The Transition to Governing Project

by
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Our Transition to Governing Project is dedicated to understanding and improving the transition from campaigning to governing. Started in 1998, the project is an American Enterprise Institute project in conjunction with the Brookings Institution and the Hoover Institution funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Norman Ornstein, AEI, and Thomas Mann, Brookings, are codirectors, and John Fortier, AEI, manages the effort. The project has addressed the transition in three broad areas: (1) facilitation of the transition of a new administration into office; (2) scholarly analysis of the blurring of the lines between campaigning and governing, sometimes referred to as the "permanent campaign"; (3) improvement of the quality of the presidential campaign by focusing media attention on the governing qualities of the candidates. In addition, the project served as an umbrella for several other efforts such as the White House Interview Project, the *Nomination Forms Online* project, and the Governance Institute's Workways of Governance Project.

1. Facilitating the New Administration's Transition into Office

We knew in advance that the 2000 election would bring a significant presidential transition. For only the second time in 30 years there was no incumbent president running, and the electoral prospects for each party were good. Adding to that the very close margins in both houses of Congress and the closely divided Supreme Court, we knew that the aftermath of the election would be interesting. How interesting, we did not know! The open presidential contest meant two things. First, both parties' candidates would have to plan for transition and would welcome serious research on the subject. Second, both parties might be amenable to reforming the transition process, as either candidate might soon occupy the oval office.

On the first front, we provided information to the public, the media, and the candidates on the successes and failures of past transitions and lessons for the future. In particular, we gathered officials involved in the transitions of past administrations at a number of public conferences to address various aspects of transitions: planning for transition, the appointments process, the foreign policy transition, etc. Participants included Ed Meese, Mack McLarty, Jack Watson, Robert McFarlane, Reed Hundt, and Boyden Gray.

The project also worked with Richard Neustadt to publish a select collection of the memos with transition advice he had written to presidents and presidents-elect. The memos are written for Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton, as well as advice for the 2000 nominee. *Preparing to be President, The Memos of Richard E. Neustadt* (AEI-Brookings 2000) was edited by Charles O. Jones. Jones and Neustadt contributed new essays that survey the transition advice provided to presidents over the past 40 years and put the memos in larger context.

On the second front, we addressed various aspects of the transition process that needed reform, in particular the appointments process. Ornstein testified before both House and Senate committees on bills aimed at reforming the transition process. We also aided members of Congress and committee staff in drafting a bill, which ultimately became the Presidential Transition Act of 2000. The bill made a modest start at reform by providing that transition funds could be used for orientations for new political appointees and asking the Office of Government Ethics to examine the financial disclosure requirements for political appointees. As a result of the report, released last April, several additional bills will be introduced that simplify the reporting categories for appointees and streamline the process. Finally, we hosted several public events on conflict of interest regulations and streamlining the appointee forms, and we are in the midst of a project to catalogue the history of Senate "holds" on nominations and to provide recommendations for reform.

2. The Permanent Campaign and the Blurring of the Lines between Campaigning and Governing

The second major theme of the project is the permanent campaign. The past 30 years have seen a blurring of the lines between campaigning and governing. Techniques, institutions and personnel once associated with election campaigns

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are now part of the landscape of day-to-day governance. Pollsters are employed by presidents and parties to test support for legislative proposals. Outside groups coordinate media campaigns for or against pending legislation, often many months before an election. The presidency has developed its own set of institutions and practices such as war rooms, outreach offices, and "message of the day" in order to mount a constant campaign to maintain the president's standing. The media cover much of governing like a campaign horse race.

The project has concerns that the blurring of the lines between campaigning and governing may crowd out governing and focus political actors' attention wholly on reelection. But it also recognizes that our political landscape has changed and that we need to understand those changes. *The Permanent Campaign and Its Future* is the first scholarly attempt to understand the permanent campaign in a comprehensive fashion.

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3. Thinking about How Presidential Candidates Would Govern

Third, the project aims to improve the media coverage of presidential candidates by providing a greater focus on the governing qualities of the candidates. Traditionally, media coverage of the campaign focuses on three major areas: (1) the day-to-day horse-race coverage of the campaign, e.g., who's up or down in the polls and the travels and speeches of the candidates; (2) the issue positions of the candidates down to the most minute policy proposals; (3) the character background of the candidates, in particular the childhood, upbringing, and any scandalous past financial or personal behavior. Campaigns rarely cover perhaps the most important qualities of the candidates, those related to their governing capacities. Our major presidential candidates have had significant records of service in public office as governors, members of Congress, vice president, etc., but the media do not give as much attention as they should to candidates' records of public service. How did a candidate make decisions, set an agenda, deal with the media, work with members of his or her own party or the opposition party, deal with crises, and manage staff? If the public is looking for someone who can move beyond the campaign and turn to serious governing, the answers to these questions are important essential information for voter decision making.

To address these issues, the project hosted nine prominent, public events on the governing qualities of the major presidential candidates. We started in January 2000 with four events, one each on how Bradley, McCain, Gore, and Bush would govern. We gathered panels of six, which included two supporters—one colleague of each party—and two reporters—one with a Washington perspective and one from the home state. At each session, moderators E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* and the Brookings Institution and David Brooks of the *Weekly Standard* posed questions to the panelists. Panelists included Senator Chuck Hagel, Representative George Miller, Governor John Engler, former Senators David Durenberger, Bob Packwood, and Larrry Pressler, state legislators from Texas, and former staffers. In the summer, we hosted two events on how Bush and Gore would govern in foreign policy, with Gore foreign policy adviser Leon Fuerth and Bush advisers Richard Perle and Robert Zoellick. We hosted two more events, one at each convention with Nebraska governor Mike Johanns, former George Bush legal counsel Boyden Gray, Texas state senator Teel Bivins, Congressman Ed Markey, former ambassador and Senator Jim Sasser, former Governor Pete Wilson, and others. Finally, the Presidential Debate Commission asked us to host an event at the Kennedy Library in Boston as part of the education program the day before the first debate in Boston. Panelists included former representatives Vic Fazio and Jim Jones and Texas Secretary of State Elton Bomer.

What did we learn about Bush and Gore? The transcripts of each of the nine two-hour sessions are available at our website, <www.aei.org/governing>. We learned, among other things, that there are sharp differences in the candidates' attention to detail, management styles, areas of expertise, and approaches to dealing with Congress.

The events themselves, many of them covered by C-SPAN, provided valuable information for voters, as well as spurred members of the media to make their own independent investigations into the governing qualities of the candidates. The reporters who served on our panels and covered the events, wrote and broadcast stories along these lines. Among the most significant were lengthy pieces written two weeks before the election by John Harris (on Gore) and Dan Balz (on Bush) of the *Washington Post*.

The Transition to Governing Project tried to address the transition at several levels. One of the reasons it is so difficult to reduce transition advice to a few universal maxims is that a transition encompasses more than just what a new White House does between election day and inauguration day. It also involves the preparation, the early days of the administration, the political environment, the campaign, and the particular strengths and weaknesses of a new president. The activities of our project and the others, as well as the series of articles in this issue, will begin to put the 2000 transition in its proper context.

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