The 2008-2009 Presidential Transition Through the Voices of Its Participants

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When Barack Obama assumed the presidency on January 20, he had in place a White House decision-making system of his choice, a policy agenda in order and a plan of his priorities, and a personnel process well under way. Several factors contributed to the orderly transition into the presidency. First, Congress, the president, and the executive branch over the years had made decisions that affected the transition, especially in the national security area. Second, members of the incoming administration worked with records of White House office structures, administration operations, and personnel processes and with former government officials experienced in past transitions. Third, unprecedented early transition planning and actions by the George W. Bush administration led to a new level of cooperation between the outgoing and incoming administrations. Finally, the early attention of Senator and then President-Elect Barack Obama to the need for transition planning and his assignment of experienced and knowledgeable people to handle studies of White House staff structure, agency operations, policy development, and staff selection eased the move from campaigning to governing.

It was mid-morning at the White House on January 20, 2009. President and Mrs. George W. Bush were hosting the traditional pre-inauguration coffee in the Blue Room for President-Elect and Mrs. Barack Obama, as well as the Cheneys and the Bidens. Meanwhile, the chiefs of staff for the outgoing and incoming chief executives, Joshua Bolten and Rahm Emanuel, went over to the Situation Room in the West Wing, where they joined the national security teams for both administrations. They were alert to new developments in an unfolding security threat pegged to the inauguration, which would be witnessed by millions throughout the world. By this point, the principals of both national security teams knew one another from their group crisis training sessions and their one-on-one meetings that had begun before the election. And the Bush administration had prepared information for officials from the Obama team. "We talked about a

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: I thank Alexis Simendinger and John Kamensky for their corrections and helpful suggestions for improvements of the manuscript.

threat to the inauguration, which had just surfaced in the last 24 hours. And the FBI briefed the threat—the intelligence community briefed the threat, what we were doing about it, how credible we thought it was. . . . it involved an attack on the mall," said National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, who was in the room and involved in the response. The night before the inauguration, an FBI/Homeland Security bulletin issued to state and local law enforcement identified a possible threat to the event from al-Shabaab, a Somalia-based Islamist group with links to al Qaeda (Hsu 2009).[1]

Hadley recalled that the session that morning "went almost three hours [with] the incoming and outgoing core teams of the National Security Council . . . I was there, Condi [Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice] was there, [Secretary of Defense] Bob Gates was there, [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] Admiral Mullen was there, [Central Intelligence Agency Director] Mike Hayden was there, [Director of National Intelligence] Mike McConnell was there. . . . we had the Attorney General [Michael Mukasey] as well, and [FBI Director] Bob Mueller came for part of it. And we had [the] rough counterparts on the other side [officials named to those positions by President-Elect Obama]" (Hadley 2009).

Cabinet members and designees felt sufficiently comfortable with one another to discuss responses the incoming president could have. "Senator [Hillary] Clinton really showed . . . the sense of both a politician and also [was] able to see things from the president's perspective. And she asked the best question of the meeting, which was 'So what should Barack Obama do if he's in the middle of his inaugural address, and a bomb goes off way in the back of the crowd somewhere on the mall? What does he do? Is the Secret Service going to whisk him off the program—or the podium, so the American people see their incoming president disappear in the middle of the inaugural address? I don't think so.' " The threat discussion with all of the principal officials in the outgoing and incoming administrations allowed everyone to work through a potential crisis event on the first day for Barack Obama and the last one for George W. Bush. It also demonstrated how well people were able to work together. Joshua Bolten commented about the handling of the situation: "Rahm was well informed and he had informed Obama about what was going on. So at that moment I was proud of the way that we had managed to integrate the incoming folks into the management of a potential crisis" (Bolten 2009).

The crisis management operation that morning illustrates several aspects of the 2008-2009 transition that made the period a successful transfer of power. First, since 2001, Congress, the president, and the executive branch have made decisions that indirectly as well as directly had an impact on the transition, especially in the national security area. Second, members of the incoming administration worked with administration records of White House office structures, administration operations, and personnel processes and with former government officials experienced in past transitions. Together, the records and the people represent an institutional memory of what worked

1. On February 26, 2008, the State Department designated the organization as a terrorist group, noting that it "poses a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism that threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States" (*Federal Register* 2008).

in past transitions and what did not. Third, unprecedented early transition planning and actions by the George W. Bush administration led to a new level of cooperation between the outgoing and incoming administrations. Fourth, the move from campaigning to government was eased by the early attention by Senator and then President-Elect Barack Obama to the need for transition planning and his assignment of experienced and knowledgeable people to handle studies of White House staff structure, agency operations, policy development, and staff selection. All of these factors helped create an environment in which President Obama took the oath of office and entered the White House on January 20 with a decision-making system of his choice, policy initiatives ready to present to the public and to Congress, a sense of his priorities, and a personnel process under way. That is what a well-prepared transition can buy for an incoming president. It doesn't happen by chance; it requires solid preparation from the outgoing as well as the incoming administration to achieve a smooth handover of power, especially when there is a change of parties involved.

The focus of this article is the thoughts and reflections of those involved in the most recent presidential transition. The time period begins with the early stirrings of transition preparations in 2007 and continues up to the inauguration. Developed through interviews with those active in the transition, the piece describes the actions officials took and their thoughts about what happened during the pre-presidential period. I began the interviews in early January 2009 and continued them through June. Most of the major figures in the transition are on the record here. All of the quotes from officials and transition participants in this article come from interviews that I conducted with the quoted individuals, who are listed in the references with the dates when I interviewed them. All of the interviews took place in Washington, D.C. The ground rules for the interviews were that they were on the record with an option to put some information on background or off the record. No one put information on background, and only two people had any information of consequence that was off the record, most of which did not deal with the transition. The Bush White House officials interviewed who worked on the outgoing transition include Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten; Deputy Chief of Staff Joel Kaplan; National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley; Press Secretary Dana Perino; Counselor Ed Gillespie; Communications Director Kevin Sullivan; Deputy for Management of the Office of Management and Budget Clay Johnson; and Robert Shea, chief staff aide to Clay Johnson. The people I interviewed who worked for or in the transition operation of President Barack Obama include John Podesta, co-chair of the Obama transition; White House Cabinet Secretary Christopher Lu, executive director for the transition; Don Gips, White House personnel director and head of the agency review teams following the election; Press Secretary Robert Gibbs; Deputy Press Secretary Joshua Earnest; Communications Director Ellen Moran; Deputy Communications Director Dan Pfieffer; and Harrison Wellford, a former government official and Washington lawyer who worked on White House organization in an early transition initiative beginning in late spring that continued until the administration took office. Other transition participants whom I interviewed include William Ball, the representative of Senator John McCain's campaign who dealt with the White House and government agencies, and Gail Lovelace, transition director for the General Services Administration (GSA). Not all of those who were interviewed are quoted here, but they still proved important to the portrait of how transition operations worked.

Government Security Initiatives with an Impact on the Transition

One of the aspects that made the 2008-2009 transition such a well-thought-out one was the groundwork laid by government actions taken to enhance national security. Congress and the president viewed a smooth transition as a national security necessity, and both branches took action on issues related to getting a new administration up and running as soon as possible. The impetus for much of their preparatory work was the events of September 11, 2001. The attacks on the United States that day had a substantial impact on the shape of the 2008-2009 transition. In two particular subject areas discussed here, the recommendations of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission) shaped the course of the 2008-2009 presidential transition. Security clearances for administration nominees and contingency crisis plans are areas in which Congress and the administration took action. These two issues areas provide us with examples of the ways in which national security issues were important in guiding the presidential transition. There are other transition security issues as well, such as those concerned with ensuring a smooth first transition for the Department of Homeland Security, but our discussion is focused on the examples of security clearances and contingency plans.

The government adopted the 9/11 Commission recommendations to improve the national security clearance process and to gather and provide information on security threats. In recent transitions, security clearances have consistently been an issue because they represent a major pinch point in getting presidential appointees from announcement to confirmation. The appointment process itself is notoriously slow, with the result that it takes an extended number of months to get a new government up and running with a president's political employees in place. Effectively gathering and sharing security threat information was an important concern after the September 11 attacks, and a central feature of the 9/11 Commission report to Congress.

Revamping Security Clearances for Presidential Appointees

The 9/11 commissioners criticized the lack of a full complement of presidential appointees in national security positions at the time of the terrorist attacks. One of their recommendations to Congress and the president was to see future national security teams in place sooner than was the case in 2001.

> Since a catastrophic attack could occur with little or no notice, we should minimize as much as possible the disruption of national security policymaking during the change of administrations by accelerating the process for national security appointments. We think the process could be improved significantly so transitions can work more effectively and allow new officials to assume their new responsibilities as quickly as possible. (9/11 Commission Report, 422)

Congress and the president responded to the commission's recommendations for a smooth transition by providing in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 for changes in the security clearance process for nominees to executive branch positions. In the section on presidential transitions, the act calls for the president-elect to submit names for clearance as soon as possible after the election results are affirmed.

> The President-elect should submit to the Federal Bureau of Investigation or other appropriate agency and then, upon taking effect and designation, to the agency designated by the President under section 115(b) of the National Intelligence-Reform Act of 2004, the names of candidates for high level national security positions through the level of undersecretary of cabinet departments as soon as possible after the date of the general elections held to determine the electors of President and Vice President under section 1 or 2 of title 3, United States Code. (Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, Sec. 7601 Presidential Transition, [f][1])

At the same time, the act provides that the two major party candidates can begin setting up their organizations for the transition by submitting names for national security clearance prior to election day. "Each major party candidate for President may submit, before the date of the general election, requests for security clearances for prospective transition team members who will have a need for access to classified information to carry out their responsibilities as members of the President elect's transition team" (Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 [c][2]). This section of the act was a potentially useful tool for the presidential candidates. They could submit names to the FBI for security clearances so that the eventual victor could be prepared for national security events on election day and following the election.

The White House was particularly interested in having the transition teams for the presidential candidates make effective use of the new legal provision allowing the candidates to clear their names early. Joshua Bolten talked about his discussions with representatives of the candidates. "I thought the most important thing for them to focus on was the personnel side and that they really needed to get that going early; that we were there, ready to use the authorities from the legislation to get them clearances and that we wanted to put in place a mechanism that would permit them, without fear of compromise either on the general issue of being presumptive and sort of arrogantly starting to name people, or on just the specific side of names getting out." The question for Bolten was how to create a way for the transition teams to submit names without leaks to reporters and others. "We were keen to put in place a mechanism and a commitment that they would face no risk from us, the White House, in pushing that process forward. Both sides were, I thought, naturally reticent about taking a political ding for naming people too early and I think the Obama people might have been nervous that if they gave us names that we would leak the names. But we were able to assure them that we were not going to make the situation any worse for them."

The Obama transition team began submitting names in the summer of 2008 after they met with Justice Department officials in a joint discussion with Republican presidential nominee Senator McCain's representative to discuss transition resources. Chris Lu, executive director of the Obama transition, described the Bush administration's effort to implement the clear-early provision in the 2004 act. "One of the things we had to do was get security clearances for our folks, because there was a whole group of people who would need access to classified information . . . on November 5th. . . . They said first, 'Shoot for maybe submitting a hundred people's names for clearances, for interim clearances.' . . . We probably submitted about 150, 200 [names]. We submitted well more than a hundred."

The Obama transition operation made early use of the law's new allowance section and submitted the names of people they wanted in their administration. There was no requirement in the law or by the agencies performing the clearances that those submitting the names stipulate the positions to be held along with the identity of people the presidential candidate wanted to serve in his administration. In early December, David Shedd, deputy director of national intelligence for policy, reported to attendees at a meeting of President Bush's Transition Coordinating Council that President-Elect Obama received the President's Daily Brief from the Bush intelligence community, as had Rahm Emanuel, his designated White House chief of staff. "Not a single daily briefing has been missed," Shedd reported (author's notes, Transition Coordinating Council meeting, December 4, 2009).[2] Emanuel could only have participated with an FBI security clearance.

Should Senator McCain have been elected in November, the situation would have been different because of a decision that he made. The McCain transition team would have had no one cleared to work on information requiring a national security clearance unless they had come to work for McCain with a current, preexisting clearance. Will Ball, Senator McCain's representative who met with Bush administration officials and served on the transition board, said that they did not submit any names to the FBI for review during the transition period. "We met with the Justice Department, FBI, and IRS representatives about the process, but we did not turn names in to initiate the process. We had lists of names compiled internally for Senator McCain, but he did not wish at that point to turn names in to begin the clearance process on any individual." Discussed later in the article, in part McCain feared appearing presumptuous if names submitted to the FBI prior to November 5 leaked to the press.

Further Streamlining the Nomination Process

The Bush administration tried to reduce the time needed to perform a national security investigation in advance of the transition period. Clay Johnson, the deputy for management at the Office of Management and Budget, used several approaches to reach the goal of getting presidential appointees requiring Senate confirmation (PAS) into office

2. In Executive Order 13476, "Facilitation of a Presidential Transition" (October 9, 2008), President Bush established the Transition Coordinating Council "to assist and support the transition efforts of the transition teams for the 'major party' candidates." The order provided that outside groups and individuals could be consulted on transition issues and brought into council meetings if the director of the group chose to do so. Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten, who chaired the group, invited a half dozen transition experts to several of those meetings. I attended the fourth and fifth sessions as an observer. I was invited in my role as director of the White House Transition Project (http://www.whitehousetransitionproject.org).

earlier than was true in 2000-2001. Johnson said his focus was twofold: "Expand the capacity to do the work and shorten the process, the elapsed time."

There were three ways the Bush administration sought to increase capacity. First, require the FBI, the agency conducting many of the national security clearance investigations, to reduce the amount of time it takes to conduct an investigation and, second, have the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) do investigations as well. Johnson explained how the government determines how many clearances need to be done and then asks the FBI to figure out what resources it needs to reach that goal: "You go to the FBI and you say you need to figure out what sort of staff you need to be able to do this in 30 days, maximum. It used to take 60 days on average, including filling out the paperwork for the applicant. Sixty days average is not satisfactory. We expect 30 days maximum. So the FBI goes back and they have to figure out how many extra agents to hire and how to change their processes and so forth. So they were charged to go do that." In addition to increasing the funding for the FBI to hire a sufficient number of agents or personnel to conduct the investigations, Johnson also recommended using other agencies to do investigations, especially the Office of Personnel Management. "We looked at alternative organizations to do the investigations. We determined that it is conceivable that if the new administration wanted to . . . with no real impact on quality of the investigation, [to ask] OPM to do a lot of these investigations," Johnson said.

Third, the Bush White House took an additional step to get needed presidential appointees in place early in an administration. Their effort was aimed at reducing the number of presidential appointee positions requiring Senate confirmation. The effort failed. The idea was to reduce non-policy-making positions requiring Senate confirmation from PAS (presidential appointee Senate confirmed) to PA, presidential appointments not requiring consultation with Congress. With Clay Johnson leading the internal effort to streamline the process in 2001, White House officials came up with a list of positions that the Bush administration believed could be dropped from the list of approximately 1,200 Senate-confirmed ones. "The actual letter we ended up sending to the Congress, and I think it was over 100, maybe 140 or 150 positions that weren't policy positions, they weren't high level operational positions, they were support positions," explained Johnson. "Leg [legislative] affairs, government affairs, public affairs, intergovernmental affairs. . . . We recommended all the general counsels, all the CFOs, those kind of positions."

If the designated positions were converted to presidential appointees without Senate confirmation, the officeholders, Johnson observed, "would still be presidential appointed positions and they could still testify." The group also included part-time board and commission positions that are Senate confirmed. "Some of them are important, like the Broadcasting Board of Governors and some of these things can be sensitive, but others . . . there's no apparent reason why they we need to be Senate confirmed." The idea was not to change the posts, but rather, "it just streamlines the process a little." The response of the Senate leadership was not positive. "They looked at it and they disagreed with our definition of what was critical or not. They came back and had whittled the list down to eight positions. . . . we got the message that they weren't interested and said thank you." In preparation for the 2008 transition, White House officials tried to rekindle the discussion with Congress and thought about "going back up with such a list, but nothing ever became of it," Johnson said.

Joel Kaplan, deputy chief of staff under Joshua Bolten, viewed the effort as "a bit of tilting of windmills . . . To me that falls into the category of good government that is probably not worth spending a lot of high level time on it because it is unlikely to happen. I did not use up a whole lot of my time and effort. I had been through a similar effort early in the administration. . . . Congress just does not like getting rid of PAS positions." Johnson said that the "issue is not whether they need to confirm somebody or not to ensure that America is having the best and the brightest in these positions. That's not the thing that drives their thinking." Senators of both parties are interested in having leverage with administration officials. "Every appointee is a bargaining chip. . . . the more power and leverage they have over an administration the more they like it. Remove the number of leverage points, the number of Senate confirm positions . . . it removes some power from them."

Senators want the lower-level positions to retain their PAS status, as lower-level positions are more realistic bargaining chips than are cabinet secretaries. "They wouldn't dare try to bargain with somebody who is going to be Secretary of Education. . . . because that's high profile. They would rather do their bargaining with some lower profile people because it's sort of a nuisance and you try to get rid of the nuisance." Johnson's chief staff aide, Robert Shea, pointed out that political appointees who have managed to get through the confirmation process enjoy the added legitimacy that Senate confirmation provides them and are just as reluctant as senators to see positions converted to PA ones.

Creating and Sharing Contingency Plans

The second area of recommendations that became an important part of the 2008-2009 transition was the 9/11 Commission recommendation calling for an administration to provide national security threat information to the incoming team as soon as possible after the election. "The outgoing administration should provide the president-elect, as soon as possible after election day, with a classified, compartmented list that catalogues specific, operational threats to national security; major military or covert operations; and pending decisions on the possible use of force" (9/11 Commission Report, 422-23). There were a variety of ways in which the Bush administration provided information on national security issues, including one-on-one meetings of the incoming and outgoing cabinet officers and agency heads, like the one on inauguration day, and contingency plans dealing with national security threats.

National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley reported to Bush's Transition Coordinating Council (TCC) on December 4, 2008, that the core national security teams for the president and the president-elect had met and discussed the review under way of the administration's Afghanistan operations as well as the operational aspects of the war on terror (author's notes). President Bush was involved in preparing a series of memoranda for the record on 40 issues, a project discussed later in the article. Hadley prepared a series of 17 contingency plans. "If the worst happens, here are some responses," he told the TCC members in early December about the project. While the contingency plans were an ongoing operation, Joshua Bolten commented that "we put a lot of effort in towards the end of the administration into making sure that those [were] updated, in place . . . ready to hand over in good shape. . . . Our impending departure . . . really helped focus our minds on making sure those things were right before we left."

The contingency plans were created by a separate group than those in the National Security Council (NSC) who were working on the 40 issue memoranda. The work was done in the National Security Council's Office for Strategic Plans and Institutional Reform. Hadley explained the development of the group and its work. The group gathered information from across the administration about possible crises that might arise. "And they in turn started to work with the policy planning people at Treasury, State, and DOD, to start addressing issues . . . three to five years out. And we asked them to develop a list of contingency plans, things that might happen. We started this in 2007, for our own purposes. But I also thought it was going to be useful, something to give to the transition team." The individual plans were developed through an administration-wide search for information. "We tasked these papers out, some of them to the intelligence community through the NIC (National Intelligence Council), some of them individual agencies, some this little group did by itself, some the NSC did." When he was talking to the Obama transition people, Hadley told them, "It's just a starting point for your own thinking if this happens, particularly early on your watch." General James Jones, President Obama's national security advisor, indicated that he wanted them, so the Bush White House provided them (Hadley 2009).

Developing Crisis Training

Crisis management was an important part of President Bush's transition out of office. When the transition team began working on the transition in early 2008, Chief of Staff Bolten worked with Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin, who specialized in White House operations. "Joe and I started conversations probably in early 2008, maybe even before that for serious planning. . . . We wanted to be sure that each of the operating units was leaving behind a good record of how they did business, and that required a fair amount of lead time," said Bolten.

"Joe was especially focused on the security aspects and on emergency procedures. That really is one of the tough spots in all of these things in preparing for a crisis. It's very hard to get people who have more than full plates on a daily basis to focus on an event . . . everybody either thinks or hopes won't happen. To get them to spend time preparing for that is hard." Hagin worked on emergency planning until he left the White House on July 23. "Joe spent a lot of time trying to make sure that . . . before we left . . . we had in place the best possible emergency procedures and that we had mechanisms to make sure that incoming people were trained and that there would be continuity between the administrations. He worked a lot with the military office as well as on the infrastructure, the physical and technological infrastructure that goes with responding to an emergency."

Hagin's emergency plans later led to a crisis training event held on the White House grounds on January 13, 2009. The Obama and Bush White House and national security teams worked together on a manufactured crisis scenario involving improvised explosive devices in several cities (Ward 2009). It was an opportunity for the incoming and outgoing officials to sit next to one another and think through possible crisis responses. "Part of it [the crisis exercise] is . . . sobering to the incoming team and it tells them here is a bunch of stuff I need to learn about quickly and be ready for . . . on day one, which is something I think was not the case in the mind's of either the outgoing or incoming administration in 2001. . . . I think everybody from both sides appreciated the importance of getting it right," Joel Kaplan commented.

The Bush team valued crisis training because they knew from their experiences in 2001 and during Hurricane Katrina how difficult it can be for personnel across the government to work together in situations where they do not know one another. In his role at the Office of Management and Budget, Clay Johnson was involved in the development of training for crisis management. The idea for such a plan came from what they had learned during Hurricane Katrina about the operation of the government in crisis. You need to have a history with people in other agencies; otherwise, it is difficult to make the initial contacts work if they get together for the first time in a crisis. Johnson observed that the need to have regular contacts among those in departments and agencies across the government arises from the fact that "we do way more things that are government-wide now than we did 10 years ago. . . . So one of the things that came out of Katrina was an initiative to train our people, orient and train and groom people . . . such that they are used to working with their counterparts in other agencies." This is important in settings in which conditions are not optimal for decision making, such as situations "where they never have enough information about what's going on, where there's no clear recipe for success."

Adding to Transition Difficulties

While security needs advanced the presidential transition time clock, there were areas in which security needs made the move into the White House more difficult than it had been in previous years. First among them was the transfer of the personnel selection process from transition headquarters to the White House. John Podesta, who directed the Obama transition based in Washington and was its public as well as behind-the-scenes face, said building a government was a challenge: "The one thing that I think that we didn't account for was the inability of the personnel system, in essence, to function on January 21st. . . . it wasn't like we didn't think about it. We had planned for it. It just proved to be the most difficult piece to transition." There were difficulties because of security concerns relating to integrating data into the White House system. With thousands of résumés and information on positions and people, there was an enormous amount of data to put into the White House system at the same time.

Don Gips, Obama's director of the Office of Presidential Personnel, described the situation as he and his staff came into the White House on January 20: "We were flying blind for about a week or two, . . . at least once we got it fixed, we were up and operational." They had not anticipated the White House security needs related to the input of computer data. "They then need to go through the database to make sure nothing was going to cause the White House system to go down. So it's just a regular certification process for [data] that enters the White House. And we were bringing a lot of data over from the transition," said Gips. "There was just no way around it." Podesta thought the answer would have been to have a two-track operation going for the first couple of weeks. "The one thing I would have done differently is I would have kept the transition personnel process rolling for two or three weeks, while the people got into the White House, got the systems up, imported the data. . . . There was probably a two or three week period where we stopped, and they hadn't really quite started, which was different in personnel than it was in the policy part." The Obama transition operation could have kept an operation going outside of the White House for personnel until those inside the building caught up with the White House computer system.

The Importance of Institutional Memory in the Transition

The institutional memory available to presidential candidates and their staffs has grown broader and deeper. There are now four main sources of information for them to tap in shaping how they will handle their transitions to govern should they win the presidential election. First, there is a great deal of information available through published government sources and online. In 2000-2001, departments and agencies did not use Web sites as informational tools in the way they did eight years later. In the 2008-2009 transition, staff for the two presidential candidates did not need to wait for the White House to provide them with significant information about what government agencies are doing and to get some assessments of their performance. There is valuable public information they can access online. In addition, there is a growing body of scholarly literature on presidential transitions that transition teams can tap for what works and what does not.[3] New White House staff and administration officials repeatedly cite transition postmortems as helpful to their understandings of their jobs, offices, and preparations to govern.

The second source of institutional memory is the written record that former transition teams and current White Houses officials pass on to aides to the president-elect. Those include the files from previous transitions, the writings of personnel involved in transitions, and the information gathered by a sitting administration describing its operations. The third source of institutional memory is the first-person record a president-elect and his staff can draw on. One of the most important troves of information are the individuals who have taken part in earlier transitions and, in many cases, those

3. As the director of the White House Transition Project, a group of two dozen political science presidency scholars preparing information about presidential transitions and White House operations, I gathered and gave to each of the transition teams 32 published books relating to transitions and White House operations (see http://www.whitehousetransitionproject.org). In June, I delivered them to Harrison Wellford to use in his work on White House staff structure and to give to the Obama transition team, and in August, I gave the materials to Will Ball, who served on the transition board of the John McCain operation and was preparing information for his team on past transitions.

who held key offices. These individuals form the institutional memory for presidential candidates as they think about moving out of a campaign into governance. The fourth type of institutional memory in the 2008-2009 transition was the memoranda prepared by Bush administration officials on foreign and national security policy and domestic policy issues. Stephen Hadley oversaw the preparation of 40 memoranda on issues important in the national security and foreign policy areas, while Deputy Chief of Staff Joel Kaplan prepared memoranda for issues in the domestic policy area.

Available Public Information

As part of their preparation for office, transition staff in 2008 and 2009 had available to them a great deal of information about the operation of the agencies, including budget and performance information. "We've made it a requirement that every agency's home page have a section, and I think everybody but Defense and Homeland Security, which are two big departments, have done this, where there's a link on the home page that says something to the effect of Department of Agriculture performance and budget . . . here's how all the programs work. Here's where all the IG [inspector general] reports are and so forth," said Johnson.

Additionally, transition team members can now visit watchdog Web sites that track the performance of government agencies as well as congressional Web sites that include hearings, legislation, and reports. The Congressional Research Service and the Government Accountability Office both publish individual assessments of government performance and information about presidential transitions that are important sources of information as candidates task staff to gather information about the presidential transition ahead of them. Academic and other online sites provide easy access to presidential speeches, statements and announcements, and official actions, such as those found at http://www.americanpresidency.org. There are other groups that monitor government actions and agencies, such as OMB Watch (http://www.ombwatch.org).

Information about past transitions persuaded the Obama team to put a White House staff together before the cabinet. Starting around May 2008, Chris Lu, Senator Obama's legislative director in his Senate office and early point man for the transition, gathered information as his first step in preparing for a transition into the presidency. "One of the things I did early on was basically read everything I could possibly find about transitions." His reading of the transition literature led him to the conclusion that the sequencing of personnel decisions is very important. "The one thing you learn is that the Clinton folks probably made a mistake in choosing their cabinet first and then the White House staff. If you go back to those articles, some of their White House staff didn't get chosen until right before inauguration day. . . . We were very conscious of that. We needed to have a White House staff in place early so . . . we had our senior White House staff pretty much filled out by Christmas."

Former Secretary of the Navy William Ball is the person who was responsible for gathering information for Senator McCain's transition operation. "I tried to spend some time studying each transition. . . . by the time we got started, it was a given that you had to start these things early, and that the identification—that the organizational effort had to start earlier than before, because of not only the national security situation, but as we learned in October, the economic situation." As a result of what they learned from past transitions, the McCain operation placed its emphasis on selecting personnel to staff an administration should McCain win and on a budget to submit in early February.

Records from Earlier Transitions

The Democrats have gradually built an institutional memory that proved helpful to the Obama transition. Chris Lu, executive director of the Obama transition, explained the importance of the work done by earlier candidates and their transition staff. Jim Johnson, who handled the projected transition for Senator John Kerry, provided Lu with the information the Kerry people gathered in 2004. One of the areas in which Johnson's documents were useful was the information they had on transition finances. Alexis Herman, who served as a co-chair of the John Kerry transition effort in 2004 and worked on transition planning for Al Gore in 2000, included a breakdown of how they would spend the government transition funds and how much money they needed to raise to augment the public money. "You get about $5 million in federal funding and we ended up raising probably another 4 or 5 million [dollars] on top of that. . . . You have no idea how many people you need to hire, how expensive it is. . . . But they [the Kerry transition team] had done such a detailed budget in 2004 down to . . . you need this many people to staff the call center, this many people to do document retention. . . . We basically took their budget, updated the numbers, tweaked it a little bit, and that was our draft budget . . . On things like that, there's no sense in reinventing the wheel."

Chris Lu found the written transition record he inherited from Jim Johnson and the Kerry team to be helpful to the Obama transition operations as well as governing. Lu also found that discussions with his predecessors and their office practices to be important for how he now runs his White House Cabinet Affairs Office. Having canvassed several people who once held his position as White House cabinet secretary, Lu and the Obama team "took from the best practices of the Clinton administration and blended some of the best practices of the Bush administration . . . The Bush administration gave us a lot of . . . helpful suggestions that we incorporated." From the Clinton administration, they learned the importance of the status of the White House cabinet secretary. In the Clinton years, the position was classified as an assistant to the president, the highest White House rank, while it was downgraded later in the Bush years.

There were people associated with the Obama transition effort who worked on several Democratic presidential transitions. Harrison Wellford was one of them. He worked on the Carter transitions in and out of the White House and prepared transition information for presidential candidates Bill Clinton and John Kerry. Lu said of Wellford, "Harrison is one of these people with such incredible institutional memory about transition, so he was a invaluable asset." Wellford was involved in early discussions with the General Services Administration. "And then Harrison did a lot of outside consulting with John Podesta on a variety of issues," said Lu. Working with fellow lawyer Tom Shakow, Wellford worked on White House–related issues and general transition ones.

Predecessors as an Information Source

The Bush national security team met with principals as the inauguration loomed. Hadley recounted, "We agreed we would try to have the new team have some face to face conversations to talk about the key issues that were transitioning, and that came about. Condi had a dinner at the State Department 10 days, maybe two weeks before the inauguration, where Jim Jones and Hillary Clinton, and Tom Donilon [Obama's incoming deputy director of the NSC] were on one side, and Condi, and I, and she had someone from State [were] on the other. . . . And we went over in detail North Korea, and Middle East peace." Hadley thought the dinner session with the national security team was helpful to the incoming administration team members. "And it was very useful because it actually was the night before, or two nights before Senator Clinton [Obama's nominee to be secretary of state] . . . had her confirmation hearing, and . . . she really clearly drew on that with respect to North Korea, maybe the Middle East as well . . . It gave them, again, a starting point on where we were."

Some Bush White House officials believed their successors needed only a limited amount of information from them because they thought the work they had been doing on the campaign and transition was similar to what they would be doing when Obama came into office. President Bush's press secretary, Dana Perino, talked to her successor, Robert Gibbs, about press operations before January 20. "He didn't really need a lot of advice from me. I think that they've seen how the media has operated. . . . the same outlets covering us have been covering them in the campaign." Perino gave Gibbs a sense of the resonance of the presidential spokesperson's words. "I did tell him about how the worldwide audience is listening, . . . And sometimes it's hard to remember that your audience is bigger than the 40-odd people [who] sit in the briefing room. You're taking their questions, but what you say matters to the whole world."

Will Ball gathered information for the McCain transition about past transitions from published sources and from speaking with people knowledgeable about transition patterns. An institutional memory was important for Senator McCain's operation, but it did not focus solely on the written record or the information developed by the Bush White House. The McCain team relied heavily on the experiences of one primary person: William Timmons. Timmons was a White House veteran who had worked in the Nixon and Ford administrations in congressional relations and had worked on the transitions of those two chief executives and Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush. Timmons was one of six people forming "the board" of the McCain transition operation. Fellow board member Will Ball recalled, "Bill Timmons had been through all these transitions and he brought a very fine-tooth-detailed comb, sort of detailed focus on budget—transition budgets, and transition people, and transition procedures." Ball heard anecdotes about Timmons's long track record with Republican administrations: "At Senator Warner's retirement party, John Warner said, 'You know, in 1968, I was involved in the Nixon transition, and my boss was Bill Timmons,' " Ball said.

Memoranda on National Security and Domestic Issues

One of the efforts by members of President Bush's White House staff to create a record of their work was related to the contingency plans. There were two types of memoranda on issues the Bush administration had dealt with during their eight years: national security and foreign policy, and domestic policy. Under Steve Hadley's guidance, the NSC prepared 40 memoranda on a variety of issues. The issues were chosen by the senior directors of the NSC. Hadley explained how he constructed the foreign policy and national security memoranda. "They were both country focused, and they were also functionally focused, so China policy, Iraq policy, Afghanistan policy, Pakistan policy, our policy with respect to Iran, all the big issues. . . . And similarly we would have the war on terror, proliferation. We would go through and have trade issues, Doha [Doha Development Round of World Trade Organization negotiations] issues. So it was both issues driven by our relations with particular countries, but also the functional issues that we were dealing with, that cut across substantive areas. There were a number of them on the defense directorate, [such as] what did we do about cyber security, for example?"

The process of writing the memoranda began in February 2008 and continued through most of the year. Hadley described what he said to General Jones and Tom Donilon: "The first section will be what we found, what our strategy was, what we think we accomplished, and what was left to do, what was going to hit the new team early on. And then we supported that with tabs, where we had all the relevant policy documents, notes of NSC meetings or principals' meetings, or in some sense deputies' meetings, where major policy decisions were made, the key presidential speeches, or my speeches, or Condi's speeches; 'memcons' of meetings the president had, and the telephone calls the president had, which we actually pulled out of the set, in terms of the actual transcripts, but the index showed what they were. And I said to the new team, 'If you decide you need any of these, call us, and we'll get you a copy.' And they have, and we have." In a discussion of the memoranda at the fourth session of the Bush Transition Coordinating Council, Hadley said the president read and edited them (author's notes). Bolten discussed President Bush's interest in the memos. "Especially on the national security side, the president read a lot of those and made his own comments . . . because he wanted to see them. He was interested in something of a recap on his way out the door."

Deputy Chief of Staff Joel Kaplan was responsible for assembling domestic policy memoranda. The goal of the domestic memoranda was different than for foreign policy, primarily because domestic policy is transparently in public view. "In the foreign policy area you expect . . . that a lot of issues are just mid-stream. And the history of the issues and . . . how you engaged with allies or non-allies is important background for the incoming NSC team and the [new] administration and the State Department and Department of Defense." In the domestic policy area, much of the information is already in the public arena. "A lot of those memos would be stuff like [background about the] No Child Left Behind [the 2001 law] or what we did on Social Security or what we did on Medicare, which the incoming Obama administration already had positions on that tended to be adverse to ours," he said.

Kaplan described their instructions to agency heads. "What we asked them to do is 'pick out . . . the critical issues that are going to come across the secretary's desk, or should come across the secretary's desk.' . . . so [the Obama team could] make sure that in the first 90 days that this does not catch you by surprise," Kaplan said. "Rather than sending them 40 different issue papers on things that they would not be interested in . . . and would disagree anyway, what we thought would be most helpful to them would be 'here are the things where you are going to have to do something.' It might be because of litigation. It might be because of a statutory deadline that is occurring. It might be because it is just in flux, like student loans."

Unprecedented Early Transition Planning by President Bush and His Administration

While most incumbent presidents turn to transition preparations in the final months of their administrations, President Bush began more than a year ahead of time. That early start gave the administration the opportunity to communicate with representatives of the presidential campaigns after the primary season was at a close and well before the election. Beginning in the spring, the Bush team worked within the administration directing preparations of executive branch agencies and disciplining the process of issuing "midnight" regulations. Within the White House, the Bush personnel staff catalogued key administration positions. After the conclusion of the primaries, the General Services Administration began planning with representatives of the two presidential candidates for the creation of transition office space. The campaign transition representatives also worked with White House officials on developing the memorandum of understanding, the document signed by representatives of the outgoing and incoming administrations that sets transition ground rules. In this section, we will look at these preparations and their importance to the transition to govern.

Creating a Disciplined Process from the Top

One of the elements crucial to the success of the 2008-2009 transition was the unprecedented effort by President Bush and his administration to take steps to bring about a smooth transition to power for whomever won the presidential election. John Podesta commented on the cooperation the Obama transition operation received from Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten and the administration. "I think we had a very good professional interaction. I think that was empowered by the President [Bush]. . . . I think it would have been Josh's [inclination] anyway, but I think Bush was mindful of what was going on and . . . said . . . 'make this thing work right.' It gave us the opportunity to create the dialogue that went back and forth." The early discussions among transition representatives on both teams went beyond anything the White House, departments, and agencies had done as a group.

In past transitions, outgoing two-term presidents thought about their obligations in the final months of their administrations. President George W. Bush departed from his predecessors with his early concern and his instructions to his chief of staff to prepare for a smooth transition. Joshua Bolten discussed the mandate he received about the transition from President Bush in 2007. "I don't recall him talking about the transition until about a year before the end of the administration. And he and I, and I don't have a specific date, had a conversation probably in late 2007, in which he said that he wanted to make sure that his transition was the best; that he recognized that regardless of who won the election, we were still going to be in a situation where the country was under threat. And he basically said 'go all-out to make sure that the transition is as effective as it possibly can be, especially in the national security area.'" When asked how President Bush planned on bringing about the goal of the best transition, Bolten replied, "It was up to me. It was not a detailed conversation. It was explicit but not a detailed conversation, which is the way he operated; I set the direction, I set the principles." President Bush told him, "You go work on it and when you get issues that require my attention, bring them back."

With Bolten responsible for the planning, individuals and agencies took their cues from him. Bolten began early to set the stage for a solid handover on January 20. He set the dimensions of the transition out of office, assigning specific transition responsibilities to White House and administration officials, issuing orders to administrative agencies, working with administration figures on priorities and timetables, working on national security and domestic policy issue information in preparation for the transition, providing for a smooth personnel process, and meeting with representatives of the Obama and McCain transition teams. All of these actions required coordination of officials and institutions throughout the executive branch. Candidate representatives met with government officials. Everything was on a timetable geared toward getting the transition teams up to speed before the election.

Communicating with the Representatives of the Presidential Campaigns

Clay Johnson described the meetings that Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten had with the representatives of the two campaigns. Bolten met with the candidate representatives on successive days in mid-August. " 'Let us profess our level of commitment to serve you two equally and here are the players you will be introduced to, will be working with, and we want to help you on the presidential personnel front. We want to give you . . . background information on what . . . the person in every one of these PAS jobs does statutorily.' . . . So it was the things we were going to do for them and the things that we could help them do: what they needed to do before the election. Then there was very, very frequent communications between their representatives and the White House's representatives just on every conceivable kind of thing." Chris Lu of Obama's team discussed the regular exchanges he had with Deputy Chief of Staff Blake Gottesman and with the McCain people as well. "Blake was the one that was tasked with interacting with the campaigns. . . . Blake and I probably talked every couple days, and I also had regular contact with the McCain people."

One of the unique aspects of the transition operations the Bush White House created was bringing together the representatives of the two presidential campaigns to gather information and make decisions well before the election. The Department of Justice held a meeting with the McCain and Obama people. Justice officials discussed the process of submitting names for clearance following the conventions. The IRS described background check procedures for taxes for those who might be nominated. The associate attorney general for administration assembled both sides. Will Ball, who was the McCain transition representative attending meetings, described what information the two camps received at the meeting: "As a part of the clearance process, the FBI representatives briefed on the FBI portion of the process. The Justice Department briefed on their role, and how . . . if we had sent names in, what would have been the procedure they would have undertaken, both for interim clearances, and then after the election, for the full permanent clearance process. . . . We understood the process and the procedures . . . We never did submit a list for pre-clearance."

After the election, the Bush administration brought in members of the Obama transition operation on substantive issues as well as on procedural ones. While most actions were well planned in advance, there were also meetings held in response to particular issues that arose during the transition period from the election to the inauguration. The most pressing issue during that time period was the critical financial situation, including the near collapse of major American automobile companies. During that period, Joshua Bolten brought together the Obama financial team members with Treasury and White House officials of the Bush administration to discuss the appointment of an auto czar. Although the Sunday, November 30, 2008, meeting in Secretary Henry Paulson's office at the Treasury Department did not lead to joint action, team members explored the possibilities of how funds from the Troubled Asset Relief Program could be used and what measures could be taken to deal with the crisis in the auto industry.[4] The session brought together the most important White House players on economic issues—Secretaries Paulson and Carlos Gutierrez (Commerce), Joshua Bolten, Joel Kaplan, Keith Hennessey (director of the National Economic Council), Dan Meyer (director of legislative affairs), and Kevin Froman (legislative affairs director for the Department of Treasury). The Obama economic team representatives at the meeting included Larry Summers (director designate for the National Economic Council), Mona Sutphen (White House deputy chief of staff designate), Dan Tarullo (leader of the economic policy team), and Phil Schiliro (White House legislative affairs director designate). The team members may not have been able to work out a coordinated policy, but at least the incoming and outgoing officials set a precedent of meeting together to tackle important issues.

Directing Executive Branch Agencies to Prepare for the Transition

Bush administration officials identified early on that to make their transition efforts useful, they needed to get agencies to work together. Clay Johnson began his work when

4. For a discussion of the meeting, see the discussion Keith Hennessey (director of the National Economic Council in the Bush White House) has at http://keithhennessey.com/2009/06/07/dr-goolsbee-gets-it-wrong-on-the-auto-loans/. It is a discussion vetted by several Bush administration people who were present for the session and represents their collective thinking about the meeting.

Joshua Bolten came to him to talk about the executive branch transition. "We first had a conversation about let's decide what we . . . as a leadership community want to establish as our goals for preparing to receive the new team and get them up to full governance speed quickly. . . . So that began in response to Josh saying, 'Clay, I want you to handle what agencies do to prepare and separately we'll get the White House squared away.' So that began in say March or April. So that's why we went through several iterations of what we wanted to define as success for all the agencies in May and June."

At the spring meeting of the President's Management Council (PMC), a collection of 22 of the key agencies, Johnson talked to agency representatives about the transition. As deputy director for management in the Office of Management and Budget, Johnson chaired the council. The President's Management Council was established by President Clinton in an October 1, 1993, memorandum as an initiative to coordinate the work of the most critical government agencies (Clinton 1993). Johnson described the council in the Bush administration as a group that "guided and coordinated all government-wide performance and management reform activities, which would include such efforts as the transition to a new administration" (Johnson 2009). The agencies worked together to establish common agency priorities and templates for their work. Working with what he considered to be a cooperative team of executive branch staff, Johnson discussed the transition with the group in a meeting held on May 14, 2008. "I don't think any previous administration has tried to get the different agencies together and say let's agree on some common definitions of what it means to prepare." By getting agency representatives together, the group could settle on some common ways of gathering and presenting transition information. "It gives people some better perspective about what the agencies are doing so you can pick best practices from all the different agencies and perhaps even raise the bar in terms of what agencies do . . . People from the agencies loved them [the meetings] because they had just never ever talked to their transition counterparts at other agencies." On July 18, Johnson sent a memorandum to agencies and departments laying out their transition roles (Johnson 2008). "The memo was basically the sum and substance of our conversation [in the May 14 PMC meeting] about what we wanted to agree to."

Johnson's instructions to the agency staff were to focus on priorities. "The way we referred to it was the, not hot and spicy items, but the high priority items or the items, the trend, the specific transactions that the new leadership group will have to deal with and . . . they won't have a choice," Johnson said. " 'There's a decision [that] has to be made on this, there's these legal rulings or these regulatory things. There's this world conference that your secretary has to go to in the first 90 days or so.' Focus your assemblage of information on those matters because things are going very, very quickly and they're not going to have time and it won't be appropriate for them to know everything they ever need you to know about the history of the Department of Agriculture, and so forth."

Johnson and Gail Lovelace, who was responsible for the General Services Administration (GSA) transition effort, discussed getting agency personnel together to discuss the transition as a group rather than simply meeting with agency people individually. "One of the things we had talked about with the PMC was . . . get the senior career transition leads from all agencies together as appropriate," Johnson said. As it worked out, agency leaders were very interested in meeting as a group. The group met three times, Johnson said. The first session was held on September 23, 2008.

Disciplining the Issuance of "Midnight" Regulations

One of the elements of modern transitions is the issuance of regulations and executive orders at the end of a term, especially when the election brings a change in party and, with it, a change in political philosophy. What results is a rush by agencies to submit regulations designed to put in place their priorities. Joshua Bolten issued a memorandum May 9, 2008, seeking to rein in so-called midnight regulations. The memorandum stated, "Except in extraordinary circumstances, regulations to be finalized in this Administration should be proposed no later than June 1, 2008, and final regulations should be issued no later than November 1, 2008" (Bolten 2008). He laid down a process for discipline. Even so, there were a sufficient number of eleventh-hour exceptions to draw the administration's critics and the attention of news organizations.

Bolten discussed his memorandum. He said the idea for it had come from Susan Dudley, who headed the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs at the OMB and Jim Nussle, the director of the Office of Management and Budget. Bolten was sympathetic to the idea of tiding up the regulations process at the end of the Bush administration because he remembered that President Clinton and his team had left them with a pile of regulations in January 2001. "I was determined that we avoid that. In other words, I was trying to create a situation in which we didn't recede from what we thought was right, but that we did not intentionally jam or burden our successors. That we go through as much regular order as we could and that we move rapidly to implement the president's agenda while he was president; but that we not do it in a midnight manner with the specific intent of burdening our successors. I just felt like the experience that we had had on the way in shouldn't be standard operating procedure. . . . I asked the president about it before I signed the memorandum and he confirmed that he didn't want to do business that way. He wanted to do business straight. So that was the purpose of the memorandum."

While he felt the idea was good, it was sometimes difficult to implement. "It's a little hard to get the cabinet officers to focus on it. . . . One of the reasons that I had as many appeals as I did in October and November and December is that the cabinet officers didn't pay any attention until they realized that they were about to leave office with some important piece, some agenda item that either they thought was important or they thought was important to the president's agenda, {left} undone. And here was my memorandum saying that if you didn't have it done by X date, it's not happening."

Deputy Chief of Staff Joel Kaplan commented that the real impact of the regulations memorandum was to move the clock back and give those in the White House additional time to consider exceptions to the memo. "Josh wanted to be able to identify principled rules by which exceptions would be granted, which really was not fleshed out in the memo. . . . I think what it . . . really was most effective at doing was—I think somebody on our staff coined this phrase—it basically moved midnight to 9 o'clock," Kaplan observed. "You still had a lot of rush at the end, but the end was no longer defined as December 15th; it was now November 1st. We still had a lot of people rushing in and trying [to regulate] but then we had a period to make more rational decisions about where exceptions were warranted. And we did shut down a lot of late rulemaking, much to the chagrin of the agencies, who have a lot of people working on stuff."

From his view, Bolten found unwarranted the criticism of their effort to slow down the promulgation of regulations. "I thought that was a good government thing to do and I was more than a bit peeved to have had the White House take—it wasn't a lot of criticism, but it was more than trivial criticism—for our supposed midnight regulations, when in fact we were making a pretty serious effort to do the opposite." Some groups were critical of the memoranda, as they saw it as an effort to make it difficult for the next administration to change regulations.[5]

Cataloguing Key Personnel Positions

The Bush White House gathered information and helped smooth the personnel process for the transition operations of the Obama and McCain campaigns. The White House personnel office brought together information about appointed positions and also facilitated a discussion with the two campaigns about the purchase of new software to be ready in the White House to handle a high volume of résumés that would be sent to the new administration.

Gail Lovelace, who headed government transition coordination for the General Services Administration and was involved in most meetings with transition representatives, commended this effort. "I thought Presidential Personnel, for example, did a great job in working with both campaigns to help them understand the complexities of bringing people into the government and what it would take to manage the tens of thousands of resumes that they would be hit with and all of the other complexities that I think a lot of people take for granted, going through the confirmation process and all of that. Presidential Personnel spent a tremendous amount of time with both campaigns."

The Bush White House preparation for the candidates on personnel issues included accumulating information on each of the presidential appointees requiring Senate confirmation. Clay Johnson described the effort to gather information on confirmed positions: "They [Office of Presidential Personnel] had developed it. Joie Gregor [director of the Office of Presidential Personnel] came in. She had put it together in an organized way. . . . [There was] reference material on that particular position but it didn't exist for all positions in some consistent manner until Joie came on." Will Ball, the McCain transition representative, described the information contained in the four volumes assembled by the Bush White House with personnel information. "It had the statutory history of the position, Secretary of Defense, established 1947, National Security

5. For an example of the suspicions of groups tracking government regulations, see the concerns of OMB Watch about the Bolten memorandum at http://www.ombwatch.org/node/3703. For criticism of the impact of their labor regulations, see the congressional testimony of Lynn Rhinehart, associate general counsel of the AFL-CIO, at http://judiciary.house.gov/hearings/pdf/Rhinehart090204.pdf.

Act, . . . Had the name of the incumbent, it had basic information about the department, budget, number of employees, scope of responsibilities. So it was a lot more detailed than you would find off the shelf with one of the federal manuals."

Initially, the White House came up with a list of 150 positions they considered to be key ones based on agency recommendations. The list was less useful than intended. Joshua Bolten commented, "I do remember being a little bit surprised at some of the names on that list when it first showed up in my office. Because I think . . . we allowed the agencies themselves to tell us whom it was important to get named and confirmed early, and there were some sort of silly names on the list. So that exercise could have and should have been done better." Prepared early in the transition before the September financial crisis, the list focused on national security positions and did not focus in the same way on the economy.

Chris Lu, who was the contact person for the Obama transition on daily issues with the White House, talked about the effort the Bush White House initiated to upgrade the personnel system software. The new president would need a computer software program capable of handling hundreds of thousands of résumés from people seeking appointments. The representatives of both candidates met in the White House to come to agreement on the parameters of the software. Lu explained, "We had meetings at the White House with the McCain campaign where we all discussed what we wanted in a system. And we basically came up with the specs for it, and we agreed on it. The White House contracted it out. Once they got the software vendor, the vendor gave the system to us and to the McCain campaign people to tinker with as we wanted, so that whoever won, on November 5th they would have it the way they wanted it. . . . And that was really facilitated by Bush administration."

Creating GSA-Supplied Office Space

Another aspect of the transition is the work of the General Services Administration, which is the entity that leases or provides space for the president-elect and his transition team and disperses the funds provided by Congress. Chris Lu discussed his work with the General Services Administration. "GSA really . . . dealt with us in a very even-handed way and made modifications of the transition space based on our requirements and our preferences. And we had basically said, if we win, we're going to want to have a transition base in Chicago as well. And they started mapping that entire thing out before election day. Whatever we asked them to do, they were very amenable to doing."

By tradition, GSA personnel tasked with presidential transitions begin their work with candidates only when there are clear nominees for the two major parties. Lovelace said that the GSA's schedule depended on the results of the primaries. "Everybody follows the campaign, especially this time . . . We didn't reach out to the campaigns this time until Hillary {Clinton} stepped down {in June} and we had two, a Republican and a Democrat, that we knew were running for office. Once she did that, in a matter of a couple of days I reached out to the campaigns." The campaigns gave the GSA a green light to talk to transition representatives. "We met for the first time with both of them on the same day. It was July 11th," Lovelace said. "We met with one party in the morning and one party in the afternoon. . . . Each group brought two people. And then from our side, David Bibb [acting administrator of the GSA] was still here. He was the executive in charge, and I was there. We had our lawyer there."

The GSA discussed issues related to space and office needs. "And we do everything, . . . building out the space, where they want desks, where they want trash cans . . . We had charts that were laid out—a huge chart. Literally for each of the floors that they were on, we had desks in place, trash cans in place, everything. Where we were putting the Xerox machines, everything," said Lovelace. In preparation for the transition, Lovelace began talking to agency people in 2007. "I thought agencies need to start thinking about this. . . . I actually started in November 2007 going out talking about GSA's role because I figured I could do that. But what I was really trying to get them to do was to focus on their internal role. . . . DHS is a good example. They had studies that were done because, of course, this is a very vulnerable period of the government. And with their particular mission, did they have leadership in place when all of their politicals stepped out?" In working with agencies, Lovelace worked with OMB management deputy Clay Johnson.

Crafting the Postelection Memorandum of Understanding

One of the important postelection steps is the agreement between the White House representative of the transition and the representative of the incoming administration on the agency review teams that the president-elect sends into the government to gather information on executive agency operations and programs. Deputy Chief of Staff Blake Gottesman, who replaced Joe Hagin in late July, provided the Obama and McCain representatives with previous memoranda for them to tinker with so that after the election, Joshua Bolten, as the president's representative, could quickly reach agreement with John Podesta, the incoming transition representative. The agreement concerned what the ground rules would be for the agency review teams and for their information-gathering visits to government agencies. The election was November 4, and the memorandum of understanding was signed by Joshua Bolten and John Podesta on Saturday, November 8. The early signature was important because without it, agency review teams could not get started gathering information from departments and agencies.

Chris Lu, who helped negotiate the agreement for the Obama transition operation with Gottesman, discussed the challenge of sending so many people out into the agencies. "At least 500 people went out . . . [to] a hundred different agencies; and we had established protocols in advance for how people would get access; and what they would be allowed to see. . . . But even though they were negotiated by . . . the White House, at the individual agency level there was all kinds of . . . interpretations of it that sometimes made it difficult for our folks."

Making sure that the agreement worked in a smooth way, Chris Lu worked regularly with Gottesman. "I actually had a daily call where we would hash-out okay, 'x' agency, we're hearing from our folks at this agency. If there's a problem, then you would work on those. And without fail, every one of those problems got resolved in about a day or so."

Barack Obama's Corporate-Style Transition Operation

President Obama's transition planning operation brought together people who were knowledgeable about and experienced in government operations and policy, as well as those who knew the candidate well. The operation had a well-organized process for gathering information and making decisions. It had a personnel operation that brought in people with expertise and a background in government service. The transition board, the agency review teams, and the policy teams during the transition successfully brought together people, process, and policy as the Obama teams gathered information on department and agency operations and prepared to govern. The policy teams prepared initiatives for the new administration-in-waiting to share with the Democratic congressional leadership, such as the economic stimulus bill, state children's health insurance, and the Lucy Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. The transition teams also prepared executive action for the president to swiftly set the tone of an active chief executive moving in a different policy direction from his predecessor.

John Podesta as the Transition Director

"John Podesta did an amazing job and queued up all the necessary decisions," commented Chris Lu. "That was incredibly important, because this transition was unique in so many ways." In addition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial crisis that surfaced in September brought with it rounds of decisions to be made government-wide. The Obama team worked on governing before they came into office. Dan Pfeiffer, deputy to Chris Lu in the transition and deputy communications director in the Obama White House, commented on their early role in governing decisions. "We didn't really get to transition because we were in a quasi governing mode almost from the moment we got there. You know, when we tried to pass the Recovery Act, and auto companies are failing, . . . the American people were looking . . . to the next president and not the current president for guidance. So we . . . jumped in."

The Bush administration brought the president-elect and his team into many crucial decisions. In such an environment, "the last thing he [Obama] wanted to think about was all the day-in and day-out stuff with the transition, and he didn't have to," Lu commented. "That was one of the advantages of having a very smooth transition. . . . [Obama] obviously had more important issues on his plate."

In commenting on the Obama transition operation, Joshua Bolten observed that the seeds of success of the Obama transition organization lay in its corporate rather than family structure. "Obama's campaign was corporate by the end. . . . to take somebody like Podesta who had been Clinton's chief of staff and . . . had a good relationship with Obama but not a family member, and to basically sub-contract to him." It worked well because Podesta brought to the transition the resources of a cadre of people with experience appropriate to transition and governing tasks, as well as the financial resources to fund his own operation during the early months before government funding began. As the founder and head of the Center for American Progress, Podesta had a wealth of resources to draw on as he prepared for his transition role. The organization has 180 employees and a yearly budget of $25 million (Eggen 2009). Founded in 2003, the organization has almost daily presentations of experts and practitioners on domestic, foreign policy, and national security issues.

Through their many sessions, Podesta got to know the talents and interests of a broad range of people in a variety of policy circles. The center has found places for selected ones who needed support for their work and became known as a government-in-waiting for a Democratic administration. Podesta estimated that, by late spring 2009, there were approximately 40 people from the center who had jobs in the Obama administration (Eggen 2009). When Senator Obama brought Podesta to his team after Hillary Clinton left the race, he welcomed an advisor with experience building an organization and with a reputation around Washington as an effective person who knows how to make things work. In commenting on Podesta and Bolten, Steve Hadley observed, "They're both very substantive, and they're kind of low key. They've got their egos in line." That style worked well for Podesta in the transition and for Obama as well, as his transition chief kept out of the limelight and focused on the tasks of preparing to govern.

Part of the reason the Podesta operation worked well was that he was not a member of the coterie of aides around the candidate, nor did he want a job in an Obama administration. Chris Lu indicated that the Obama transition operation was mindful of the need to staff the transition with people who were not angling for a job in the coming administration. "You don't want them jockeying for their future jobs, so we looked for people who either didn't have a vested interest in who was going to staff certain jobs or could be seen as honest brokers . . . In many ways, that was the perfect pick, because John Podesta made clear fairly early on that he had no desire to go into the administration, at least at the outset, so people saw John as an honest broker." These were lessons learned through the experiences of those serving in earlier transitions and administrations and reinforced in the writings of Clay Johnson.

Early Transition Stirrings

Chris Lu was responsible for transition work in the late spring and early summer before John Podesta came on to lead the effort in late July. "I think there were conversations happening very early on largely between Senator Obama and Pete Rouse [chief of staff of Obama's Senate office], probably in the spring. . . . I will tell you that from my perspective I was asked to start thinking about the transition in probably mid-May, so before the primaries were actually over," said Lu. "I suspect Pete Rouse had been thinking about it even longer than that." Rouse, now a senior advisor to President Obama, worked for and was very close to Senator Obama. Lu explained his transition assignment. "It actually came about in kind of a funny way. I was the legislative director in the Senate office under Pete Rouse, who was the chief of staff. As Pete spent more and more of his time on the campaign, I became the acting chief of staff, and I was fine doing that role, because it was an important role. But I remember having a conversation with Obama. It was probably March or April, and I said, 'Look, I'm happy to continue doing this and holding down the fort in D.C., but if there's a better use of my time in the campaign I'd be interested in that as well, even if that meant moving to Chicago.' " Senator Obama said he needed him in Washington, but "if there's something you can think about that you could do here in D.C., I'd be open to it." Lu suggested the transition. "He mentioned that to Pete—and he had really wanted Pete to be the main guy." But as Rouse devoted more time to the campaign, there wasn't sufficient time for him to handle transition work as well. "So I was basically Pete's designated person on the transition efforts, and then at a certain point, Pete . . . backed out and let me handle it."

In the spring and early summer, Lu read all of the transition materials available from earlier administrations, such as those previously discussed here. He got the Gore and Kerry transition materials from Jim Johnson and read articles and books on past transitions. "There was not a long time that was pre-Podesta. And, during that time it was basically just me talking to as many people as I could, and me talking to David McKean [co-chair of the Kerry transition], Alexis Herman [co-chair of the Kerry transition], and to Jim Johnson, talking to Harrison [Wellford], talking to a lot of the good government groups on the outside, just pulling together as much information as I possibly could for John [Podesta]," said Lu. Johnson and McKean led the 2004 Kerry transition effort. Harrison Wellford, who was one of the leaders of the Carter transition out of office, handled the White House staff structure piece of the Kerry transition. He did the same for the early Obama effort, working with a PowerPoint presentation he had developed for Kerry in 2004 and updated in June and July 2008.[6] Then, in July, John Podesta came in to run the transition as part of a three-person group that included Valerie Jarrett [currently senior advisor to President Obama] and Pete Rouse in addition to Podesta. Lu took the position of executive director and became the daily contact with the Bush White House on transition issues.

There were people associated with the Obama transition effort who represent the institutional memory of several Democratic presidential transitions. Harrison Wellford was one of them. In addition to his work on the Carter transitions in and out of the White House, he prepared transition information for presidential candidates Walter Mondale, Bill Clinton, and John Kerry. Lu said of Wellford, "Harrison is another one of these folks who has such incredible institutional memory about transition, so he was a valuable asset." Wellford was involved in early Obama team discussions with the General Services Administration. "And then Harrison did a lot of outside consulting with John Podesta on a variety of issues," said Lu.

Personnel and the Obama Transition

One of the important aspects of the transition was developing a process to staff an Obama administration should he win. Chris Lu explained what Senator Obama was thinking about early in the transition in terms of people he would want to bring into his administration: "Senator Obama in probably our first or second transition meeting with

6. In late spring, when Harrison Wellford and fellow lawyer Tom Shakow were working on an update of his PowerPoint presentation on the White House staff structure developed for the Kerry transition, he asked me for a scholar's perspective on how staff structures had developed over time. I gave him information on staff developments as a whole and on the functioning of specific offices.

him was very, very clear, that he wanted us to build an administration that just was not the usual suspects, . . . the inside the Beltway people. He wanted people that not only had a diversity of race and sex, but . . . folks that actually had private sector experience, state and local experience, people from academia, people from all parts of the country."

Obama White House personnel director Don Gips commented that the goal of bringing new people into the administration was of continuing interest. They pursued numerous paths to recruiting a diverse pool of applicants, Gips said, "including extensive outreach both through the Internet and through outreach of groups around the country." One of the ways the administration broadened the pool was by allowing cabinet secretaries to bring in their own staffs when they took their posts. "Our cabinet's pretty diverse in where they've come from, so Ken Salazar [secretary of the interior and former senator from Colorado] has people from Colorado. . . . and Gary Locke's [secretary of commerce and former governor of Washington] brought people from Washington state. Those help . . . broaden the pool of people we're looking for." Most administrations encourage cabinet secretaries to accept political appointees whom White House officials have vetted and selected for the departments. The president's team usually worries about divided loyalties and the values of those who serve cabinet secretaries, while their real boss is the president.

In the summer months, the personnel operation was dominated by a fear of leaks. Lu discussed their fears. "We weren't . . . asking potential nominees for their tax returns. We were basically having our folks run Nexis searches on people. . . . We were very conscious of the leaks; and, in the summer of 2008, at the end of the summer, we were very, very careful about this presumptuous arrogance label that McCain's campaign had started throwing at us."[7] The result was that perhaps needed work was not getting done. "Could we have done more work? Yeah, we probably could have done more work on that front, actually. But the idea was that we did not want to be thrown off by leaks coming out of the transition about 'x' person being named for a certain job."

Previous administrations with successful personnel operations had one person who handled the recruitment and hiring process from early in the election year, through the transition, and into the White House as personnel director for the first year. Ronald Reagan had Pendleton James, a personnel search specialist, handle the personnel process from the spring of 1980 through to the White House as personnel director. The same was true with Clay Johnson, who worked on appointment and transition issues for George W. Bush from June 1999 into the White House. With the Obama operation, several people have held the personnel portfolio. First, Michael Froman, who later would be appointed to the Obama National Security Council staff heading the international economics unit, handled personnel along with Federico Peña. Podesta observed that "it would have been preferable to have the person who was going to be the personnel director from the point of the election moving forward. But Mike was doing a good job. He had built out the

7. On July 24, 2008, Senator McCain's spokesperson, Brian Rogers, criticized Senator Obama for transition planning. Following up on a report in Marc Ambinder's blog for *The Atlantic*, Rogers released a statement reported by Fox News that said in part, "Before they've even crossed the 50-yard line, the Obama campaign is already dancing in the end zone with a new White House transition team," McCain spokesman Brian Rogers said in a statement (Fox News 2008).

team. It made sense for him to continue with that." Froman, Peña, and Obama Senate aide Jim Messina, who later became White House deputy chief of staff, carried the personnel portfolio until Donald Gips took it over and brought it into the White House.

While there were notable problems with several nominations at the beginning of the process, especially with three cabinet secretaries—Treasury, Commerce, Health and Human Services—as well as the management deputy at the Office of Management and Budget, the process settled down once the administration got their clearance process working so that they were better able to recruit nominees for positions and sense trouble. The administration had to provide waivers to several nominees who did not meet President Obama's ethics regulations, but the bad publicity that such waivers generated had a short life. By the 100-day mark on April 29, the administration was ahead of Obama's recent predecessors in terms of nominations announced and confirmed by the Senate.

Transition and Campaign Operations

While the McCain transition operation was entwined with the McCain campaign, such was not the case with the Obama operation. "We very much separated the work of the campaign from the work of the transition," said Lu. "If there was an hour of time that the senator could spend either on planning the transition or helping to win the election, we wanted him to win the election. So we very carefully did not put our campaign people onto the transition, and they were actually sort of cordoned off from it." With two separate operations, there was a need for a person who could coordinate them, at least as far as letting each know what the other was doing. Pete Rouse had that role. "Pete has always been seen as an honest broker on things, and Pete was really the conduit of information back and forth."

There was overlap with campaign policy people when the transition operation needed the names of appropriate policy experts. "I had worked closely with our campaign policy director, Heather Higginbottom, so when I wanted to say, 'We're looking for somebody to help us on education policy to balance out the team, who would you suggest?' She would give me names of people she thought were good who the campaign wasn't using. . . . I think the communications people were coordinating to some extent." There was crossover on scheduling as well, Lu said. "We did not want to take up Obama's time in the last . . . month or so . . . And in retrospect it obviously was the right decision."

Once Obama won the election, then the campaign people who had focused on the election goal came into the transition operation. "A lot of our planning got changed from November 4th to November 5th. We largely hadn't talked to people on the campaign before we did any of these things, and then once we won, we then had those conversations," Lu said. "People like [campaign spokesman] Robert Gibbs, [campaign strategist] David Axelrod, who we largely had not interacted with at all during the transition, had very strong ideas on what we should do." Once the campaign people got into the transition and went through the recommendations, there were changes. "There was probably a mixing of ideas, and so I'm sure we used a lot of stuff that had been preplanned. A lot of it was changed based on the input of people who had been on the campaign."

As executive director of the transition, Chris Lu stayed in Washington during the campaign. "John [Podesta] had conversations with Senator Obama every single week, a short call . . . where they discussed things, but we largely didn't want to take up the candidate's time at all." After the campaign, Lu was in Washington while the president-elect spent most of his time in Chicago. "The first month was just meeting after meeting with Podesta, Rahm [Emanuel], president-elect, vice president-elect [Joe Biden], and a couple other people. . . . There were mostly personnel related meetings. But the day-to-day operation of the transition was basically John and myself doing it. Rahm initially did not get involved really in the transition . . . but there came a point at which Rahm . . . started taking on more and more of the planning. . . . There came a point at which John started passing more of that stuff off to Rahm."

In most presidential transitions, after election day, the campaign team worries about missing an opening to get a Washington job with the new president. The Obama team sought to allay the fears of campaign staff members. Lu recounted, "There were a good number of folks on the campaign who just needed some time off and didn't want to help on the transition. . . . The message was sent to them that, 'Look, if you take time off, this is not going to disadvantage you in getting a job'; and it didn't, because lots of folks that didn't participate in the transition got wonderful jobs." At the same time, the senior people on the campaign wanted to participate in the transition. "I think virtually every senior level person who wanted to participate had a chance to participate. And Pete Rouse was the main person helping to facilitate that."

The Transition Board, Agency Review Teams, and Policy Working Groups

There are a variety of patterns that presidential candidates have followed in organizing their official transitions after election day. A transition operation has to decide on a central organization to guide the preparations for governing. "One of the things that we did very early on after John Podesta came on was to sit down and figure out how we wanted to organize the transition," Lu said. John Kerry, for example, used three people who formed a board that together served as co-chairs. In the Obama transition, there was a board of three co-chairs—John Podesta, Valerie Jarrett, and Pete Rouse—who represented the three facets of Obama's political persona. Jarrett is the close friend from Chicago; Rouse, his trusted mastermind from the Senate; and Podesta, the wise survivor of the Clinton years who could navigate Washington and all three branches of government.

Lu described the board operations, which had 12 members active in the operation. "Each person was in charge of a certain [policy] area and they would manage that part on a day-to-day basis." In addition, some of the transition board members managed a policy working group team that was developing initiatives for the new administration. Lu continued, "And then we would have board meetings. . . . every two or three weeks. We had conference calls every week, and then a sit-down meeting every couple of weeks where people report on what was going on." John Podesta served as its chairman. The advantage of the structure was the way it brought together people from Barack Obama's political career, those who had long experience in government, and a few new to governing. "There were a lot of folks who came out of Obama world: people like myself, . . . Pete [Rouse] . . . Michael Froman, Julius Genachowski, Don Gips; people like that who are Obama people. And then there are people who had had previous experience in government, people like . . . Carol Browner."

Some people on the board, such as foreign policy specialist Susan Rice, had experience in the Clinton White House and with Barack Obama as well. Others, such as Sonal Shah of Google, had public and private sector experience but were new to the Obama world. Lu, who served as executive director of the transition senior staff, talked about the blend: "I thought it was a very useful process to get cross-pollination of ideas. . . . We had virtually no leaks at all; and it was a nice mix of people. There were people who had [an] institutional history in government, [and] a lot of other people who may not have had history in government, but understood Obama world." The board experience also gave the senior staff, almost all of whom came into the administration, a feel for working together as a team in the Obama White House and throughout the executive branch.

While the Obama transition board and policy working groups discussed policy and strategies, Obama's agency review operation was designed to gather information to support individuals nominated and appointed to the administration. The Obama team defined what the 10 teams were asked to do. The 10 teams organized around issues and agencies were charged to "provide the President-elect, Vice President-elect, and key advisors with information needed to make strategic policy, budgetary, and personnel decisions prior to the inauguration. The Teams will ensure that senior appointees have the information necessary to complete the confirmation process, lead their departments, and begin implementing signature policy initiatives immediately after they are sworn in" (http://change.gov).

The specific nature of their task helped organize what could well have become an unwieldy operation. The structure was headed by three co-chairs—Melody Barnes, Lisa Brown, and Don Gips—and 15 working group members who headed review teams. The basic part of the operation was the 10 review teams organized around issues and government agencies, such as the education and labor and justice and civil rights teams. Each team had a group of lead people ranging from 6 for transportation to 21 for economic and international trade. The teams themselves varied from 10 for the government operations team to 75 for the national security team. Altogether, there were 365 team member positions—134 team leads for the 10 teams with a leadership of 15 working group members and the three agency review co-chairs.

Though there were what appeared to be a multitude of people working independently in the agency review operation, they were closely guided by John Podesta. As a former staff secretary in the Clinton administration, Podesta was experienced in bringing together mission and method. He described the operation as "much more highly disciplined process than at least the past Democratic transition. . . . People had very specific assignments about what to produce in what form and at what lengths. So they didn't just wander all over the place producing reams of useless information." There were templates for the teams to use rather than having each one decide how to produce information. "You know a template for the budget, a template for particular management challenges. People reviewed all the most recent IG [Inspectors General] reports, the GAO reports on the agency," Podesta said. "I think that what was most specific, what was most helpful probably was to try to marry the agency mission . . . and those elements of where there were problems, . . . with . . . what the budget looked like, where there [were] looming decisions that would need to be taken early on by a cabinet secretary, with a mission coming from the campaign."

Podesta commented that the agency review teams produced what they were asked to do. "People actually came through and executed . . . [which is] what really made the effort worthwhile." The protocol they set up stressed gathering similar information from all the agencies they were assessing. "You could take a program, an agency, the budget, [and say] these are the challenges, how do you move forward and produce the results Obama had promised, both during the campaign and then fleshed out in the transition and into the early parts of governing?" Cabinet secretaries and White House staff found the information they received from the agency review teams to be useful, Podesta said. "They got strategic product that was more digestible, [a view of] both opportunity and challenge from the perspective of what Obama was trying to accomplish coming into office, as . . . it was coming from the campaign. So there was alignment between what these review teams were producing and the way the now-transition team was thinking about the project of governing. That gave the review teams the opportunity to surface particular problems in the agency, but not just wander all over the place and . . . start making it up from scratch." He added, "in my conversations with the incoming cabinet secretaries, they very much appreciated that they were getting focused, well-written, reviewed third-draft 30-page memos, not 5,000 pages of junk [as] had been practiced in the past."

An additional element of the transition structure was the policy working groups that complemented the work of the transition board and the agency review teams. The policy teams worked through the issues in the seven areas—economic, education, energy and environment, health care, immigration, national security, and technology, innovation, and government reform—and prepared initiatives for the administration to undertake once President Obama took office. Ranging from 8 members for the immigration group to 41 for the national security one, altogether there were 134 people in the working groups, including the 11 leaders of the individual groups. The groups worked through policy issues along with the transition board that resulted in a swift start for the administration on January 20. Working with the Congress, President Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act on January 29, the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act of 2009 on February 4, and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 on February 17. The nine executive orders and nine presidential memoranda that President Obama signed in his first 10 days in office covered a broad range of subjects, including ethics standards for administration employees, labor regulations, the economy, detention policies and the future of Guantánamo Bay, reproductive rights, energy, a White House pay freeze, and a review of agency regulations. All of the work the Obama transition teams did was aimed at getting their policy agenda under way as soon as possible. While there were, and continue to be, criticisms the Obama agenda was too broad, the president got off to the start that he hoped with policy initiatives moving in the directions he sought. As large an operation as the transition board, agency review teams, and policy working groups were, the process was both disciplined and productive. The total of 679 members on the three transition operations (transition board, 26; agency review teams, 517; policy working groups, 134) was a disciplined operation. The corporate style structure gave shape and substance to what the Obama transition operation did.

The Family-Style Transition Operation of John McCain

Joshua Bolten observed that while the Obama operation was characterized by its corporate structure, the McCain operation had a family feel to it. McCain's transition operation was small and decisions closely held. When it came to submitting names to the FBI for security clearances, McCain was not willing to take the chance of a leak of personnel information, and those working in the campaign did not have time to focus on that aspect of transition planning. Bolten said, "The McCain campaign was a family operation and I think they were reluctant to subcontract something as delicate as who are the people that are going to help start to fill out this administration to somebody outside the family. And everybody inside the family was working too hard on the campaign to spend time on the effort." Will Ball, a longtime friend of McCain and former navy secretary who was one of six people on McCain's transition board, explained Senator McCain's thinking on his decision not to submit names for security clearance before the election: "From a candidate's point of view, I'm not sure in the home stretch of a campaign, weighing the relative merits of lists of candidates for cabinet positions [is a good use of the candidates time], . . . how practical that is. You can put them in, but then think about that a minute. If you put in five names [of people] who may be candidates for Secretary of Homeland Security . . . there cannot be a 100 percent guarantee that those names won't get out into the public domain." In addition to the possibility of a leak, the process represents an imposition on people, a step McCain did not want to impose on individuals, especially when there was no assurance someone would get a position. "In order to initiate that process, you have to provide the Standard Form 278 [public financial disclosure report] and other forms to each of those five prospects, and they have to go through the somewhat difficult process of completing those forms. And so is that an imposition on someone who may be on a list of five candidates for a cabinet position, but doesn't make the final cut?"

John McCain had a group of six people handling transition issues, two of whom were also central people in the campaign operation. Rick Davis and Trevor Potter served as the campaign manager and campaign counsel, respectively. Trying to work meetings around their schedule was not easy, especially in the fall. Two of the six, John Lehman, former navy secretary and 9/11 Commission member, and Russ Gerson, who has a professional personnel search firm in New York, were based in New York and did not spend their full time in Washington. Will Ball was based in Washington, as was William

Timmons, a lobbyist with strong ties in the Washington community. Joshua Bolten discussed the differences in dealing with the two organizations. "I invited both campaigns to send a transition designee and the Obama camp seemed much more organized. . . . They had groups and sub-groups and the desk in charge who knew everything. The McCain campaign was a little slower on the uptake and was a little more ambiguous about who was actually in charge." Ball represented the McCain transition operation in meetings at the White House and the Department of Justice, but there was no publicly designated leader among the transition group board members.

In the early stage of the pre-convention period, the McCain operation was low key. The veterans working on transition and campaign issues persuaded McCain to allow people to begin gathering information, though he was reticent. Ball explained the startup of the operation: "He permitted those of us who were working in this area . . . to go forward rather aggressively and start to make plans. He did not want to initiate it too early . . . Through Rick Davis, his campaign manager, and Charlie Black [McCain friend, campaign advisor, and a veteran of the Washington lobbying community] and others, he recognized early on, that this is a complicated process, and so he permitted this activity to begin." Ball spent April and part of May gathering information, reading about past transitions, and having conversations with people such as Andy Card, former chief of staff for President Bush, and Clay Johnson, as well as others in the Washington governing community. After Memorial Day, he met with campaign manager Rick Davis and Russ Gerson, who was handling the personnel search, to discuss transition preparations.

The McCain transition operation focused on the federal budget and on developing the personnel list. The personnel operation focused on building a database of possible nominees. Ball recounted, "Russ Gerson came down from New York each week and pulled together a team of volunteers." Ball explained that as Gerson shaped the team gathering names for personnel suggestions, he was encouraged by Senator McCain to search broadly. McCain said to "pull people in from beyond the beltway . . . who would have some fresh ideas, and who were leaders in their respective fields, and who could help . . . develop a broad based list." That was in June or July, Ball recounted. After they got their team of personnel volunteers together, "we began to meet in September. . . . we had probably 15 who were group leaders, and then each of them would have two, sometimes three people to assist them." Their meetings were structured so that the volunteer team leaders came in on Thursday and worked through the weekend. "We would feed them . . . at the headquarters there, but . . . they volunteered their own time," Ball commented.

Most of the McCain transition volunteers were not professional personnel search experts, but rather professionals who knew policy. Some were friends whom Senator McCain knew well. "We had a woman from the faculty of Yale medical school, who was an M.D., who led our health group. We had financial [people] from New York, and one from Texas. We broke it down by different disciplines," Ball said. McCain tapped some old friends, Ball added. The team "had a retired admiral [from] Florida, who came to help with the Defense Department, who Senator McCain had known years ago. So it was an eclectic mix." Ball said the guidance given to him and to Gerson was "to identify people without ties to Washington to be the initiators of this process in compiling prospective [candidates for nomination]. This was well before the stage of calling and asking, would one be willing to serve. This was to simply compile a list of prospects." They never advanced to the next step.

McCain's team prepared to submit a budget consistent with the candidate's campaign agenda. Ball pointed out that the transition would have been different from a Bush to Obama one. "In our case, had we won, it would have been a same-party to same-party transition. . . . Clay [Johnson] had done a pretty good job of laying out the objectives and goals [for the internal administration transition]. We tried to focus on the policy side and the budget side, specifically getting a budget team together that would anticipate the fact that this budget process was so front loaded." Ball was referring to the fact that within his first month in office, a president has to submit a preliminary budget to Congress, which is followed later by a more complete document. The transition group worked on schedules and its goals. "And so we had a similar budget group assembled. . . . So personnel, budget, planning in the broader sense, goals and objectives, we would discuss, and a timetable. We'd . . . take a timetable, and break it out into phase one, phase two, phase three, with—pre-convention, pre-convention planning, which was for lack of a better term, fairly covert, it was underground, so to speak." The time periods broke down for them in this way after the pre-convention period. "Then convention to election day, with a much broader effort, involving more people and more engagement with our broader personnel team and policy teams. And then, you know, election day in Phoenix, we had our [three] books ready and our plans ready," said Ball.

The meeting schedule for the group of six was dominated by the need for at least two of the participants, Rick Davis and Trevor Potter, to put their attention on their campaign responsibilities "We tried to meet every week. . . . But as a practical matter, since Rick Davis was integral to this process and he was the campaign manager, we couldn't nail that down every week." With John Lehman and Russ Gerson in New York for much of the week, the group needed to get together through a weekly conference call through August and September rather than in person. "In October, we started trying to meet every week. And then down the home stretch of the campaign, we pretty much had our plans ready. The last two weeks of October, we had a lot of communication, but we didn't have any meetings."

The lesson of the McCain transition is similar to the one that came out of the Obama operation: transition structures and direction reflect the candidate they serve. President Obama sought out people to guide his transition who knew him and his policy preferences, his campaign, and the terrain of presidential governance. While he chose friends to join his transition, such as Valerie Jarrett, Pete Rouse, and Chris Lu, he relied most heavily on John Podesta to manage his transition, a person who was not a close associate and, in fact, had supported his chief opponent in the primary season. For Senator McCain, having a small coterie of friends around him was paramount. Though those associates represented many years of governing experience and had an interest in moving transition preparations forward, the candidate was wary of having them create a broad transition effort of anywhere near the scale of the Obama operation.

Conclusion

We learned through this transition that it is possible to assemble and direct a large organization of transition team members without the group getting out of hand. With a transition structure of 679 people, the Obama operation could easily have gone in many different and conflicting directions without generating significant governing information. That has happened in many previous transition efforts, but good management kept the operation on track in this transition. If effective ground rules are established by the incoming and outgoing administrations for the transition team to gather information from government agencies and departments, an effective organization can get a large organization to stay within the rules and produce reports structured to meet presidential needs.

The 2008-2009 transition taught us that all benefit when a president directs early and thorough preparations for the change over in administrations. At the direction of President Bush, Joshua Bolten guided a government-wide effort to define and then meet the needs of the new administration. Presidents today cannot afford to let preparations wait until after the election. Through legislation, executive direction, and individual effort, the Congress, President Bush, and career and political officials in the departments and agencies all worked hard at preparing the next president and his team for the responsibilities of governing. President Bush established a useful model for his successors to follow as they prepare to leave office. White House and administration officials made certain information was available on government programs and positions and that there was continuity in governing with career staff assigned to fill the posts of political appointees as they left the Bush administration. While such presidential action can realistically be done when a president is not running for reelection, it remains to be seen whether an incumbent president who is running for reelection will be so cooperative in gathering and providing information to the opposing party candidate.

The transition was an effective one in meeting the president-elect's needs. More than earlier transitions, when President Barack Obama came into office, he had a White House staff structure in place, his personnel operation up and running (even if problems persisted), his priorities established, and his initiatives ready to introduce as legislation and executive action. He and his staff were well informed by those in office throughout the government about the status of issues and programs. It took a series of government actions to lay the ground work for the transition by easing the clearance process for appointments so that people could begin working in the transition as soon as there was a president-elect. The path to governing was smoothed by the increasing amount of information available in the public domain as well as available from earlier transition preparations of presidential candidates. A great deal of the credit for the smooth passage to power in 2009 belongs to Barack Obama and the experienced group handling his transition as well as the team of President George W. Bush headed by Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten.

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