

OPINION

It's Not Too Soon to Plan the Transition

By Max Stier
And Gary Ginsberg

Dear Senators, We know you're busy campaigning and the election is just four months off. But what should be occupying a large portion of your time right now is how you will govern *after* the election when you have some 4,000 posts to fill.

With two ongoing wars, the threat of terrorism, a flagging economy and only 77 days between the election and the inaugural, the decisions—or lack of decisions—you make today may well determine whether your presidency is successful. Yes, you need to choose a competent running mate. To be ready on day one, you also need to start planning for the transition from this administration to your own.

The key to an effective transition is getting your appointees in place and up to speed as quickly as possible. But if history is a guide, your administration won't have its full team in place until the spring or summer of 2010. Even the current Bush administration—widely credited with running one of the more efficient transitions in recent memory—had only 60% of its appointees in place when our nation was attacked on Sept. 11, 2001.

A major reason for these delays is that candidates treat transition planning like a championship trophy they're afraid to touch. To plan for a transition means you're

too confident or complacent. You're measuring the drapes of the Oval Office instead of hustling for votes. In today's environment, this thinking is both outdated and dangerous. Instead, here are three things you should do to ensure that your presidency gets off to the right start:

- *Start transition planning now.* You should formally establish your transition team as early as possible—that means today. Start by appointing someone you know and your campaign leadership trusts to oversee your transition planning, and build a team with the resources necessary to tackle this daunting task.

This team should begin collecting the names of potential appointees, with a focus on selecting White House staff first. The team should also think about how best to prepare your political appointees for the job, and to build relationships between appointees and nonpolitical career staffers. You will need to make a special effort to attract appointees with management skills, as opposed to just technical expertise or political bona fides.

- *Set aggressive staffing goals.* To prevent a leadership vacuum and give transition planning a sense of urgency, you should publicly pledge to work with Senate leadership to have 50 top officials confirmed on the day after the inauguration, including all key posts within the departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State and Treasury.

To afford adequate time for the requisite background checks and for the Senate to review and approve candidates, you will need to choose your nominees shortly after the election. At a minimum, you should name your top three economic and top three national security advisers within 10 days of the election.

Some advice for Obama and McCain.

Looking even longer-term, you should aim to have your full slate of Cabinet and sub-Cabinet level appointees confirmed by Congress's 2009 summer recess. A campaign that starts focusing on personnel matters after the election would have no chance of even coming close to meeting these goals. Start now, and you won't regret it.

- *Use your Senate experience to your advantage.* Coming from the Senate, you will have an edge over every other president of the past 40 years when it comes to transition planning. Before the election, you should reach out jointly to your colleagues to begin consultations about how to conduct the transition as seamlessly and efficiently as possible. As a veteran of the Senate, you will also be better positioned to take on a necessary fight. One of the biggest compli-

cations of transitions is that too many presidential appointees are subject to Senate approval. Of the approximately 4,000 political positions you will fill, an astonishing 1,137 require Senate confirmation.

Ask yourself this: Does your typical assistant secretary for public affairs really require days of testimony and questioning before being confirmed? Work with your Senate colleagues to streamline the process so that only those jobs that are truly central to the functioning of the United States government require such enhanced scrutiny. While you're at it, cut the total number of political appointees in half, as Sen. McCain proposed in the 1990s. This will save time, money, and most importantly, ensure the jobs of government get filled in a more timely fashion.

We recognize that the prospect of Election Day can be all-consuming, and you face tremendous pressure to expend all of your energy on making sure you prevail. But the reality is that the time to do the practical work of governing has already begun. If you are going to be losing any sleep these days, it should not be over concerns about losing the election, but winning.

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