



HOW BUSH AND OBAMA CREATED A GOLD STANDARD TRANSITION

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring that an incoming administration is ready to govern in the most consequential transition since 1932 will require active cooperation of an incumbent administration. The transition from George W. Bush to Barack Obama presents a model of how two administrations from different parties can work together to secure America in the face of challenges at home and abroad. This paper draws on the example set by Bush and Obama to describe how to manage an effective transition between outgoing and incoming presidents in three areas: people, policy and process.

PEOPLE

Setting a Positive Tone

The foundation for a cooperative transition from one administration to the next begins with the two presidents themselves. President Bush set the tone two days after the 2008 election when he [addressed](#) staff members on the South Lawn of the White House about the upcoming transition:

“Ensuring that this transition is as smooth as possible is a priority for the rest of my presidency. We face economic challenges that will not pause to let a new president settle in. This will also be America’s first wartime presidential transition in four decades. We’re in a struggle against violent extremists determined to attack us -- and they would like nothing more than to exploit this period of change to harm the American people. So over the next 75 days, all of us must ensure that the next president and his team can hit the ground running.”

Bush’s remarks were the most extensive comments in history by any outgoing president on the importance of a smooth transition. On Nov. 10, 2008, Bush hosted Obama at the White House, which made him just the second president in a change of party transition to meet with his successor within a week of the election. Bush used the occasion to speak about the financial crisis that was wrecking the global economy and his determination to rescue the Big Three automakers. Following this first meeting, Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson spoke with the president-elect regularly to keep him abreast of new developments. Obama transition spokesperson Stephanie Cutter [recalled](#) that both teams were determined to “reassure people that we collectively – the Bush White House, the Bush administration, the transition team and the president-elect – had this under control.”

Appointments

One of the most important responsibilities for a new administration is to fill the nearly 4,000 politically appointed positions across government. This task took on new urgency after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The 9/11 Commission found that it took the Bush administration more than six months to fill vacant national security positions, and that such vacancies leave the nation vulnerable in the event of a national security incident. The commission’s recommendations to prevent such a situation from reoccurring were included in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. The Bush administration interpreted the law broadly to enable Obama to obtain more than 100 security clearances for transition team members and appointees before the election and handled the names with the utmost discretion to prevent leaks.

The Bush administration went further than any of its predecessors in helping Obama bring in new appointees. Office of Management and Budget Deputy Director for Management Clay Johnson

attempted to speed up the background investigation process for new appointees by directing the FBI to shorten the time of investigations, while the Office of Personnel Management shared the load. Additionally, White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten sent out memoranda in November and December calling for the resignations of political appointees so that Obama would have maximum flexibility to assemble his administration. Bolten even included language to use in resignation letters.

Briefings

Each new official that Obama named met with their counterpart in the Bush administration. Building on the example set by the presidents themselves, these meetings focused on substantive issues that the new administration would face. The Bush team hosted several briefings and dinners during the transition period that featured the incoming and outgoing secretaries of State and the incoming and outgoing national security advisors. Starting after Thanksgiving, mid-level Bush national security staff members and incoming Obama officials met to discuss management and policy issues. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley's NSC staff supplemented these in-person meetings with 40 memoranda for the president-elect and his team, as well as contingency plans for various scenarios.

In addition to briefings from current officeholders, the Bush administration made intelligence community officials available to the Obama team. With Bush's approval, Obama received his first President's Daily Brief on November 6 in Chicago. Once the incoming national security team was announced in early December, each of these officials were cleared to receive the PDB briefings. The intelligence community provided two dozen briefings in Washington for at least 54 incoming officials and advisers between November 21 and January 6. The unprecedented extent of the briefings that the Obama team received, and the number of people who participated, were made possible by Obama's early selection of his team and Bush's commitment to bringing the new officials up to speed.

POLICY

Key Decisions

Events do not take a hiatus during the presidential transition, but developing policy or responding to a crisis during this time is difficult. An effective transition will see cooperation between the outgoing and incoming administrations on issues of national importance. Here again, the transition between Bush and Obama is instructive.

After the election, the Bush administration consulted with members of the Obama transition team on important policy issues, notably the financial crisis and the precarious position of the auto industry. The White House worked with the Obama transition's congressional team to move Troubled Asset Relief Program legislation through Congress. Bush Chief of Staff Bolten brought the Obama economic team together with officials from the Treasury Department and the White House to discuss plans to save the U.S. auto industry from bankruptcy. On November 30, officials met in Treasury Secretary Paulson's office to explore the appointment of an auto industry czar and identify candidates. The discussion also covered how TARP funds could be used and what other measures might be taken to help the auto industry.

Regulations

Bolten did not want to limit Obama's freedom of action by issuing regulations in the waning days of the Bush administration, so he issued a memorandum to limit so-called "midnight" regulations. The memorandum called for regulations to be proposed no later than June 1, 2008 and final

regulations to be issued no later than Nov. 1, 2008. The White House staff also wrote memoranda on domestic policy issues for their successors and catalogued administration policies. OMB Deputy Director for Management Johnson directed agencies to prepare summaries of key issues and important decisions that the new administration would need to make.

During a successful transition, incoming and outgoing administrations put partisan debates aside to coordinate on policy in the national interest.

PROCESS

Coordination with the Incoming Administration

The preparations that outgoing administrations make before the election are vital to enable strong collaboration with the incoming administration after the election. Many of the practices that Bolten implemented in 2008 – early planning, the creation of an interagency transition coordinating council, collecting information inside the agencies – have since been codified in law. Bolten used the transition coordinating council, which convened senior officials from the White House and select agencies, as a forum to address issues directly with Obama transition officials. When questions arose over whether the Bush administration was converting political appointees into career positions to remain in government, known as “burrowing in,” the acting director of OPM used a transition coordinating council meeting to explain the rationale behind the conversions to the Obama team. Problem-solving through direct conversation was a hallmark of the transition.

The spirit of cooperation at the White House prevailed across the government. The General Service Administration’s federal transition coordinator at the time, Gail Lovelace, worked closely with Obama transition executive director Chris Lu to support the transition team. Every day during the transition period, GSA employees onboarded new members of the Obama team. GSA officials proudly said that they took Obama transition team members “from the street to [their] seat in 15 minutes.” Transition team members were given access to agencies based on the conditions agreed to in the memorandum of understanding signed by Bolten and Obama Transition Co-chair John Podesta. The MOU addressed the handling of non-public information and how disputes were to be resolved.

Emergency Preparedness and Crisis Management

One of the 9/11 Commission’s chief findings was that the government needed to be ready to respond to a crisis during presidential transitions. The Bush White House took one of its most farsighted steps on Jan. 13, 2009, by hosting an emergency preparedness exercise with the incoming Obama administration. Bush and Obama national security officials who were assigned to the same post sat together and worked through a terrorist attack scenario so that they would be able to perform effectively during a crisis. The exercise prepared officials from the incoming and outgoing administrations to work together when a potential threat arose on Inauguration Day.

Days before the inauguration in 2009, credible intelligence emerged about a possible terrorist attack on the National Mall during the inauguration ceremony. Senior national security officials from both administrations met in the White House Situation Room on the morning of January 20 to handle the issue while Bush, Obama and their wives had coffee in the Blue Room of the White House. Ultimately, the threat dissipated but the response was a testament to the ability of senior leaders from both administrations to manage a crisis during the transition. The practice of hosting

an emergency preparedness exercise between the incoming and outgoing administrations was codified into law by the Kaufman-Leavitt Presidential Transitions Improvements Act of 2015.

Incoming and outgoing administrations should adopt processes to facilitate a smooth handoff that minimize any disruption to the government's ability to protect the public and carry out its duties.

CONCLUSION

Transferring power during a time of great challenge requires strong cooperation between the outgoing and the incoming presidents. President Bush's final act of service to the nation was his assistance to the incoming Obama administration. Bush enabled Obama appointees to enter government quicker and more prepared than ever before, coordinated on policy issues and instituted effective processes to manage the transition across the government. The 2008-09 transition remains the gold standard and definitive model for how to smoothly execute a presidential transition.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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