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Dave Marchick (00:00)

Today, we're talking to two exceptional individuals, both of whom served at the highest levels of government, both of whom served as chief of staffs for the president of the United States, both of whom served in the second term in that role. And for the purposes of our discussion, they also are unique in that they participated in three types of transitions: a transition into government, a transition to the second term, and then a transition to a new president, where they presided over perhaps the best transitions ever done in the history of the United States. So welcome to Josh Bolton, who served as chief of staff as well as a number of other roles for President George W. Bush and Denis McDonough, who served as chief of staff to President Obama. Welcome and thank you for being with us today.

David Marchick (01:18):

Josh, let's start going back to the election of 2008. You were on the campaign and you actually worked for President Bush, then Governor Bush, for almost two years before the election. Bush did something very unusual, which was he tapped Clay Johnson to develop a transition plan in the spring of 1999, 18 months before an election, which is very unusual. Was that planned? What's your view on that in hindsight?

Josh Bolton (01:48):

In hindsight, it's a good idea. And, what we experienced later was candidates who were reluctant to set up their transitions in advance cause they didn't want to seem to be measuring the drapes, which is understandable but a mistake. And so, what President Bush did, it wasn't super formal, but Clay Johnson was his good friend from college who had been, after a distinguished business career, had been serving as a head of personnel for the governor of Texas. And somebody who's been deeply involved in personnel is an important element of transition. And so then governor Bush, having decided that he did want to take the whole process seriously, and should he win, be well prepared to govern, thought this would be a good role for Clay, who was not a particularly political person.

Now, Clay didn't have all that much to do early on, but it was good to have him identified and in the role long in advance and to have somebody who was really spending their time not focused on trying to win the election, which is what everybody else is focused on, but focused on what do you do after you win.

Dave Marchick (3:10):

Dennis, you were involved in the campaign, but then Senator Obama started his transition planning in—

Dennis McDonough (3:19):

Yes. He started talking with Pete Rouse about transition planning in early spring of 2008, and then later in the spring (you may remember the exact dates) asked Chris Lu to run the transition much of the way Clay did for the Bush campaign. I think it does make sense to bifurcate the responsibilities and as much as the campaign responsibilities are all encompassing, and you want somebody who's close to the candidate who has the trust and a candidate and can be discreet.

Josh Bolton (4:01):

it's interesting that that both Clay Johnson and Chris Lou were classmates of the then candidate. So somebody really close to them whom they could talk about sensitive personnel decisions with and no, it wouldn't go anywhere else.

Dennis McDonough (4:20)

Yeah. And so that discretion is really important. And then the trust—that there's a longstanding relationship, that somebody is not going to try to be gaming the process—I think strikes me as a sensible, so as you're suggesting, the idea of getting a good head start on it makes sense. Whom the candidate chooses to be in that position of both trust and discretion, I think is also important.

Josh Bolton (4:45)

An interesting contrast lesson is from the Trump administration where I mean it feels sort of clever and appropriate for the candidate to have chosen what had been a primary adversary to do something like run the transition, but that really isn't a good role. Christie ended up being purged right before the Trump administration actually took office. So he and a small team had done a fair amount of transition work—I think in a responsible way is my recollection. And then sort of feeling in a presence of somebody who wasn't really on the team, the president-elect decided, no, that's not my guy. And they threw out the transition work. The lesson here may be pick a buddy,

Dave Marchick (5:57)

So fast forward to election day, Clay Johnson had then built a team and then on election night, surprise, surprise, nobody's declared a victor. Okay. So you go through the recount and actually your transition, instead of being 73, 74 days, which the typical transition, was only 36 or 37 days. So were you ready on inauguration day to start?

Josh Bolton (6:22):

Yeah. You got to be ready. I mean, you don't have a choice. you can't say, let's hold this off for a week. You can't go to John Podesta (the chief outgoing chief of staff at the time) and say, yeah, we're not really quite ready. Can you hang on for another couple of weeks while we do it? So you don't have any choice to be ready.

We had several advantages on the Bush team. One is that it was a well-organized, coherent team with a leader who valued all of that. The second is that we had Clay Johnson already underway. We had a vice president elect who was deeply experienced in government and could be deployed to help with the transition, and actually to lead it when the time came. And finally we had a group of people on the campaign staff who were prepared to step in and take roles in government that were relatively comparable to the roles that they had in the campaign. So, we did not experience what I think most administrations experience, which is a tension between the people who had really just killed themselves to get the candidate elected and weren't necessarily the right people to staff the senior positions in government. Therefore, there's the campaign folks who are accustomed to having been in charge and doing things by the seat of the pants, and then all of a sudden all these nerds show up with government experience. We didn't have a lot of that because we sort of had the nerds in place already.

Dave Marchick (8:16):

You had your team in place. But what was it like for you Dennis? Same type of thing?

Dennis McDonough (8:19):

Yes. And same type of thing. There's another important timing piece, and I think maybe you guys lived this—particularly Josh, given the intensity of the recount and then the truncated nature of the transition—but you're tired and the candidate’s tired right at the end of the campaign. And you realize quickly that actually the hard part’s to come. And so having a bifurcated team with some fresh legs ends up being extraordinarily important. So yeah, there there's some tension. But I recall mostly a sense of appreciation that there was a set of fresh legs to kind of do the significant work of identifying people, getting people to and through ethics and background checks and murder bordering them. And so I do think this concept of fresh legs coming in at a key time, it was really important.

Dave Marchick (9:40):

And Josh, the transition from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration was, let's say, less than smooth. It was not, maybe it was good with you and Podesta, but there were a lot of problems. There were a lot of stories and I think that informed President Bush’s thinking later about how he was going to hand off. But what was your recollection of some of the challenges associated with the Clinton to Bush transition?

Josh Bolton (10:03):

Yeah, my recollection is that the reporting of the difficulties was exaggerated. I mean, media were looking for that kind of thing naturally. We did only have that that truncated transition. And by the way, Dennis, if you think about fresh legs, imagine having just run the marathon, and as soon as you hit the tape, somebody says there's a one-mile sprint coming up, and then see how your legs feel after that. So, it was a pretty tired team that walked into the White House on January 20th, 2001. But it was a pretty upbeat team.

I think in part because of the contested election, some of the young folks on the Clinton team were bitter. they had been strong Gore partisans, which I completely understand. So there were really minor things. It didn't come from the top. Podesta and his crew were super professional and gracious. The W's were missing from a bunch of the keyboards, that kind of thing. And kind of a funny one I experienced was I got to my desk in my office and nobody could reach me because my phone had been forwarded to a different number. Juvenile pranks. And so, we're laughing now. We actually kind of laughed at him at the time. We tried to downplay him, but the press was keen on reporting some kind of conflict. It wasn't that bad, but you're right. Our experience did inform some of President Bush’s feeling about it. And he appreciated all of the gracious stuff and was annoyed by the few bits of ungraciousness and it probably would have been his instinct anyway, but he probably set himself at that point on a course of being determinately gracious.

Dave Marchick (12:20):

We'll get to this later. But you set up this whole process when you were leaving, when President Bush was leaving, to facilitate an easy entrance for either Senator Obama or Senator McCain. Dennis, during this period, you were having regular conversations as part of the transition process with Steve Hadley who was then the national security advisor.

Dennis McDonough (12:41):

Well, so the Josh really set the tone at this time as he, I'm sure hasten to add was at the direction of the president reckless at the direction president. Transition was happening in a state of war and it was important to recall that and to make sure that there was no slip from cup to lips in the context of the transition. because I think it is, it's worth taking a moment here to just recognize that the, the transition is set by the constitution that's set quite clearly, which means our adversaries know that too. And we can't give them any impression that somehow in the midst of this handoff that we're somehow losing track of important objectives of the country. And so the kinds of conversations that I had with the national security advisor, Steve Hadley at the time, or the conversations that Josh was having with Rahm. And Steve was having conversations as well with Tom Donalyn and Jim Jones. Those are all really important things. And just to go back on what Josh was saying a minute ago, I think the general sense I had during the transition was a kind of a sense of comradery recognizing that we are handing off to a new team, but given the stakes of the affair you want to see them be in a position to succeed.

Dave Marchick (14:32):

And so the handoff from the Bush administration to the Obama ministration was smooth, even though essentially a large part of the campaign of then Senator Obama was a repudiation of some of the Bush policies.

Josh Bolton (14:44):

Right. That way I remember it is that both candidates were running against the president. They had, both Obama and McCain were fashioning their campaigns as not Bush and, and God bless him, George W. Bush understood that and did not take it personally. Some of the rest of us did, but I mean, President Bush was sufficiently unpopular toward the end of his term, that it was kind of a political necessity for even the Republican candidate to be to be repudiating some of the Bush positions and in particular on what had become very unpopular conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We weren't actually indifferent, we were rooting for McCain, but we stayed out. And on the president's direction in the early part of 2008, he said prepare a really good professional, smooth transition because this is the first transition in modern history when the United States itself is under threat. And we have a national security responsibility here and do the best possible job you can regardless of who wins this election.

Dennis McDonough (16:07):

I think it's worth putting it in that personal terms as Josh just has. I mean, we talked a minute ago about, being at the end of the race at the end of the campaign and then turning the corner and realizing that the hard work is just starting, and we had fresh legs to either take over things or augment the team, but the one person or the two people who don't get to slow down are the president and the vice president elect. And so, President Obama felt that commitment that Josh has given voice to from President Bush. The fact is, as the president, you're taking over this thing and there is very few people 45 of them, who have been through it. And add to that the stakes that Josh has just talked about, which is this is in the age of Al Qaeda and the global terrorist threat that had struck right here at home and the president himself recognizes the enormity of the challenge. So, the fact that his predecessor has kinda teed up a process by which to make that not more challenging, but more smooth, is a very personal thing.

Josh Bolton (17:40):

Dennis is right. It is a very personal thing to both the incoming and outgoing, and a lot of their teams. I do have to correct one thing that Dennis just said though, there are only 44 men who have actually served as president of the United States. David, do you know why? Trump was the 45th president, but Grover Cleveland, is counted twice, right? Exactly.

Dave Marchick (18:08):

So, let's fast forward to year four. So in year four, you're the director of OMB, which has broad powers across the government and also was just as responsible for transition planning. And Dennis, you were deputy national security advisor at the time. So are you planning for a year five in the way that you were planning for a year one? Are you thinking about personnel? Are you thinking about new policies? Are you thinking about how do we re-energize, reorient, refresh?

Dennis McDonough (18:40)

Well, yeah, I mean on one level, your day to day responsibilities are no less. In fact, they're as intense as ever. And so the questions about what you do every day are quite obvious. I mean, you'll recall that in September, 2012 is Benghazi, as an example of the enormity of the questions that you're wrestling every day as a matter of course. And so the agenda as a daily matter is plenty full, but you do have to be thinking about what the next term priorities are. The president is out campaigning and making commitments to the voters about what it is that he will do, and you want to make sure that those commitments are able to be executed and are based on concrete executable strategies.

And so that work is ongoing. And then of course, you're thinking about your team and some of your team may have already indicated that they've got different plans. So you're making plans for them. But then you're also thinking about, you've been through a transition once, you know that the stakes of the game are as high as they get. And you know that at the end of the day, that personnel are key to making sure that you can execute against those challenges. So yeah, you're thinking also about people.

Dave Marchick (20:29):

Because the data shows that about half the people that are secretaries, deputy secretaries or under-secretary—just less than half—turn over within the first six months of a second term, which means that's a lot of new people, a lot of new bodies, a lot of new people to bring in.

Dennis McDonough (20:45):

Yeah. And the newness is a good thing.

Josh Bolton (20:50):

Well, I would say that the Bush administration made the converse mistake, which is that we didn't really treat it as a moment of transition. I mean as farsighted and thoughtful as I think President Bush was in directing a robust transition in 2008, I cannot say that that was very high on the agenda in 2004. And anybody who's elected president is a competitive person and isn't inclined to say I need to plan for defeat. Right? And so the person sitting in the Oval Office is likely to have the kind of personality who's focused on how are we going to win and what are we going to do after we win. And there was plenty of focus on that in the Bush White House in 2004.

There was not a lot of focus in 2004 on planning for what to do if we lost. And I know Andy Card, my predecessor and our good friend, who was chief of staff at the time, tried to persuade the president to think about a second term, even in victory, as a moment of transition. The moment, even in victory, as a moment to think, just think about the staff and the cabinet from the beginning. And presidents just aren't inclined to do that. And good advice is seize the opportunity. Assume you're going to win but treat it as a transition and make sure you're prepared and to hand off in good shape in case you don't.

Dave Marchick (22:38):

So what would you advise people on the Trump administration to do now that they're coming up on year four, they're running for reelection. He could win and if he does win, presumably as Americans, we want him to have an effective government and plans. So what would you advise them to be doing now and into year four?

Josh Bolton (22:56)

I mean, treat it, treat it like at a transition. Maybe appoint a transition director of some kind, some somebody that the president is close to, rethink all of your personnel and know what your priorities are. I mean, President Obama, I'm sure was like President Bush in knowing what priorities he wanted to pursue in the beginning in year five of the presidency. But we sure weren’t thinking about reshuffling the cabinet and that kind of thing. And those are all important things to think about. That would be my advice to the Trump administration including the president, but the president by personality, every president by personality is going to be resistant to that kind of advice.

Dennis McDonough (23:44):

I think that the same lesson that we talked about earlier about a bifurcated team and new legs and fresh perspective I think applies. And so, I think a best practice is to think about how do you put this somewhere where somebody you trust and who's discreet can help you give a good hard look at that. And as chiefs of staff, we had strategies as to how to do that as a general planning matter, red teams and clean teams and stuff like that. But having one expressly dedicated transition team makes sense. And then, this is where you can use the agencies to your advantage. Here, there's a lot of ways to do it, but just very concretely, the Department of Justice in 2012 set aside a team of people to help clear personnel associated with the Romney transition so that people could get down the time curve to getting those security clearances. In fact, several people get the security clearances so they could begin to dig in on them.

Dave Marchick (24:53):

They had a 150 to 200 people. And this was a lesson out of 9/11 when President Bush had all the secretaries in place, all the deputy secretaries, but not all of the undersecretaries and people below that had received their security clearances. And so the 9/11 commission said, let's get people cleared in. The Obama administration did a great job of saying, we're going to set aside a team, we're going to insulate them from politics and we're going to commit to the Romney campaign to get their people cleared and they're not going to leak. And that was really a good innovation from the Obama administration.

Dennis McDonough (25:21):

And a lot of that now is, as we've talked about a couple of times and as David, you and your team know better than we do, is some of those practices are memorialized in statute and the presidential transition act.

Dave Marchick (25:34):

The concepts of the transition act actually trace back to something that Josh Bolton did and Josh, you really set the gold standard for transition planning when you left office. Actually the only other president that had tried to effectively transition out and affect the plan was Truman because he was so frustrated that he didn't know about the bomb, about everything else. When he took over, he tried to get Eisenhower and also the democratic candidate to work with him and Eisenhower kind of blew him off. And there's a famous letter that Truman wrote to him saying, you're being really dumb for not doing this. Right after the election, President Bush brought the entire White House staff to the front lawn and made perhaps the most comprehensive statement ever made by a US president on the importance of a smooth transition of power. Let’s take a listen.

George W. Bush [from video] (26:27):

This peaceful transfer of power is one of the hallmarks of a true democracy and ensuring this transition is as smooth as possible is a priority of the rest of my presidency. We face economic challenges that will not pause to let a new president settle in. So for the next 75 days, all of us must ensure that the next president and his team can hit the ground running.

Dave Marchick (26:50). So president asked you. Why did you think it was important to actually start a year ahead to get the gears of government going to hand off the government in a smooth way to either Senator Obama or Senator McCain?

Josh Bolton (27:06):

It’s not more complicated than what the president said when he gave me the direction, which is the first time in modern history that the territory of the United States is actually under threat. And we, we cannot afford those weeks and months of people trying to learn on the job. They’ve got to be as, as well prepared and as well in place as we possibly can make them beginning on January 20th. So it was just that simple. And so, we put some effort into it. I can't say it was a an exceptionally well organized effort because we didn't have a playbook. Dennis was right, there's really no manual for how to, how to turn over government.

Dave Marchick (28:01):

But what did you do, which then became the playbook and then became the law?

Josh Bolton (28:10):

Well we had a transition group that cut across the government, [had] representatives from all of the sectors of the government and so on, that we met periodically. We showed strong White House interest in every one of the agencies preparing themselves well to prepare the next folks coming in. And that's an easy thing to do in the second term, way out in the open because you can't get reelected so it doesn't look like you're anticipating being defeated, and we invited in outsiders into that process and then we made contact with the campaigns early on and really invited them in, strongly encouraged them to come in and start reading in, start giving us names to clear.

Dave Marchick (29:05):

Bush was supporting McCain. How did you give the Obama team comfort that you were going to be fair?

Josh Bolton (29:12):

You just tell him we'll be fair. We'll keep your confidence since now, once again, in our case it was pretty clear that both candidates were running against the president. So, we clearly had a side, we were for McCain, but we went out of our way to demonstrate to the Obama team that we were playing it straight

Dave Marchick (29:30):

And you felt like they were being fair, Dennis?

Dennis McDonough (29:36):

Totally playing that straight. And there's obviously there's a kind of philosophical question and then there's a structural question. The philosophy that Josh communicated—I'm comfortable speaking for the McCain campaign because I guarantee they had the same sense that we did. But we, for example, our campaign is now public, our campaign was hacked in the summer of 2008. The notification of that incident came from Josh. And Josh called David Pluff. And Pluff called me and said, you're the only guy with security clearance around here, you got to go talk to these guys.

Dave Marchick (30:19):

And you found that out through intelligence sources or some other manner from the FBI?

Josh Bolton (30:22):

From the FBI.

Dennis McDonough (30:24):

And so for the first question, philosophically and temperamentally is there a reason for us to trust these guys? I mean, you know Josh? You trust him, right? Then there's a structural question which is, are the agencies set up? Each agency has a lead and it's a career civil servant or a foreign service officer, and that person has her team. And then once you're a president elect, you then have an agency lead and the landing teams that marry up with those structures. So Josh did both, right? He communicated his interest in an effective transition, but he also built a structure that ends up being the basis now for the statute that requires, as I say, a civil servant, non-political person in each agency who's going to stay.

Dave Marchick (31:25):

Josh, one of the things that made it unique, was that it was the first time actually since Truman that a two term president was leaving office when their vice president wasn't running. So if vice president Cheney were running for office, could you have done the same thing or it would have been difficult?

Josh Bolton (31:43):

Yeah, we definitely would have done the same thing. We would have had exactly the same instruction from the president, but it would have naturally been more difficult. That made our lives somewhat easier in a difficult circumstance. Though the one thing to say about the Bush to Obama transition is to add to what Dennis said is that as committed as we were to doing it right, we were kind of groping along and trying to figure out how to do that. Our counterparts on the Obama side were a really experienced professional and civil bunch of folks. Beginning with Chris Lu, you mentioned the president's classmate from law school, who was the executive director or something. And then in comes John Podesta as the chairman of the transition. And lo and behold, John Podesta is the guy who was Clinton's last chief of staff and had done the last transition out. So he knew what was going on. And we knew him as someone of integrity who had dealt with us fairly. And it was, it was super easy to deal with an Obama team that was so well staffed and extremely well organized from the perspective that I could have.

Dave Marchick (33:10):

So actually President Bush asked Andy card to be chief of staff several weeks before the election. Did Obama ask Rahm the same thing?

Dennis McDonough (33:16):

I think so. I remember the conclusion of that meeting that night, whether he actually and his decision that night,

Dave Marchick: (33:27):

You guys wanted a cool collected person like Josh to be chief of staff, and that's how he came up with Rahm?

Dennis McDonough (33:32):

We were looking for somebody with nine and a half fingers. He's of medium height. That's what, that's what science claims is. Somebody like Rahm strikes me as more short, but he claims they're medium height.

Josh Bolton (33:53):

But, you know as, as different as Rahm and I might be by disposition and as different as our vocabularies… Well let's just put it this way. We can both swear, but Rahm can swear for 10 minutes without repeating himself. As different as he and I are by personality we were actually friends from his service in the House Democratic Leadership. And in particular, he was a key contact for the White House during the financial crisis. So, he was somebody we were accustomed to. And I in particular, as the chief of staff, was accustomed to working with him. So, we had the fortuity of that, but that fortuity went across a lot of the positions that were transitioning in and out. And it speaks, I think to one of the strengths of our system of democracy is that people at different places on the ideological spectrum if they're professional and experienced have probably run into each other and know how to deal with each other. And one of the concerns I have about our current environment is that, that's deteriorated.

Dave Marchick (35:19):

President Obama also made a statement on the importance of a smooth transition right after the election of 2016.

Barack Obama (clip) (35:27):

The peaceful transition of power is one of the hallmarks of our democracy, and over the next few months we are going to show that to the world.

Dave Marchick (35:35):

And Dennis, so you, when you were chief of staff, when Obama was leaving office, you essentially followed the Bolton playbook.

Dennis McDonough (35:40):

Yup. Yes. So I did try to just run each of the things that Josh ran. I didn't do as good a job of planning in advance, but I did try to emulate—

Josh Bolton (35:55)

You weren't aware it was coming? Took you by surprise?

Dennis McDonough (36:03):

It shouldn’t have. But I don't have a good excuse. If we do another one of these, I'll have a good excuse by then.

Dave Marchick (36:12):

And you actually worked pretty well with both Secretary Clinton's team who you knew well, but also Chris Christie's team.

Dennis McDonough (36:18):

We had a very regular meeting cadence starting after the conventions. We were getting information making sure that the people were cleared, we're getting them information they needed, that they had workspaces. I think we can come back to this later, but I think this whole question of workspaces and computer infrastructure in this day and age is an important thing. Making sure that people are practicing good cyber hygiene, that people are aware of that.

Dave Marchick (36:48):

Because we know that other countries are going to try to hack into the transition teams with 100% certainty.

Dennis McDonough (36:55)

They're going to try to do everything they can to disrupt, collect at all times, and they're going to look for times of vulnerability.

John Bolton (37:10):

Then this is the pro pro, the most vulnerable time in the entire calendar of United States governance is those few days with outgoing and incoming.

Dennis McDonough (37:28):

So in addition to the structure of meetings, that giving the teams for Secretary Clinton and for then Mr. Trump their workspaces getting them information, which are Josh innovations. And the other two things that Josh did that we emulated are we had lunch in the chief of staff's office. I think Josh did a breakfast of four. We invited all the living chiefs of staff and Reince and we had a conversation with him over lunch. And then in January, we also emulated another Josh innovation, which is basically a joint meeting of the national security council and homeland security council personnel, a tabletop exercise. So people got to know each other, people got to brief through their colleagues. The incoming team got some familiarity with at least the flow of the meeting and the nature of the documentation. And so those are all things that we quite purposely emulated after Josh.

David Marchick (38:39):

But they weren't in law as well?

John Bolton (38:42):

Yeah. And they were, but they were much better organized and I think executed eight years later than they were our time because we were still kind of fumbling with the playbook and thanks to a lot of good work done by folks on the outside and including an organization, David that you know well, the Partnership for Public Service, Dennis, by the time your time came around, there were statutory obligations and there was kind of a playbook by then. So as much as I appreciate the kudos being given to the Bush administration on the way out, I think what was done in the Obama administration and I hope what will be done at the appropriate time in the Trump administration was much more organized and professional than we were able to accomplish in 2008.

Dave Marchick (39:38):

Well, Josh Bolton, Denis McDonough, thank you very much for your time. And more importantly, thank you very much for the service to our country.