishing the direction of government. With a clear campaign agenda, an incoming president can quickly

signal his governing priorities. President Reagan signaled his intention to carry through on his budget and tax cut priorities in his first days in office. Less than an hour after he had been sworn into office on January 20, 1981, President Reagan signed a memorandum that was followed the next day by an executive order freezing the hiring of civilian federal workers. “I pledged last July that this would be a first step toward controlling the growth and the size of Government and reducing the drain on the economy for the public sector,” the newly inaugurated president said. “And beyond the symbolic value of this, which is my first official act, the freeze will eventually lead to a significant reduction in the size of the Federal work force. Only rare exemptions will be permitted in order to maintain vital services.”<sup>29</sup> The following day he signed a memorandum cutting by 5% “obligations for consulting, management and professional services, and special contract studies and analyses. . . . Cut obligations for travel by 15 percent” and halting the “procurement of furniture, office machines and other equipment, except military equipment and equipment needed to protect human life and property.” As a last measure, Reagan provided: “I am directing that Members of the Cabinet and other appointees set an example by avoiding unnecessary expenditures in setting up their personal offices. Appointees are not to redecorate their offices.”<sup>30</sup> In an area where the president had discretion, Reagan moved quickly to set the tone. Just as quickly, the Senate confirmed all but two of his cabinet nominees that first day.

For other presidents as well, transition planning meant an early start on their policy initiatives. “We weren’t stumbling around the first couple of months of the administration,” commented Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin about the transition of George W. Bush in 2000–2001. “We were able to get right down to business.”<sup>31</sup> Because those handling the White House transition—Andy Card, Joshua Bolten, and Hagin—had served in previous administrations, they knew where the traps lay. “We knew all the basics that allowed us to at least walk from the first day rather than crawl,” he said. “That is important.” From that beginning, the president and his administration focused on their priority issues at a tempo of their choosing without being sidetracked by the agendas of others. In their first year, though, they found that they had to change course. First, on June 6, 2001, the Republicans effectively lost control of the Senate with the change of party affiliation of Senator James Jeffords of Vermont from Republican to Independent and his indication he would caucus with the Democrats. That switch meant, at a minimum, alterations to some of President Bush’s agenda items, such as his tax cuts. September 11 meant further changes in policy priorities as well as significant challenges to the economy.

In the case of President Obama and his team, the first weeks were productive ones with executive orders, memoranda, proclamations, and legislation important to the administration and the Democratic majority in Congress. With a financial collapse a distinct possibility, the president wanted to establish early that his administration was under way and taking hold of the crisis. In his first ten days in office, President Obama took executive action through a series of ten memoranda directing the bureaucracy to take action on certain subjects. He also signed nine executive orders dealing with a range of domestic and national security issues, including a review of our policies dealing with detainees in Guantanamo Bay, abortion, and ethics requirements for members of the administration. All of these actions required a great deal of preparatory work during the transition period.

### 3. Seizing Political Momentum

Getting off to a fast start has the benefit of leaving little blank space for your critics to fill and represents an opportunity to discuss what you want to talk about. Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, a group that facilitated transition discussions in the late spring of 2008 and 2012 with teams representing those running for the presidency, commented on the importance of the transition in dominating discussion as a president comes into office. “I think especially in today’s political climate to actually have an affirmative agenda, your honeymoon period gets shorter and shorter and shorter. Your opportunity for change is much, much greater at the very front end of your term. And so the faster you do your transition, the faster you actually have the ability to have people in place to execute on your positive agenda, and you spend a lot of time reacting to things as the term lays out,” he said. “The idea of a quick transition also means you improve your likelihood of actually making it happen by making it fast, because there are fewer things—the political momentum is with you in a way that just dissipates really quickly, and there are going to be fewer people that are going to stand in your way to get your stuff done at the front end. That’s the up side.”<sup>32</sup>

President George W. Bush had an agenda ready to go that rolled out their chief initiatives in a weekly order. That way, the amount of time spent on the outcome of the election was held to a minimum. He had an order of initiatives that went from his first week in office until his sixth. Each week had a policy theme to it. The issues went from education in the first week to establishing the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives in his second. That week President Bush also signed an executive order designed to clear away bureaucratic hurdles for non-profit agencies dealing with five executive branch departments that often interact

with community organizations: Justice, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education.

Each week the president spoke on the issue of the week, and so too did members of his cabinet. He followed those first three weeks of education and faith-based issues with ones devoted to increasing military spending and tax reform. With each of the issues, President Bush spoke on the issue, often brought in congressional leaders to discuss the subject, and traveled outside of Washington to speak to relevant groups. The discussion of military spending, for example, included speeches to troops at Fort Stewart, Florida, and at the Norfolk Naval Station in Virginia as well as to National Guard members in Charleston, West Virginia.

While he spoke on issues of his choice, he also worked on issues that surfaced requiring presidential attention, including the early April downing of a military intelligence plane over China. He emphasized his role as chief executive through his swearing-in ceremonies with each of the cabinet members and a talk about the subjects that they handled in their individual departments. Taken together, there was little room for his critics to surface and get attention for their positions. News organizations were interested in following the new faces in the executive branch, most especially the president. President Bush gave them a great deal to write about. So much so, in fact, Democrats and reporters spent little time on President Bush's status as the last president since Benjamin Harrison in 1881 to enter the presidency with fewer popular votes than his opponent. Their early transition planning enabled Bush to enter office as a reasonably strong president, not one weakened irreparably by a cloudy election.

#### 4. Quality of Information

Gathering information well before a president comes into office is important because the previous administration removes its papers and digital records from the White House before the new occupant comes in. The more a president and his team know when they come into the White House, the more quickly they can get started. Chief executives come into the White House with no institutional memory awaiting them as an informational support system; only the Counsel's Office and the National Security Council retain files from the previous administration that the new presidential team can use. The Presidential Records Act of 1978 requires that presidential records leave a White House with the outgoing president. How much information is available to the incoming team about the operations of the White House and the fifteen cabinet departments depends on the

preparations provided for by the incumbent White House and the cooperation of the department secretaries and their deputies. The trucks begin pulling up to the White House in December to load in the boxes of White House Central Files that are still in the building. The end result is that when a new administration comes into office, the desks and file cabinets are empty. Having so many records leave the building is a big hurdle for the new team, which wants to get up to speed quickly.

The outgoing administration helps the new team assemble information important to a fast start. The agency review teams assembled by the transition team for President-elect Obama during the transition period made a difference in the kinds of information the policy teams worked with as they developed initiatives for the early days of the administration. They had 517 people on the agency review teams fanned out through government to find the status of programs in the departments and agencies and what was working and what was not. They had information assembled by the General Services Administration on the functions and responsibilities of each of the units. The President's Management Council, composed of the chief operating officers in the government, typically the deputy secretary of the departments and the largest agencies, produced information for the transition team about the hot issues and upcoming schedules important for each unit. Once the new team came into office, they had current information on the department or agency from both their own review teams and from those in office in 2008.

In coming into the White House, an early start is important because incoming staff need time to figure out the functioning of the offices they are going to occupy. There are many ways in which White House functions and operations will continue whether a Democrat or Republican holds the presidency, but there are fewer people serving across administrations in those offices at the career level as in the past. Anita McBride, who came into the White House at the beginning of the Reagan administration and returned for each Republican administration thereafter, noted the gradual loss of institutional memory from the time she first served in the White House in 1981. "People who had been there twenty and thirty years that were training all the new administrations weren't there, and that was very striking to me coming back in 2001 and coming in as acting director of White House personnel and not having the go-to people that I was used to in the past just to help you get started," said McBride.<sup>33</sup> With fewer people to train those coming in, an early start is important to develop the necessary information from other sources than career people.

## 5. Reducing Mistakes

The transition is a vulnerable decision-making period. There are important choices to be made, and mistakes are costly, especially in the appointments area. If a president-elect makes a mistake, it can drag on well into the new administration. The area of presidential appointments has tripped up several recent administrations as they started out of the gate. It took President Clinton until the middle of March to get his candidate for attorney general confirmed. It turned out that his first nominee, Zoë Baird, had not paid the required Social Security taxes for two household staff members. *Time* magazine carried a headline: “Clinton’s First Blunder: How a Popular Outcry Caught the Washington Elite by Surprise.”<sup>34</sup> *Newsweek* early on painted a portrait of an administration coming into the White House without a grasp on governing. “The transfer of power may have looked seamless on TV, but behind-the-scenes chaos reigned during the first days in the Clinton White House,” the authors wrote. “The switchboard was overwhelmed, in part by callers complaining about Zoë Baird’s nomination as attorney general. Many top aides were unreachable because offices—and direct phone lines—were still being assigned. Even the computer system wasn’t working.”<sup>35</sup>

In such an environment, it was difficult for the president and his staff to handle the problems associated with the attorney general position. President Clinton went through another nominee, federal judge Kimba Wood, before finally settling on the Florida state attorney in Miami, Florida, Janet Reno. It was February 11 when he nominated her and a month later before she was confirmed by the Senate. The problems from that one nomination caused trouble for him in other areas.

In contrast, President George W. Bush wasted little time at the start of his administration over inappropriate cabinet nominees. He had one nomination that caused trouble, but the situation was resolved fairly quickly. When Linda Chavez was named secretary of labor, information surfaced that she may have previously had undocumented workers as household help. When confronted with information that she had helped support an illegal worker, she stepped down. While the Clinton attorney general process took over three months from the naming of the first nominee to Reno’s confirmation by the Senate, the Bush labor secretary flap traveled the same distance in three weeks.

Max Stier discussed the protection an administration has if it starts planning early. “There’s also a protection against a down side, which is there are lots of risks out there. The world is an ugly, scary place, and not having a quick transition means you are more likely to be subject to a risk that you don’t have your

team in place to deal with,” he said.<sup>36</sup> In his view, there is an opportunity a president squanders if he does not begin planning early. “I think there’s both upside loss and downside risk that you can avoid by effective, quick transition, and I do think that the metric of doing better than the last person is insufficient not only because no one’s done it well but also because the world is changing so quickly that the requirements for doing it faster are all the more important.”

## 6. Effective Working Relationships

When presidents establish early relationships with congressional leaders, what difference does it make for them? While the relationships may come apart, they sometimes exist long enough for a president’s policy priorities to get enacted. President George W. Bush provides a good example with the early relationship he built with Senator Edward Kennedy. Jim Manley, a Kennedy aide who was present at the time, recalled an exchange between President Bush and Senator Kennedy that helped them work together to further the president’s No Child Left Behind legislation.<sup>37</sup> President-elect Bush’s initial foray into education was to bring together key congressional players in the area of education as he planned an initiative his first week in office. In late December, he brought together at his Texas ranch those he and his staff considered the key players. Senator Kennedy was not invited to the gathering.<sup>38</sup>

In his first week in office, President Bush had another meeting of Senate and House members involved in education issues. This time the meeting was at the White House and included the key players on education, Democrats as well as Republicans. This time the president saw an opportunity to work with Senator Kennedy. “At the end of the meeting, the President looked around the room and said to Senator Kennedy, ‘The press is waiting for you out there, and they’re going to try and drive a wedge between you and I right away over the issue of’—I think it was probably testing and standards—‘and I hope you won’t do anything to fall into that trap.’”<sup>39</sup> Manley said “Kennedy agreed, and sure enough we walked out the door. I don’t think we ended up going to the microphones. We started walking right to his van, which was parked on the drive, . . . There was a large pack of . . . reporters, and they’re just shouting questions at Kennedy. ‘What’s your view on this? What’s your view on that?’ And Kennedy just kept right on going and got in the van and said a few innocuous words.” Manley viewed the senator’s response as important to the two men’s working relationship: “That sent an important signal to the administration, to the President that he was someone that could be trusted.” In Manley’s view, the discussion and understanding between Bush and Kennedy was “probably a key, defining moment in the relationship, because the

White House was astute enough to realize that the potential for a stakeout had disaster written all over it, and Senator Kennedy was smart enough not to fall into the trap.” It was, he said, “a pretty subtle, but pretty important telling point. “After the initial mix-up, they identified Senator Kennedy as someone that they could do business with. And under great opposition, if you will, from many within the party and within the leadership, Senator Kennedy worked to pass No Child Left Behind,” he added.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond the White House, a good presidential transition can make a difference to the quality of the relationship between the political team coming in and the career staff in the departments and agencies. An effective transition “enables you to get the trust very quickly of the career staff,” said Dan Chenok, who worked in the Office of Management and Budget as a career staff member during both Democratic and Republican administrations before leaving to the private sector. As a member of two agency review teams for the Obama transition, Chenok saw the importance of the president-elect’s transition operation to acquiring the trust of career staff: “It is really important for there to be a good trust relationship as quickly as possible between the incoming team and the career staff. The trust relationship often gets built up in the transition.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to the relationships, in those early days it is also necessary to build the “working parameters” of the relationship, said Chenok. One of the ways the Obama transition operation built links with career staff was to bring onto their transition teams former members of the agencies who had both knowledge of agency operations and who had preexisting relationships with career staff.

### 7. Taking Advantage of Goodwill

For a short while, the president has the goodwill and attention of the public and the Washington community. Even in politics, people do not want to attack the newcomer until there is substantial reason to do so. In the early days, if he has strong poll numbers, there is little advantage for a president’s opponents to go on the attack against the administration’s people and positions. Instead, they wait.

The early months are ones where the president ordinarily can count on the public backing the job he is doing. But it doesn’t last. Presidents need to make use of that time to introduce their people and programs. President Obama won election with 53 percent of the popular vote. Yet by the time he was sworn into office, he had 68 percent job approval. He maintained that level through his first hundred days even though his job disapproval ratings went from 12 percent in his first days in office to 29 percent at the hundred-day mark. A year into his presidency, President Obama had a 49 percent job approval rating and 44 percent in-



TABLE 1.1  
*Gallup Presidential Job Approval Ratings and Percentage of Popular Vote*

	Percentage of popular vote <sup>1</sup>	Gallup job approval in first days in office <sup>2</sup>	Gallup job approval at 100-day mark <sup>3</sup>	Gallup job disapproval at 100-day mark <sup>3</sup>
Dwight Eisenhower	54.9	68	73	10
John F. Kennedy	49.7	72	83	5
Richard Nixon	43.4	59	62	15
Jimmy Carter	50.1	66	63	18
Ronald Reagan	50.7	51	68	21
George H. W. Bush	53.4	51	56	22
Bill Clinton	43.0	58	55	37
George W. Bush	47.9	57	62	29
Barack Obama	52.9	68	65	29

<sup>1</sup>American Presidency Project, "Presidential Elections Data."

<sup>2</sup>"Two-Thirds Approve of Obama's Job."

<sup>3</sup>American Presidency Project, "Presidential Job Approval Ratings Following the First 100 Days, Eisenhower–Obama."

dicating disapproval. A president needs to move during those early months, because support is not going to last once the chief executive submits his legislative proposals and his critics surface.<sup>42</sup>

Nor was President Obama alone in having a relatively high presidential job approval rating early in his presidency when compared with the percentage of the popular vote he received in the November election. Except for President George H. W. Bush, all recent presidents have had a substantially higher early approval rating than their percentage of the popular vote in their election to office. Of the nine presidents elected to the presidency from Dwight Eisenhower through Barack Obama—not counting Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford, who ascended to the presidency through the death or resignation of their predecessors—five of the nine presidents experienced at least a fifteen-point increase from the popular vote percentage to the early presidential approval rating. President Eisenhower was close, with a thirteen percent increase from his percentage of the popular vote to his early Gallup approval rating, while President George W. Bush had an increase of nine percent. Only two presidents—Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush—saw little movement between their election and early approval numbers.

The willingness of the public to give the new president a chance and look at him in a positive way is an important resource for a chief executive. That goodwill helps spur the Senate into confirming a president's cabinet-level nominees. He may have trouble down the line with deputies to the deputy secretaries, but at the top level, the Senate is willing to move quickly. In change of party transitions from Presidents Carter through Obama, unless a president withdrew a nominee,

the Senate confirmed them within days. All but two of them were confirmed less than a month after the inauguration, which was when their names were formally sent to the Senate. Goodwill translates into positive steps for a new administration as it assembles its team. For President Obama it led to a string of early legislative victories, such as the American Recovery Act and, several months later, the Affordable Care Act.

## 8. Capturing Public Attention

In addition to being willing to give the new president support for how he is handling his job as he begins his term in office, the public pays more attention to what the president says and does in the first months of his administration. That willingness to listen does not last through the chief executive's term. The inaugural address is important not only because it is a statement of the president's priorities but also because it draws strong public attention. Even though the ceremony is usually held on a weekday, a significant segment of the public watches the presidential address.

Individual speeches early in a president's term receive the attention of the public. President Reagan kept up the theme of getting the budget under control through a televised address less than a month after he came into office. In reviewing all of the televised addresses to the nation from his eight years in office, his February 18, 1981, budget speech had the largest audience. In a poll conducted by Richard Wirthlin of the audiences for twenty-two of President Reagan's major speeches, the average number of people who heard "all" of a Reagan speech was 21%, "part" of a speech was 24%, "read about later" was 16%, and "heard/read nothing" was 39%.<sup>43</sup> For his budget speech, however, 39% heard all of it, 25% part of it, 18% read about it later, and only 18% heard or read nothing about it. Reagan knew that this early period of his presidency would be important for getting the attention of the public, and he took advantage of it.

In part it was the subject, but the timing of Reagan's budget speech was important too. President Clinton delivered an economic speech on February 17, 1993, one day earlier in his presidency than Reagan delivered his. Clinton's result was similar to Reagan's experience in terms of the size of his television audience. To the question if a person watched all, some, a little, or none of the Clinton speech, 70% saw some part of the speech, while only 30% said they saw none.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time the public is watching, the press's treatment of presidents in the early days is fairly positive as well. The Center for Media and Public Affairs found in its charting of news coverage by ABC, CBS, and NBC that in the first fifty days of the George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush adminis-

trations, presidents got positive coverage for particular aspects of their administrations. The center's evaluation of press coverage of President George H. W. Bush was 61% positive, while those numbers in the three major networks fell in the Clinton first fifty days to 44%, and rose in a similar period of George W. Bush's tenure to 48%.<sup>45</sup> Even if their overall coverage was under 50% in its favorability, the coverage of individual policy areas came out well in the George W. Bush administration: faith-based initiatives 60%; defense 50%; taxes 49%; domestic policy 48%; other economic 54%.<sup>46</sup> While President Clinton did not receive as many favorable as unfavorable stories in his first fifty days, he did come in with favorable television pieces about himself and by members of his administration, which is the medium toward which recent administrations have aimed their publicity efforts. In the period between his election and inauguration, President Clinton had 64% favorable television pieces, and the coverage of his new team was even more favorable, except for controversial cabinet nominees Zoë Baird for attorney general and Ron Brown for commerce secretary.<sup>47</sup>

While poor transitions may not hobble a presidency, they prevent a new president from taking advantage of all of the opportunities that come to him when he enters the White House. In a wartime situation, an ineffective start means there will be a break in the continuity that is so important to carrying on the tasks and programs already in place.

### 9. Presidential Reputation

It is said that you only get one chance to make a first impression, and presidents are mindful of their need to use the early days to establish themselves with the public. One of the first and most important transitions a president needs to make is the one from candidate to chief executive. A president is responsible to all of the people, not just those of his party or those who voted for him. He needs to make the switch from candidate to president of all of the people.

If he is to be successful as chief executive, the president-elect needs to make that move during the transition rather than at the beginning of his presidency. One of the ways presidents-elect make that switch is by staying out of view for a time after the initial announcements related to the senior White House staff and domestic and foreign policy and national security teams. Once this group of aides is chosen, the president-elect can then head out of public view. It is a natural move to make because the stresses and strain of campaigning leave candidates exhausted. President Ford was so hoarse when he ended his campaign that Betty Ford read his concession telegram with him standing behind her.

The natural move for a president-elect, once he has rested, is to come to Wash-

ington. The length of that hiatus depends on circumstances. President Reagan went to his ranch and then in mid-November came to Washington for a brief visit and did so as president-elect, not as the Republican candidate. His schedule emphasized a bipartisan tone. He gave one dinner for the Washington community and was hosted by columnist George Will for another. The dinner the Reagans hosted included as guests the leaders and minority leaders of Congress as well as committee chairs, lobbyists, party officials, reporters and columnists. He included Democrats and Republicans and all of those whose support he needed to achieve his goals. It was a formal affair given by the president-elect and his wife Nancy at the F Street Club. The Washingtonians attending the event appreciated the manner in which Reagan was seeking to build connections with them.

“After four long years as wallflowers, members of the Washington establishment will finally have a suitor in the White House. Never was a neglected belle more eager to be wooed,” noted Lynn Rosellini in the *New York Times*.<sup>48</sup> Edward Bennett Williams, a Democrat and member of the Washington establishment, commented: “Obviously, he is reaching out. . . . That is something the current President [Carter] never did.” Clark Clifford, who advised Carter on foreign affairs, expanded on that theme for Rosellini: “The [Carter] White House missed an opportunity to ease their problems by remaining apart from the social activity of this city.” The day after his meeting with President Carter, Governor Reagan went up to Capitol Hill and called on Democratic and Republican leaders in the House and Senate. Those he went to see included Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy. Additionally, he stopped by the Supreme Court to see Chief Justice Warren Burger and then the other members of the Court. His message was clear: He wanted their support, and he was willing to come to them to get it.

Once he got into office, he got off to a quick start with a slew of executive orders and administrative memoranda. That led to favorable publicity about his leadership style, which portrayed a man who knew what he was doing. Veteran White House reporter Helen Thomas wrote about his focus on the economy one month into his presidency: “President Reagan is living up to his campaign promise to make the economy his No. 1 priority. As his one-month anniversary in office nears and he prepares to unveil his economic package Wednesday, he has kept the nation’s eyes riveted on that issue alone.”<sup>49</sup>

At the hundred-day mark of his presidency, President Reagan received continued praise for his leadership on the economy and for his overall good start. “With a gift for political theater, Mr. Reagan has established his goals faster, communicated a greater sense of economic urgency and come forward with more comprehensive proposals than any new President since the first 100 days of Franklin D.

Roosevelt, the hero of his youth and the man whose record of achieving social change Mr. Reagan seeks to emulate—albeit at the opposite end of the political spectrum,” wrote Steven Weisman in the *New York Times Magazine*.<sup>50</sup> “In Rooseveltian fashion, Mr. Reagan has commanded the attention of the public, the Congress and America’s allies and adversaries. He has skillfully courted new and old friends, kept Democrats and liberals on the defensive and maintained a friendly posture even to those who, like labor leaders and blacks, regard his program as anathema.” Weisman noted as well Reagan’s knack for avoiding the early mistakes of earlier administrations: “And, perhaps by luck, he has managed to avoid the serious blunders of many predecessors. Before the end of their first 100 days, after all, John F. Kennedy had the Bay of Pigs, and Jimmy Carter had already alienated his congressional allies and had been dramatically rebuffed by the Russians on his early arms-control initiative, setting negotiations back as much as a year for the ill-fated nuclear arms treaty.”

With his budget cuts and tax cuts legislation passed that year, President Reagan established a pattern of leadership that shot up his Gallup poll numbers at the hundred-day mark. Table 1.1 shows the figures. Seven of the nine elected chief executives from Presidents Dwight Eisenhower to Barack Obama had job approval ratings of at least 62%, with only two in the fifties (Presidents George H. W. Bush and Clinton had 56% and 55%, respectively). Two of the presidents, John Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower, had ratings of 83% and 73%. Since 1960, though, presidents have had to settle for significantly lower but still strong numbers. Yet Presidents Obama and George W. Bush had 65% and 62%, respectively. The relatively robust public approval numbers for almost all of these chief executives made a difference in their approach to their jobs and their relationships with the public and the Washington community. Reputations are formed early in Washington, and when important players view presidents as knowing what they are doing, they are more willing to give them more support for their programs.

### 10. A Good Transition Benefits the Outgoing President

How a president leaves office can be a significant factor in his legacy. Certainly it influences the stories written about him as he leaves office. For President Clinton, the end of his presidency brought criticism from Democrats as well as Republicans. News articles and broadcasts at the end of his presidency reflected the questions about the 176 pardons he granted, particularly the one to exiled financier Marc Rich, as well as the plea deal he struck on that final day to avoid further investigation of his lying in the deposition he gave in the Paula Jones case. The Rich pardon was particularly damaging. A 2013 Associated Press obituary on Rich

described the conditions under which Rich left the United States for Switzerland in 1983. He left “after he was indicted by a U.S. federal grand jury on more than 50 counts of fraud, racketeering, trading with Iran during the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis and evading more than \$48 million in income taxes—crimes that could have earned him more than 300 years in prison.”<sup>51</sup> Rich was on the FBI Most Wanted List when Clinton pardoned him.

Later newspaper articles mentioned vandalism by junior White House staff that was purported to have occurred as he left office. The vandalism reports spread so far and wide that Congressman Bob Barr (R-Ga.) requested the General Accounting Office to investigate the claims. The agency’s June 2002 report concluded: “Damage, theft, vandalism, and pranks occurred in the White House complex during the 2001 presidential transition. Incidents such as the removal of keys from computer keyboards; the theft of various items; the leaving of certain voice mail messages, signs, and written messages; and the placing of glue on desk drawers clearly were intentional acts.”<sup>52</sup> But the GAO concluded: “It was unknown whether other observations, such as broken furniture, were the result of intentional acts, when and how they occurred, or who may have been responsible for them.” The GAO estimated the costs associated with the repair and replacements of items at the beginning of the new administration at \$9,324.<sup>53</sup> Questions arose too about items of American porcelain and decorative arts acquired by the Clintons said to total \$190,027.<sup>54</sup> The initial piece over the Clintons’ gifts raised questions posed by the chief usher about the uncertainty of whether the items belonged to the White House or the Clintons.<sup>55</sup> By early February, the Clintons paid for or returned the items where ownership was an issue.<sup>56</sup> All of the Clinton controversies led to articles such as one by Godfrey Sperling appearing in the *Christian Science Monitor*: “Bush’s Promising Start and Clinton’s Sorry Exit,” was the headline of his article.<sup>57</sup>

A month after President Clinton left office, the controversies surrounding his exit had still not quieted down. The *Washington Post* reported that the hullabaloo created by his exit had elevated President Bush’s early poll numbers and were responsible for the precipitous fall of Clinton’s figures. “There is widespread agreement that Republican gains have been the result,” John Harris and Dana Milbank reported in their *Post* article. “The questions around Clinton have helped reinforce Bush’s pledge to ‘restore dignity’ to the White House. A poll last week by Zogby International showed that 64 percent of respondents said they had an ‘overall favorable’ impression of Bush, up 10 points from a month before. Clinton scored 48 percent favorability, down eight points in a month.”<sup>58</sup> President Clinton worked his way back up to his earlier highs, but his exit cost him in popularity.

TABLE 1.2  
Gallup Presidential Job Approval Ratings

	Gallup average job approval while in office (%)	Gallup final job approval rating while in office (%)	2010 Gallup retrospective approval (%)
John F. Kennedy	70	58	85
Lyndon Johnson	55	49	49
Richard Nixon	49	24	29
Gerald Ford	47	53	61
Jimmy Carter	45	34	52
Ronald Reagan	53	63	74
George H. W. Bush	61	56	64
Bill Clinton	55	66	69
George W. Bush	49	34	47

Source: Saad, "Kennedy Still Highest-Rated Modern President, Nixon Lowest."

His last Gallup poll while in office had him at 66%, with the Zogby poll showing him a month later at 48%. A poor exit had a sharp, if transitory, impact on his public approval ratings.

All around, President Clinton's exit was viewed as one of the messiest in memory and one future presidents would want to avoid. In fact, one of the issues discussed in a White House meeting at the end of President Bush's time in office was how to avoid a situation of petty vandalism similar to what happened in the end of Clinton's presidency when some junior staffers took the letter W (a common nickname for George W. Bush) off of some White House computer keyboards.<sup>59</sup> While the actual instances of defacement were few, articles abounded about the destruction.

What happens in his transition out of office is significant for how people view the president. While President George W. Bush left office with a low public approval rating, his transition out of office continues to receive considerable praise as the most successful one a president has had. It is one element in the rise of President Bush's ratings in the years following his presidency.

### Transition Challenges

In order to take advantage of the opportunities a transition offers as well as to avoid its hazards, the presumptive party candidates need to prepare for the presidency before they come into office—ideally, well before the party conventions. By taking advantage of the opportunities a presidential candidate has to begin early information-gathering on personnel, programs, and presidential actions, a president-elect has a better chance than he otherwise would have of successfully

establishing the direction of the new administration. In addition to setting the course of presidential policy, an effective transition will help the incoming president staff up the White House and the administration.

While an effective transition provides a good start for an administration, the duration of its beneficial effects will last only as long as the president and White House as well as administration officials are responsive to their new environment. Their operation must be flexible and able to detect changes in conditions and sense new issues rising. Without that capacity, the benefits of a good transition will prove transient.



**Posted with permission from the Johns Hopkins University Press.**  
<https://www.press.jhu.edu/>