



# We've Done This Before: Presidential Transitions during a Time of Crisis

The 2020 election took place during a pandemic, high levels of unemployment and a nationwide reckoning on racial discrimination. President-elect Joe Biden will now have to deal with these challenges head-on along with a wide array of other pressing domestic and national security issues.

Our newly elected president has historic company. In 1861, Abraham Lincoln took office as Southern states were seceding from the union. In 1933, Franklin Roosevelt became president during the Great Depression. In 1980, Jimmy Carter negotiated the freeing of U.S. hostages from Iran after losing his reelection bid. And in 2009, Barack Obama became president during a major economic crisis.

These previous experiences can inform the work of the current presidential transition facing today's unique challenges. This report includes eight recommendations for a president-elect's transition team and an outgoing White House based on interviews with veterans of previous transitions and other experts.

As Josh Bolten, chief of staff for President George W. Bush, advised, an incoming team must have thorough transition planning and be prepared from the outset. "You don't have a choice," he explained. "You can't say, 'Can you hang on for another couple of weeks while we do it?'"<sup>1</sup>

1 Quotes in this report that are not explicitly cited come from a combination of original interviews, the Center on Presidential Transition event Talking Transitions (available at <https://bit.ly/3k439MW>) and the Center's podcast series Transition Lab (available at <https://bit.ly/3nWteA8>). See the methodology for details.



## LESSON 1

### Prepare for Day One. Not Week One or Month One.

While all presidential transition teams plan to be ready as soon as the new president takes office, today's ongoing economic and health crises leave no room for a learning curve.

Lisa Brown, co-director of agency review for the 2008-2009 Obama transition, suggested transition planning should have two components. One is to pursue the president's policy goals. The other is to prepare for the unexpected. "As you go into an agency, you want to know what is going to hit you in the face when you walk in the door," she said. "What are the things that you're going to need to pretty quickly address?"

Most recent presidents had to confront national security issues immediately. In 2009, the incoming Obama team had to deal with a terrorist bombing threat during the inauguration. Obama officials with security clearance sat in the White House Situation Room with members of the Bush administration and intelligence officials as Obama was sworn in.<sup>2</sup>

Ongoing military interventions – even some opposed by the new team – require a responsible hand-off. In December 1992, about a month after he lost his re-election bid, President George H.W. Bush ordered 30,000 American soldiers to Somalia to address a humanitarian disaster. President Bill Clinton's team had to take command immediately upon taking office and never fully established clear objectives.

In 2017, President Donald Trump had to decide quickly on action in Yemen against a key counterterrorism target. Two days after Trump's inauguration, Secretary of Defense James Mattis was briefed on a possible raid.<sup>3</sup> The operation had been considered by Obama officials, but the decision was delayed until the new administration took office. Trump ordered the raid on Jan. 29, less than 10 days into his presidency.<sup>4</sup>

2 Martha Joynt Kumar, "Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power," Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, 10.

3 Dexter Filkins, "James Mattis, a Warrior in Washington," The New Yorker, May 22, 2017. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3duubLa>

4 Missy Ryan and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "A raid in remote Yemen and a SEAL's death still reverberate for Trump," The Washington Post, March 1, 2017. Retrieved from <https://wapo.st/3jxKb0l>

How can transition teams be ready for moment one of day one?

Veterans of past transitions emphasized the need to focus on personnel and organizational structure so new administrations can make quick decisions and adapt rapidly. Just having good people in place is not enough.

“There’s an old saying in emergency management,” former Federal Emergency Management Agency official Tim Manning told *The New York Times*. “Disaster is the wrong time to exchange business cards.”<sup>5</sup>

Former Undersecretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy added, “The chemistry on the team, the complementarity of skill sets and experience, can make things go very smoothly or very badly depending on the composition.”

Jonathan Burks, chief of staff to former House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., pointed out, “Your team hasn’t worked together, at least not in these functions. Even if they were on the campaign together, the kinds of routines you engage in during a campaign are fundamentally different than what you do while governing...Simple things are going to be hard early on in an administration.”

Organizational structure is also critical. Historian Martha Kumar asked, “Is everybody who’s a top-level aide get access to a president on a regular basis or do they have to go through central authority?” Through her research, Kumar concluded, “The White Houses that tend to be able to deliver for a president...tend to be those that are hierarchical.”

Denis McDonough, Obama’s second term White House chief of staff, highlighted the need for a diverse staff. “There’s massive strength in...making sure the [staff] looks like America...That has a great virtue all its own – how that team works well together, how it reflects the strength of the country – that has a self-reinforcing impact over time.”

When transition teams meet with federal agencies, the focus should be on efficient communication and pressing issues. Brown suggested, “It does no good to hand an incoming [Cabinet] secretary a 100-page document. We did these one pagers or two pagers. What are the top things I’ve got to deal with? And the top ways of quickly moving to implement priorities?”

Presidents will not be able to make important decisions without the proper team and relationships in place. “No matter how good you are as president, you are overseeing 2 million people and a trillion-dollar-plus budget, and the largest organization on Earth,” Obama once acknowledged. “You can’t do it all by yourself.”<sup>6</sup>



## LESSON 2

### **There is only one president at a time.**

“It’s important that the current president runs through the tape into Jan. 20,” McDonough declared. “But it’s also important that...the current president recognize that an effective transition and a clean hand-off to his successor is also part of the job description of – and the definition of – an effective president.”

Successful transitions require strong cooperation between the incoming and outgoing administrations with attention to how they will balance responsibilities and communication.

In 2008, cooperation between the outgoing Bush and the incoming Obama administrations was essential to dealing with the ongoing financial crisis. Despite running a campaign that was critical of Bush’s handling of the economy, the Obama team did not want to undermine the sitting president once the election was over.

Stephanie Cutter, spokesperson for the Obama-Biden transition, explained, “We had to be very careful with our comments and what we were putting out there because we were working so closely in cooperation with [the Bush administration]...As soon as you move from a campaign to a transition, out goes the campaign rhetoric. It’s not Bush’s economy...it’s ‘what are we going to do?’”

This does not mean a president-elect must remain silent. But public communication must be sparse and intentional. For Obama, that meant limited appearances such as radio addresses. Cutter added, “Somebody needed to reassure people that we, collectively – the Bush White House, the Bush administration, the transition team, president-elect – had this under control.”

The outgoing White House must also be willing to share information and allow for the incoming president to make decisions.

Michele Davis, part of Bush’s team at the Department of Treasury, advised, “Don’t leave [an incoming administration] with a time bomb that’s going to explode the first week they’re in office.”

“We definitely struggled with how much does [the Obama transition team] want to be briefed and have an opinion on things we’re doing during the transition,” Davis said. “It was very hard to help get them up-to speed, but only take them up to the day before inauguration and not take them along on the journey for the rest of the term.”

Valerie Jarrett, a senior Obama advisor, complimented the cooperation offered by the Bush team. “Even though we disagreed on just about every possible policy you could think of, [the Bush officials] were a treasure trove of information that proved invaluable.”

Finally, both sides of a transition must also accept that outgoing presidents are not without power during their final months in office.

The day after losing the 1980 presidential election,

5 Nicholas Confessore, Andrew Jacobs, Jodi Kantor, Zolan Khan-Youngs and Luis Ferré-Sadurní, “How Kushner’s Volunteer Force Led a Fumbling Hunt for Medical Supplies,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 2020. Retrieved from <https://nyti.ms/3dnEAYR>

6 John Dickerson, “What Trump Should Have Learned From His Predecessors,” *The Atlantic*, July/Aug. 2020. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2RZf4zz>

President Jimmy Carter told his staff to “get your chins off the floor and make this the best transition out ever,” according to senior aide Stuart Eizenstat.<sup>7</sup> Carter helped pass a number of major bills in his final months, including the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (otherwise known as the Superfund). Carter also continued to negotiate with Iran regarding U.S. hostages which were eventually released the day of his successor’s inauguration.



### LESSON 3

#### **Act quickly and take advantage of the honeymoon period (whether or not there is a honeymoon period).**

Conventional wisdom used to be that new presidents get a honeymoon during their first few months in office when they have a greater chance for policy-making success.<sup>8</sup> Michael Nelson, professor of political science at Rhodes College, said this may no longer be the case. “I think we’ve seen that because the country is so polarized politically, even new presidents have a hard time getting up the kind of surge of support that marked previous presidents,” Nelson observed.

Regardless, new presidents facing immediate crises must move quickly – whether or not they have additional political support. In previous crises, early victories often came from plans already in the pipeline before the new president took over.

The first 100 days of Franklin Roosevelt’s administration during the Great Depression are often seen as the model for early action. Roosevelt presented a series of policies – some of the early components of the New Deal – to Congress in his first months in office. Similarly, Congress approved Obama’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 less than a month into his presidency – a stimulus bill which originated during Obama’s transition. Both presidents enacted major changes quickly, which helped combat the ongoing crises and signaled the White House could have a demonstrative impact.

When making big decisions, veterans of transitions emphasized the need to consider the limits of political capital.

Brown suggested the balance between short and long-term goals is critical. “I think you can walk and chew gum,” she said, “but I think you also have to recognize that depending how much political capital you have and what Congress looks like, you have to figure out what are the key things you’re going to want to get through quickly.”

7 CNN Special Reports, “Race For The White House: Reagan v. Carter,” Feb. 23, 2020. Transcript retrieved from <https://cnn.it/2HDpCmc>  
8 Matthew N. Beckmann and Joseph Godfrey, “The Policy Opportunities in Presidential Honeymoons,” *Political Research Quarterly* 60(2): 2007, 250-262



### LESSON 4

#### **Rely heavily on career officials.**

Members of previous transitions – Democrats and Republicans alike – universally praised career officials, especially during moments when experience is invaluable.

Margaret Spellings, the secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, said, “Our career public servants are a treasure and are culture carriers... incredibly knowledgeable and just a tremendous asset.”

Neal Wolin, the deputy secretary of the Treasury under Obama, agreed. “In any agency, there are five to 10 career civil servants who are national treasures. Very few people have heard of them, and they don’t necessarily garner headlines. But without them, our country would be in a much weaker position.”

Brown emphasized the value of having transition team staff who were familiar with the workings and people in key agencies. “Who can I trust? That’s one of the big questions when you go into agencies,” Brown stated. In her experience, it helped “there were so many people on the agency review teams who had either worked in the agency before or had a lot of engagement with it.”

For years, one of those trusted federal employees was Gail Lovelace.

Lovelace, who served as the chief human capital officer at the General Services Administration and earned the nickname The Godmother of the Presidential Transition, explained, “Our job was to make it easy for incoming transition teams to do their job.”

Lovelace described her goals: “We wanted to make sure that not only were agencies prepared for the transition team to come in, but also help them think about who was going to be in acting roles in the interim.” In particular, she noted, “Career officials, especially at the Senior Executive Service level, are so key in a transition, both preparing the incoming administration, helping the current administration leave, but also being prepared to act in very key roles.”



### LESSON 5

#### **Don’t automatically throw out all the work created before you took office.**

When a presidential campaign is successful, there’s an instinct to dismiss everything associated with the previous administration, especially if that previous administration was from a different political party. Following this instinct, however, can lead to missed opportunities.

Lovelace advised, “I think current transition teams need to look at prior transitions to learn how they were managed. Every transition is going to be different based on a variety of factors including what is going on at the time in our country. Learn from the past, but really look for opportunities.”

President Roosevelt took advantage of work done by the previous administration. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation was created during President Herbert Hoover's administration to restore confidence in a damaged banking system. Roosevelt expanded the RFC's powers to purchase stock and provide loans.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Roosevelt signed the Emergency Banking Act into law which was originally prepared by Hoover's staff at the Treasury Department.<sup>10</sup>

In 2008, George W. Bush White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten believed so strongly in the value of sharing information he assembled a meeting of former chiefs of staff to provide guidance to Obama's incoming chief, Rahm Emanuel. Thirteen of the 16 living chiefs of staff attended, and Bolten described it as a chance "to share stories and wisdom."<sup>11</sup>

During turbulent times, steadiness and continuity are important, especially for financial markets. Michele Davis warned, "If you came into office and the first three months you were just undoing things and creating more uncertainty, you really lose public confidence pretty quickly."

Wolpin said the Obama team had confidence in a number of the Bush political appointees at Treasury.

"On the personnel side, we kept in place a certain number of people, partly for continuity and also for capacity in a period that was very challenging," Wolpin said. "There were a number of people, mostly who Hank Paulson had brought in from outside or people who understood markets or understood financial institutions, who we asked to stay on."



## LESSON 6

### **Acknowledge that national problems can't be solved without state and local governments.**

Presidents play a large role in setting an agenda and proposing legislation, but the executive branch is often reliant on state and local governments for implementation.

For example, the March 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act was overseen by the Small Business Administration. However, the program used banks to take applications and distribute funds as part of the Paycheck Protection Program. Unemployment benefits were distributed through the federal-state unemployment insurance system, allowing states to determine the amount of benefits and eligibility rules.

A major component of the American Recovery and

9 James Butkiewicz, "Reconstruction Finance Corporation," Economic History Association. Retrieved Oct. 26, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3e0OsrZ>

10 Stephen Greene, "Emergency Banking Act of 1933," Federal Reserve History, 2013. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3owwFxs>

11 Martha Joynt Kumar, "Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power," Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015, 259.

Reinvestment Act of 2009 was funding for "shovel-ready" infrastructure projects to fix roads and bridges. The federal government provided funding and guidelines, but the states and localities were essential in the execution. In addition, much of the transportation funding was delivered through established federal programs, taking advantage of pre-existing systems.<sup>12</sup>

The Affordable Care Act of 2010 allowed state governments to set up their own online health insurance marketplaces. The federal program was dependent on decisions made by state officials and the reliability of a range of websites.

National crises take national efforts to combat. But new presidents must realize that any national effort will not succeed unless federal leaders provide clear guidelines and processes for local governments to follow.



## LESSON 7

### **Overcome risk aversion and be prepared to experiment.**

The federal government is not known for adapting quickly. In times of crisis, however, the usual aversion for rapid change is often decreased – namely because it has to be. The current COVID-19 pandemic forced many federal agencies to adapt to remote work for its employees in a matter of days. In the weeks following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the government added numerous security measures for entering government buildings and flying.

Transition teams should encourage a spirit of innovation and risk-taking. Experimentation has been a hallmark of previous transitions during tumultuous times.

When Bill Clinton took office in 1993 facing a recession, his administration used the transition period to consider several ideas and convened a high-profile economic summit. But once in office, new stimulus spending failed to gain support in Congress and Clinton's team shifted to other efforts such as the creation of the Earned Income Tax Credit. Not all of Clinton's proposals succeeded – most notably his effort to reform health care – but flexibility was a key element of his early economic achievements.<sup>13</sup>

Ben Bernanke, who served as chairman of the Federal Reserve during the 2008 financial crisis, looked to Roosevelt's process for inspiration. "Roosevelt's specific actions were, I think, less important than his willingness to be aggressive and to experiment," Bernanke wrote.<sup>14</sup>

12 Shoshana Lew and John D. Porcari, "Eight Years Later: What the Recovery Act Taught Us About Investing in Transportation," Brookings Institute, Feb. 22, 2017. Retrieved from <https://brook.gs/2FeG5Mn>

13 William J. Antholis and David Marchick, "Transitions in Crisis," Miller Center, Oct. 2020. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3dc2c2y>

14 Jon Hilsenrath, "Bernanke's Fed, Echoing FDR, Pursues Ideas and Action," The Wall Street Journal, Dec. 15, 2008. Retrieved from <https://on.wsj.com/3kyrcDN>

Bernanke adopted this attitude when he asked staffers to embrace “blue sky” thinking. This approach led to some of the innovative efforts such as quantitative easing and cooperation between large central banks known as swap lines.<sup>15</sup>

Wolin described how the Obama economic team at Treasury went about problem-solving. “We felt like we were in an idea lab all the time. We spent an enormous amount of time starting with a blank sheet of white paper saying to ourselves, ‘what would we try to change if we had a magic wand?’”



## LESSON 8

### **Be prepared to admit mistakes and learn from them.**

Any leader who values experimentation will also have to deal with errors and unintended consequences.

Lincoln tried to improve his chances for winning re-election by replacing his first-term vice president, Hannibal Hamlin with pro-Union Southerner Andrew Johnson. After Lincoln’s assassination, Johnson discarded many of Lincoln’s plans for reconciliation between the North and South.<sup>16</sup>

Roosevelt suffered a defeat when the National Recovery Administration – the agency created to help workers by creating codes of “fair practices” – was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935. Many of the duties of the agency were later included in the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which allowed employees to form unions and bargain collectively.

Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis believes experimentation goes hand-in-hand with honesty. “Leaders who are innovators are the ones

we [in the business world] are hungry to find...I think leaders know that they have to have that bedrock of integrity,” he stated.

Former General Motors CEO Dan Akerson agreed: “You’ve got to give a realistic, broad-based appraisal of the situation and let people know that you understand how complex the problem is and that you don’t have all the answers. But you’re always going to tell the truth, the absolute truth. You’re not going to bend it for political perception or gain. By doing so, you’ll have authenticity.”

Part of that honesty includes an acknowledgement that no person can solve problems by themselves.

Journalist John Dickerson, who has interviewed countless leaders and public officials, concluded, “The presidents who have thrived when events veered in an unexpected direction have something in common: They are the ones who had the courage to ask for help.”<sup>17</sup> Dickerson added, “We can’t forget that a president’s success in office will ultimately rest less on his ability to solve all the nation’s problems and more on his ability to hire and manage a team that stands a chance of doing so.”

<sup>15</sup> Robert McCauley, Catherine R. Schenk, “Swap innovation, then and now,” VoxEU, April 12, 2020. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3kzU-na2>

<sup>16</sup> Jules Witcover, “Lincoln’s Successor Problem,” Politico, April 13, 2015. Retrieved from <https://politi.co/3kxVyXc>

<sup>17</sup> John Dickerson, “What Trump Should Have Learned From His Predecessors,” The Atlantic, July/Aug. 2020. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2RZf4zz>

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