



# Presidential Transitions are a Perilous Moment for National Security

History can provide lessons for future administrations to prepare for unforeseen crises

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BY Sasha Blachman, Marissa Brophy, Paul Hitlin and Mia Imparato



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

CENTER *for* PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

# About the Center for Presidential Transition

The Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition is the nation's premier nonpartisan source of information and resources designed to help presidential candidates and their teams lay the groundwork for a new administration or for a president's second term.

## About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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## Introduction

One of the top priorities of any presidential administration is to protect the country from foreign and domestic threats. While a challenge at all times, the country is especially vulnerable during the time of presidential transitions—whether it is from one administration to another, or from a first to a second term. Adversaries test the country’s policies and resolve as administrations deal with significant staff turnover, important policy decisions and the implementation of plans designed in previous years.

New presidents must deal with additional complexity when they take responsibility for national security from a different administration with its own worldview. In modern history, incoming American presidents have needed to establish their own approaches quickly to deal with conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan that each spanned decades. Important decisions can also overlap administrations. For example, President Barack Obama left the decision whether to conduct a raid against a terrorist target in Yemen to President Donald Trump in 2017.<sup>1</sup>

New administrations face four main challenges when assuming responsibility for the national security of the United States:



1. **Information: Receiving, reviewing and acting on information from the previous administration to carry out existing operations and start enacting new policy goals.** The information that informs decision-making during times of crisis is only available on a limited basis during a transition, which means new officials face an especially high volume of information on Day One.

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<sup>1</sup> Dexter Filkins, “James Mattis, a Warrior in Washington,” The New Yorker, May 22, 2017. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3duubLa>



2. **Decision-making: Preparing for the unpredictable escalation of known threats and responding to unforeseen challenges.** New administrations must build cohesive teams of political and career leaders that are prepared to prevent or respond to crises using efficient decision-making processes and communication channels.

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*For the last three reelected presidents, an average of 46% of top officials serving at the end of the first term resigned from those positions within the first six months of a second term.*

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3. **Leadership: Filling key leadership positions amidst the challenges and delays of the Senate confirmation process.** In a best-case scenario, a new president takes command with a full team of national security leaders in place. However, an [examination](#) of more than 30 of the top national security positions in the government shows that none of the last four presidents had more than 55% of those positions filled or nominated by their 30th day in office.<sup>2</sup> Presidents entering their second term must also prepare for high turnover. For the last three reelected presidents, an average of 46% of top officials serving at the end of the first term resigned from those positions within the first six months of a second term.

### Nominations of top Senate-confirmed national security positions at the beginning of each administration

President	Number of positions*	Number of holdovers who stayed at least 100 days	Positions with a holdover or nominee by Inauguration Day	Positions with a holdover or nominee by Day 30	Positions with a holdover or nominee by Day 100
W. Bush	32	4	8 (25%)	11 (34%)	22 (69%)
Obama	43	8	20 (47%)	23 (53%)	29 (67%)
Trump	45	4	13 (29%)	15 (33%)	20 (44%)
Biden	46	4	16 (35%)	18 (39%)	35 (76%)

\*The number of positions differ because new positions and agencies have been created over time.

Note: Positions filled or nominated means either a Senate-confirmed official was serving in the position, or the administration had officially sent a nominee for that position to the Senate.

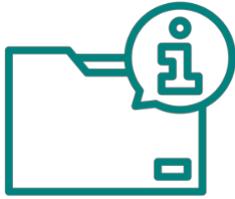
Source: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition • Created with Datawrapper

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed statistics, see the Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition report from 2022 entitled, "[Slow Nominations and Confirmations Pose a Threat to National Security.](#)"



4. **Cooperation: Facilitating effective cooperation with both the previous White House and the career federal workforce, especially those who work in national security-related jobs.** Presidents will not be well-prepared to handle crises unless they have communication with the outgoing administration and a solid working relationship with experts in the civil service.

# Challenge 1



## Getting (and trusting) information from previous administrations

### *1961 Bay of Pigs invasion*

On April 16, 1961, President John F. Kennedy canceled the second planned air strike against Cuban air bases after a first attack was unsuccessful. The decision ultimately doomed the strategy designed to incite a movement to overthrow Fidel Castro's government. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion, coming three months into Kennedy's presidency, became known as one of the biggest foreign policy failures of the 20th century as about 1,200 U.S.-trained Cuban exiles were captured and more than 100 were killed.

The political fallout and resulting international crises would define Kennedy's presidency far beyond his first year. The mission also serves as one of the clearest examples of national security challenges facing incoming presidents. Much of the planning had been conducted under Kennedy's predecessor, President Dwight Eisenhower, and the transition to the new administration played a major role in the lead up to the mission's failure.

Eisenhower [approved](#) the plan in March of his last year in office. After Kennedy won the 1960 election, he needed to prepare to take command of CIA plans that had been in the works for some time. One day before the inauguration, Eisenhower asked Kennedy to do whatever is necessary to see through a change in the communist government in Cuba.

At the time, there were no laws governing the transition process and coordination was mostly left to the judgment of the two leaders and their circle of advisors. According to scholars such as Rebecca R. Friedman, Kennedy made a series of decisions during transition planning and the first few months of his administration that contributed to the military failure.<sup>3</sup> He dissolved Eisenhower's decision-making structures such as the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board, which reviewed and monitored the implementation of policy. While

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca R. Friedman, "Crisis Management at the Dead Center: The 1960-1961 Presidential Transition and the Bay of Pigs Fiasco," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41(2), June 2011, 324. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23884834>

Kennedy received briefings during the transition period prior to taking office, accounts differ on how much he knew about the invasion plans. He had varying levels of trust with different political and career advisors complicated by a lack of structure for varying perspectives to be heard together.

All presidents can adjust decision-making structures based on how they prefer to receive information, but Kennedy made sweeping changes before he was prepared to assume full responsibility for problems that would result from the decision. Kennedy's newly appointed advisors were also unaware of many of the relationship dynamics at play in the federal government that would affect their ability to advise the president and coordinate with the CIA which had been involved since the plan originated under Eisenhower.

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The Bay of Pigs is an example of how difficult it can be for new presidents to take over existing policies and plans. In 1962, a National Security Council structure that accounted for Kennedy's decision-making style supported the president's successful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis—demonstrating the ability of a new administration to learn from early challenges and the realities of governing.<sup>4</sup> Congress later passed the [Presidential Transition Act of 1963](#) establishing a framework to promote an orderly and peaceful transfer of power by providing federal funding and guidance.

**Lessons learned:** Today, by law, members of incoming presidential administrations are allowed to begin receiving classified information as soon as the results of the presidential election are ascertained by the General Services Administration. But preparing to process such information immediately upon taking office is critical for new presidents to make informed choices on a wide range of policies and activities.

Teams planning transitions must begin their work long before the election. The Center for Presidential Transition [advises](#) presidential candidates to begin transition planning at least six months prior to the election. The administrations of presidents seeking reelection should plan for both the transition to a second term and the possibility of the need to make a smooth hand-off of national security responsibilities to an incoming administration. During this period, transition planners should identify people to serve in key national security roles and design the best ways to collect information from federal agencies once they are allowed contact. Transition teams must prepare to build relationships, receive information about existing policies and prepare effective decision-making structures.

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<sup>4</sup> The White House, "History of the National Security Council." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3VdPXZh>

## Challenge 2



### Preparing to make critical decisions immediately upon taking office

#### *1993 World Trade Center bombing and Waco standoff*

In February 1993—just one month into President Bill Clinton’s first term—the administration had to confront two major national security challenges: the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York followed almost immediately by the beginning of a standoff in Waco, Texas, between law enforcement divisions of the Department of Justice and a heavily armed religious movement called the Branch Davidians. The two events happening so early in the administration and in proximity to each other demonstrated that new presidents can be confronted with challenges unlike any seen in this country before—and must often address them with acting officials in key leadership roles.

On Feb. 26, Ramzi Yousef and conspirators bombed an underground parking garage of the World Trade Center, killing six people and wounding more than 1,000. The attack represented a new kind of terrorism on U.S. soil.<sup>5</sup> The Clinton administration had to respond quickly and innovate because the existing structures of federal agencies were not organized to address this new type of terrorism. As journalist Steve Coll wrote, “The National Security Council had yet to issue any formal directive about which government agency should take the lead in a case like the World Trade Center bombing or how different agencies should work together.”<sup>6</sup>

Only two days after the bombing, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms attempted to execute an arrest warrant against the Branch Davidians and their leader David Koresh. The 51-day standoff began with a shootout that led to the deaths of four ATF agents and culminated in

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<sup>5</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, “The 9/11 Commission Report,” July 2004. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/443c16n>

<sup>6</sup> Steve Coll, “Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001,” Penguin Books, 2004, 253.

an FBI raid on April 19, during which a fire broke out that engulfed the compound. More than 70 residents were killed.

The events in Waco raised questions about mismanagement and stirred discussion about coordination of national security responses. In subsequent reports to Congress, investigators detailed conflicts between the negotiation and tactical teams.<sup>7</sup> Both teams reported they were not satisfied with the quality of information they were receiving from the other and joint meetings were held too infrequently.<sup>8</sup>

The responses and decisions related to these events were complicated by key vacancies in the administration. Most notably, Clinton struggled to fill the position of attorney general. For nearly two months, the job was held by an acting official as Clinton's first two choices were foiled by controversies. This led to [confusion](#) over who was leading the Justice Department: the acting attorney general [Stuart Gerson](#), a holdover from the previous administration, or Webster Hubbell, sent by the Clinton administration to be the White House liaison.

Janet Reno was finally confirmed on March 11. This meant she took office soon after the Waco standoff began and was immediately thrust into the position to make difficult decisions.

**Lessons learned:** Both the World Trade Center bombing and the events in Waco demonstrated that surprises can happen in a new administration's earliest days, and the best way to be ready for Day One is to have clear leadership in place as early as possible. It is not enough for transition teams to staff and set up the White House, but they must also plan for how to staff federal agencies and communicate important decisions throughout the executive branch.

As Christopher Liddell, Trump's former deputy chief of staff, suggests, new presidents should clarify staff responsibilities and reporting relationships throughout the government months before inauguration based on the administration's priorities.<sup>9</sup> Processes for making policy decisions should be clear, especially regarding how a new White House will respond to external, unpredictable events. Liddell argues that recent history has shown that new leaders do not necessarily know much about the basics of governing, which they only discover after they take office. "A White House full of new colleagues in governing mode does not have the luxury of time to establish these kinds of decision-making frameworks," Liddell wrote.

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Justice, "Evaluation of the handling of the Branch Davidian stand-off in Waco, Texas: February 28 to April 19, 1993," October 1993. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3L1NUD2>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Justice, "Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco, Texas: The FBI's Management of the Standoff at Mt. Carmel," October 1993. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/40v5p4h>

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Liddell, "The Five-year Presidency," National Affairs, Spring 2023. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3n3obSS>

## Challenge 3



### **Navigating the Senate confirmation process to fill national security leadership positions**

*Terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001*

The deadliest terrorist attack on U.S. soil occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, when members of the terrorist group al Qaeda hijacked four commercial planes, two of which hit the World Trade Center while one crashed into the Pentagon and another crashed in an open field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people were killed. The attack occurred about eight months into President George W. Bush’s presidency.

The already brief transition period for the incoming Bush administration had been shortened by 36 days due to the adjudication of the disputed 2000 election. Those lost days reduced the opportunities for Bush to receive intelligence briefings and make decisions for national security leadership positions. The subsequent bipartisan “[9/11 Commission Report](#)” stated that a delayed presidential transition “hampered the new administration in identifying, recruiting, clearing, and obtaining Senate confirmation of key appointees.” The report further explained how vacancies in top leadership positions can affect how information and policies are managed.

As chairs of the commission Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton [wrote](#), “We found... that the Bush administration, like others before it, did not have its full national security team on the job until at least six months after it took office.” FBI Director Robert Mueller was not in place until Sept. 4—just one week before the attacks. James W. Ziglar was not confirmed by the Senate to be commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service until July 31. At the Department of Defense, Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith was not confirmed until July 12. The assistant secretary for special operations and low-intensity conflict—a key counterterrorism office—was not filled by the Bush administration prior to 9/11.

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Bush’s Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld later told the [commission](#) that he felt the Defense Department was not organized adequately or prepared to deal with new threats like terrorism prior to 9/11. He added that his first months in office were consumed with getting new leadership in place and working on a new defense policy. A longer transition period may have allowed the administration to make some of those decisions earlier on.

The 9/11 Commission recommended comprehensive structural and management changes to promote information sharing among intelligence agencies and to improve the transition process to get leaders in place more quickly. Many of those proposals were enacted as part of the [Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004](#).

**Lessons learned:** New presidents are not afforded a learning curve when assuming office and it can take time for relationships and trust to evolve between agency leaders. Even with the planning recent transition teams have done in identifying officials early, no recent president has been able to fill the majority of their key national security positions soon after taking office.<sup>10</sup>

An examination of more than 30 top national security leadership positions shows that Bush filled or nominated individuals for only 25% by Inauguration Day, and only 34% by day 30. His progress in the early months does not necessarily account for the new understanding created by 9/11 and the subsequent creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

His successors have not fared much better: Obama nominated or filled nearly half (47%) of those positions by his first day in office, followed by Trump with 29% and President Joe Biden with 35%. By their 100th day in office, only Biden had nominated officials to fill three-quarters of these crucial Senate-confirmed positions.

Turnover is also a big issue for administrations planning for a second term. They, too, must plan in advance how to fill leadership posts and navigate the Senate confirmation process long before knowing whether they will win reelection. The last three two-term presidencies had to deal with substantial turnover among their top political appointees early in their second term. In fact, a Center examination found that an average of 46% of secretaries, deputy secretaries and undersecretaries serving an incumbent president on Election Day resigned from their positions within six months into the second terms.

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<sup>10</sup> For more detailed statistics, see the Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition report from 2022 entitled, “[Slow Nominations and Confirmations Pose a Threat to National Security](#).”

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Filling national security leadership positions should be a top priority for transition teams long before any White House takes office. Streamlining the paperwork and vetting processes before nomination, as well as improving the Senate confirmation process itself, is necessary for leaders to take their seats and establish themselves as a team as soon as possible.

## Challenge 4



### **Facilitating effective cooperation with both the previous White House and career workforce**

#### *2008-2009 transition and Inauguration Day threat*

The 2008-2009 presidential transition was the first post-9/11 transition between different presidents, and the hand off from Bush to Obama was a test of reforms in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act and elsewhere. At Bush’s direction, the outgoing administration dedicated significant time to supporting his successor. The core of this effort was a smooth transfer of information: the Bush team produced 40 national security memos, coordinated agency efforts to onboard Obama team members, and processed security clearances for members of the incoming national security team before the election so they could receive intelligence briefings along with the president-elect.<sup>11</sup>

The Bush administration created another key transition practice: two [tabletop exercises](#) where senior leaders from both the incoming and outgoing teams would simulate a response to a national security crisis. On Jan. 13, 2009, the Bush White House hosted an emergency preparedness exercise with the incoming Obama administration. National security officials from both administrations worked through a terrorist attack scenario so that they would be able to perform their duties effectively during a crisis.

The lessons from this training exercise were put into practice mere days later when credible intelligence emerged about a possible terrorist attack on the National Mall during Obama’s inauguration. Senior national security officials from both administrations convened once again, this time monitoring the danger from the White House Situation Room. The outgoing and incoming Secretaries of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff and Janet Napolitano, worked together with their senior leadership teams to ensure the safety of the event. The response was a

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<sup>11</sup> Partnership for Public Service’s Center for Presidential Transition, “How Bush and Obama Created a Gold Standard Transition,” Nov. 2020. Available at <https://bit.ly/3VE7ASx>

testament to the coordination and planning of both teams. Their shared commitment to preparation over a series of months built a level of trust and communication that was critical to manage the threat.<sup>12</sup>

Bush’s National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley later explained that the tabletop exercises were designed to fill a critical need for incoming teams: to help them understand the resources that are available across government to deal with a crisis that could strike at any time.<sup>13</sup> The practice of hosting an emergency preparedness exercise was later codified into law by the [Kaufman-Leavitt Presidential Transitions Improvements Act of 2015](#).

**Lessons learned:** The coordination between the Bush and Obama teams raised the standard for future outgoing administrations: to go beyond the minimum requirements for transition planning and support the success of future administrations for the safety and security of the United States. It is the responsibility of Congress to ensure that these transition improvements are not just recognized as a footnote to history, but that best practices become law and serve administrations and generations to come.

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<sup>12</sup> Martha Joynt Kumar, “Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power,” Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> “The Chatter Podcast: Former National Security Advisor Steve Hadley’s Reflections on Presidential Transitions,” Lawfare, Feb. 16, 2023. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3MT2qzJ>



*Photo credit: U.S. Department of State*

## Conclusion

These events remind future transition teams, national security leaders and the public that the first months of new administrations are an especially vulnerable time for the country's national security. Successful transition planning is essential for minimizing the risk.

Many groups must play important roles: Presidential hopefuls must create strong transition planning teams, outgoing administrations must prepare to share important intelligence and give incoming administrations the knowledge and assistance needed so they can be ready to govern from Day One, and civil servants and agency leaders must facilitate the transition from one administration to another. Both the incoming and outgoing teams must, for the good of the country, put aside any hard feelings left over from the rhetoric of the campaign or arising out of policy differences to provide the incoming administration the most effective transition to its governing responsibilities.

Congress can support national security by helping future presidents get their leadership teams in place without delay. For example, the Center for Presidential Transition recommends decreasing the number of political appointments requiring Senate confirmation.<sup>14</sup> While key national security positions can and should remain Senate confirmed, reducing the overall volume of positions requiring confirmation would help presidents get their leadership teams in place while preserving the Senate's constitutional duty to advise and consent. Future administrations and Congress also should work together to streamline paperwork related to background investigations, disclosures and vetting to prevent delays on the pathway to nomination. Finally, Congress should continue to codify best practices into law, as they did in 2016 by requiring shared tabletop exercises which were successful during the 2008-2009 transition.

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<sup>14</sup> For more detailed recommendations, see the Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition report from 2021 entitled, "[Unconfirmed: Why Reducing the Number of Senate-confirmed Positions Can Make Government More Effective.](#)"

As [Kean and Hamilton](#) summarized when reflecting on the 9/11 Commission's report, "To be truly effective and help protect our nation from national security threats during and soon after a presidential transition, our outgoing and incoming leaders must be cooperative, take these requirements and best practices seriously, and act in the best interests of the nation."

# Authors



Sasha conducts quantitative and qualitative research to support the Center for Presidential Transition. She maintains the Partnership’s political appointee tracker and analyzes data to inform the Center’s recommendations for improving the transition process. Sasha’s experience studying decision-making in U.S. foreign policy inspired her to work on issues of national security. Her favorite public servant is former Secretary of State (and fellow Wellesley College alumna) Madeleine Albright. Sasha admires Secretary Albright’s quick wit, ability to lead with empathy, championship of women’s empowerment, and her unwavering belief in the power of democracy to guide the world towards a better future.



Paul Hitlin manages research for the Partnership’s Center for Presidential Transition including the organization’s presidential appointment tracker produced in collaboration with The Washington Post. He also helps lead the Partnership’s research on public trust of the federal government. Paul believes information should be a public good, an idea that informed his work at the Pew Research Center where he studied media, technology and data science. Paul’s favorite public servant is former Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone who was well-known for his commitment to community organizing and campaign finance reform.

# Project Team

**Sasha Blachman**  
Research Associate

**Valerie Smith Boyd**  
Director, Center for Presidential Transition

**Marissa Brophy**  
Intern, Center for Presidential Transition

**Bob Cohen**  
Senior Writer and Editor

**Samantha Donaldson**  
Vice President, Communications

**Paul Hitlin**  
Senior Manager

**Mia Imparato**  
Intern, Center for Presidential Transition

**Audrey Pfund**  
Creative Director

**Nicky Santoso**  
Digital Design Associate

**Betsy Super**  
Senior Manager, Center for Presidential  
Transition

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CENTER *for* PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

600 14th Street NW  
Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20005

[presidentialtransition.org](http://presidentialtransition.org)  
(202) 775-9111

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 [rpublicservice](https://www.instagram.com/rpublicservice)