The George W. Bush presidential transition: The disconnect between politics and policy

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ABSTRACT

The first months of a new presidency are a unique time in American politics. It is a period of great presidential activism, with appointments and policy initiatives announced on almost a daily basis. It is a "honeymoon" period, when the president's relationships with Congress and the media are at least cordial if not deferential. It is a period when campaign promises come due and domestic politics are on everyone's mind. It can also be a period of frustration as newly elected presidents struggle with recalcitrant staffs and large unfamiliar bureaucracies. This paper examines the transition of the Forty-third president, George W. Bush, noting problems experienced and offering lessons.

INTRODUCTION

Newly elected presidents almost always feel frustrated and inadequate in their dealings with the Congress. Washington is unfamiliar territory for presidents, especially if their only experience was at the gubernatorial level of government. The key to a successful first year in the White House is advanced planning and learning during the transition period from one administration to another. This period lasts eleven weeks just seventy-seven days. It is a frightfully short period of time to adjust to the Washington culture. Yet failure to do so will inevitably result in policy failures for the president.

What if the elected president had to survive a strong primary challenge and then engage his opponent in a razor thin election? Suppose further that the election was not over on Election Day and continued during the transition phase. Suppose a newly elected president lost more than half of the transition to this contested election. This was the plight of George W. Bush after December 13, 2000.

The 2000 presidential election represented a unique challenge for transition efforts. Due to the uncertainty of the electoral vote open transition efforts were highly criticized. For example, President Bush sought to create an image of leadership by openly discussing his possible cabinet choices in the days immediately following the undecided election—discussions criticized by the media as premature. (1)

This article will examine the effects of the short transition upon George W. Bush's policy agenda. It is the position here that certain dysfunctions can be traced to the transition period which resulted in a confusion of politics from policy. We will first present a framework for analyzing intra-party presidential transitions. Second, we briefly describe the complexity of the 2000 election and its impact upon transition efforts. Third, we assess a few impacts upon various Bush Administration policies. Fourth, we present a case study of the effects of this transition upon Iraq policy. Finally we offer some suggestions for remediating these problems traceable to a shortened or normal transition period.

PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

One way of judging presidential transition is by assessing the quality and quantity of presidential appointees in place early in a presidential administration. While appointments are important (and we shall assess the Bush II Administration's progress in this area) they do not tell the entire story of a successful transition, We need a framework that...

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George W. Bush - George W. Bush - Presidency: Bush was the first Republican president to enjoy a majority in both houses of Congress since Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s. Taking advantage of his party's strength, Bush proposed a $1.6 trillion tax-cut bill in February 2001. A compromise measure worth $1.35 billion was passed by Congress in June, despite Democratic objections that it unfairly benefited the wealthy. Politics, Law & Government. Science. Sports & Recreation. Courtesy of the George W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum/NARA. Bush, George W.: September 11 attacks. George W. Bush addressing reporters in the Oval Office of the White House, September 13, 2001. Courtesy of the George W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum/NARA. George H.W. Bush straddled the divide between conservatives like Ronald Reagan and the liberal wing of the GOP led by figures such as Nelson Rockefeller. But Bush's internationalist approach to foreign policy — a function in part of his experience as a Navy bomber pilot in World War II, a U.S. representative to the United Nations, an envoy to China and a director of the Central Intelligence Agency — was his greatest legacy, according to presidential historians. And then Bush went to China to represent the U.S. as President Gerald Ford's top diplomat there. His title, chief of the U.S. liaison office to the People's Republic of China — rather than ambassador — suggests just how new and delicate the relationship between the two powers was at the time. Reagan's No. 2.