





# GETTING STARTED

***“The President needs help!”***

These are the four most urgent words ever delivered to a president of the United States. They were the words of the President’s Committee on Administrative Management. The president was Franklin Roosevelt, the year 1937. That was the year Inauguration Day was advanced from March 4 to January 20—and life for newly elected presidents became ever more difficult. You could no longer take a leisurely four months to plan your administration or, like Woodrow Wilson, enjoy a month’s vacation in Bermuda.

Instead, following election on November 4, you have seventy-seven-and-a-half days (counting Christmas and New Year’s Day) to perform the incredibly difficult and complex job of creating a government before taking office.

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There is no shadow cabinet to move in with you, as in a parliamentary system. Your staff—created for campaigning, not governing—lacks many of the talents you now require. Your political party asks not what it can do for you. The government’s civil service is either too liberal or too conservative, according to past presidents. And this is just the start of your problems.

No political scientist so thoroughly understood the hazards of presidential transitions as Richard E. Neustadt, the Harvard professor who had also been on President Harry S. Truman’s staff and an adviser to John F. Kennedy. The two primary hazards, writes Neustadt, are “newness,” which he equates with ignorance, and “hubris,” which he calls “a kind of early arrogance.” The arrogance radiates from the winning team luxuriating in its remarkable victory. Counterarrogance can wait for your first defeat in Congress or your administration’s first front-page scandal.

But ignorance? Surely we elect presidents of fine education, many skills, and experience in jobs with titles like “governor” or “senator.” Yet governors too quickly learn that Washington is not Atlanta, Little Rock, or Austin writ large. It will take time and attention to unlearn lessons that had previously worked so well. As a senator, on the other hand, you have the right to believe that you know Washington. But what you soon realize is that the Washington you know largely revolves around Capitol Hill and its legislative ways. There are vast differences in scope and style between life under Article I and Article II.

As if to make this point brutally, Neustadt cites the experience of John F. Kennedy, the last senator elected president before the 2008 election. Less than three months after his inauguration, Kennedy blundered into the “misadventure at Cuba’s Bay of Pigs in April 1961.” In asking the Joint Chiefs of Staff for its assessment of the CIA’s invasion plan, says Neustadt, Kennedy

evidently was too ignorant to understand that when the military is asked to comment on an operation that is someone else's responsibility it will be loath to open its mind—or its mouth. Nor did Kennedy understand the terms of reference in which military advice was tendered to him. The Joint Chiefs told him that they thought the CIA plan had a “fair” chance of success. What the colonel who wrote those words meant by them was “fair” as next to “poor.” What Mr. Kennedy took them to mean was “fair” as “pretty good”. . . . And so it went. The military chiefs were half a generation older than the President: they had seen him on television during the campaign, championing vigor and calling for firmness against Cuba. They did not wish to look weak.

The transitions of the eight presidents-elect of the “modern” era have been a mixed success at best. The scholars' consensus is that two made multiple mistakes so serious as to cast doubt on whether they were ready for prime time. By their actions (or inaction) they dug holes for themselves that they would have to dig out of. Digging takes time and resources. Two presidents allowed events to go forward that had lasting adverse international consequences. All made errors—most often in appointments, though sometimes in policy proposals as well—for which they paid a price.

While you were campaigning, some folks—volunteers, interns, staff—were gathering material for your use after the election. This probably included job descriptions for positions you will have to fill, an annotated list of laws that will expire during your first year in office,

The seal used on page 1 is from the invitation to the inaugural ceremony of President Richard Nixon in 1969. It is the Great Seal of the United States, not the Seal of the President. The Great Seal was approved by the Continental Congress in 1782. The Seal of the President is a product of tradition, not statute, and dates back to President Rutherford B. Hayes, 1877.

The difference between the two seals is slight. The Great Seal features a circle of clouds encasing thirteen stars above the eagle; the Seal of the President has an arced cornea of thirteen stars with the clouds above. Until 1945, however, there was a more radical difference. The eagle in the Great Seal held an olive branch in its right talon and a bundle of arrows in the left. This was reversed in the president's seal by Harry Truman. As explained in a White House press release: “In the new Coat of arms, Seal and Flag, the Eagle not only faces to its right—the direction of honor—but also toward the olive branches of peace which it holds in its right talon. Formerly the eagle faced toward the arrows in its left talon—arrows, symbolic of war.”

and documentation on turning campaign promises into draft legislation or executive orders. Your experts have contributed memos of what awaits you in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and other places, as well as how to fix the health care system and the economy.

It used to be that pre-election planning was considered bad politics: you don't want voters to feel that you're taking them for granted. But Jimmy Carter experienced no adverse electoral consequences when he created a small transition office in Atlanta during the 1976 campaign. What he faced instead was a hammer-and-tong battle between transition staff and campaign staff. This happened again after Bill Clinton's 1992 victory. Ronald Reagan, however, devised a formula that worked well: leave no room for infighting by giving the ultimate power to a member of your inner circle whose decisions are understood to have your full support.

### **Why this book is called “What Do We Do Now?”**

The title of this book—suggested by my friend and former Nixon speechwriter William Safire—comes from the 1972 movie *The Candidate*. Written by Jeremy Lerner, himself a former political speechwriter, the movie stars Robert Redford as Bill McKay, the politically disillusioned son of California's former governor. McKay is persuaded to launch a long-shot candidacy for a seat in the U.S. Senate. In the early months of the campaign, McKay attempts to discuss substantive issues with voters. But as he gains in the polls, McKay drops his focus on issues for empty slogans such as “For a better way: Bill McKay!” In the movie's famous closing scene, McKay—unexpectedly victorious and facing the prospect of going to Washington—confronts his campaign manager with the question “What do we do now?” The line has come to symbolize the idea that politicians often care more about getting elected than about governing.

McKay's question actually has a shadow in history. According to Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., when candidate John F. Kennedy asked adviser Clark Clifford in August 1960 to write a transition memo, he said, “If I am elected, I don't want to wake up on the morning of November 9 and have to ask myself, ‘What in the world do I do now?’”

To supplement the material you may receive from these and other quarters, this workbook offers some thoughts on how to best organize a presidency distilled from accumulated wisdom and experience. It contains no flight plans for how to deal with Iraq or the economy. Instead it draws on the excellent work of scholars who professionally study presidential transitions and on my own involvement in all of the transitions since 1960–61, when I was a young man on President Dwight Eisenhower’s White House staff awaiting the arrival of the incoming Kennedy people.

Presidential experts do not always agree, of course. One school of transition scholars advocates that you “hit the ground running.” They urge you to take advantage of the honeymoon period that the media and the voters usually give a new president. You’ll never have all the pieces in place when you take office anyway, so go for quick victories. Good first impressions are important. Another school of scholars advises you to be cautious while you’re still learning the ropes. You’ll never have all the pieces in place when you take office, and ignorant presidents make unnecessary mistakes. It’s hard to undo bad first impressions.

Both are right.

After you have assessed your circumstances—the size of your electoral victory, makeup of Congress, state of the economy, immediate troubles in the world—it is essential to prioritize your long-term goals and then have a pocketful of doable actions ready for quick victories.

Now, let us begin.

## **Transition Budget**

The federal government provides funds for both the incoming and outgoing presidents under the Presidential Transition Act. The funds cover office space, staff compensation, communications services, and printing and postage costs relating to the transition. During the 2000–01 transition, the General Services Administration (GSA, the housekeeping arm of government) was authorized to spend \$7.1 million—\$1.83 million for the outgoing Clinton administration, \$4.27 million for the incoming George W. Bush administration, and an additional \$1 million for the GSA to provide additional assistance. Had there been a presidential transition in 2004–05, a total of \$7.7 million would have been authorized. Funds for the 2008–09 transition will be provided for in the president’s fiscal 2009 budget.

*Source:* Congressional Research Service.

## Worksheets

Properly position your presidency—creating a sort of personal political gyroscope—by completing these two short exercises. First, list the five reasons you think people voted for you (not merely what your pollster told you). Then list the five most important promises you made during the campaign. Don't include promises such as President Jimmy Carter's "I'll never lie to you."

If you think people voted for you because of your personal characteristics and to deny the Oval Office to your opponent or his party, then you have already accomplished these goals. But the other reasons you wrote down probably relate to fears and hopes at home and abroad. Refer to this list every December when you start to write your State of the Union address.

As for promises you made during the campaign, some will obviously have to be honored over time, but others should be ready for submission to Congress (or to be put into effect as executive orders) as soon as possible after the inauguration. Keep the list short and doable. You can name on the fingers of one hand the things Ronald Reagan said he wanted to do in January 1981. While you want to keep your promises, you may find that circumstances change and you have to adjust to new situations. Or you may learn things you didn't know, as happened with President Kennedy, who had spoken of a "missile gap"—a Soviet advantage in nuclear weapons capabilities that threatened U.S. security—during the 1960 campaign. Later evidence revealed the missile gap to be a myth.

If President-elect Bill Clinton had used these exercises in 1992, he might have avoided the rocky start of his administration when it got sidetracked by the "gays in the military" issue.

**Why Did the Voters Choose You?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

**What Promises Did You Make?**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

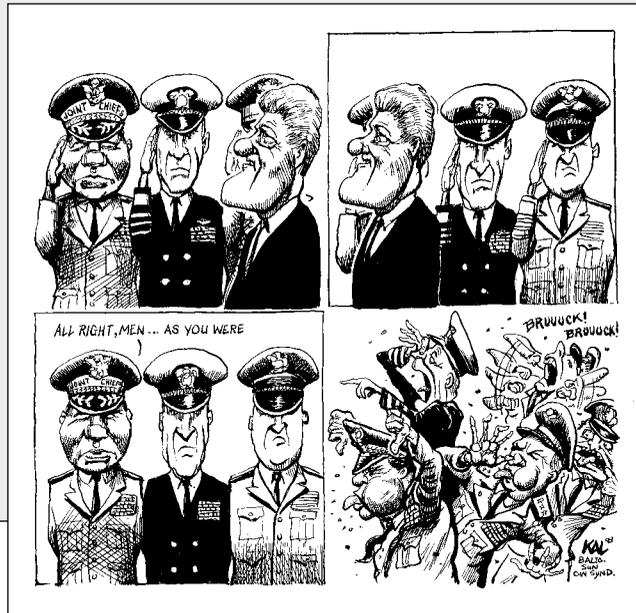
## Case in Point: Gays in the Military

Article 125 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice bans homosexual behavior in the armed forces. Bill Clinton pledged during the 1992 campaign to lift the ban unconditionally. In response to a question during a press conference on November 16, 1992, the president-elect declared, "I intend to press forward with that in an expeditious way early in the term." Although Clinton's campaign had been built on economic recovery, tax policy, budget cuts—"It's the economy, stupid!"—the first weeks of his presidency ended up being dominated by gays in the military.

The emotional nature of the issue caught the new president unprepared. Responses were instantaneous and explosive. In his memoirs, *My Life* (Knopf, 2004), Clinton described doing a Cleveland television interview "in which a man said he no longer supported me because I was spending all my time on gays in the military and Bosnia. . . . When he asked how much time I'd spent on gays in the military, and I told him just a few hours, he simply replied, 'I don't believe you.'"

General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the president's proposal "prejudicial to good order and discipline." Powell was supported by the chief of naval operations, the army chief, and the commandant of the Marine Corps, who, according to Clinton's memoir, "made it clear that if I ordered them to take action they'd do the best they could, although if called to testify before Congress they would have to state their views frankly."

Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee and the leading expert on the military in the Senate, force-



**"All right, men . . . as you were"**

Cartoon by Kevin "KAL" Kallaugher, *Baltimore Sun* ([www.kaltoons.com](http://www.kaltoons.com))

fully challenged Clinton. He was joined, in a moment of rare bipartisanship, by Senate minority leader Bob Dole (R-Kans.). The House of Representatives opposed Clinton by more than three to one.

A public opinion poll showed that lifting the ban was strongly approved by 16 percent of the electorate and strongly disapproved by 33 percent. Clinton noted, "It's hard to get politicians in swing districts to take a 17 percent deficit on any issue into an election." Activists confronted each other in Lafayette Park, across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, as they did in demonstrations and counterdemonstrations in Los Angeles, Seattle, Colorado Springs, and other cities.

Experienced presidents invent techniques to defuse potentially explosive issues—appoint a blue-ribbon commission, and set a deadline for action in the future. This is what General Powell had recommended in December 1992. Six months later, Clinton accepted a defense department proposal to create the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. But not before, in the opinion of transition scholars, he had hit the ground stumbling.

## **Presidential Commissions**

Creating presidential commissions involves choosing a distinguished chairperson and a representative panel and setting a deadline for future action. These presidents also used them to cool hot issues.

### **President Kennedy: Commission on the Status of Women, 1961**

Chaired by former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt

### **President Nixon: Commission on Campus Unrest, 1970**

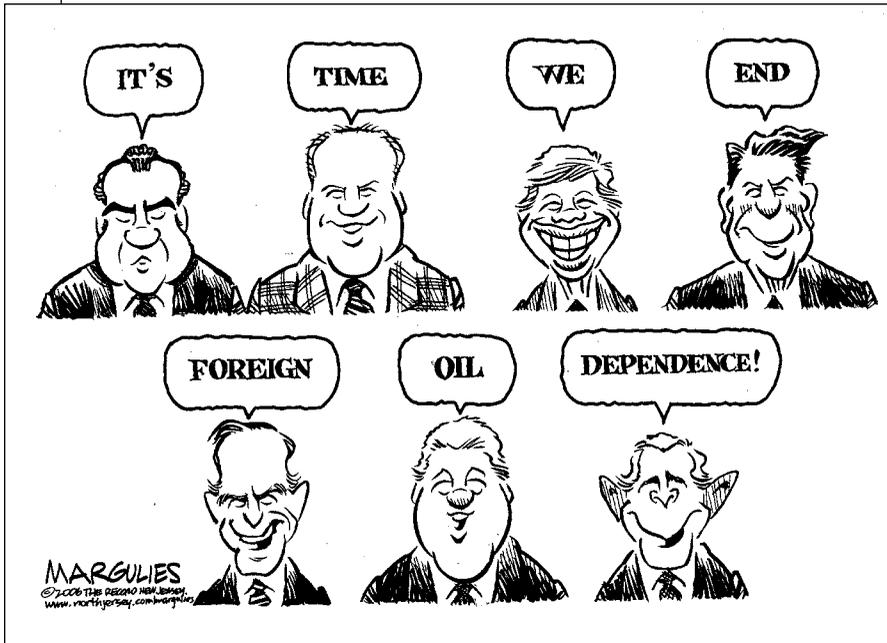
Chaired by William Scranton, former governor of Pennsylvania

### **President Ford: Commission on CIA Activities within the United States, 1975**

Chaired by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller

### **President Reagan: National Commission on Social Security Reform, 1983**

Chaired by Alan Greenspan, former chairman of President Ford's Council of Economic Advisers



**“It’s time we end foreign oil dependence!”**

Cartoon by Jimmy Margulies, ©2006, *The Record*, New Jersey

### **Extract from a Transition Memorandum**

Early in 1980, Republican National Chairman Bill Brock invited me to serve on a task force he created to prepare material to be presented to the party’s presidential nominee immediately after the national convention. My assignment was to help the candidate think about transition planning.

The next two chapters in this book will help you think about these questions as you begin assembling your White House staff and cabinet.

MEMO TO: THE PARTY'S NOMINEE  
FROM: STEPHEN HESS  
SUBJECT: TRANSITION PLANNING  
DATE: MAY 22, 1980

. . . In a sense, you are immediately faced with three-dimensional decision-making: there are people decisions, structure decisions, and policy decisions. If you decide first on a person, you may become locked into a structure and/or a policy. Presidents-elect always make people decisions first, then rue many of the consequences. . . .

Assuming that you will want to get on with appointments, as have your predecessors, are there not ways to group together the consideration of certain jobs so as to keep policy and structure in mind at the same time? For example, by concentrating first on the triangle of State-Defense-NSC [National Security Council]? This mode of arranging your decisions can help you think about what you want of each agency and what qualities you most desire in a secretary of state, a secretary of defense, and a national security assistant. The same principle would apply to thinking about key economics positions.

Other factors enter into the appointing process: Do you want to give your cabinet officers the authority to choose their own deputy/under/assistant secretaries? Are there any jobs that can be best filled by setting up search committees? How much conflict/consensus do you wish to build into your advisory system? What sort of commitments do you want to get from your appointees? When you do not have specific people in mind, what are the most useful questions to ask candidates for each top job? What positions do you wish to abolish? What precedents need to be considered, such as a western governor for secretary of the interior? What part do you want members of Congress and the National Committee to play in people decisions? How do you want to go about screening candidates for conflicts of interest and other disqualifying characteristics? There needs to be a strategy for the announcement of appointments.