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FAULKNER: Smooth transition from one presidency to the next

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OP-ED:

It is assumed that a new president takes control of the executive branch the way a ship's captain takes control of his ship. He enters the pilothouse, surveys the controls, and gives the order to get underway. In reality, most new presidents quickly discover that the controls in their pilothouse are not hooked up to anything and the engine room is still being run by those loyal to the previous administration.

This is why the presidential transition and the planning for that transition are critical to the success of the incoming administration. This is not about continuity; this is about changing things to implement the voters' mandate.

The Reagan transition of 1980-81 was one of the best-run transitions in history. This was because [Ronald Reagan](#) and those around him understood that it would be a great disservice to democracy to begin an administration from a standing start. Planning for Mr. Reagan's transition began on Nov. 13, 1979, the same day he announced for president. Ed Meese was tasked with developing a "think piece" on the transition. By the spring of 1980, Mr. Meese and his longtime friend, Penn James, had completed their think piece. The plan to create a "Planning Task Force" was approved during the Republican Convention in mid-July.

By Labor Day 1980, while the media and public polls showed a close race between then-[President Carter](#) and then-Gov. Reagan, Richard Wirthlin's pollsters were verifying a landslide of historic proportions. On Sept. 8, 1980, Mr. Reagan's transition planning moved from the small, 10-member task force to a major operation within the national campaign staff. I became a part of this transition effort on Sept. 10.

As director of personnel for the Reagan-Bush Campaign, my role was to prepare the personnel process and databases for the transition. Personnel is one portion of the "holy trinity" of transition. To govern effectively, a new president must take immediate control of the money, the law and the people. A new President has to submit his own budget within days of being sworn-in. He must immediately begin redirecting discretionary spending for the current fiscal year. A new president is also stepping-in, midstream, on regulations, policy, negotiations, procurements and procedural manuals that are all in the pipeline from the outgoing administration. Depending on the scope and degree of change from the outgoing administration, many of these legacy projects and systems must be immediately halted, dismantled or redirected.

The Reagan transition anticipated revolutionary change from the Carter era. Therefore, a team of management experts developed critical path analyses for each cabinet department and major agency. Their reports outlined the key offices in each Department and agency that were needed to seize effective operational control of that organization. Some of these were political positions and some were career. In all cases, it was critical for an incoming secretary or agency head to "lock down" their organizations to stop as much of the Carter legacy, as soon as possible. This meant interdicting ongoing operations like the awarding of discretionary grants. In one instance, an acting career official was removed and replaced, in mid-signature, with millions of dollars worth of pending discretionary grants on his desk.

My role was to have as many people ready for office as possible by Jan. 21, 1981. The first step was securing or preparing clearances. I was already working with the Secret Service and the FBI on clearing staff for the campaign office and the advance teams. It was an easy evolution of my duties to make sure each agency transition team had pre-cleared personnel. Some of these were drawn from congressional staffers and government contractors who had current security clearances (especially important for national security and intelligence agencies). As the Planning Task Force, and later the transition administrators, identified agency team members, I updated and reactivated clearances for those who had served under Presidents Nixon or Ford. As inauguration day neared, I moved transition personnel into shadow positions for each agency and prepared certificates of appointment and additional clearances.

By the time Mr. Reagan took his oath of office, he not only had his cabinet confirmed by the Senate, but also had hundreds of political staff poised and ready to fan out into the agencies. On Jan. 21, 1981, legions of Reagan and Bush loyalists took up positions astride the critical flows of information, funding, policy and operations in all the cabinet departments. By the end of Mr. Reagan's first hundred days, we had established similar "beachheads" in every major agency, while the cabinet secretaries were moving ever deeper and taking more detailed control of their respective programs. The Carter era ended and the Reagan revolution began in record time. Mr. Reagan's landslide mandate was well on its way to making history through innumerable tactical and operational decisions made possible by expert planning and implementation of his transition.

If history is any guide, transition planning is already underway by those in the career bureaucracy. The Defense Department and Congress are already holding inaugural planning sessions. Invitations to inaugural parade marching units were probably sent a month ago. The General Services Administration is already leasing space for the Office of the President-Elect and is preparing option packages for computers, telephones, and office layout that will be presented to the winning candidate's team within days of the election. It is imperative that a presidential candidate have someone ready to take that call and they know what to say.

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