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Recommendations for an Effective 2008 Transition

by Clay Johnson

This is to lay out my personal thoughts and recommendations regarding the upcoming Presidential Transition of 2008, based on my experience as the Executive Director of the Presidential Transition of 2000, the research I did to prepare for that assignment, and the resources I know this next Administration will inherit.

General

- Six months or so before the election, designate someone to, at a minimum, plan the Transition, and preferably, prepare to be the Executive Director or Chief Operating Officer of the Transition. Don't worry about jinxing the campaign or being too presumptuous: it is irresponsible for anybody who could be President not to prepare to govern effectively from Day One.

- Set specific goals for the Transition and assign specific people to be responsible for the accomplishment of each. Without goals to drive the preparation to govern, the transition period will be spent responding to the tremendous inflow of advice, job seekers, volunteers, well-wishers, and press inquiries. I suggest the following generic Transition goals for whomever is elected President:
 - Clearly communicate that you are aggressively preparing to govern, you are operating without hubris or triumphant partisanship, you are experienced and not a neophyte, you are ethical, and you understand that the President-elect is not the President until noon on January 20.
 - Select the senior White House staff and an organizational structure and decision-making process by mid-December.
 - Select the Cabinet members by Christmas and have them briefed and ready for confirmation hearings by about January 10, the timetable that has been met by prior Administrations. The Senate will be anxious to hold hearings even before the new President is sworn in; so they can confirm the new Cabinet members within a day or two of Inauguration Day.
 - Summarize the new Administration's priorities for each Cabinet department, and the primary issues, facts, and campaign promises related to each: it is important to prepare each Secretary-designee to be the new President's Secretary, versus merely the Secretary.
 - Prepare to proactively reach out to Congress, supporters, trade associations, well-wishers, and job seekers in order to show your interest in them and to connect with them how you choose to do so and according to your timetable.

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Especially work to establish a strong working relationship with Congressional leadership.

- Develop a preliminary 20-day, 100-day, and 180-day schedule for the new President to guide the initial focus for his or her energies and time.
 - Prepare to present the new Administration's proposed budget by early-February, which is when the FY10 Budget is to be presented to Congress.
 - Review the executive order and regulatory issues requiring immediate attention from your new Administration.
- Plan on the Transition costing at least \$9 million, in 2000 dollars, which is what the 1992 and 2000 Transitions each cost. Have the Campaign Fund Raising group ready to field a direct mail solicitation shortly after the election for the difference between forecasted costs and what the General Services Administration provides.
 - Count on needing and having to organize at least 800 people at the peak of the Transition. The Reagan and Clinton Transitions each used 1000+ people, but a lot of these extra people were needed to do work like data entry and correspondence that can be done more efficiently today with the help of technology and the internet. The majority of these can be volunteers, as there will be plenty of people available to provide general support, and Congressional staffers, who will be in fall recess, to work on policy and governance matters.
 - It is a good idea to use private Transition monies to pay for temporary housing for Transition workers, and to provide some relocation assistance. For legal reasons all of this support must be provided and paid out before the Inauguration. In 2000, Senior White House Staff-to-be were given the estimated cost of their physical moves, while all other staff members relocating to DC from the Campaign or Governor's office were given \$1000 each.

Manage the "Incoming"

- Expect a large number of job seekers, at least 40,000 in the first few weeks and at least 75,000 in the first few months. Make an on-line application available on a transition web site; so the applicants can apply directly (and, by the way, do their own data entry). I suggest the Transition incorporate into its website the functional on-line application currently used by the Office of Presidential Personnel (PPO), as is or with modifications, or formally decide months before the election that it wants to develop its own.

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Also use the transition website to help potential applicants begin to understand the reality of public service and that it's not for everyone: the pay is low and the hours are long, divestiture of assets is often called for, there are post service employment and lobbying restrictions, and there is a lot of public and Congressional scrutiny.

- Expect a lot of advice, from members of previous Administrations, “experts”, interest groups, lobbyists, Governors, Legislators, donors and the like. Organize to receive this information: “partner” with them but in such a way as not to be consumed by the partnership. Designate separate people to serve as contact points for Governors, donors, and members of Congress.
- Send separate communiqués to Governors, Mayors, Members of Congress, donors, supporters, etc, to tell them how best to communicate with the Transition. Differentiate between how they apply for a position, recommend someone for a position, provide input, and volunteer.
- Be aggressively proactive in connecting with Congress. Members from the President-elect's party, in particular, want to know if the new Administration intends do it with them or to them. Designate senior people with established credibility to actively seek input, and set up a system for ensuring timely responses to Congressional recommendations and questions.

Assemble the New Administration's Team

- Select someone to be in charge of Presidential Personnel at least 6 months before the election, if at all possible. Have him/her confer with appropriate subject matter principals and policy people, and use the generic position description materials compiled by PPO, to reach preliminary conclusions about the type of person the President-elect should be seeking for each Cabinet position; and when conferring with subject matter principals, solicit suggestions about who should be considered for each senior position. Then initial discussions about Cabinet member and senior sub-Cabinet selections can be substantive and goal oriented, and not just about who did what during the campaign. A significant challenge in assembling any new Administration's team is balancing the need to select the best people to do the work ahead and the natural desire to reward key people who helped get the new President elected.

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- Begin early enough before the election, plan and organize, assemble the necessary resources, and set as a high priority to put in place by about April 1 the 100 or so most important Cabinet and sub-Cabinet personnel. Every Administration might prioritize the positions differently but everyone agrees that it will be very important for this next Administration to work with the Senate to put into place as quickly as possible the key national and homeland security sub-Cabinet.

No previous Administration has had confirmed more than about 25 Cabinet and sub-Cabinet personnel by April 1; so this goal is a significant challenge. PPO is currently defining the resources, timetable, and organization they believe the new Administration would have to employ to help the new President select these 100 people in time to get them cleared and confirmed by the Senate by April 1. Also White House Counsel, PPO and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) are working to significantly expedite the clearance process to make it possible to accomplish that goal. These same offices are working with the Senate to get to them much faster the information on the nominees they need to accomplish the goal.

(Along these same lines, the new Administration should set as its goal to have working by the August recess the entire Cabinet and sub-Cabinet, which is about 400 people. No previous Administration has had confirmed more than about 240 Cabinet and sub-Cabinet personnel by this date.)

- Make every effort to designate senior White House staff by January 1; so the senior group can get comfortable working together and used to managing the President-elect's schedule in the weeks leading up to the inaugural like they will manage it after he/she takes the oath of office. They also need to be in position to provide guidance and counsel to the new Cabinet Secretaries. The new President's Chief of Staff-to-be is the best person to lead this effort, separate from but in coordination with the effort to identify the Cabinet and sub-Cabinet.
- Have early conversations with Secretary-designees about the collaborative nature of the sub-Cabinet selection process. Some Presidents have allowed their Secretaries to select their sub-Cabinets, while other Presidents have mandated who would serve in each Secretary's sub-Cabinet. It is important that each appointee is loyal to the President, knows the President selected him or her, and is someone the Secretary can work with. Therefore the recommended but more challenging approach to sub-Cabinet selection is for Presidential

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Personnel and the Secretaries to collaborate: both have to agree on who to recommend to the President.

Prepare the New Team to Govern

- Focus on getting the new Cabinet Secretary-designees off to an informed, confident start. Provide them basic briefing material on the Department, the President-elect's campaign promises on their subject area, a group to support them during the confirmation process (a chief shepherd who's helped previous nominees get confirmed, a public affairs person, a Presidential Personnel contact, and a cabinet affairs person), a lot of contact information, and temporary office space (preferably so all the Secretary-designees can be near and get to know each other).
- Use small teams of five or so people to interact with Department personnel to put together focused briefing books for the Secretaries-to-be. Minimize potential conflicts of interest in interacting with the Departments, and maximize the quality of the briefing material. Therefore, exclude lobbyists and overt job seekers from these teams, but assemble them and other "experts" into advisory groups for each new Secretary, and allow them to submit individual but not group recommendations on any issue they desire to comment on.
- Designate a small team to work with OMB to ensure the FY10 Budget reflects the new Administration's priorities. OMB is very experienced at working with budget-knowledgeable representatives of new Administrations to accomplish their budget-related goals in the 2 months or so they have to work together.
- Designate a few people to research all current Executive Orders (EOs) to determine if there are any that the new President wants to rescind or replace with EOs of his or her own to define new courses of action right away.

A Presidential Transition is very, very intense and full of conflicting emotions and pressures.

- The candidates naturally want to wait until after the election to prepare to govern, but it is irresponsible to do so.
- The President-elect's staff and advisers want to celebrate and recover from the grueling campaign, but they can't: the new Administration only has about 75 days to prepare to govern and deliver what they said they would if elected.

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- The President-elect's staff and advisers have been focusing on the 50+% of the people they need to vote for their candidate, but now they need to focus on the entire populace they have been elected to serve.
- The President-elect's natural desire is to reward key people who helped get him or her elected, but his or her focus really needs to be on selecting the best people to do the governing work ahead.

Every candidate must prepare to govern, starting months before the conventions when each officially becomes the candidate. And every Transition must organize and prepare to focus on what they must get done if they want the President-elect to be well prepared to govern at noon on January 20, 2009.