

# Perils of Presidential Transition

by Glenn P. Hastedt and Anthony J. Eksterowicz

The first months of a new presidency are a unique time in American politics. It is a period of great presidential activism, with appointments and policy initiatives announced on almost a daily basis. It is a “honeymoon” period, when the president’s relationships with Congress and the media are at least cordial if not deferential. It is a period when campaign promises come due and domestic politics are on everyone’s mind. It can also be a period of great frustration as newly elected presidents struggle with recalcitrant staffs and large, unfamiliar bureaucracies.

It is also a period in which foreign policy challenges and opportunities may arise that demand a presidential response. The extent to which a successful response is crafted heavily depends upon the planning and learning that takes place in advance, during the transition from one administration to another. This period, from the first Tuesday in November until January 20, lasts precisely eleven weeks.

The 2000 presidential election represents a unique challenge for transition efforts. Due to the uncertainty of the electoral vote, open transition efforts were highly criticized. For example, George W. Bush sought to create an image of leadership by openly discussing his possible Cabinet choices in the days immediately following the undecided election—discussions criticized by the media as premature.<sup>1</sup> What such criticism did not recognize, however, is that transition efforts in modern presidential campaigns begin well before Election Day.

The concern over presidential transitions is relatively new, and their consequences for the conduct of American foreign policy have gone largely unexamined. Far more attention is given to the impact of presidential personality, bureaucratic politics, and small-group decision-making procedures. To address this void in the literature, we examine the problems and pitfalls associated with modern presidential transitions as they specifically apply to the making of foreign policy. We argue that a three-part transition syndrome exists in the area of foreign policy that has serious consequences for the conduct of American diplomacy. We conclude by presenting lessons aimed at alleviating the problems encountered by modern presidential administrations in transition.

## DIAGNOSING THE SYNDROME

Since 1935, when the Twentieth Amendment shortened the presidential transition period from sixteen to eleven weeks, there have been just six interparty transitions: the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and Clinton presidencies. If

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we concentrate upon modern administrations, that is, those that have approached this process in a systematic fashion, the number is reduced to four: Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. Of these, only three represent transitions from one party to another: Carter, Reagan, and Clinton.

What can we expect from a new president as he begins to construct a foreign policy? Richard Neustadt is one of the few scholars who has written on the perils facing incoming presidential administrations in their transition phase. He argues that regardless of their background, most first-term presidents and all interparty presidential successors will be new to the policy process at the presidential level. Thus, the presidents-elect are prone to be caught by surprise by events in the domestic or foreign policy realm. Secondly, presidents may face pressures to act in haste: a new president will be eager to show his capacity to act "presidential." Thirdly, most presidents will face the problem of hubris, or the feeling that they or their administration know best how to organize and respond to policy problems.<sup>2</sup>

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These qualities of hubris, haste, and naïveté tend to produce a three-part transition syndrome in the area of foreign policy. First, key policy positions are adopted during the transition period on the basis of broad strategic principles or campaign themes before the realities of governing have a chance to replace the euphoria of victory. Secondly, desiring to separate itself from its predecessor, the incoming administration commits itself to deal with policies before it has established procedures for policy guidance, coordination, or implementation. Thirdly, the tendency to pursue foreign policy options with little regard for how the solution will be viewed in other countries is accentuated because the administration has yet to establish personal or bureaucratic relations with other states.

To see how this syndrome manifests itself in reality, we will examine how Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Clinton set foreign policy priorities and acted on them in the early days of their administrations.

#### **THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION**

*The Mandate.* Jimmy Carter did not have a strong claim to a presidential mandate. He received approximately 50 percent of the vote to Gerald Ford's 48 percent, and 297 electoral votes to Ford's 241. But he did have a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress. In addition, he had an 80 percent public approval rating at the time of his inauguration.<sup>3</sup> Carter campaigned as a Washington outsider pledging to clean up the mess in the nation's capital. Yet, to be effective in terms of policy, he had to work within the confines of Washington's political culture.

*The Transition.* Carter was the first modern president to think systematically about his transition. As early as the summer of 1976, he diverted financial resources from

his campaign to a transition effort under the direction of Jack Watson, who then assembled a staff of approximately fifty people. One of Watson's responsibilities was to compile inventories on personnel, known as the Talent Inventory Program.<sup>4</sup> There was a downside to this early action, however: it created tension between the transition organization and the campaign organization under the direction of Hamilton Jordan. As the power struggle ensued, Jordan began to win and the effort that Watson oversaw, namely, the systematic search for personnel, suffered. In the end, Carter appointed campaign people to White House positions. The recognition of the importance of advanced planning came into conflict with the need to win a presidential campaign.<sup>5</sup>

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The relationship between the incoming and outgoing presidents was, at the outset, quite cold. When the Ford staff attempted to give their counterparts advice and information, it fell on deaf ears.<sup>6</sup> The hubris that Neustadt identifies was probably at work here. There was also the problem of naïveté in the Carter administration. This Georgian who had campaigned as an outsider had no prior understanding of the inner workings of Congress, and his staff had problems dealing with the modern reform-minded Congress in particular. Executive/legislative relationships were strained, and as a result, there was a considerable learning curve.<sup>7</sup> This was attributable in part to the new president's propensity to appoint young and inexperienced Georgian outsiders and campaign workers to White House staff positions.

*Policy Priority: The Panama Canal Treaty.* Carter's first foreign policy initiative, and the subject of his National Security Council's initial Presidential Review Memorandum,<sup>8</sup> was the decision to conclude a Panama Canal Treaty. Just days after the inauguration, on January 27, 1977, the Policy Review Committee met and recommended that a new treaty be negotiated "in good faith and rapidly."<sup>9</sup> In the campaign, the status of the Panama Canal had not been a major point in Carter's foreign policy critiques of the Nixon/Ford administrations. Instead, Carter had sounded a bipartisan theme, indicating that did not foresee relinquishing practical control of the Panama Canal Zone while at the same time endorsing the 1974 Kissinger framework for the future of the canal.

What changed Carter's position by the time he became president-elect? Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security advisor, notes that during the transition, Carter decided that negotiating a new treaty would be an early priority of his new administration. The primary conceptual force behind this turnabout was the Commission on U.S.-Latin American Relations, which called for a new U.S. foreign policy toward the region that recognized Latin American states as active and independent participants in an interdependent world.<sup>10</sup> The commission was quite persuasive: Robert Pastor notes that twenty-seven of its twenty-eight recommendations became administration policy.<sup>11</sup>

In January, the report's chief architect, Sol Linowitz, was designated as Carter's special representative to the treaty negotiations, joining Ellsworth Bunker, who had been given this assignment in 1973. Linowitz was designated as a temporary ambassador with an appointment not to exceed six months. As such, his appointment was not put before the Senate for confirmation. This action, while legal and fitting given the speed with which the Carter administration wished to proceed, was politically naïve and created problems for the administration with the Senate. Some members objected to Linowitz's appointment because of his close ties with the Marine Midland bank. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), for example, argued that a major purpose of a new Panama Canal Treaty was to bail out American banks, which were concerned about Panama's willingness to repay loans.<sup>12</sup> Others were concerned that the six-month limit on Linowitz's tenure placed unwarranted pressure on American negotiators to conclude a treaty and would result in the United States' paying too high a price for a new agreement.<sup>13</sup>

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Also contributing to Carter's sudden embrace of a new Panama Canal treaty were personality factors and the worldviews of key appointees. Pastor, who served in the Carter administration as director of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC), notes that Carter was "a man who delighted in trying to accomplish more than anyone thought possible."<sup>14</sup> With respect to the Panama Canal treaties, Robert Strong adds that Carter was fully aware of the unpopularity of the initiative and that it was fully in keeping with his character to "take on the Panama treaties early in his administration, even though conventional wisdom in Washington had it that Panama was a second-term issue."<sup>15</sup> Still other scholars, such as Richard Melanson, note that Carter deliberately took on hard issues and that for him, the Panama Canal treaties "symbolized not retreat or surrender but the generosity of a strong, confident nation."<sup>16</sup>

Negotiations with Panama stretched through the winter, spring, and summer of 1977. According to participants, Carter did not involve himself heavily in the negotiations. Bunker and Linowitz were given the authority to use their own judgment in resolving U.S.-Panamanian differences so long as the final treaty was "generous, fair, and appropriate."<sup>17</sup> On August 9, one day before his appointment expired, Linowitz announced that an agreement had been reached on two new treaties.

One might expect that Linowitz's limited tenure would have prepared the Carter administration for a speedy resolution of the negotiations. It did not. In fact, the speed with which an agreement was reached created a serious problem for the Carter administration, as a disjuncture arose between process and product. Simply put, the administration was not prepared to engage Congress in a treaty ratification battle. Strong notes that once presented with the agreements, the administration's first move was to lobby for time. The prospect of defeat was very real, and senators were asked

not to commit themselves until the administration had a chance to lay out all of the facts.<sup>18</sup>

The Carter administration's lobbying effort was described as badly handled. Meetings with legislators and staffers were described as "one-way communications" with no effort to solicit advice on how to handle specific treaty issues. Rumors of deal making and vote buying were rampant, and in the end, one of the most powerful arguments put forward to support the treaty was the need to protect the president from an embarrassing defeat.

Panamanian politics also complicated the ratification process. The proposed new treaties met with opposition in Panama, where a national referendum on their acceptance was held. In an effort to garner additional support and minimize some of the unpalatable compromises that negotiators made, government officials publicly put forward interpretations of controversial treaty provisions that were at odds with those given by Bunker and Linowitz. Matters degenerated to the point that a meeting between Carter and Panama's military leader, General Omar Torrijos, was hastily arranged so that a common interpretation could be announced.

In its handling of the Panama Canal treaties, one can see the mutually reinforcing influence of haste, hubris, and naïveté. Carter moved with such speed that his administration was unprepared politically to put the treaty before Congress. Full of self-confidence and a sense of purpose after his electoral victory, he elevated to highest priority an issue that had received little press during the campaign, and in the process raised suspicions both in Washington and throughout the Americas over his intentions.

## THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION

*The Mandate.* Ronald Reagan won a three-way presidential race in 1980 with 51 percent of the popular vote and an impressive 489 electoral votes. The 97<sup>th</sup> Congress was split, however, with Democrats controlling the House 243 to 192 and Republicans controlling the Senate 53 to 47. President Reagan quickly claimed a mandate for governmental reform. Like his predecessor, he campaigned as a Washington outsider attacking "big government" entrenched in the nation's capital.

*The Transition.* The Reagan transition effort was distinguished by its willingness to learn from the Carter team's mistakes. Reagan's pretransition planning occurred earlier than Carter's and was systematically organized. In April 1980, candidate Reagan initiated an ambitious set of task forces to advise him on budget and foreign policies. What began as an operation of seventy quickly grew to 132. Think tanks like The Heritage Foundation also contributed to policy recommendations. To finance such a grand effort, Reagan campaign associates gathered contributions to a "Presidential Transition Trust." This trust raised \$1 million in addition to the monies obtained under the Presidential Transition Act, which specifically provides for presidential transition funding. All told, it was the most aggressive, early, and expensive transition effort, aimed at allowing the new president to hit the ground running. In the

end, approximately 1,500 people were involved in the Reagan transition,<sup>19</sup> including pre- and postelection efforts.

During the transition, the relationship between Reagan and Carter was strained. When the two met after the election, Carter is said to have thought Reagan to be detached and uninterested in the issues that were discussed.<sup>20</sup> However, the relationship between Reagan's transition team and the Carter administration was generally positive. Advice was given, some of which was even taken. However, the Reagan team was, as a whole, more experienced in federal government than the Carter people had been.

Though its rhetoric was heated, the Reagan administration adopted a less activist foreign policy stance in its first months in office than had the Carter administration. Still, the influence of the transition was evident in its handling of two major inherited issues: the sale of the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia and U.S. policy toward El Salvador.

*Policy Priority 1: AWACS.* The first major foreign policy crisis for the new Reagan administration was a self-inflicted blow that had its roots in the transition process. At issue was an \$8.5 million arms sale to Saudi Arabia that involved tanker planes, fuel tanks, and sophisticated air-to-air missiles for 60 F-15 fighters, whose transfer Congress had already approved, and AWACS reconnaissance aircraft.

The basis for the arms deal had been laid in the last half of the Carter administration. In 1978, to overcome congressional opposition to the sale, the Carter administration agreed to place operational restrictions on the aircraft. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown told Congress in May 1978 that "Saudi Arabia has not requested nor do we intend to sell any other systems that would increase the range or enhance the ground attack capability of the F-15s."<sup>21</sup>

The fall of the shah of Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed the strategic picture in the Middle East and led to a new round of negotiations over arms sales between the Carter administration and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia now requested that the F-15s be upgraded, and the Carter administration indicated that it was sympathetic to the plan.<sup>22</sup> Locked in a tight reelection campaign and with sixty-eight senators urging him to reject the proposed arms sales, Carter got Saudi officials to withdraw their request until after the election.

One of Reagan's complaints about Carter's foreign policy had been its moralizing quality. That administration's arms sales policy very much fit this profile. By presidential directive, arms sales were not to be a normal part of American foreign policy, and dollar limits were set.<sup>23</sup> During the campaign, Reagan had opposed placing constraints on arms sales, and once elected, he directed the State Department to come up with a different policy. He placed Under Secretary of State James Buckley in charge of this task. Buckley presented the outlines in a May 1981 speech, and it became official policy in July, when the Reagan administration rescinded Carter's Presidential Directive 13 and put its own guidelines in place.<sup>24</sup>

In its haste to act, and perhaps overconfident of the merits of its proposed change in policy, the Reagan administration did not wait for Buckley's review to be com-

pleted or for its findings to be approved before making decisions on specific arms sales. It approved several sales that the Carter administration had not acted upon, among them the proposed Saudi arms sale. During the transition, incoming secretary of state Alexander Haig met with Carter administration officials to talk about the Saudi sale. Press reports indicate that the latter offered to put the sale before a post-election lame duck session of Congress in order to save the new Reagan administration from having to deal with what was known to be an unpopular proposal.<sup>25</sup>

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Nothing came of the Carter administration's offer, and on February 25, 1981, Reagan announced that he had approved the sale of additional weapons systems and refinements to Saudi Arabia. Michael Klare states that Reagan was surprised by the opposition with which his announcement was met.<sup>26</sup> Under pressure from lobbyists who argued that the proposed arms sale would provide Saudi Arabia with an offensive capability that threatened Israeli security, Reagan first scaled back the package and then announced on March 2 that he would put it on hold while his advisors took a closer look at the proposed sale.

In April, with Buckley's review still incomplete, the Reagan administration announced that it would supply Saudi Arabia not only with the requested upgrades but also with five AWACS, seven tankers, and twenty-two ground radar stations. Once again, Klare states, Reagan was caught off guard by the opposition to his proposal.<sup>27</sup> This view was echoed by many in the Senate, including supporters of the sale, who acknowledged that "the administration failed from the outset to recognize its repercussions."<sup>28</sup> So intense was the opposition that Reagan did not formally notify Congress of the arms sale until October.

Visible here are two hallmarks that we have identified of a foreign policy in transition: the new administration's haste to put its own stamp on policy and its unfamiliarity with the legislative environment. These factors exacted a toll on the administration's lobbying effort. Senator John Glenn, who voted against the arms sale, characterized the effort by remarking, "I know of no one on either side who does not think this has been grossly mishandled."<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, Congress approved the sale by a vote of 52 to 48. The argument was similar to that during the Panama Canal Treaty debate: to defeat Reagan on his first major foreign policy initiative could cripple U.S. foreign policy for the remainder of his term.

Reagan's embrace of the Saudi arms sale appears largely to have been based on two factors consistent with the transition syndrome. First, as mentioned above, was the new administration's desire to separate itself from the previous administration by quick action. Secondly, the Reagan administration's strategic outlook gave primacy to the need to bolster key U.S. allies and reestablish American leadership. Trying to explain the Reagan administration's position, Henry Kissinger argued that for it to

reject the AWACS sale “would have involved unacceptable costs in the relationship to Saudi Arabia.” Larry Speaks, Reagan’s press spokesman, stated that Reagan felt the sale was crucial given the “serious deterioration over the last year or so of security conditions in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region and the growing threats to our friends from the Soviets and other pressures.”<sup>30</sup>

The emphasis on strategic principles as a guide to action came at the expense of attention to the political realities of the proposed arms sale. J. Brian Atwood, who lobbied Congress on behalf of the State Department during the Carter administration, observed that Reagan might not have realized the political costs of letting the opposition become so organized. Moreover, he observed, “a lot of those senators who reversed themselves under great pressure [to support the sale] have been embarrassed by this whole thing and they’re going to suffer the political consequences of it.”<sup>31</sup> He predicted that in the future, they would be less willing to take risks for Reagan.<sup>32</sup> At least as far as Middle East arms sales were concerned, Atwood’s prediction was more accurate than those that saw the foundation for a new foreign policy consensus: between 1983 and 1985, three arms sales packages to Lebanon had to be withdrawn due to congressional opposition, and a 1985 arms sale to Saudi Arabia was voted down in the House.

Lastly, it can be noted that the strategic arguments put forward in support of the arms sales failed to materialize in large part because the administration did not consider how the policy would be received abroad. U.S.-Israeli relations became strained. Prime Minister Menachem Begin told the State Department that the arms sale was a “serious threat” to his country’s security. Israel’s June 1981 raid on an Iraqi nuclear reactor and July 1981 raid on PLO headquarters in Beirut were described as undertaken in part to demonstrate Israel’s frustration with the Reagan administration’s efforts to attract the support of Arab states.<sup>33</sup> The arms sale did not have the intended effect of increasing U.S. influence with Saudi Arabia. In 1982, the Saudis rejected Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger’s proposal that Saudi Arabia actively join in support of Reagan’s Middle East policy of promoting regional consensus opposed to the expansion of Soviet influence in the area. Moreover, Saudi leaders refused to enter into discussions on placing limits on how the AWACS might be used.<sup>34</sup>

*Policy Priority 2: El Salvador.* Central America had gradually worked its way up the Carter administration’s foreign policy agenda. The NSC met five times between September 1978 and July 1979 to deal with the growing influence of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Relations between the new Sandinista government and the Carter administration had soured to the point that in his final days in office, Carter suspended the final installment of a \$75 million aid package and authorized a secret intelligence finding that permitted the CIA to support anti-Sandinista forces within Nicaragua.

Melanson observes that “presidential candidate Ronald Reagan may have lacked foreign policy experience but he surely did not lack opinions about America’s role in the world.”<sup>35</sup> And one area where Reagan had definite opinions was Latin America. As Pastor notes, “to Reagan, the Monroe Doctrine was a living guide of almost spiritual importance.”<sup>36</sup> One of the most important aspects of the transition syndrome is



that it allows such opinions to become the basis of policy without subjecting them to the usual give-and-take of the policymaking process.

Reagan's personal views were reinforced by a report issued by the Committee of Santa Fe in July 1980.<sup>37</sup> Formed to correct what it saw as the leftist bias of the Commission on U.S.-Latin American Relations, the group warned that the Caribbean was becoming a "Marxist-Leninist lake" and that developments throughout the region constituted a threat to U.S. security interests. The 1980 Republican platform endorsed the committee's analysis, using similar language to criticize Carter's Latin American policies. All five of its leading authors would join the new administration.

According to Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, Reagan "wanted an immediate plan on the disastrous unraveling of central authority in Central America."<sup>38</sup> El Salvador became the first test case for reversing the course of American foreign policy in the region. In February 1981, the State Department issued a White Paper based on documents that it considered authoritative, which indicated that in late 1980 the Soviet Union and Cuba had agreed to deliver tons of weapons to the Marxist-led guerrillas in El Salvador.

Spearheading the administration's new approach to Latin America was Secretary of State Haig, who saw the "morning of administrations" as the best time to send foreign policy signals, particularly to the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> Haig remarked on the risk taken by the Soviet Union in support of the revolutionaries. Describing the problem as one of "externally-managed and orchestrated interventionism," he promised to "deal with it at its source."<sup>40</sup>

The White Paper sparked much controversy. On March 6, 1981, *New York Times* columnist Flora Lewis reported on the existence of a twenty-nine-page dissent paper drawn up in November 1980 by the NSC, State Department, Defense Department, and CIA personnel. In June, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* published articles criticizing the White Paper for questionable translations and misidentifying authorship on various articles. Most serious were questions about the Soviet Union's true role in supporting the guerrillas. Eventually, U.S. officials acknowledged that the administration had "overreacted" to the evidence in blaming the Soviet Union, but they defended the correctness of the White Paper's central conclusion: Cuba and Nicaragua did give aid to El Salvadoran guerrillas in November and December 1980.<sup>41</sup>

Congress also reacted with skepticism to the Reagan administration's attempt to redirect American foreign policy in Central America. The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Programs approved Reagan's request to shift additional military funding to El Salvador by a vote of eight to seven. The vote was a harbinger of the strained relationship that would settle in between the Reagan White House and Congress over Nicaragua. As Bruce Jentleson notes, the "virtual war between the branches" on Nicaragua was not typical of congressional-executive interactions during the Reagan administration, nor was it inevitable.<sup>42</sup> It was the product of "highly counterproductive strategies both sides opted for."

Lastly, this attempt to reverse American foreign policy did not reflect the full reality of what was transpiring in El Salvador. The problem was not simply that of a

government challenged by left-wing guerrillas, but of an authoritarian government under siege from both the Left and the Right. From a military point of view, the greater threat came from the Right, with the leftist guerrillas' having been defeated in a January 1981 offensive. Rightist forces interpreted the singular focus on the leftist challenge as a statement of support for their position. Roberto D'Aubuisson, a right-wing leader, told the press that based on his conversations with Reagan administration officials, the United States "would not be bothered by a takeover." The State Department quickly moved to counter this interpretation of U.S. foreign policy but the White House was less firm, stating, "We don't have a view on that."<sup>43</sup>

One can see all the aspects of the foreign policy transition syndrome at work here. Spurred by Haig's conviction that time was of the essence, the newly formed Reagan administration moved so quickly on El Salvador that it disregarded facts and confidently expected that its word would carry the day. When this did not happen, the administration found itself locked in the first phase of a long-running battle with Congress over control of U.S. policy toward Latin America.

#### THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

*The Mandate.* President Clinton received 43.3 percent of the popular vote to George Bush's 37.7 percent and Ross Perot's 19 percent. The electoral victory was larger, with Clinton's receiving 370 electoral votes to Bush's 168. This was an election with a disillusioned electorate, and while Clinton claimed a mandate for change, the numbers belied much of that claim, as did his relatively low personal popularity ratings for a new president. The Clinton congressional coattails were nonexistent. Ten House seats were lost in the 1992 election, leaving the new president with 258 Democrats in the House and 57 in the Senate, the lowest margin of congressional Democratic support since 1966.

*The Transition.* The Clinton-Gore Pre-Transition Planning Foundation took action during the fall campaign to assess Carter's mistakes and Reagan's successes.<sup>44</sup> Even earlier, during the summer of 1992, Democrats with experience in previous White Houses organized to help Clinton with his potential transition to the presidency. James Pfiffner notes that the Clinton campaign was not actively involved in these efforts but did establish a low-level effort of its own.<sup>45</sup> Overall, however, very little work was accomplished on crucial personnel issues during the pre-election period.

Even after the Clinton victory, a transition team was slow in forming. The effort was composed of three levels or branches. The *policy* branch consisted of four "cluster" coordinators for economic, domestic, health, and national security policy.<sup>46</sup> An *operations* branch was composed of ten cluster coordinators overseeing work on such areas as economics and international trade, science and space, justice and civil rights, etc.<sup>47</sup> Third was a *personnel* group under the direction of Richard Riley. These cluster teams were slow to organize. For example, with only thirty-two working days left in the transition, most of the ten operations clusters had not yet initiated their status reviews of government agencies and departments.<sup>48</sup>

The appointment process was also slow, due, in large part, to Clinton's insistence on being directly involved in the appointments and his agonizingly slow and methodical deliberations over his own candidates.<sup>49</sup> Further complicating the transition process was the decision to conduct it from Little Rock, Arkansas, a move that some in the administration retrospectively regretted.<sup>50</sup>

There was an effort by members the Clinton transition team to meet with their departing counterparts shortly after the election while President-Elect Clinton met with President Bush. The Bush people presented a brief primer on personnel issues. One of the Bush participants noted that the Clinton people asked little and made no demands.<sup>51</sup>

*Policy Priority 1: Gays in the Military.* While conventionally treated as a domestic policy issue, the question of gays in the military was also very much a foreign policy problem. It cut to the heart of questions about military effectiveness and spilled over into a broader debate over Clinton's capability to serve as commander-in-chief.

At a 1991 campaign stop at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, presidential candidate Bill Clinton indicated that if elected, he would lift the ban on homosexuals in the military. Clinton's statement was made in response to a student's question and, according to Clinton, was offered without prior consultation with campaign aides or consideration of the broader issues involved. Nevertheless, that promise soon became a staple on the campaign trail. In responding to a January 1992 questionnaire, the candidate indicated his intention to sign an executive order lifting the ban and his belief that "patriotic Americans should have the right to serve the country as a member of the armed forces, without regard to sexual or affectional orientation."<sup>52</sup> His first formal written statement on the subject came in February 1992, when he wrote, "People should be free to pursue their personal lives without government interference."<sup>53</sup> A campaign position paper called for "an immediate repeal of the ban on gays and lesbians serving in the United States Armed Forces."<sup>54</sup>

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### **Instead of circumventing the opposition, the Clinton administration's efforts to act quickly only served to reinforce congressional fear.**

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Clinton's potentially explosive campaign promise generated remarkably little negative publicity during the postconvention phase of the campaign. All of that changed shortly after the election. Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) voiced their dissent through retired Admiral William J. Crowe, who publicly supported Clinton during the campaign but opposed lifting the ban, and Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-OK). Reportedly, they urged Clinton to appoint a presidential commission to examine the issue over a one- or two-year period.<sup>55</sup>

The tone of these discussions was not conducive to compromise. Clinton's transition team placed John Holum, a Washington lawyer, in charge of preparing a plan for lifting the ban. He met with General Colin Powell, the JCS, and other military

leaders; Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn (D-GA); and gay rights groups. Holum's position was that he "wasn't there to ask whether it should be done . . . [but] how it could be done to minimize the impact on combat effectiveness."<sup>56</sup> Such a stance highlights the new administration's hubris and inflexibility. Holum's report was finished in early January and sent to Little Rock for Clinton to read. It contained warnings of the danger ahead by two of Secretary of Defense Les Aspin's advisors. They urged the new administration to develop a strategy for heading off the impending conflict with the Congress.

Early legislative action on this issue will be detrimental . . . to the president's long-term relations with Congress, his relationship with the military as commander-in-chief and may hinder the intended policy of change.<sup>57</sup>

The incoming administration's early efforts to lift the ban on gays in the military were also hampered by its naïveté about the nature of governing. Concerned primarily with keeping its campaign promise, the Clinton administration felt compelled to move quickly out of a fear that conservative Republicans and Democrats in Congress would write the existing administrative ban on gays into law by attaching it as an amendment to an early piece of legislation. Instead of circumventing the opposition, the Clinton administration's efforts to act quickly only served to reinforce congressional fear about the consequences of this move. The new administration's reassurances to gay rights groups of Clinton's continued support further reduced the room for compromise with Congress.

Aspin's aides recommended a meeting among President Clinton, Senator Nunn, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, and Senator Ted Kennedy to plot out a strategy. No such meeting took place. In fact, Clinton did not meet face-to-face with the JCS on this issue until January 18, a delay that angered the chiefs and their supporters in Congress, who felt that they should have been consulted from the outset about a major change in military policy. Aspin himself urged Clinton to approach this meeting not as a negotiation but "as the first step in the consultation that you have promised."<sup>58</sup>

Senator Nunn, without whose support the administration had no chance of succeeding, was reportedly angered by Clinton's failure to consult Congress; and Senator Dan Coats (R-IN), who led the Republican opposition to lifting the ban on gays in the military, complained about the new administration's "in-your-face" approach:

During Aspin's confirmation they said they would consult and hold hearing . . . it was really a surprise when the president simply announced he was going to do it immediately.<sup>59</sup>

The need for compromise was not lost on all members of the new administration. The voice of Secretary Aspin, a veteran of Capitol Hill, is conspicuous. He noted on January 18 that

the votes in Congress, if it comes to it, are overwhelmingly against it. . . . The point you've got to understand is that as a practical matter we are not going to

be able to force this down the throat of the Congress. . . . If Congress does not like it, it isn't going to happen.<sup>60</sup>

In the end, Clinton compromised and set July 15 as the date for a formal executive order lifting the ban on gays in the military. His action allowed Majority Leader Mitchell to postpone any votes on the subject with the argument that the administration's position was not yet in place. The six-month breather also allowed for congressional hearings and for continued negotiations between Aspin and the JCS. These tense meetings produced the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, an agreement under which soldiers are not asked about their sexual orientation but would be dismissed for homosexual conduct.

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### **The foreign policy issue that offered the most openings to criticize the Bush record was Bosnia.**

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Clinton's naïveté about the process of governing and building a consensus in Washington and his highly developed sense of confidence in his own political abilities were very much in evidence in the handling of this issue. Clinton proceeded initially as if campaign promises would automatically and painlessly translate into policy by virtue of his electoral victory.

*Policy Priority 2: Bosnia.* Vacillation is a common critique of the Clinton administration's foreign policy, and its policy toward Bosnia was no exception. However, Clinton's early Bosnia policy shows the influence of electoral politics and the transition. In fact, the Clinton transition can be read as a missed opportunity to control and channel the influence of Clinton's personality on foreign policy.

Sandy Berger, candidate Clinton's advisor on national security affairs, correctly predicted that President Bush would try to portray Clinton as inexperienced and unqualified to deal with foreign policy problems. To counteract this argument, Clinton brought together a small group to work on national security issues. Its core consisted of Berger, Anthony Lake, and Richard Holbrooke. They agreed that Clinton should follow a two-pronged strategy: criticize the Bush record where it was weak and adopt a more forward-looking position on some foreign policy issues than did Bush.<sup>61</sup> Holbrooke notes that in the summer of 1992, the issue that offered the most openings on both counts was Bosnia.<sup>62</sup>

Clinton proceeded to attack the Bush administration on Bosnia for "turning its back on violations of basic human rights" and "being slow on the uptake," and he promised to "make the United States the catalyst for a collective stand against aggression."<sup>63</sup> Fearing that the actions of a Clinton presidency might not match its campaign rhetoric, in August 1992 Holbrooke wrote a memo to Clinton urging him to adopt a more vigorous policy against Serb aggression and counselling him that the choice was not between "Vietnam and doing nothing."<sup>64</sup>

Holbrooke notes that after the election he had little contact with his campaign colleagues, who were now deep in the transition process. Returning from a December trip to Sarajevo and Zagreb, Holbrooke wrote another memo, this time to the soon-

to-be National Security Advisor Lake and Secretary of State Warren Christopher, one week before inauguration. He was told by associates that the Clinton team was deeply immersed in its own discussions over Bosnia and did not want to hear anyone else's views.<sup>65</sup> As predicted, no one responded. Weeks into the new administration, Holbrooke contacted Lake to find out if the memo had been received. He was told that it was "useful" but that some of his recommendations "undercut us at the U.N."<sup>66</sup>

On Bosnia, the subject that preoccupied the president-elect's foreign policy team was whether or not to support the Vance-Owen peace plan. Bush had supported the plan, and in an interview on January 13, 1993, Clinton indicated that he did as well.<sup>67</sup> Lake also voiced support for the plan just prior to his taking office.<sup>68</sup> Yet, beneath these public pronouncements of support, disunity existed.

Internal conflict over what to do about Bosnia came from three sources. The first can be found in the outlooks of the key members of Clinton's foreign policy team. Secretary Aspin wanted to do as little as possible on Bosnia; Lake favored strong action; and Christopher "was on different sides at different times."<sup>69</sup> Secondly, there was a desire on the part of many people surrounding Clinton to distance the new administration as far as possible from the Carter administration, of which Cyrus Vance was a part. Elizabeth Drew notes that "generally speaking, people who served in the Carter administration were not held in high regard" when it came to filling cabinet posts.<sup>70</sup> David Owen writes that Vance was seen as an "old-style Democrat," something the "new-style Clinton Democrats" wanted to put behind them:

Clinton, himself, and the people in the White House closest to him, unlike Christopher, Tony Lake, and Les Aspin, barely knew Cy Vance. They were from the South and West, were not influenced by the East Coast foreign affairs establishment and were determined not to be labelled a Carter Mark II administration.<sup>71</sup>

The third source of internal discord on Bosnia was the general sense of hubris that is so common following victory. A senior White House official noted:

There was a legend developing from the fact that we won . . . and it carried over into the administration. It suggested that we were more masters of our own fate than reality allows. . . . We weren't ready—emotionally, intellectually, organizationally, or substantively.<sup>72</sup>

That the emerging Bosnia policy would be driven by general strategic principles and personal beliefs with little attention paid to the ongoing diplomatic initiatives surfaced in a February 1, 1993, meeting between Owen and Christopher in New York—a meeting that Owen describes as "disillusioning." He comments that as the discussion progressed it became "painfully apparent" that in spite of the administration's criticisms of the Vance-Owen peace plan, Christopher knew "very little about the details."<sup>73</sup> Owen attributes part of Christopher's ignorance to the time demands of running the transition operation in Little Rock following the election.<sup>74</sup>

The Clinton administration's first major decision on Bosnia was made on February 5, 1993, and was arrived at in a rather casual fashion.<sup>75</sup> Policymaking on Bosnia

was the province of the Principals Committee, whose core members were Lake, Aspin, Christopher, Powell, CIA Director James Woolsey, and UN ambassador Madeline Albright. On that day, at the conclusion of the third principals meeting on Bosnia, Clinton joined the discussion and indicated that the United States must take the lead in the humanitarian effort. He then made a number of decisions, including becoming directly involved in humanitarian action; asking the UN to authorize a no-fly zone, and trying to get economic sanctions tightened.<sup>76</sup>

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### **The impact of decisions did not match the rhetoric surrounding them.**

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The impact of these decisions did not match the rhetoric surrounding them, and so a series of meetings were held through April in which more options were formulated. Clinton, however, kept postponing a decision. At the same time, the president's public pronouncements about the moral need for strong action were creating pressures to act.

The two primary options to emerge were 1) a combination of lifting the embargo and launching bombing strikes against the Serbs and 2) a ceasefire and protection of the Muslim enclaves. A five-hour May 1 meeting at which Clinton had committed himself to making a decision led to the selection of the "lift and strike" option. The decision apparently was made with little regard for the difficulty of selling this policy to U.S. allies. Christopher was immediately dispatched to Europe to try to do so. He had been warned by British and French leaders not to arrive with a *fait accompli*, especially if it was the lift-and-strike option, and his mission met with little success. The newly minted U.S. policy already was unraveling in the White House itself, as Clinton began having second thoughts.<sup>77</sup> With little support for lift-and-strike at home or abroad, after his return from Europe Christopher "moved methodically to shut down the Bosnia policy."<sup>78</sup>

### **LESSONS**

*Transition.* All three transitions under scrutiny here are of the interparty type and are similar in many respects. All three presidents were outsiders campaigning against the Washington establishment and claiming a mandate for change. All three presidents had trouble, to varying degrees, assimilating to the Washington political culture and in particular dealing with an aggressive Congress. All three were unfamiliar with the process of forming policy on a national scale. All suffered setbacks and mistakes in foreign policy during their first year. While the causes of these mistakes can be found in many quarters, for each of these administrations, the manner in which the transition was handled proved to be an important contributing factor.

*Foreign Policy Similarities.* The cases examined here represent a cross section of the foreign policy issues facing recent presidents. They include relations with Third World states (Panama, Saudi Arabia, and El Salvador), a foreign policy problem laden with domestic overtones (gays in the military), and a post-cold war dilemma over

intervention (Bosnia). In spite of the considerable variation that can be found in the details of each case, similarities emerge.

As suggested at the outset, interparty transitions are at particular risk for the foreign policy transition syndrome. Key decisions are made during the campaign and transition period. Personality plays a role here, but it is also clear that the transition is a time when nongovernmental organizations can be particularly influential. The Commission on U.S.-Latin American Relations influenced Carter's Panama Canal decision; during Reagan's transition, the Committee of Santa Fe played a similar role. Clinton's decision to reform the policy on gays in the military was made with little forethought during the campaign, and his Bosnia policy was formed largely with an eye toward distancing himself from the Bush and Carter administrations.

Secondly, key decisions were made before the foreign policy team and decision-making process were in place. Reagan, for example, made key decisions on arms sales before the Buckley review was completed. Clinton acted on gays in the military without consulting leading military officers who opposed the move, and his transition team in Washington had soured on the Vance-Owen peace plan even as top appointees continued to voice their support for it.

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### **Time and again, new presidents have sought delays in order to allow process to catch up with policy.**

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New administrations, perhaps heady with victory, are often surprised by the opposition their initiatives encounter in Congress. Neither Reagan nor Clinton appeared prepared for the hostile response with which their policy initiatives were met. Carter appeared to realize that a new Panama Canal treaty would be unpopular, but he was no more prepared than other presidents to deal with Congress. Time and again, new presidents have sought delays in order to allow process to catch up with policy.

Lastly, when crucial decisions were being made, scant attention was paid to how the new policy would be received in the affected state or whether the policy made sense in terms of the realities of the situation. Power and size did not make a difference here. The views of the Soviet Union and major European allies were no more considered than were those of Panama, and the realities of politics in El Salvador were ignored just as easily as those in the Middle East.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**


Future presidents-elect, including the one preparing to take office as this issue goes to press, must acknowledge that the transition period is becoming more important. It should no longer be taken for granted as a honeymoon; it must be managed well. The United States is the sole remaining superpower, and other countries look to it for leadership on many matters, whether the government is in a transition period or not.

It is clear from this review that there exists a clear dichotomy between policy and process. As such, any efforts to avoid the perils associated with early foreign policy



initiatives must address both sides of the problem. Even prior to the election, the candidates should devote time to learning the foreign policy process. Those persons who have been involved in transitions or who have written about them suggest that candidates' advisers and staff members are much more willing to discuss process rather than policy at this early stage.<sup>79</sup> These efforts must be bipartisan in nature and include experts and current representatives from the Congress. They should be available to both presidential candidates and to their transition teams (if in place) and campaign staffs.

It is only after the election that the focus should shift to specific foreign policy problems and detailed programs. Transition teams should be formalized early and begin work on appointments quickly. During this time, a foreign policy summit should be held on the model of Clinton's economic summit, which explored various options for the president's economic agenda. The intent would be to garner knowledge for policy options that would later be submitted for legislative action. During the post-election transition phase, the number of participants must be enlarged to include members of interest groups, experts, and the people writ large. These meetings would provide an important pre-governing forum for reviewing and critiquing the policies advocated by the various foreign policy advisory groups that inevitably emerge during the campaign.

Presidential transitions are very fragile periods. The time frame of eleven weeks is simply inadequate for extensive planning in the policy or process areas. Presidential candidates need to do all they can to ensure an orderly, organized, and politically profitable transition. They should strive to begin the process early and focus on issues of political process. The emphasis in this early phase should be upon learning the Washington policy process. If presidential candidates are successful, then their presidencies can begin on a confident note. If they are unsuccessful, foreign policy issues may overwhelm them and their presidencies. 

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, William Schneider on CNN's *Inside Politics*, November 8, 2000; and Brian McGrory, "Both Rivals Failing Test," *The Boston Globe*, November 14, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Neustadt, "Presidential Transitions: Are the Risks Rising?" *Miller Center Journal*, 1994, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Larry Berman, *The New American Presidency* (Boston, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1987), p. 312.

<sup>4</sup> James P. Pfiffner, "Taking Over the Government: Key Tools for a New Administration," in *Some Views From the Campus*, vol. IV of *Papers on Presidential Transitions in Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Md: University of American Press, 1987), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Carl M. Brauer, *Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower Through Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 180–183.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> William F. Mullen, "Perceptions of Carter's Legislative Success and Failures: Views from the Hill and the Liaison Staff," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 1982, pp. 522–533.

<sup>8</sup> Robert A. Pastor, *Whirlpool: U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Latin America and the Caribbean* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Commission on U.S.-Latin American Relations, *The Americas in a Changing World* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1974).

- <sup>11</sup> Pastor, *Whirlpool*, p. 45.
- <sup>12</sup> William L. Furlong, "Negotiations and Ratifications of the Panama Canal Treaties," in *Congress, the Presidency, and American Foreign Policy*, John Spanier and Joseph Noguee, Eds. (New York: Pergamon, 1981), p. 81.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Robert A. Strong, *Decisions and Dilemmas: Case Studies in Presidential Foreign Policy Making* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1992, p. 158).
- <sup>16</sup> Richard A. Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus: American Foreign Policy Since Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 102.
- <sup>17</sup> Strong, *Decisions and Dilemmas*, p. 146.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Frederick C. Mosher *et al.*, *Presidential Transitions and Foreign Affairs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), pp. 58–59.
- <sup>20</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 105–106.
- <sup>21</sup> Michael Klare, *American Arms Supermarket* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), p. 149.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3, 42.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 150
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- <sup>28</sup> *Reagan's First Year* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1982), p. 20.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Klare, *American Arms Supermarket*, p. 151, 153.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153–154.
- <sup>32</sup> *Reagan's First Year*, p. 20.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 45
- <sup>34</sup> Klare, *American Arms Supermarket*, p. 154.
- <sup>35</sup> Melanson, *Reconstructing Consensus*, p. 138.
- <sup>36</sup> Pastor, *Whirlpool*, p. 66.
- <sup>37</sup> The Committee of Santa Fe, *A New Inter-American Policy for the Eighties* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Inter-American Security, 1980).
- <sup>38</sup> Roland Evans and Robert Novak, *The Reagan Revolution* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), p.165.
- <sup>39</sup> Alexander Haig, *Caveat* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), p. 96.
- <sup>40</sup> Pastor, *Whirlpool*, p. 68.
- <sup>41</sup> Glenn P. Hastedt, *American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, Future*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2000), pp. 154–155.
- <sup>42</sup> Bruce Jentleson, "American Diplomacy: Around the World and Along Pennsylvania Avenue," *A Question of Balance: The President, the Congress, and Foreign Policy*, Thomas Mann, Ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1990).
- <sup>43</sup> Pastor, *Whirlpool*, p. 69.
- <sup>44</sup> Al Kamen, "Some Expert Advice for Clinton: Get it Right Before Jan. 20," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 1992, p. A21.
- <sup>45</sup> James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running*, 2nd ed. (Lawrenceville: University of Kansas Press, 1996), pp. 164–165.
- <sup>46</sup> "Who's Who in President-Elect Clinton's Transition Team," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1992, p. A25.
- <sup>47</sup> "Clinton's Cluster Coordinators," *The Washington Post*, November 26, 1992, p. A27.
- <sup>48</sup> "Talking to Those Who Have Been There," *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Devroy, "Bush, Clinton Confer on the Transition of Power," *The Washington Post*, November 19, 1992, p. A1.

<sup>52</sup> Ann Devroy, "President Opens Military to Gays," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 1993, p. A11.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Barton Gellman, "Clinton Says He'll Consult on Military Gay Policy," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1992, p. A1.

<sup>56</sup> Dan Balz, "A Promise That Held Inevitable Collision," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 1993, p. A6.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Barr, "Hill Backs Gay Ban, Aspin Says," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1993, p. A1.

<sup>59</sup> Ann Devroy, "Joint Chiefs Voice Concern to Clinton on Lifting Gay Ban," *The Washington Post*, January 23, 1993, p. A1.

<sup>60</sup> Barr, "Hill Backs Gay Ban, Aspin Says."

<sup>61</sup> Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 40–41.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 41–42.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1995), p. 96.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Drew, *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 142.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp. 28–29.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>73</sup> Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, p. 106.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 106–107.

<sup>75</sup> Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 146.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 197–198.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>79</sup> Victor Kirk, "After the Victory," *The National Journal*, November 28, 1988, pp. 2390–2391.