

Perspective on Presidential Transitions—Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power

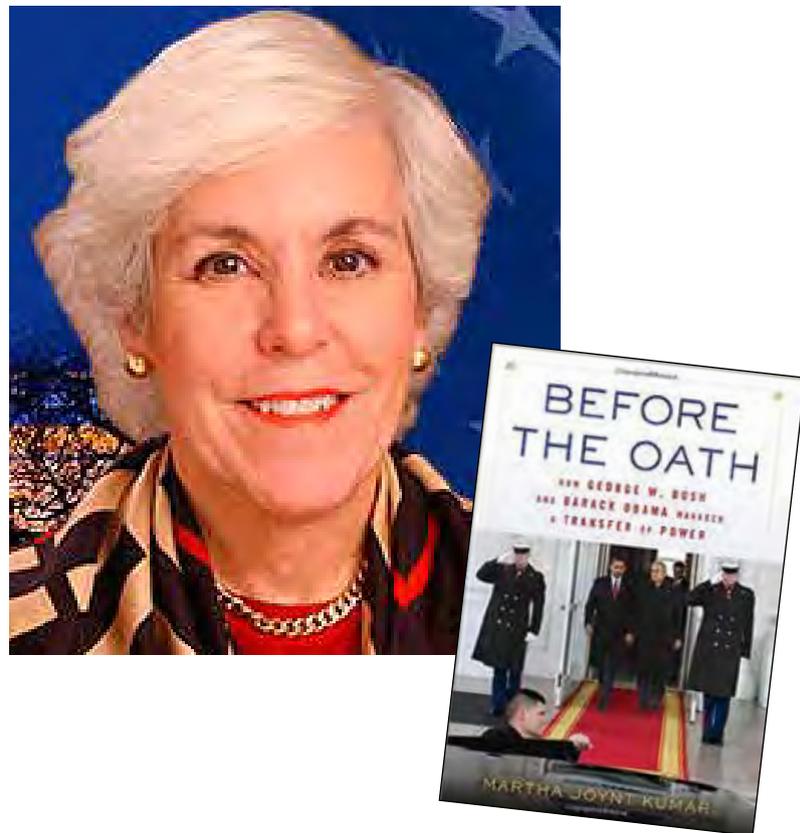
By Michael J. Keegan

There are approximately 75 days between a presidential election and the inauguration of a new president. This is considered the presidential transition period. It is a time of opportunity and hazard for an incoming administration. The transition from campaigning to governing requires that presidential policies be transformed from rhetoric into an actionable agenda and then into concrete results. Neither good policies nor sound investments are likely to work, let alone succeed, if undermined by poor implementation. Managing the federal government remains a complex and difficult assignment, both technically and politically. Numerous failures in recent years underscore the need to pay attention not only to policy, but also to whether and how policies and programs are actually executed.

In order to get an administration operational without delay, both candidates must be ready to do the following when one of them takes office. The candidates need to be prepared to select and vet some 100 top administration officials, staff up their White House, be ready in the first week to issue a dozen executive orders reflecting their social priorities and withdraw ones issued by their predecessors, have ready a speech to Congress on a major policy issue, and decide their budget priorities. Early planning makes all the difference.

The development of government-wide presidential transition planning in the U.S. has a relatively short history. The next presidential administration and senior level appointees need to be ready to lead and manage the government effectively when they step into the office on day one.

- What are the characteristics of a well-prepared, successful presidential transition?
- How does the 2008-2009 presidential transition represent a model to be followed by future incoming and outgoing administrations?



- What more can be done to enhance the U.S. presidential transition process?

Martha Joynt Kumar, author of *Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power* joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share her perspective on these questions and to discuss her latest book on presidential transitions. Her research underscores the importance of early planning in presidential transition among incoming and outgoing administrations. Kumar enjoyed unprecedented access to several incumbent and candidate transition teams, putting readers directly behind the scenes.

Given the epic challenges facing government today, Kumar does us all a service by placing a necessary spotlight on a hallmark of American constitutional order: the peaceful transition of power from one president to the next. The following is an edited excerpt of our conversation.

The Beginnings of Modern Presidential Transitions

One of the enduring characteristics of the American political system is its ability to manage—both peacefully and decisively—the changeover of presidential power, regardless of election results. That said, there is a relatively short history regarding formal presidential transitions. As the presidency grew in importance in the 20th century, midcentury presidents began to provide information on the positions and programs of their administration. President Harry Truman was the first to have a government agency—the Bureau of the Budget—to collect and give administrative information to his successor. Truman wanted to make certain that his successor would not be left in the same situation as he was when he became president upon the sudden death of Franklin Roosevelt in 1945. Truman had been vice president a short period of time, beginning his term on January 20th. In early April, Roosevelt died and Truman became president. He found that there was a great deal that he didn't know about what was going on in government, particularly related to the war, and the biggest issue was the development of the atomic bomb. He didn't want this for his successor. He announced at the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner that he wasn't going to run for reelection, then he talked to people in the Bureau of the Budget about preparing for a transition and gathering information for the next president.

They set about gathering the information. Truman also invited the party nominees to the White House after their conventions. He wrote both Adlai Stevenson and General Dwight Eisenhower about coming into the White House, but let me read to you the exchange, as it portends what in fact happened decades later during the 2008-2009 transition. On August 13, 1952, the president wrote to the candidates: "I'll have General Walter Bedell Smith and the Central Intelligence Agency give you a complete briefing on foreign situations." Following their respective briefings, each nominee would have lunch with the cabinet. President Truman also indicated to Eisenhower that the CIA would provide him with information on the world situation on a weekly basis. "After the initial CIA briefing, we will have lunch with the cabinet and after that, if you like, I'll have my entire staff report to you on the situation in the White House. Then that way you will be entirely briefed on what takes place."



Eisenhower was reluctant to take advantage of the offer. He wrote in response, "In my current position as standard bearer of the Republican Party and of other Americans who want to bring about a change in the national government, it is my duty to remain free to analyze publicly the policies and acts of the present administration whenever it appears to me to be proper and in the country's interest. I believe our communication should be only those which are known to all of the American people. Consequently, I think it would be unwise and result in confusion with the public mind if I were to attend the meeting in the White House to which you have invited me."

Truman was not happy and his response was pretty strong. It was a handwritten response, and those he could mail when he was passing a mailbox on his morning walks. He wrote, "I am extremely sorry that you have allowed a bunch of screwballs to come between us. You have made a bad mistake and I am hoping it won't injure this great republic."

What Truman wanted to do was make sure that both candidates were well informed, but the politics at the time didn't call for it. Today, the situation is different.

In 2008, Josh Bolten, who was President George W. Bush's Chief of Staff in charge of the transition operation, had representatives of both the Obama and McCain campaigns visit the White House and work on several different things; items that were going to be important to get straight before a new president took office....[in a sense, doing what President Truman wanted to do many decades earlier].

Factors Contributing to the Increasing Importance of Presidential Transitions

Since President Truman first reached out to his successor, presidential transitions have become more formal and complex, as the office of the presidency has ascended in importance. The president is a world leader and as such, needs to be ready and knowledgeable of situations and circumstances on day one. The 2008-2009 transition was the first handoff of power from one president to another president—an outgoing to an incoming president—since the attacks of September 11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The security posture of the country was a definite impetus for the increasing importance of transition planning.

As in 2008-2009, you're going to have the most preparation at the end of a two-term president such as George W. Bush, given that the president knows he is moving on. Therefore, he can dedicate the latter period of his administration to thinking through the things his administration has done and the issues it has dealt with and communicating it to the next administration. But, I'd like to underscore that it is also useful for the outgoing president's own legacy.

For example, Steve Hadley put together memoranda on the problems and issues the Bush administration dealt with, the countries that were important for a new administration to know about, as well as the actions and activities that had taken place between the U.S. and specific countries. These memos also highlighted the issues of importance, including nuclear proliferation. These were useful documents not only for the new administration, but also for the outgoing administration, providing it with an opportunity to wrap up their efforts...an [artifact] for presidential libraries.

Elements of the 2008-2009 Presidential Transition

The 2008-2009 transition took place in an altered environment. As the Bush administration prepared for the transition, they viewed it differently than any experienced by earlier presidents. This same sentiment ran through the government as a whole. My book and research indicate that the preparations for the 2008 transition were more extensive and polished than any preceding one. That makes the 2008-2009 transition important to document for what happened, who was involved, what they did, and why they did what they did. My latest book focuses on such questions because the preparations are important, as well as a guide for future transitions.

This book focuses on the prominent elements in the Obama transition into the White House and the transition out of the White House by President Bush. Both aspects of a transition—the incoming and outgoing—are very important for understanding how the transition was organized and executed. Two studies in the book demonstrate the important aspects of the transition: the handling of presidential appointments and the central place of national security issues in a solid start to an administration. Together these subjects develop a portrait of how the change took place between Presidents Bush and Obama in early 2009.

Characteristics of an Effective and Successful Transition

The 2008-2009 transition was a particularly good one because both sides took it very seriously. One of the factors involved in a good transition is that the president himself must be involved and direct the transition. Transition preparation requires a long lead time; in December 2007, President Bush charged his chief of staff Josh Bolten that given the country is involved in two wars, it was critically important to have the best transition ever. Most presidents will say they want to have the best transition ever, but the question is when they say it. Saying it in December of 2007 is a lot different than saying it the November of the presidential election when you don't have time to do very much.

With that charge, Bolten was able to make a plan, identify what needed to be done, and get a head start on it. One of the distinguishing features of this transition was the series of templates used by Bush's staff and administration officials



as well as the transition team for President-elect Obama. On both sides and independent of one another, staff created a series of templates for acquiring what information they would need and when they should be gathering it. The templates covered diverse functions and institutions. The templates also addressed the requirements and demands for the approximately 1,200 executive branch positions a chief executive has to fill and the process of gathering information. President Bush and his team left behind a solid outline of the steps future administrations can take to provide a productive start to their successors.

Ways an Effective Transition Benefits a President

In a broader sense, an effective transition buys a new administration the chance to take advantage of the opportunities that exist at the beginning of an administration and to reduce the number of inevitable hazards. The benefits range from the direction of government to the reputation a president establishes in the early days.

It allows you to take advantage of the goodwill that is out there. When a president comes into office, there is a substantial amount of goodwill. You can see it by looking at the percentage a president won by and then look at the early Gallup polls once he comes into office, and you see a rise in the percentage of support. In my book, I outline 10 ways an effective transition benefits a president. I highlight a handful:

Continuity in Government: Transition from one administration to another is a volatile time. You don't want threats

and enemies to take advantage of this rather fragile period. Continuity in government programs and decisions—as well as crisis contingency plans—is important at such a vulnerable time. There are challenges that you want to make sure are not going to damage your administration, so as an outgoing president, you want to leave as stable a situation as you possibly can. With war in Afghanistan and Iraq underway in 2008, continuity in governing was essential. It was important in more than a national security sense. In 2008, the new president had an estimated 7,854 positions his administration could fill. With that many positions, a president and his staff need to set priorities.

Directions of Government: The presidential transition is an important element in establishing the direction of government. With a clear campaign agenda, an incoming president can quickly signal his governing priorities. President Ronald Reagan signaled his intention to carry through on his tax cut priorities in his first days in office. Less than an hour after he was sworn into office, Reagan issued a memo followed by an executive order to freeze the hiring of civilian federal workers. For other presidents as well, transition planning meant an early start on their policy initiatives. In President Obama's case, he signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act just a few days after coming into office, which he referenced often in campaign speeches as an item he had to accomplish. He also signed nine executive orders dealing with a range of domestic and national security issues. All of these actions required a great deal of preparatory work during the transition period.

Seizing Political Momentum: Getting off to a fast start has the benefit of leaving little blank space for your critics to fill in and represents an opportunity to discuss what you want to highlight. In today's political climate, your honeymoon period gets shorter and shorter. The opportunity for change is much greater at the beginning of the term. The political momentum is with you in a way that dissipates quickly. For example, President George W. Bush had an agenda ready to go and rolled it out in a weekly order. Each week had a policy theme to it. The issues went from education in the first week to establishing the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) in his second.

Reducing Mistakes: A good transition also helps to reduce mistakes. The transition is a vulnerable decision-making period. There are important choices to be made and mistakes are costly, especially in the appointments area. The presidential appointments have tripped up several recent administrations. It took President Bill Clinton until the middle of March to get his candidate for attorney general confirmed.



In contrast, President George W. Bush wasted little time at the start of his administration with only one nomination causing him trouble. The process of selecting your appointees requires the creation of the White House staff first, so you are setting up your decision-making system: what kind of information do you need before you can make a decision? Then you can start thinking through your appointees, because mistakes early on can really slow you down, turning a positive into a negative.

Effective Working Relationships: A well-planned transition can provide you an opportunity to establish effective working relationships with Congress and career staff. For example, President Reagan hosted a dinner at a fancy club during the transition period in Washington, and his guests were not only people he was going to appoint, but also the Democratic leadership in Congress. With this gesture, Reagan wanted to let people know that he was making a transition from being a candidate to being president. It is a critical leap from being a candidate of a party to president of all of the people. One of the ways the Obama transition operation built links with career staff was to tap former agency members with both agency knowledge and existing relationships with career staff. Several other ways an effective transition can benefit a president encompasses having good quality information, taking advantage of goodwill, and capturing public attention.

Rhythm of Presidential Transitions

Transitions have a rhythm to them that involves a defined number of people, activities, and decisions to be made. There are four traditional transition phases. The first stage occurs during the primary campaign phase, when most presidential candidates designate a person to gather information on personnel and decision timetables. The second period follows the party nominating conventions when government institutions, such as the Office of Government Ethics, get involved in the transition process in a limited way. Following the election, when the winning candidate has been designated president-elect, the formal 75-day transition period into office forms the third phase. The fourth and final period is the transition into governing that takes place following the inauguration. In 2008, there were five stages in the transition rather than the traditional four. The additional phase transpired once candidates became apparent for both of the major parties and government agencies, and the White House could, and did, begin the process of establishing contacts with each candidate.



Getting the Right People in Place

The personnel rules learned over the course of several administrations are: 1) hire one person to shepherd the personnel process; 2) have that person work on personnel from the early days of the campaign; 3) have a settled White House personnel staff before beginning cabinet selection. The Obama transition did not follow these rules, thus the personnel portfolio went through many hands. The benefits of having one person lead the process for an extended time are established. That person can start early and line up what needs to be done to gather names. That person can deal directly with the presidential candidate on what qualities and background he wants from his nominees. This lead person can establish the process and rules for handling nominees, and if or when a nominee doesn't measure up, there's an established mechanism to provide a swift exit.

Lessons from the 2008-2009 Presidential Transition

The 2008-2009 transition is regarded as an ideal template for how to plan future power changes, whether a same-party handoff or a change in party transfer of power. This is the reality of a post-September 11th world combined with technological advances that make it easier to coordinate efforts.

There are practices and lessons from the Bush-to-Obama transfer of power that future transitions should consider adopting. I'll share some of those insights.

Leverage the Resources of the Incumbent President: All benefit when a president directs early and thorough preparations for the change in administrations. At the direction of President Bush, Josh Bolten guided a government-wide effort to define and then meet the needs of the next administration.

Be Prepared to Consult on Policy: A president-elect can expect to be involved in government policy before Inauguration Day. Constitutionally, a president exercises power until noon on January 20. However, in practical terms, presidents are aware that power is about to change hands, so acknowledging the coming change may in fact involve the president-elect in planning. This was the case in 2008 around the national security actions discussed between Steven Hadley and General Jones, which I elaborate upon in the book.

Move Up the Transition Calendar: Although current legislation defines early transition planning as beginning after the major-party nominating convention, the reality is that government agencies and candidates start their planning and assemble informal contacts when there are presumptive candidates.

Shift from Campaigning with a Staff Ready to Govern: There is always pressure on a president to bring with him those who helped him reach the White House. As it happens, campaign people are often not the best-qualified people to accomplish policy initiatives. There is a single goal during an election: to win the election. The focus is short-term. Governing requires dealing with people in a more nuanced way, which may not necessarily be a strength of campaign professionals. Balancing the number of campaign people who want jobs with the appropriateness of their backgrounds is a challenge that confronts every president.

To Make a Transition Last Make Management a Priority: Perhaps the greatest challenge that each president faces is how to make an effective transition last as long as possible. This is why it is useful to bring in experienced key players who can assess the kinds of change they can bring about and where concentrated action might be a waste of resources. It benefits new administrations to organize according to past practices, getting the right people in place, having a management agenda, and anticipating that transition issues may change.

In the end, it is important that the outgoing administration work with the incoming administration prior to the transfer of power. It is essential for an incoming president to have a decision-making system of choice in place, policy initiatives ready to present to the public, and to Congress, a sense of key priorities and a functioning personnel process. ■

Martha Joynt Kumar recently retired as a professor of political science at Towson University and is the author and coauthor of several books on the media and presidency, including the 1981 classic *Portraying the President: The White House and the Media*, published by Johns Hopkins.

You can listen to the complete version of my interview with Martha on *The Business of Government Hour* at businessofgovernment.org/interviews.