

FOUR WAYS FOR THE US PRESIDENT-ELECT TO HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

By Sharon Marcil and Meldon Wolfgang

ON NOVEMBER 9TH, 2016, the transition to the White House will officially begin for either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. After nearly 18 months of campaigning, the president-elect will have only 73 days to prepare to take the helm of one of the largest entities in the world: the US federal government. Considering the scale and complexity of the task at hand, every hour counts.

How can the president-elect best utilize those 73 days? It's an extremely daunting task, but he or she has the luxury of learning from those who have gone before. We have reviewed transition records dating to Ronald Reagan's presidency to analyze how four of the past five presidents used this transition time.¹ We also looked at the early-stage transition plans of those presidents' opponents, who ultimately lost the election. Through this research, we identified four recommendations for how the upcoming president-elect can best use the transition period to prepare to effectively lead the nation after the inauguration. Specifically, the present-elect should:

- Create and refine the new administration's policy agenda
- Pick a team to help execute the agenda
- Set the tone for interactions with the media and Congress
- Recover from the exhausting campaign

These recommendations offer clear guidance on how the next president-elect can learn from the successes and challenges of the past to ease the changeover in the White House.

Create and Refine the New Administration's Policy Agenda

The first thing that the president-elect needs to do is to determine policy objectives for the next four years. Candidates often make promises during a campaign, but fulfilling those promises will involve varying degrees of difficulty. The new administration needs to set priorities with the understanding that not everything will be

accomplished in the initial term of the presidency.

Fundamentally, there are two approaches to developing a policy agenda: narrow and deep, or shallow and wide. In 2012, Mitt Romney’s transition team planned a narrow and deep approach that focused on just four policy priorities. In comparison, Barack Obama’s transition team took a broader approach, looking for quick-win opportunities to make improvements in each agency. While each approach has its pros and cons, the campaign and transition teams must be clear on which approach has been selected and align on the policy goals of the new administration.

Refining the policy agenda for the new administration is an iterative process that begins before the election. The goals and objectives should continue to be refined during the transition period as the teams begin to learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of each agency and how they would help or hinder the fulfillment of campaign promises.

Pick a Team to Help Execute the Agenda

Once the agenda is established, the president-elect should use the transition period to quickly fill the new administration’s leadership roles. As we have recommended in the past, the president-elect should aim to submit 100 nominations to Congress by Inauguration Week and get up to 500 appointments approved within the first seven months of taking office. (See “Why The US Presidential-Transition Process Should Start Now,” BCG article, September 2016.) Getting the right people in place, however, is infinitely more important than filling the roles with just anyone. Taking a few critical steps will allow the new administration to do so.

First, the new administration needs to gain a basic understanding of what’s required for each of the various roles under consideration. While this may seem self-evident to business leaders, each new administration has to essentially recreate position de-

scriptions for each appointee. Many positions require a specific skill set rather than a detailed understanding of the topic on which a particular agency focuses. Figuring out whether a role requires a specific type of expertise (for example, leadership experience for a cabinet secretary, operational management expertise for a deputy secretary, or topic expertise for key policy positions) is critically important to getting the right people in key roles.

Second, the president-elect needs self-awareness and an objective perception of his or her own strengths and weaknesses in order to pick leaders who complement those characteristics.

Third, although cabinet secretaries are often confirmed quickly, it typically takes 60 to 90 days to get subsequent senior team members approved and on board. Rather than nominating appointees in a cascading fashion—as most prior administrations have done—the president-elect should consider sending slates of nominees to the Senate for approval, so that the nucleus of the leadership team is established in critical agencies all at once. Still, if getting the full slate of cabinet secretaries in place as quickly as possible comes at the expense of installing policy and functional teams in agencies with ambitious change agendas, there will be a big loss in effectiveness.

Finally, the new administration should determine how well each agency is currently performing to better understand what type of leader is best suited for it. For example, if an agency is struggling and needs a major reset, the president-elect should appoint a secretary with the experience to lead a major change-management effort.

It takes significant time to identify, vet, and select political appointees, and these tasks occur during a period in which the president-elect faces myriad other obligations. (See Exhibit 1.) Moreover, this process has become more rigorous in the past several decades, requiring more and more time and resources during the transition period. As such, given recent past experience, presidents-elect should be ready for at least

Recover from the Exhausting Campaign

Finally, the president-elect should use the transition period to rest up before the first day in the Oval Office. All four of the presidents we analyzed spent about one-third of their transition periods privately, away from public duties, either on weekends or on vacation. In fact, doing so was the second biggest activity to occupy their time, after meeting with advisors or receiving security briefings. Most presidents-elect opted to spend the bulk of this time in their home state, rather than in Washington, DC. (See Exhibit 2.) In fact, most transition teams established a two-office approach, in which a core group in the capital began to build the foundation necessary for governing. While the transition is still a very busy time for a president-elect, who will probably work at least 12 hours a day, it should

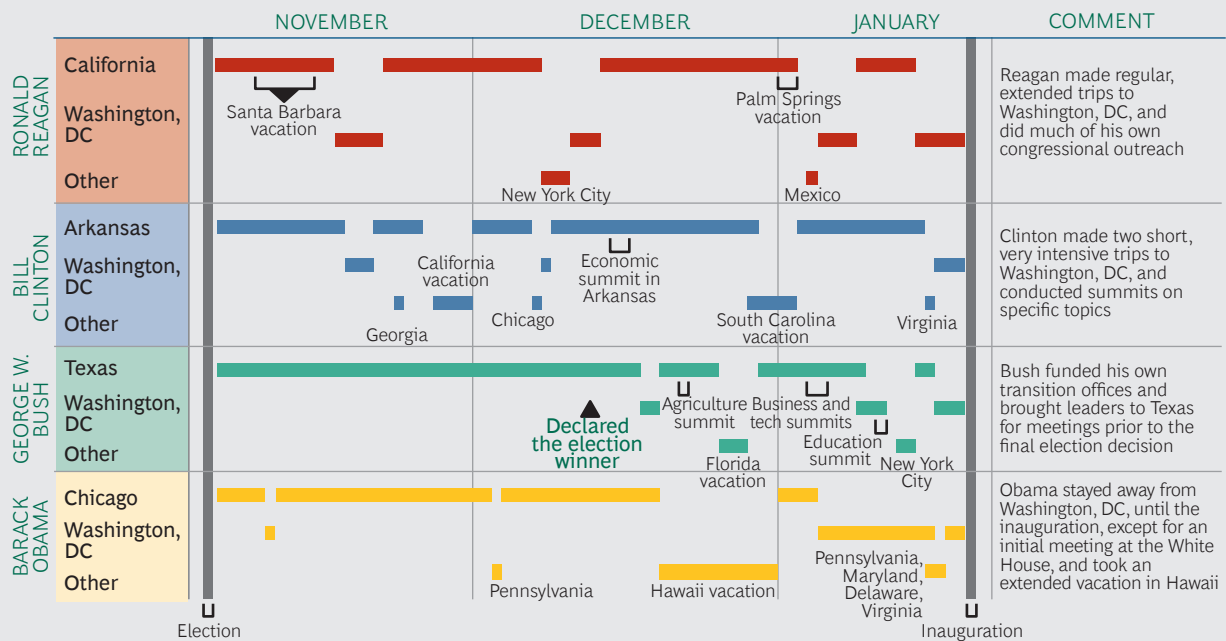
be used effectively to recuperate before facing the trials of presidential office.

ACCORDING TO OUR research, the 73-day transition period offers a critical opportunity for the upcoming president-elect. With the right policy agenda, a strong team, an effective approach for interacting with the media and Congress, and a chance to recover after the election, the president-elect can lay the foundation for a successful administration.

NOTE

1. The analysis included Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Note that Bush was not formally declared the winner of the 2000 election until mid-December, which affected the pace of his transition.

EXHIBIT 2 | Most Presidents-Elect Stay Away from Washington, DC, During the Transition Period



Sources: CNN; the *New York Times*; the *Washington Post*; publicly available transition websites, including whitehousetransitionproject.org, marthakumar.com, and change.gov; and transcripts of the presidential diary in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
Note: Each block represents the length of time spent in a particular location.

About the Authors

Sharon Marcil is a senior partner and managing director in the Washington, DC, office of The Boston Consulting Group and the leader of the firm's Public Sector practice in North America. You may contact her by e-mail at marcil.sharon@bcg.com.

Meldon Wolfgang is a senior partner and managing director in the firm's Boston office, and he leads talent management for BCG in North America. You may contact him by e-mail at wolfgang.meldon@bcg.com.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) is a global management consulting firm and the world's leading advisor on business strategy. We partner with clients from the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors in all regions to identify their highest-value opportunities, address their most critical challenges, and transform their enterprises. Our customized approach combines deep insight into the dynamics of companies and markets with close collaboration at all levels of the client organization. This ensures that our clients achieve sustainable competitive advantage, build more capable organizations, and secure lasting results. Founded in 1963, BCG is a private company with 85 offices in 48 countries. For more information, please visit bcg.com.

© The Boston Consulting Group, Inc. 2016.
All rights reserved.
11/16