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DIFFICULT TRANSITIONS

Presidential Transitions and Foreign Policy Perils

Perhaps the most harrowing—yet simultaneously hopeful—feature of the American system of government is the transfer of power from one president to the next, a period stretching from the quadrennial national election through the inaugural and into the first months of governance. For Washington insiders, this time is known simply as "the transition," and it is one of the most studied yet least fully understood aspects of our democracy.

On a formal level, the transition has been a part of our national experience since the election of George Washington, yet the reality has changed dramatically over the past two hundred and twenty years. The first inaugural was held on April 30, 1789, and the transition "team" consisted of President George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Knox, and Edmund Randolph—men who would go on to serve as the first treasury secretary, secretary of war, and attorney general, respectively. They all got together one afternoon for tea near the Federal Hall in New York City to coordinate their plans for the new administration. For the next one hundred and fifty years most presidents simply asked a few trusted advisers to spend several weeks assisting with the logistics and personnel matters associated with the move to the White House.

In 1938 the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution changed the inauguration date to January 20. Particularly in the post–World War II

era, the transition process preceding and following the inaugural became more elaborate with each passing president. While the Constitution stipulates a seamless flow of executive power from one president to the next, the process has become more turbulent than envisioned by the founding fathers. Indeed, the rituals and risks associated with modern transitions have grown exponentially over the past several decades.

The very idea of the transition is one of the features that distinguishes the United States from most other democracies and parliamentary systems around the world. During the recent handoff of the political baton from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown in the United Kingdom, for instance, the whole process was completed in a few days with the assistance of a couple of moving vans and a few personnel changes in some key jobs around the prime minister and in cabinet offices. Scarcely a beat was missed while Gordon Brown dealt calmly and effectively with a domestic terrorist attack against the Glasgow airport and a foiled plot in central London in the days immediately following the handover. Presidential transitions in the United States, by contrast, are increasingly prolonged and complicated affairs with thousands of people moving into new positions of responsibility over several months across dozens of agencies. The possibility that a comparable domestic terror threat might emerge in the first days of a new U.S. administration causes many government specialists, foreign policy practitioners, seasoned observers, and the candidates themselves to shudder.

While transitions present challenges for domestic policy, they can be deadly in the arena of foreign policy. There is an acute sense of vulnerability when power changes hands, accompanied by an extended period of uncertainty about how well the new team will handle the challenges of office. There may be a so-called honeymoon period on the domestic front as the new president sorts out the policies and candidates for senior government jobs, but there is rarely time for a honeymoon or learning curve in the international security realm. From the early era of the cold war, when new presidents and their advisers worried about being "tested" by their Soviet counterparts, to more recent concerns about whether a new crew fully grasps the myriad complexities of homeland security and intelligence provisions, and whether terrorists might seek to

disrupt the period of power transfer, presidential transitions have been fraught with anxiety and uncertainty.

This is a book about how presidential transitions and foreign policy intersect every four years and why the process can pose such profound problems to an incoming team of officials seeking to serve and protect the nation. The very word "transition" typically evokes the period between the quadrennial first Tuesday in November, when the American people vote to elect a new president, and inauguration day the following January 20, when the new president formally takes office. But it has long been recognized by practitioners and scholars alike that the transition really begins during the campaign itself, when the candidates stake out their positions on foreign policy and begin to assemble a team of advisers, and continues for many months into the new administration. This book covers the entire process and offers recommendations for how best to traverse the full length of a transition.

We begin by presenting the perspectives of some who have participated firsthand in this unique process and then turn to an analysis of the factors that make transitions in today's environment riskier than in the past. We look in detail at four phases of the transition: the campaign, the initial staffing decisions after the election, the choices around structures and decisionmaking, and the early process of settling into government after the inauguration—devoting a chapter to each topic. On the basis of this analysis we provide recommendations for managing the transition in a way that achieves the newly elected president's national security objectives and avoids dangerous missteps in the crucial early days of a new administration. We conclude with some thoughts on how transitions are likely to unfold in the future amidst more contemporary challenges.

Difficult Transitions specifically describes how the early steps of a campaign can plague a transition during its formative days. We show how campaign pressures, particularly campaign promises made without full knowledge of the constraining facts, complicate the challenge of governing once elected. We also review the constraints on transition planning during the campaign itself, which make it difficult for a new president to get a running start on governing and, in some cases, create

frictions within a campaign that carry over through the transition. The obvious point of departure for this book is the critical importance of candidates taking seriously the prospect that they might actually win and therefore have to govern. Policy switches once in office may be embarrassing for domestic policy, but they can be catastrophic for national security, conveying indecisiveness and vacillation in a world that needs steadiness in the sole superpower. At the same time, slavish devotion to rash campaign commitments poses a serious danger. Candidates therefore need to think carefully about making concrete proposals before they are in a position to fully understand the facts, including the perspective of international allies and partners.

This book also underscores the need for candidates and their advisers to think through the operations of government well before getting elected and to seek expert advice about how to organize and run the national security apparatus. New presidents should not outrun their capacity to act effectively in the first months in office. Their focus should remain on filling the top jobs and carefully getting up to speed before implementing new policies. And above all, new administrations should consult with Congress, with key allies, and with predecessors, who may have actually gotten some things right, even if they were from the opposite party.

We examine the problems associated with the formal transition itself—how and with whom to staff the national security team (including how to incorporate campaign staff); what managerial approach to employ to coordinate the vast range of policy issues and challenges of policy implementation; whether to heed or ignore the advice of the outgoing administration; and how to adapt to unpleasant surprises and constraints during the first months in office.

We look at the pressures associated with the first hundred days, including how to deal with career officials who may not share the objectives of the new administration, the challenge of governing with only a partial team in place, what kind of working relationship the president and his lieutenants should establish with Congress and the press, and how aggressively to jettison the policies of the past to implement a new agenda. This is the time of greatest peril, when the hubris of election and the desire to get off to a fast start collide with limits of capacity and the

constraints of an unaccommodating real world, and when the effectiveness of the pre-inauguration transition planning is tested. We review some of the notable successes and failures of first months in office to illustrate both the perils and the opportunities facing new administrations.

We identify an extensive range of transition risks and perennial problems and conclude by providing a list of recommendations for how to successfully conduct a presidential transition with larger foreign policy and national security objectives clearly in mind. The record of modern transitions includes dodged bullets and direct hits, and this book shows how one particularly underestimated factor can make all the difference: luck.

The presidential transition of 2008–09 carries with it many great challenges, some as consequential as any in recent history. The next president will take office at an extraordinarily delicate and dangerous time in American history. He will face two ongoing conflicts in which U.S. troops are intensely engaged, our ground forces are overextended, and few good options seem available for stabilizing these situations to prevent wider conflict. There remain active nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, which threaten to destabilize their regions and undermine the global nonproliferation regime. Our nation faces a continuous elevated terrorist threat, fueled by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as social, cultural, and religious divisions from Europe to Southeast Asia. Instability in Pakistan remains a critical challenge, which contributes to the terrorist threat and risks an internal political breakdown in a nuclear-armed state. There is an urgent need to reconceptualize the "war on terror" framework that has guided American strategy since 9/11. Behind the immediate headlines are the longer-term challenges of an increasingly assertive Russia, an economically and militarily more powerful China, and transnational dangers including climate change, pandemic disease, and resource competition. National security challenges such as these always pose difficult tests, but they are especially acute during times of transition.

This review of the stakes on the global stage is important because foreign policy mistakes made at the outset of a new presidency are legion, and sometimes early wounds cause harm that lasts far beyond the initial debacle. Almost every modern president has grappled with

these challenges, many of which were not even of their own making: Eisenhower and Nixon, who inherited wars in Korea and Vietnam; Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs fiasco; the drama of the Iran hostage crisis that played out like an arc at the end of the Carter presidency and into the beginning of Reagan's term; Clinton's struggle to manage the Somalia deployment, which began in the waning days of the George H. W. Bush administration; the EP-3 crisis that occurred at the outset of George W. Bush's first term when a U.S. plane strayed too close to Chinese territory and collided in mid-air with a Chinese fighter. President after president has been tested in the early days of his administration.

Over the years, there have been a number of important studies and analyses of presidential transitions, beginning with the landmark Brookings study *Presidential Transitions* by Henry Laurin, published in 1960, which was avidly consumed by the Kennedy transition team, and the now famous Heritage Foundation's *Mandate for Leadership* in 1980, which played such a crucial role in the early days of the Reagan administration. Several of these studies have focused on the specific challenges and problems of foreign policy during transition. Most were written by scholars who drew on a growing body of oral histories, including vital contributions by the Miller Center and the White House Project. These works have been complemented by the autobiographies of many key participants in foreign policy transitions, from Dean Acheson to Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and others. This work continues to be supplemented by a myriad of think tanks and study groups that hope to influence the course of the next transition.

There is a veritable cottage industry of transition and government affairs experts who form working groups and issue expert reports during every election cycle on how to perfect this unruly process, which is quintessentially about the hope for change and betterment in American politics. Thinkers and practitioners offer sage advice on think tank panels and cable news shows, in blog posts and newspaper opinion pages. Thoughtful and insightful recommendations are issued, usually in mid-November of the year of the quadrennial contest. Scholars and pundits rarely think about these matters in such depth at other times, but in the three- to six-month period before the election and into the first one hundred days of a new president's term, the Washington community is

inundated with studies and opinion pieces for how to better manage this quadrennial process.

So why another book? In this volume, we bring the study of foreign policy transitions up to the present and seek to address the challenges in the contemporary international environment that make national security transitions today even more complex and perilous than those faced in the cold war years of superpower confrontation and hair-trigger nuclear alerts. As such, this book complements both the scholarly histories and the contemporary advice that bloom like desert flowers in the months just before and during the quadrennial transition. It is both something of a cautionary tale and a how-to self-help book in one. We undertook this study primarily for would-be and used-to-be practitioners, but it is equally appropriate reading for students, teachers and researchers, commentators, foreign policy and national security experts, journalists, foreign observers of the American political scene, and those among the interested public who simply want to acquire a sharper understanding of how our system of government works (and when and why it does not). We hope that *Difficult Transitions* will fill an important niche in the rich literature on American presidential transitions. We provide a concise survey of this body of work in the Appendix and highlight several important studies that inform our larger understanding of the process. In writing this book, we have attempted to blend the perspectives of these historians, practitioners, and political scientists with our own insights gleaned from over thirty years of experience in and around government, including service in four presidential transitions and on the campaign trail, reflections from academia, and staff work in Congress.

Difficult Transitions is a guide to what history tells us about transition train wrecks and offers advice to the next president and his foreign policy team for getting off on the right foot. And perhaps as important, this effort also offers prescriptions for avoiding the inevitable landmines and booby traps that will be encountered by even the most well-meaning and intrepid chief executive at the outset. The need for such a road map is particularly compelling today as the new administration seeks to restore American power and global prestige to face the challenges of the coming years.