

Managing Foreign Policy and National Security Challenges in Presidential Transitions

The process of transferring power from a sitting U.S. president to a president-elect is one of the most distinctive and perilous features of the American constitutional system—a time of great hope and optimism, but also one of great risk. From the earliest days of the Cold War, how the old and new leaders have navigated this strait has literally been a matter of survival for the United States and for the stability and prosperity of the entire world. The end of the Cold War has changed the nature of the dangers, but in many ways the two-and-a-half-month transition that will take place at the end of this year poses even greater challenges than in the past. These 72 days are fraught with suspense, tension, promise, and risk as a new team of foreign policy players confronts the arduous challenges of managing the interregnum.

The experience of transitions over the past 60 years is full of poignant examples of self-inflicted wounds and near misses, as well as of skillful takings of the reins. Although each transition is unique, the next president and his team need to understand the lessons of the past if he is to take advantage of the great opportunities for new U.S. leadership and avoid the landmines that lie ahead.

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Why Is This Transition Different from All the Others?

The 44th president of the United States will take office at an extraordinarily delicate and dangerous time in U.S. history. He will face ongoing conflicts with overextended U.S. troops intensely engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq, active nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, the ongoing threat of terrorism, and longer-term challenges from Russia and China. He will also need to chart policies to deal with the emerging problems of energy insecurity, climate change, global public health, and resource competition.

Grave national security challenges during times of presidential transition are hardly new—from President Harry Truman’s ascension to office at the end of World War II; through Dwight Eisenhower and the Korean War; John Kennedy and the Cold War competitions over Berlin and Cuba and around the world; Richard Nixon and Vietnam; Bill Clinton and the Balkans; to George W. Bush and the al Qaeda threat, just to name just a few.

This transition poses even greater challenges than in the past.

National security challenges are always difficult but pose especially acute problems during presidential transitions. A keen sense of potential vulnerability emerges as legions of officials from the

previous administration swiftly leave office while their successors are slowly appointed to fill the vacuum and struggle to get up to speed on complex and sensitive policy challenges. The existence of a formal transition period, ostensibly designed to facilitate a smooth handover, in many ways only complicates the problem, as the American people and the world struggle with the uncertainty created when the outgoing administration’s clout is eroding and the new president still lacks the authority to act. From Korea to the Bay of Pigs to Haiti and Somalia, transitions have contributed to policy missteps that have haunted new presidents from their earliest days in office.

Although the risk that a mishandled transition could lead to a nuclear exchange with a superpower rival has disappeared, in many ways the dangers facing the next president are even greater today. Some relate to the changing international landscape. First, the magnitude and the immediacy of the risks are growing. Although the fear of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union was real during the Cold War, the policies and structures in place lessened the likelihood that such a cataclysm might take place. Today, by contrast, a terrorist attack with weapons of mass destruction, a virulent pandemic, or a global economic meltdown in the first days of a new administration is not only thinkable but increasingly plausible. Second, the range of the risks has grown. The new team is no longer free to concentrate

its initial preparation on a single risk (the Soviet Union) but must be ready to handle a much wider range of challenges. Third, the growing scope of U.S. global interests combined with the fact that threats now often emanate from distant and poorly understood corners of the world means that the new team is far less likely to possess an adequate stock of knowledge upon taking office and thus will face an even steeper learning curve.

Some of the reasons that transitions are more difficult today than in the past are a function of the changing political context. National security policy has become more polarized in recent years, so the new president is less likely to have the luxury of a political honeymoon as the new administration tries to gain its footing. Twenty-four-hour news cycles and the extraordinary explosion of new media increase the scrutiny that the new team will face from day one. The proliferation of the number of national security positions to be filled, further exacerbated in this upcoming transition by the creation of a whole new set of homeland security–related agencies, and the slow pace of appointments and confirmations means a more extended period during which key officials will not be on the job. Moreover, the failure to adapt much of the Cold War national security machinery to emerging transnational security threats means that the incoming team must struggle either to reform or make do with old tools at the same time it is confronting new challenges.

The Core Transition Challenges

IN THE BEGINNING: CAMPAIGN COMMITMENTS

Of all the problems that have plagued the early months of new presidencies, perhaps none are more persistent or more dangerous than the problems that arise from commitments made or implied during the presidential campaign. From Eisenhower's campaign pledge to roll back Soviet gains in Eastern Europe through Kennedy's critique of the supposed missile gap, Clinton's promise to lift the ban on gays in the military, and Bush's denunciation of nation building and his characterization of China as a strategic competitor, campaign rhetoric and promises regularly come back to complicate the lives of those in new administrations. At best, an agile new team can quietly bury earlier promises that appear inappropriate once in office while suffering only transitory political embarrassment, as Kennedy managed to do with the missile gap. On occasion, however, hastily made campaign commitments—either honored or discarded—can damage a new administration's credibility, exacerbate the nation's national security risks, and set back the new administration's agenda for years to come.

That candidates make unwise or ill-considered commitments is hardly surprising. Campaigns are about drawing sharp black-and-white contrasts, not nuance, and there is a powerful incentive to reject all that has come before (a phenomenon recently crystallized in the “Anything But Clinton” syndrome at the beginning of the current administration). Closely related is the powerful incentive to include strong and relatively unconditional values commitments in the campaign as a way to contrast the “unprincipled” compromises of the incumbent, such as Ronald Reagan’s primary challenge to Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter’s attack on the Ford administration, or the recurring attack on incumbents for “coddling” China.

Many campaign promises, especially in areas such as trade, offer concrete and substantial benefits to small but highly motivated groups of voters, while the costs are less perceptible and more widely spread. Some of those costs can involve future complications with key foreign partners who have no vote in the election but are critical to achieving national security objectives, such as China and Turkey, among others. Because challengers in particular lack access to sensitive or classified information, sometimes campaign promises are simply premised on incorrect information, as was the case with Kennedy’s statements on the missile gap. Challengers also face powerful incentives to “out-tough” the incumbent administration because they frequently possess less national security experience, such as Kennedy or Clinton in Bosnia. Finally, the proliferation of foreign policy think tanks provides candidates with seemingly unending sets of policy proposals that candidates all too willingly endorse to show that their campaigns have “beef.”

PEOPLE AND PROCESS DECISIONS IN THE TRANSITION

Once the election is over and a new president elected, the formal transition begins. This period brings a focus on two core challenges: selecting the key new national security officials and deciding on the mechanism as well as processes that will govern decisionmaking.

Almost every would-be president has sought to get an early jump on staffing the new administration by beginning the process of identifying and, in some cases, vetting potential appointees even before the election. Indeed, in the cases of Reagan and George H.W. Bush, the lead transition official was selected for his expertise in personnel. Yet, despite a substantial expenditure of effort, few candidates make personnel decisions before they are elected. This often occurs because of superstition, a fear that they will be seen as taking the election for granted (a legacy of the 1948 “Dewey administration”); a desire not to alienate any supporters by prematurely crushing their hopes for high office; a reluctance to take political ownership of the previously expressed policy

views of the potential official, which may be at odds with expressed views of the candidate; and finally and most importantly, competing and more pressing demands on the candidate's time.

Unlike parliamentary systems with a system of "shadow" ministers identified prior to the election, the U.S. president-elect has an open field in choosing key appointees. This can be a significant advantage in assembling an effective team, but it also poses difficult choices. There is a particularly strong imperative to act quickly on national security personnel to reassure the country and the world that the new administration has skilled practitioners who will be ready on day one to meet ongoing or suddenly emerging crises, an imperative that has been greatly accentuated with the emergence of new terrorist threats.¹

Polarization means a new president is less likely to have a political honeymoon.

Modern U.S. presidents have resorted to a variety of different approaches to select their key policy advisers. The potential appointees tend to fall into four categories, each offering distinctive advantages and disadvantages to the new administration. Holdovers provide continuity and a rich knowledge of the factual context facing the new administration and can contribute to a sense of bipartisanship when the transition is between parties. Yet, they tend to have limited influence within new teams because of suspect loyalty—consider Colin Powell at the beginning of the Clinton administration—and frequent policy divergences, even when the transition is within the same party. Historically, holdovers have played particularly important roles when transitions were unplanned, such as those of Truman, Johnson, and Ford, and to some extent in intraparty transitions such as Reagan to Bush, but have been rarer in cases involving a change of party. The Kennedy administration offered examples of both the benefits and the risks of holdovers: by keeping Allan Dulles at the CIA, the momentum and lack of fresh analysis contributed to the Bay of Pigs disaster, whereas the choice of Douglas Dillon as secretary of the treasury (he was deputy treasury secretary under Eisenhower) helped contribute to a successful resolution of the balance of payments crisis confronting Kennedy at the outset of his administration.

A more common source of senior officials is the campaign's policy advisers. They can offer important benefits to the new president: their strengths and styles are well known to the new chief executive, and their loyalty to the president and his policies are well tested. Yet, reliance on campaign advisers presents a risk that a new administration will suffer groupthink and an unwillingness to challenge the wisdom of policies formulated during the campaign.

The most prominent example of a team of loyalists was George H.W. Bush's administration, which had the ability to operate collegially and confidentially with the president, which served Bush senior well in handling the Gulf War and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but had a tendency to rely on policies developed in the past without regard for new context, as demonstrated by the limited success they had in handling the breakup of the Soviet Union into new democratic states and their unwillingness to engage in the Balkans. Many presidents have staffed key posts such as national security adviser with campaign advisers, as was the case with Zbigniew Brzezinski under Carter and Condoleezza Rice under George W. Bush.

A third group can be categorized as "all-stars," experienced and well-regarded national security professionals who have not been heavily involved in the campaign. These individuals offer the new president the flip side of the benefits and costs of choosing loyalists. All-stars offer instant credibility and a sense that the president-elect is transitioning from the partisanship of campaigning to the national interest in governing. On the other hand, these individuals are not likely to be well known to the candidate, raising issues of compatibility, and may have little personal commitment to the president-elect's policies.

Prominent examples of all-stars include Henry Kissinger, who had supported Nelson Rockefeller, not Nixon, during the 1968 campaign; Alexander Haig, who was Reagan's first secretary of state; James Woolsey, who was Clinton's pick for CIA director; and Powell, who served as secretary of state during the George W. Bush administration. As these examples illustrate, the appointment of all-stars does not doom the team to failure but risks early personality and policy clashes that can harm a new administration from almost the first day in office.

The final group consists of Washington "worthies," respected national leaders (often members of Congress or former officials) who may lack national security expertise but have prominent public profiles. They offer some of the benefits of all-stars, including Washington savvy and public credibility, but have all of the same drawbacks, further compounded by their lack of substantive national security knowledge. Mel Laird under Ford, Charles Wilson under Eisenhower, and Robert McNamara under Kennedy are well-known examples of worthies becoming secretary of defense. Sometimes, appointees are "two-fers," such as Clinton's first secretary of defense, Les Aspin, who was both an all-star as a national security intellectual and a worthy as a prominent congressman. There are also several examples of administrations reaching across the aisle to bring in a prominent member of the opposing political camp, either to bolster a perceived weakness or to send a message of inclusivity. The appointment of Senator William Cohen (R-Maine) as secretary of defense in the second term of the Clinton administration was probably a desire to check both boxes.

Most administrations have offered a blend of these four types. In principle, these blends could offer a way to balance the strengths and weaknesses of each type. In practice, however, slots are often filled one by one, with little thought to how the team as a whole might function. Indeed, one of the most dramatic lessons of past transitions is the high price that the new presidents pay for picking their key national security officials the way children pick sides for sandlot soccer, rather than thinking about the ensemble. The seeds of conflict and disarray, such as the deep tensions in the Carter administration between Cyrus Vance and Brzezinski; the problems between Haig and the troika of Edwin Meese, James Baker, and Michael Deaver under Reagan; and those between Powell and Donald Rumsfeld under George W. Bush, have their roots in the failure to consider the ensemble.

The challenge of selecting key personnel who are both individually skilled and capable of functioning as a team is further complicated by the sheer number of appointments that must be made as a result of the widening scope of national security issues. Although cabinet officials are almost always named and confirmed by the first day in office, second- and third-tier appointments can languish for months, producing systemic uncertainty and wedging open a dangerous window of vulnerability. Cumbersome security and legal vetting, congressional overload, and the tendency of subcabinet appointees to get caught up in congressional policy disputes with the new administration all contribute to this problem.

One particularly important source of delay involves disputes between the White House and cabinet officials over who should select lower-level officials. These disputes can compromise the effectiveness of a transition, especially when the cabinet official is an all-star or a worthy rather than a campaign loyalist. The White House has a plausible claim to have a voice, both to reward campaign workers who have often made great personal sacrifices and to enhance policy coherence across the administration. On the other hand, placing loyalists without regard to the views of their immediate superiors can be a recipe for contention and paralysis, as John Bolton's 2005 appointment as ambassador to the United Nations so vividly showed.

Closely related to the choice of senior officials are the initial decisions on how to govern in the national security arena. The importance of institutions and processes has been evident since the early days of the Cold War, when the National Security Act of 1947 and subsequent amendments established

Dangerous problems arise from commitments made or implied during the campaign.

the National Security Council (NSC). Although the statutory framework has changed little since Truman's day, in practice, there has been a wide variation in how successive chief executives have made and implemented national security policy. Whereas Eisenhower pursued a highly structured decisionmaking model with frequent, formal NSC meetings over which he personally presided, Kennedy and Johnson largely abandoned the statutory procedures in favor of informal meetings of select, highly trusted advisers. Subsequent adminis-

Conflict and disarray have their roots in the failure to consider personnel as a team.

trations have adopted a blend of formal and informal procedures. Although typically the incoming president pays fealty to the need for formal procedures to be codified in a presidential directive issued in the first days in office, in practice he relies increasingly on the informal structures.

A second key decision for the transition is to decide on the relative roles and responsibilities of the key players, particularly the

relationship between cabinet and White House staff. Three primary models are apparent: one that features strong cabinet officers, another that focuses on the national security adviser and the NSC staff, and one in which the president himself is the key actor. Eisenhower, and later Reagan during the George Shultz/Caspar Weinberger period, was the most cabinet-centric. President Franklin Roosevelt was the clearest example of the third, president-centered, model, whereas Nixon with Kissinger and Carter with Brzezinski represented a blend of the second (NSC) and third. George H.W. Bush was a blend of the presidential and cabinet approaches, being actively involved but including strong leadership from Secretary of State James Baker and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, whereas National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft operated more as a policy coordinator, although he felt free to disagree with cabinet officials.

One frequently overlooked dimension of the process issues facing a transition is the role of the vice president. At least since Vice President Walter Mondale, vice presidents and their staff have gone beyond the role of confidential adviser to play a more formal part in the decisionmaking process. Mondale's national security aide, David Aaron, was a deputy national security adviser. Al Gore's principal adviser, Leon Fuerth, had a seat on the NSC principals and deputies committees, and Gore and his staff chaired important policy development groups (associated with the Gore-Chernomydin, Gore-Mubarak and Gore-Mbeki Commissions). Cheney's elaborate national security establishment under George W. Bush offered an alternative mechanism for decisionmaking in parallel with the formal NSC.

The challenge of organizing the decisionmaking process has grown increasingly complex as the range of national security issues has expanded. After Clinton established the National Economic Council at the beginning of his presidency, he faced a need to integrate the new international economic policy processes with the NSC structures. Following the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Africa, new structures were developed to deal with counterterrorism, a process that was greatly accelerated following the September 11 attacks through the creation of the Homeland Security Council (HSC) and a dual-hatted NSC/HSC deputy for counterterrorism, as well as new executive branch entities such as the Department of Homeland Security, the director of national intelligence, and the National Counterterrorism Center. Many experts and practitioners argue that the current policymaking and policy implementation mechanisms are ill suited to meet contemporary national security challenges, and the next administration will face enormous pressure to develop a new approach from the moment it takes office.

In describing the key challenges of the formal transition, we have deliberately given less attention to the substantive agenda. This is not an oversight; one of the most common mistakes of transitions has been an excessive focus on policy work at the expense of personnel and process. This focus on policy is understandable. After all, that is why the new president sought the office in the first place. Yet, standing up elaborate policy teams during the transition can cause many problems. At best, such efforts generate an enormous amount of duplicative work at a time when key individuals are already overwhelmed. At worst, enormous binders of background material and detailed policy proposals end up in landfills. This is particularly true if the policy teams develop the product before the key senior officials are selected, because the latter will want to develop their own transition studies to suit their styles and interests.

Sometimes, these efforts can introduce deep tensions into the transition, as the campaign policy team begins to suspect that their carefully developed plans will be discarded by interlopers who have no commitment to the campaign work. These tensions can arise not only in the formal transition but even at an earlier stage if the preelection transition team begins to develop policy papers disconnected from the campaign. The legendary struggle between Jack Watson and Hamilton Jordan over control over the policy work for the Carter transition not only created deep personal animosities but also hampered Carter's ability to get off to an effective start. This same pattern was repeated, albeit in a less virulent form, by the transition efforts led by Mickey Kantor for Clinton.

This is not to say that transition teams should avoid all policy development. Some issues will be underdeveloped and unaddressed by the campaign but may require early attention by the new administration. For instance, how

a president and an incoming team conceptualizes options and approaches to an inherited conflict, such as Eisenhower in Korea and Nixon for Vietnam, can be decisive in the early days of governance for a new administration. Prioritization is an important task of the transition because campaigns have an incentive to put many issues at the top of the agenda to satisfy multiple constituencies. On a final note, some campaign policies may require adjustment, which may need to take place even before the president takes office. Clinton's experience with Haitian refugees and gays in the military are two examples that illustrate the need for policy work during the transition.

SURVIVING THE FIRST 100 DAYS

When the afterglow of the inaugural balls fades into the cold light of the first day in office, the real test of an effective transition begins. There is no more perilous time for a new administration than the much ballyhooed first 100 days. Many of the legendary clichés of transition lore stem from this period—the need to “hit the ground running” to take advantage of a “window of opportunity” created by the political “honeymoon” that accompanies a new presidency. Yet, even a cursory glance at the historical record suggests that, more often than not, missteps of omission and commission during the early months bedevil incoming presidents, wreaking havoc with their attempts to gain control of the powers of the presidency, to implement their campaign agenda effectively and, most importantly, to sustain the nation's security.

At the core, the problem of the 100 days stems from a fundamental irony: a president's standing on the first day of office is often at its highest at the moment when the capacity of the administration is at its weakest.² Presidents who act too quickly are prone to errors that can damage their presidency over the long term, whereas presidents who are slow to get on track may see their presidencies hijacked by events not of their own making.

Getting the first 100 days right requires a judicious blend of boldness and caution that exploits the political opportunity of the honeymoon while minimizing the risks of hasty actions. The most successful administrations are those that scrupulously prioritize their goals with an eye not only on what is most important but also on how to achieve early victories that can pave the way to tackle other difficult challenges in the future. Even though Reagan partially squandered his capital with an ill-prepared effort to push through the sale of surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia, his success in tackling the federal budget, which took the form of dramatic defense spending increases on the national security side, remains the gold standard of how to get off on the right foot. Carter's voluminous and uncoordinated agenda, which included efforts as diverse as the Panama Canal Treaty, withdrawing U.S. forces from South

Korea, and dramatic nuclear agreements with the Soviet Union, stands at the opposite end of the spectrum. Although Carter did achieve some successes such as the Panama Canal Treaty, they came at great cost for arguably higher-priority initiatives.

The first 100 days is as often about the unwonted and unexpected agenda as it is the optimistic hopes coming off the campaign. The Bay of Pigs invasion stands as the classic case demonstrating the need to hone crisis management systems at the outset. Recent examples, including the 1991 World Trade Center attack and the Haiti and Somalia crises under Clinton and the EP-3 incident in China under George W. Bush, demonstrate how common such challenges have become.

The most successful transitions have worked to quickly defuse ongoing problems, such as Kennedy's work on the balance of payments crisis and Baker's efforts to develop a bipartisan consensus on Central America at the outset of George H.W. Bush's presidency. Many of the greatest problems have come from hastily abandoning the predecessor's policies before fully developed alternatives were developed by the new team, a problem exemplified in the most recent administration by its actions in its first months to discard Clinton's support for South Korea's Sunshine Policy, its abandonment of the Kyoto Protocol, and its disengagement from active involvement in the Middle East peace process.

Excessive focus on policy at the expense of personnel and process is a common mistake.

Ten Keys to Success: Modest Advice to the Next Administration

Scores of books and articles have been written about presidential transitions by scholars and practitioners alike. The following observations about how to handle this complex and challenging process are drawn from a combination of personal transition experience (Ford-Carter, Carter-Reagan, Reagan-Bush, Bush-Clinton, and Clinton-Bush) and the luxury of seven years to think and reflect on the history of what has gone before. The following (abridged) 10 recommendations are offered to guide the candidates and the next president-elect in traversing the perilous course ahead.

CAMPAIGNING

First, candidates must be judicious in what they promise. Concrete campaign promises in the national security arena are particularly problematic because

the facts are not always fully known to the candidates, circumstances change, and the ability to achieve concrete commitments is highly constrained even in areas in which the president's powers are particularly robust, because of constitutional authority and the United States' mighty military, economic and political power. Candidates should try to avoid getting into early situations in which they are "called" on a promise and face the Hobson's choice of making good on an ill-conceived commitment or changing policy and damaging their international as well as domestic political credibility.

The greatest success stories come from presidents who had a clear sense of priorities.

Second, candidates should also avoid answering hypothetical questions, which oversimplify and appear to constrain future decisions that will need to be made in a highly complex and rapidly changing environment. They should answer questions by stating their policy rather than buying into "yes or no" responses to other definitions of the policy options.

Third, the transition should not get disconnected from the campaign. The campaign is where policy is made, and even though the transition should get a head start on some logistical and personnel issues, a separate policy transition effort can only create confusion and divisions that will harm the ability to get off to a fast start.

Finally, the president-elect should reflect on his campaign experiences and use that experience to inform the choices about personnel and governing style. Campaigns are different from governing, but the time pressures and need to address conflicting issues and priorities are similar. These experiences can provide valuable guides for adapting the process to meet the new president's personal style and needs. He should not try to reinvent them or to impose artificial structures that will inevitably have to be abandoned.

THE FORMAL TRANSITION

During the transition, the president should first prioritize personnel decisions and focus on the team. Transitions spend a lot of effort on policy development even before key officials are selected. This is often a waste of time, because once selected the new appointees inevitably—and rightly—want to think through the choices themselves. Similarly, final decisions about process need to be held until the people who will actually be using them have a chance to weigh in; otherwise the new procedures will be stillborn. A well-balanced team effort can offer far more than the sum of its parts, and "quick hit" publicity coups during the transition will have to be lived with in the days and

months of governing. Diversity of perspective is invaluable, but too much dissension for the sake of diversity is a recipe for paralysis. Although basic loyalty to the administration is critical, cabinet officials need considerable scope to select second- and third-tier officials who must work with and represent them in interagency deliberations.

Second, procedures should be adapted or created to suit the style of the president and the new team. Formal procedures are invaluable for making sure that decisions are well staffed and that competing alternatives are considered. Yet, every administration develops its own informal procedures to ensure confidentiality, avoid lowest-common-denominator decisions, and allow for swift and agile actions. These two complementary mechanisms need to be established from the start and must reflect the way the new president absorbs information and ideas and makes effective use of advice.

THE FIRST 100 DAYS

The greatest success stories come from presidents who had a clear sense of priorities and used the magic of the early days in office to achieve them. Those who ventured most usually achieved the least. Choosing priorities is a blend of what is most important, most urgent, and most achievable. To the extent possible, the next president must try to defuse and resolve old disputes through compromise in order to facilitate moving on to the affirmative agenda for which the new president campaigned.

He should also defer difficult and complex decisions until he can fully absorb their legacy. Some decisions must be made immediately because they are forced by events, but many can wait at least for a while. Taking office brings many shocks and surprises, and it takes time to adjust campaign posture to governing reality. No matter how strong his convictions, the president must ask himself, "What if my opponent was right after all?" In the beginning, the administration will be short-staffed and will be better able to manage a complex agenda when the full team is in place.

Third, the president should try to reverse the polarization of national security. National security is difficult enough without having each decision seen through a political lens. Although the idea that politics stopped at the "water's edge" of national security has always been as much myth as reality, managing national security, especially long-term challenges, requires broad-based support if policy is to be sustained and is to succeed. Early engagement of Congress is key, as it is a necessary partner regardless of the formal executive authority of the commander in chief. The president and his team should also connect with the public early and often through the press and by speaking directly on the key issues of the day and of the future.

Finally, the next White House must prepare for crisis contingencies at the outset. It is never possible to anticipate exactly what crisis might emerge in the first days or weeks, but the fundamentals of crisis communication and decisionmaking need to be in hand and well understood by the key actors even before the inauguration. During the Cold War, continuity of government exercises associated with a possible nuclear attack was a staple of transition. Today, threats such as a terrorist attack or pandemic disease make preparedness more important than ever. The next president should try to hold on to as much expertise as possible from the previous administration until the new personnel are selected and up to speed.

Seizing the Reins Prudently, Not Fearfully

The history of presidential transitions is a highly cautionary tale replete with the dangers and missteps that have bedeviled not just the novice, but even the most experienced of practitioners. Yet, transitions are times of opportunity as well as of risk. The lessons of the past are reason for caution and prudence, but not paralysis. By carefully avoiding some of the common and all too often repeated mistakes of past transitions, a new president will be much better positioned to achieve success from the outset of the new presidency. Foresight and a clear recognition of the risks, informed by the knowledge of what has transpired in past transitions, are the best preparation for navigating presidential transitions on the horizon.

Notes

1. Richard Armitage and Michele A. Flournoy, "No Time for 'Nobody Home,'" *Washington Post*, June 9, 2008, p. A17.
2. Paul C. Light, *The President's Agenda: Domestic Policy Choice From Kennedy to Clinton* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 10.