
FOREWORD

ANDY GROVE, legendary cofounder of Intel, has written about moments when corporations reach “strategic inflection points.” Once in a while, argues Grove, the external environment changes so much that a company cannot continue doing business as usual. Either it must courageously forge a new path and is able to rise, or it is unable to break old patterns and sinks. Is it not increasingly apparent that the United States has reached its own strategic inflection point?

That is why the next Presidency of the country may be the most fateful in decades. Indeed, it is arguably true that no chief executive will have faced challenges of greater consequence and intractability since Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933. With success, as with FDR, the nation could once again blaze an upward path, but with failure, the United States could accelerate a long slide from greatness—at a perilous price for itself and the world at large.

In these pages, David Abshire captures well the nature of the challenges ahead and provides invaluable counsel for the incoming President and his or her team. Writing in the tradition of Richard Neustadt, whose memos were so helpful to an incoming John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton, Abshire brings history alive, drawing from it wise lessons for

the President immediately upon taking office. Mark this down for required reading in the next White House.

Yet Abshire would be the first to recognize that the success of the first hundred days in office also depends heavily upon the hundred days *before* inauguration. It's the preparation for leadership that can make or break a presidency as much as the exercise of power once in office. Before turning to the larger lessons of this book, then, it is worth reflecting for a moment upon the run-up to January 2009. Three goals seem especially important in today's context.

First, the next president should work right now—during the campaign—to secure a clear mandate when voters go to the polls in November 2008. Experience has repeatedly shown that those candidates who not only win the election but also receive a mandate from the people can achieve far more once in office. FDR swept into Washington with a resounding mandate for change and soon swept Congress with him. In the campaign of 1952, Dwight Eisenhower promised to “go to Korea,” and the support he thus gained enabled him to end an unpopular war without first achieving military victory. LBJ vowed to build a Great Society in the campaign of 1964, securing popular support for a blizzard of social legislation in the years that followed. And every senescent voter who went to the polls in November 1980 knew that Reagan was promising to cut taxes, cut spending, cut regulation, and boost defense and balance the budget; a Democratic Congress soon went along with him. Contrast that with the early, struggling days of Presidents who didn't seek a mandate—from Kennedy and Nixon to the two Bushes and Clinton. Mandates matter.

Candidates in the 2008 election clearly face a dilemma. If they tell the truth to voters about the tough choices ahead—on national security, health care, entitlement reform, climate change, public education, and more—they risk losing their chances for victory. No politician these days likes to talk about sacrifice or

higher taxes. But if a candidate wins by ducking the hard questions, it will be nearly impossible to govern successfully. Voters don't trust Presidents who bait and switch. What to do? Given the magnitude and urgency of the choices ahead, surely the best advice is revealed within history: our best Presidents have been those who have taken prudent but courageous risks.

Second, the next President should be spending time reading not only Abshire and Neustadt but also the classic by Stephen Hess, *Organizing the Presidency*. We think of our Presidents making lonely decisions in the Oval Office. Remember the haunting picture of JFK, standing by himself, bowed, deep in reflection? Certainly there are moments when the President and the President alone must decide. But the best Presidents have always been those who assembled and led the best teams—witness Washington and Lincoln in particular. And in government today—just as in corporations—the quality of the men and women serving a President is more vital than ever.

To our discredit as a nation, we have allowed the appointments process for the Executive branch to break down. In Kennedy's time, an average of two and a half months passed between the time of a Presidential nomination and Congressional confirmation; that span has widened decade after decade so that under Clinton, it reached eight and a half months, and under George W. Bush, no less than nine months. An incoming President may be ready on day one to bark out orders but little will happen because his departments are mere shells. Congress and the Executive branch should long ago have cleared away the bureaucratic obstacles and streamlined the appointments process.

With reform still over the horizon, the Presidential nominee of each political party should act now—before the election—to begin quietly assembling names for potential appointments throughout the Executive branch. Reagan appointed a top-flight New York headhunter, Pen James, to conduct such a process; the

morning after the President-elect announced a cabinet nominee, James was there at the doorstep with a notebook full of names and resumes for the nominee to consider. As a result, Reagan got off to one of the fastest, most effective starts in years.

In this cycle, it will also be important for the President-elect to ensure a wide diversity of talent in supporting roles. Coming off more than a decade of poisonous polarization in Washington and given the tough choices ahead, a new President must be a master at consensus building. There is no better place to start than in appointments. At a time of national peril, as Doris Kearns Goodwin has written, Lincoln carefully assembled a “team of rivals”; so did Churchill in May 1940.

Finally, the winner in November should not wait for Inaugural Day but should seize upon the transition to set the tone and thrust of the next Presidency. History shows that the quality of a transition can change the political landscape, deepening popular support for a President in the crucial, early months of governing or—if badly done—introducing a sense of buyers’ remorse. FDR, Ike, Kennedy, and Reagan also ran excellent transitions and could hit the ground running once in office; by contrast, the teams around Jimmy Carter and Clinton rue to this day opportunities squandered during their transitions.

Setting the tone does not mean that the President-elect should start issuing policy pronouncements. FDR craftily eluded Herbert Hoover’s attempts to draw him into policy-making during the transition, and historians agree that he was smart to do so. FDR knew that the country can have only one President at a time and by holding his cards close, he built up public anticipation for his arrival. What “setting the tone” means can be illustrated by Reagan during his transition: he periodically came to Washington and reached out in highly symbolic ways to leaders in both parties, to leaders of the press (starting with Katherine Graham), and to people on the streets. He showed that he wasn’t going to treat Washington

as an alien place but as his new home and that he and Nancy would be friendly, new neighbors. He put a smile on his presidency long before he moved in.

Consensus building in today's politics may sound like a hopeless dream. We have been fiercely divided for a decade and a half. But the American people seem to sense that serious danger is now lurking about us, and that is when we have traditionally rallied as a people. A President who appeals to what Lincoln called "the better angels in our nature"—who asks for a courageous mandate, who builds a ministry of talents, and governs on behalf of all of the people—is the President who can lead us once again to the lofty heights.

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