The Bush Transition in Historical Context

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At one level, George W. Bush's transition to the presidency was unique and without much precedent as a guide. Unlike the situation facing his predecessors, Bush's "official" postelection transition did not begin until December 14, the day after Al Gore's concession speech. Roughly half the time of a "normal" transition had been lost as the controversy over the Florida vote dragged on.

The reality, of course, was that transition planning had been well underway in the Bush camp.[1] But here, too, modern presidential history presented no guide. Throughout the period from November 8 to December 13, Bush and his advisors faced the unique challenge of preparing for a new presidency but within their own context of an unsettled election outcome; the nearest historical reference was the far reach of the Hayes-Tilden contest in 1876.

That said, however, the Bush transition offers the best example to date of an effort that was aware of the experiences of its predecessors, recognized the value of the lessons to be learned, and generally was prepared to reap the positive benefits of its predecessors' experiences but avoid the pitfalls.

An Early Effort: Plus Trust and Discretion

As has been the case for all transitions since 1976, Bush began early to plan for his presidency, asking Clay Johnson, his gubernatorial chief of staff, to undertake the task in the spring of 1999.[2] That Bush and Johnson commenced transition planning more than a year-and-a-half before a possible inauguration marks the earliest effort to date.[3]

An early start was not the only key element. The selection of Johnson, a longtime friend and trusted associate, to lead the pre-election effort follows the pattern of more successful recent transitions. Like Ed Meese in 1980 and Chase Untermeyer in 1988, Johnson was a member of the president-elect's inner circle. His selection for the task was not likely to generate jealousy and in-fighting, and it did not. In 1976, by contrast, although Jack Watson had worked for Jimmy Carter in a number of capacities, he was only indirectly connected to the Carter inner circle and his efforts almost immediately generated tensions with the Carter campaign staff. So too with Bill Clinton's selection of Mickey Kantor in 1992. In both cases, conflicts would spill over into the postelection period, and in Carter's case even into his early administration.

Johnson, moreover, proceeded with discretion. There was little media attention about his work until shortly before election day. That, too, is in marked contrast to 1976 and 1992 when a number of stories appeared about Watson's and Kantor's pre-election efforts, much to consternation of the respective campaign operations.

A Unique Case: A Robust Mandate but without Contention

Johnson's close and direct connection to Bush would be of positive benefit in others ways. His mandate was fairly broad and encompassed not just organizing a personnel process (the focus of the pre-election planning in 1980 and 1988), but also involved such activities as discussions with Bush about a variety of matters, contacts with former transition and administration principals, and discussions (but not selection) of possible nominees to a variety of positions. That Johnson pulled it off with a minimum of tension and publicity suggests, first, that a more ambitious and successful pre-election operation is possible. It is the first such case: The 1980 and 1988 pre-election efforts were largely limited to setting up a personnel operation. The 1976 and 1992 efforts, which are generally regarded as less successful by comparison, were more ambitious in scope. Second, that Johnson was closely connected to Bush both as someone who knew him as an executive and decision maker *and* that he was trusted by others in the Bush inner circle and campaign may have generated a degree of trust, permitting a great deal of latitude and a more robust mandate than occurred in 1976 or in 1992.

Personal Connection and Early Decisions: A Chief of Staff before Election Day

Johnson's close connection to Bush also enabled him to press upon the then-

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The Inner Circle. Among the crucial decisions Bush made before Election day was the selection of his Chief of Staff, Andrew Card. AP Photo.

candidate the need to make several crucial decisions even before election day.[4] Most important among these was the early selection of a chief of staff. It was one of the most important lessons Johnson had learned about from past transitions.

For his part, George W. Bush was willing to put that lesson into practice. That Johnson had a close connection to Bush and knew his principal as a chief executive with a particular leadership and decision-making style enabled him to raise the issue early on and have a series of conversations about the position. The selection of Andrew Card as chief of staff was settled before election day.

Bush's own efforts here are also notable. Bush was very clear about what kind of chief of staff he wanted and it was his call that led to Andrew Card's selection as chief of staff. As Johnson observes:

> "[Bush] did not want someone to be chief of staff who was over-territorial, or was a control freak, or felt like they had to control the content or the recommendations that flowed to the president. He wanted somebody who was more a facilitator, an orchestrator, and a tie breaker; as they say an honest broker....The president's knowledge about the way he likes to work led him to choose Andy Card."[5]

Card's timely selection was especially consequential. As Johnson later recalled, "It was critically important that Andy Card had been asked and accepted and was on the ground prior to the election and beginning to have conversations with Governor Bush" (Johnson 2001).

Early Decision II: Transition Leadership

Another early decision that would bear later fruit was made right after the Republican convention: Vice President-Elect Cheney would serve as the transition's chairman presuming a Bush victory.[6] Both Card and Cheney came well equipped for the task at hand. Both had served in key White House positions, both had headed cabinet departments, and both had been in charge of outgoing transitions for the administrations in which they served (Cheney for Ford in 1976, Card for Bush Sr. in 1992). Clay Johnson's postelection appointment as executive director of the postelection transition rounded out the top team.[7] Their collective knowledge and experience surpassed their counterparts in earlier transitions: Jack Watson and Hamilton Jordan in 1976, Ed Meese in 1980, Robert Teeter and Craig Fuller in 1988, and Warren Christopher and Vernon Jordan in 1992.

Cheney's early selection, moreover, settled the issue of transition leadership, which is often left until after election day. Again, contrasts may be drawn with 1976 and 1992. Carter took almost two weeks to sort out the turmoil among his lieutenants until finalizing his transition's organization and division of responsibilities. For Clinton, it was more a matter of days before Christopher and Jordan (instead of Kantor) were tapped, but important decisions on transition organization lingered through the second week after his election.

Cheney's selection to lead the postelection effort and Johnson's assignment as executive director (with heavy responsibilities in the personnel area, among others) also avoided a problem that plagued the Clinton effort in 1992: transition principals who then become slated to head cabinet departments. Their counterparts in 1992, Warren Christopher and Richard Riley, were soon picked to head cabinet departments, drawing them away to a considerable extent from their transition assignments.

Early Work Bears Fruit: A White House Staff in Place

Florida notwithstanding, by January 2, Bush had finished up with the selection of his cabinet.[8] That date placed him only about a week behind Clinton's schedule in 1992. More notable in fact, the Bush team was actually well ahead of Clinton in naming the White House staff. In 1992, Clinton's press secretary, White House legal coun-

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sel, congressional liaison, and his domestic policy adviser were not announced until the last week before his inauguration.

All of these positions in the Bush White House were unveiled earlier, in some cases much earlier. While Card's selection as chief of staff had been settled two weeks before election day,[9] in 1992, Mac McLarty's appointment was delayed until December 12. Al Gonzales, the Bush White House counsel, and Karen Hughes, the communications director, were tapped on December 17, weeks before their Clinton counterparts. As Johnson would later recall, by the time of Gore's December 13 concession, "Andy Card had made, with the president's consent, almost all of the senior White House personnel decisions. It was decided who was going to go where" (Johnson 2001).

In so doing, the Bush transition followed one of the key lessons of prior transitions. Early staff appointments enable those selected not only to get a leg up on their own jobs, it also enables the transition to move on to other levels of staff positions. In Clinton's case, he and his advisers were essentially still stuck at the top layer of the White House a few days before he was sworn into office. By contrast, the seemingly truncated Bush transition had already moved on to second- and, in some cases, third-level White House positions.

Two of the positions that Bush filled early—White House legal counsel and the head of the White House Personnel Office (Al Gonzales and Clay Johnson respectively)—were especially critical because they are integral to the appointment and vetting process for all presidential appointees. Swift appointments in these two areas, moreover, may have been an important lesson from the Bush Sr. transition: In 1988, both positions were announced the day after the election.

Incorporating Strategic and Long-Range Planning

The appointments of Karl Rove as senior adviser to the president and Karen Hughes as counselor to the president may also have reflected some lessons learned from the Bush Sr. presidency; Rove and Hughes are longtime Bush aides. Both participants and observers of the Bush Sr. White House have noted that too much was delegated to the chief of staff alone and that Bush Sr.'s communications and political affairs units were poorly organized and utilized. Those errors were not repeated.

Rove's efforts also drew on the 1980 Reagan transition, particularly the work of David Gergen and Richard Wirthlin in developing a long-range strategic plan. According to one account, Rove was placed in charge of "drawing up a detailed action plan for the first 180 days of the Bush Administration. Rove's task: to take items in the agenda Bush campaigned on, turn them into pieces of actual legislation, and then choreograph their rollout for maximum political benefit" (Carney and Dickerson 2001).

Like the successful legislative strategy group that James Baker developed as chief of staff under Reagan, Rove and Card also created a number of White House staff groups designed to further the Bush policy agenda. One was an Office of Strategic Initiatives, under Rove's direction, designed to emphasize long range planning and provide input to meetings of senior White House aides. Other groups were created to deal with long-range scheduling, communications, and congressional liaison.[10]

Fostering Loyalty and Discipline

The transition also was a time to instill a particular "organizational culture" that Bush valued. This is particularly unique in the annals of transition; many have been times of disorder, of "arrogance and adrenaline" as Neustadt once put it. Even in the (arguably) successful 1980 Reagan transition, seeds were sown for discord down the line.

The Bush transition, at least as it and the subsequent administration have unfolded, appears different. According to one account, transition advisers "said Bush insists that loyalty can flower in an institution known for distractions and back-stabbing."[11] According to James Barnes of the *National Journal*, while "the Clinton White House was more of a coalition—with aides from all parts of the Democratic Party," the Bush White was more cohesive: "Because so many people on the Bush White House staff worked together either on the campaign or, even before that, in Austin, they've not only demonstrated their fidelity to Bush, they've operated as a team and formed bonds with each other, which may diminish prospects for internecine warfare." In Karl Rove's view, "Bush has tended to surround himself with people he's taken the measure of" (Barnes 2001).

The final days of the transition even saw what Clay Johnson termed "practicing to be in the White House," which Andrew Card had instigated: "The senior staff of the White House had begun to meet for the last 10 days to two weeks of the transition, twice a day, to get in the habit of meeting with each other, communicating with each other, and to begin to talk about the president's schedule as if we were in the White House."

In sum, in Johnson's view, "a lot of planning, a lot of focus, a lot of rigor and discipline. On the agenda, a commitment to do a few things very well, that was mark of the transition" (Johnson 2001).

A Cautionary Note

Although the Bush transition understood the lessons of past transitions, it also illustrates some of the limits of transition planning and what even a well-crafted transition can bring to a new presidency. In this respect, too, its experiences were somewhat unique and lacked an historical context upon which to draw. Unlike its predecessors, the new administration almost immediately confronted a number of challenges that either had not been anticipated or could not have been anticipated. Looming over all would be the economic downturn of 2001, which would put in jeopardy Bush's tax, budgetary, and policy agendas and force harder choices than had been expected or prepared for. The administration also faced an energy crisis in California that would force it, initially against its own wishes, to develop quickly a comprehensive program under Vice President Cheney's direction. It had to grapple with the moral (and political) complexities of stem cell research. The outgoing Clinton administration presented it with a variety of last minute executive orders and regulatory rulings, particularly in environmental policy, to which it needed to respond. Politics too intervened in a hard way with the defection of Senator Jim Jeffords from the GOP and the shift in the Senate to Democratic control. Political time had dealt the Bush presidency a new but less favorable political hand.

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Finally, the events of September 11, 2001, would shock and outrage a nation, presenting the Bush administration with the gravest challenge any modern president immediately and unexpectedly would face. It marked not a transition but a transformation—not just in this presidency but in the course of the national experience. While Bush and his associates may have drawn well on the lessons of past transitions in assuming office, "normal political time" offers only so much. What past historical context could now serve as a ready and reliable guide?

Notes

1. In fact, the Florida delay may have been positive for Bush in at least one respect: It enabled him and his advisers to plan for the transition without the media spotlight and other pressures that normally occur.
2. As I argue in my book on transitions, the Carter transition marks an important demarcation in the history of presidential transitions. For further discussion, as well as analysis of the transitions from Carter through Clinton, see Burke 2000.
3. Jimmy Carter began discussions with Jack Watson (who would head his pre-election effort) in April of 1976, with a major effort only after the Democratic convention that summer. Ed Meese began to have discussions with Pendleton James in late 1979, but the Reagan effort commenced in earnest only after he clinched the nomination during the spring primaries. George Bush Sr. had some preliminary discussion with Chase Untermeyer in December of 1987, but work did not begin until it was clear that Bush had won enough primaries.
4. That some organizational and personnel decisions are in the works before election day is not unusual. In 1980, there were clearly maneuverings in the Reagan camp to make James Baker rather than Ed Meese chief of staff. In 1988, George Bush Sr. had settled on the choice of Baker as secretary of state, had give some thought to positions Brent Scowcroft might fill, and was apparently close to closure on John Sununu's appointment as chief of staff. What is interesting about the Card selection is that it was a done deal before election day.
5. Clay Johnson, interview, 20 September 2001.
6. Ibid.
7. Cheney also enlisted the services of Fred Fielding, a transition veteran and President Reagan's first White House legal counsel, to serve as counsel for the transition's clearance process. According to Clay Johnson, "We were very knowledgeable once clearance became something we had to deal with because Fred was there and he was an invaluable resource and a big part of our transition operation." Clay Johnson, interview, 20 September 2001.
8. Linda Chavez's nomination for labor secretary was withdrawn on January 9 following revelations about her assistance to an illegal immigrant. She was quickly replaced by Elaine Chao on January 11. Although the episode indicated some weaknesses in the vetting process, the Bush transition dealt with the matter with more dispatch than had the Clinton transition with its attorney general nominees.
9. Clay Johnson, interview, 20 September 2001.
10. Dana Milbank, "Serious Strategery," *Washington Post*, 22 April 2001, sec. A.
11. Mike Allen, "A Team Built on Conservative Discipline," *Washington Post*, 3 January 2001, sec. A.

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