

PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

## **Austinite is Bush point man on transition to new president**

By Ken Herman  
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WASHINGTON — Beginning when he was 21, Austin native Blake Gottesman carried President Bush's bag into the White House.

Now 28, Gottesman will soon help carry Bush's baggage out of the building.

The former personal aide to the president is now White House deputy chief of staff and the administration's point man on transition, making him a pivotal player in how the president leaves the place to his successor.

It's always a tricky hand-off, complicated this time around by a nation and world in turmoil.

"It's a confluence of three things that make this one of the most critical, certainly, in recent memory, perhaps ever," Gottesman said Friday en route to Camp David. "You have the nation in a war on two fronts, the threat of attacks to the homeland and, thirdly, the fact that we are facing serious economic challenges."

Gottesman said transitions from one administration to another are always seen as "times of weakness and vulnerability, and it's a period of heightened threat because of this perceived weakness and perceived vulnerability."

"That makes this 77-day period and this transfer of power as critical as ever," Gottesman said, citing "the need for it to be smooth and seamless and professional so that the next administration, regardless of who wins, is prepared on day one to handle all these challenges."

It's a notion seconded by people appointed by Bush to the Transition Coordinating Committee.

"The point here is business as usual will not work given the nature of the problems we have today," said committee member Max Stier of the Partnership for Public Service. "If we operate according to the timetable set during the Clinton-Bush time frame, we are in big trouble. We have got to see a greatly accelerated process of bringing the new folks in and getting them up to speed."

Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, also a transition committee member, agreed.

"When (Democratic vice presidential nominee) Joe Biden said we may be confronted with a crisis, he was right. Frankly, I think you could argue it would happen with anybody moving into the presidency," Ornstein said. "If we have a crisis and we do not have the prominent players at all levels in place and a process in place to deal with it, the consequences could be very significant."

Stier and Ornstein said they came away from a Wednesday transition committee meeting impressed with Gottesman.

"I wasn't sure if he is shaving yet," Stier joked about Gottesman's youthful appearance. "His youth belies the responsibility and his capacity."

Ornstein said Gottesman reminded him they had met years ago at a Young Presidents' Organization function, "probably when he was bar mitzvah age."

"I am truly impressed with him. This is a really smart guy and a really competent guy. He wasn't promoted to this post just out of sentiment or to reward him because he spent all those years doing scut work. He is there because he is really good," Ornstein said.

The scut work included carrying Bush's bags, placing his speeches on podiums and loading the presidential iPod as the commander-in-chief's "body man."

The Bush-Gottesman link goes back to Austin, where Gottesman had been a classmate — and sometimes beau — of the president's daughter Jenna at St. Andrew's Episcopal School. In 1999, Gottesman went to work on Bush's presidential campaign, a post that led to his first White House job as an aide to then-Chief of Staff Andy Card and later as Bush's personal aide, beginning in early 2002.

In June 2006, Gottesman, despite not having an undergraduate degree, was accepted to Harvard Business School. He headed to Cambridge, returning to the White House this past July with — like Bush — a Harvard MBA.

Bush named Gottesman a deputy chief of staff, replacing longtime aide Joe Hagin, who resigned, in a key position with a broad portfolio, now including transition.

A replay of 2001 — when the post-Election Day recount made transition more difficult — won't do in 2009, according to Ornstein and Stier.

"The fact is a very substantial number of important positions were not filled (quickly); many of them were not even filled by 9/11," Ornstein said.

Longtime Bush aide Clay Johnson, the transition point man in 2000, said in a recent Public Administration Review article that the next president should "make it a high priority to put in place the 100 or so most important Cabinet and sub-Cabinet positions by April 1."

Sooner, Stier said, recalling, by way of example, that Bush's Treasury Department No. 2 man didn't win Senate confirmation until Aug. 3, 2001.

The goal, Stier said, should be to have a full Cabinet and the top six or so officials at every agency confirmed and on the job within days of the inauguration.

"We live in a scary world and our government is a vital actor in both protecting and providing for our nation, and the absence of a complete cadre of leadership is dangerous," Stier said.

The upcoming transition began months ago under a new law allowing the security clearance process to begin before the election for key transition personnel who need access to national security information. Gottesman said the White House appointed career officials at the FBI and the Department of Justice to work directly with the campaigns in a process that keeps the White House out of the loop on who is submitted for security clearance.

Overall, the Bush team is getting it right, Ornstein said.

"I am extremely impressed with what they are doing," he said. "It's better than any in our adult lifetimes in terms of willingness and eagerness to make this work. It's genuine. It's not just for show."