

PRESIDENCY RESEARCH GROUP NEWSLETTER



Volume III, Number 2

April 1981

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

President: Lester Seligman, Illinois
Vice-President: Thomas Cronin, Colorado College
Secretary-Treasurer: Martha Kumar, Towson State
Program Director: Frank Rourke, Johns Hopkins
Newsletter Editor: George Edwards, Texas A&M

STEERING COMMITTEE

Harry Bailey, Temple
Larry Berman, UC-Davis
Dom Bonafede, National Journal
Eric Davis, Middlebury College
Alexander George, Stanford
Fred Greenstein, Princeton
Erwin Hargrove, Vanderbilt
Hugh Hecllo, Harvard
Dorothy James, American
John Kessel, Ohio State
Anthony King, Essex
William Mullen, Washington State
Richard Neustadt, Harvard
Martha Weinberg, MIT
James S. Young, Virginia

THE REAGAN TRANSITION

by

Richard E. Neustadt
Harvard University

You ask for my reactions to President Reagan's transition. An illness in the family keeps me close to home these days. So my reactions are based solely on the press along with travelers' tales from those among my Kennedy School colleagues who have gone to Washington or otherwise are active on the new regime's behalf. With that caveat, I'm glad to oblige.

Taking transition in the narrow sense of the eleven weeks between election and inaugural, Reagan and his people gave the impression of consciously trying to avoid each Carterite mistake of four years years earlier:

1. White House organization and relations got a high priority. While the Meese-Baker relationship appears to me more improvised than planned long in advance, the improvisation was done in quick time, formalized, announced and set in motion fast; thereafter Baker seemingly was free to concentrate on setting up the White House staff per se. Some things strike me as foolish, others not long for this world, but these are on the margins. At the center is the fact that by January 20 the White House staff was a going concern, manned and managed.

2. So was OMB, under new leadership, an indispensable adjunct of what we now know as the Reagan economic package. The outgoing people were not very helpful, denying the newcomers full access to Carter staff until Carter's final budget was complete. (In this they acted rather like the Ford people four years before and the Johnson people eight years earlier. The full collaboration practiced in 1952 and 1960 appears to be unknown to contemporary budgeteers in either party and to civil servants too: so much for "institutional memory"). Still, within a month the incoming budget director and his quickly-appointed associates made more use of career staff, I am told, and got to know

more of them better than Bert Lance in his entire eight-month tenure four years earlier. As in James Baker's instance, David Stockman got an enormous running start on the department heads, which means that relative to them so did the president.

3. The Reagan people may have wanted to substantially improve on Carter's timing in announcement of department heads, along with subcabinet and Schedule C appointments. If so, they did not succeed, despite the fact that pre-election plans for managing the personnel selection actually were followed, it appears, not chaotically abandoned as with Carter. The recent ethics legislation gets the "blame" for the delays in Reagan's case and probably deserves part, but not all. Some of the rest can be attributed to the sheer following of plans, which apparently means, among other things, adjudicating conflicts before appointment not after. Carter's showdown came at the top, while he himself pondered alternatives; thereafter his appointees had a free hand, if they wished; this speeded up appointments at just the subordinate levels where the Reagan process encounters its longest delays.

Still, those delays have had their uses for the new administration in a policy sense, suggesting praise not blame, so much so that they may go down as "planned." I doubt that. More likely, confusion accounts for them. Still, the utility is undeniable: department heads who, for the most part, were too disconnected from their own staffs to compete on anything like equal terms with Reagan's. No wonder the economic package got done quickly!

That package is the crux of the Reagan transition, even in the narrow sense of the term. If the package was to reach Congress in February and be used to justify presidential aloofness from other, "lesser" things, it had to be well underway by Inauguration Day. It was. Thereafter, week by week, the package was accorded the sustained, priority attention, political and public as well as substantive, which Carter had been roundly criticized for not giving his energy package (or anything else) four years before. The lesson of "pri-

orities" it seems, was learned, along with lessons on congressional and press relations where Reagan got a remarkably focused start.

Whatever mistakes Reagan proceeds to make on scores of substance or of presentation, those attributed to Carter by today's conventional wisdom are unlikely to be among them. The Reagan regime will avoid those, it appears--and no doubt make others all its own. But no important ones have been made yet so far as I can see (although a lot may lurk in people and in programs, as is usual).

The most visible misstep thus far, ironically, comes just where Reagan's people imitated Carter's, and indeed outdid them: creating "transition teams," department by department, to sop up campaign activists and other urgent well-wishers immediately after the election. Carter was the first, Reagan the second, to have public funds available for the transition period. Money has provided a mixed blessing, in Reagan's case more like a curse. Transition teams in Carter's time did no apparent harm, though little good (by definition teams appointed in advance of the department head do little good), perhaps because he personally put a tight ceiling on numbers. Reagan's people somehow lost control of numbers, in part because so many volunteers financed themselves. The results were embarrassing, if not worse. Messrs. Haig and Weinberger, among others, immediately on appointment, dismissed the teams assigned to their departments. This fuels a rumor that the teams had been deliberately created to dispose of undesired activists at no cost to the president-elect. That certainly was the effect in numerous cases, but I doubt the cause: confusion seems to me far likelier.

Outraged civil servants and their friends on Capitol Hill may now press "standards" into the Transition Act to keep the next new president-elect from putting on the payroll "teams" like these--another piece of presidential flexibility endangered by careless use.

The transition in its narrow sense has ended. "Transition" in its broader sense is just beginning. This administration's education is under way. The interlock of operating styles downtown, the consequences of new faces on the Hill, the effects of proposals in practice, the course of press relations, the surprises from abroad, the jolts at home--and the reactions of a White House cast-of-characters newly in roles and new, as such, even to one another--all this is just ahead of us, to be played out in the next year or so, by which time the transition will be over (and the 1984 campaign soon to start). President-watching seems to me as interesting as ever.

Transition as a learning-time still scares me half to death. The new administration is beginning to be criticized on grounds that slowness in filling out subordinate appointments slows the policy-making process, especially in foreign affairs. But what's the hurry? For my money it would be fine if they made no foreign policy for six months to a year!

This organization chart comes from John Kessel, who received it from James Baker, White House Chief of Staff.

THE WHITE HOUSE OFFICE



