

Directions:

1. Demonstrate evidence of close reading.
2. Highlight your confusion.
3. Answer the questions at the bottom of the page.
4. Write a 1+ page reflection in your WN.

Handing Over the Keys to the White House

A formal, 10-week transition period between presidential administrations is a time-honored American tradition. Does the handoff of power always go smoothly?

Why the long gap between the election and Inauguration?

The U.S. Constitution mandates it. It calls for the presidential election to be held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, and for the president to be sworn in on Jan. 20. (Until 1937, the Inauguration took place even later, in March.) This gives the president-elect and his advisors about 10 weeks to hire nearly 8,000 appointees to run the White House and 15 executive branch departments. During this time, aides to the incoming president set up shop in the White House and work alongside the departing president's staff, reviewing policies and budgets. There is a lot to do. The FBI has to perform hundreds of background checks, and the new team must get up to speed on sensitive national-security issues. No wonder presidential candidates often start planning their transitions as soon as they've locked up their party's nomination. They typically keep those efforts quiet, for fear of appearing presumptuous. When word leaked out last month that Barack Obama had formed a transition team, John McCain complained that Obama was "already measuring the drapes" for the Oval Office.

Are transitions just one big job fair?

No, they also can set the tone for the first year of an administration—and beyond. Ronald Reagan, for instance, announced early on that his first Cabinet appointments would be the secretaries of defense and Treasury, a clear signal his defining issues would be a defense buildup and tax cuts. Bill Clinton's transition, on the other hand, was chaotic and marred by internal disputes, as various aides jockeyed for position. Before taking office, Clinton added to his troubles by casually mentioning that he wanted to lift the ban on gays in the military. The ensuing uproar persisted into the first months of his administration, and while he looked for some way to appease both gays and military brass, he was unable to focus on his major campaign themes of health care and the economy.

Have transitions always been so elaborate?

No. For most of American history, they consisted of just a few meetings between the outgoing and incoming chief executives. They became an official part of the process a few years after Franklin Roosevelt defeated Herbert Hoover, in 1932. With the country on the brink of the Great Depression, Hoover suggested that he and Roosevelt make some joint declarations on the economy. Roosevelt refused. "It's not my baby," he said. Hoover was unable to rally support for his recovery plan, and by the time Roosevelt took office in March, a full-blown depression was underway. Following that disastrous delay, the Constitution was amended to move the inauguration to January, and Congress took the first steps to formalize the process. Some experts believe the transition period is still too long. "It is ironic," says former Sen. Claiborne Pell, "that our Constitution provides for up to 10 weeks of crippled leadership each time the presidency changes hands."

Are transitions cordial?

A strained civility usually prevails, but not always. John Adams sabotaged his successor and former friend, Thomas Jefferson, by appointing several loyalists as federal judges in the waning hours of his presidency. Then he skipped Jefferson's inauguration. In 1928, Calvin Coolidge refused to meet with his successor, Herbert Hoover, though they were both Republicans. "That man has offered me unsolicited advice for six years," Coolidge explained, "all of it bad." Winners can be just as rude. After Clinton's election in 1992, President George H.W. Bush's spokesman Marlin Fitzwater invited Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos to his office to talk about the job. Stephanopoulos strolled in, put his feet up on Fitzwater's desk, and announced that he could spare five minutes.

How can transitions go wrong?

Most unsuccessful transitions fall victim to self-inflicted wounds. Jimmy Carter started planning his transition in the spring of 1976, appointing an old friend, Jack Watson, to head up the team. But after Carter's victory over Gerald Ford, campaign manager Hamilton Jordan demanded a bigger say in assembling the new administration. The transition then started from scratch, delaying appointments and tagging Carter as disorganized. The first President Bush made trouble for himself by jettisoning appointees who had worked alongside him in the Reagan administration. "Everyone knew someone who had gotten a pink slip," says presidential scholar Stephen Hess. The hard feelings lingered, and when Bush's nominee for defense secretary, John Tower, ran into resistance, resentful Republicans offered little support and the nomination was rejected. Then again, outgoing administrations have been known to make mischief for a new president.

What kind of mischief?

They set policies in the last days of their administrations that will be difficult or embarrassing for the next president to undo. Days before Clinton left the White House, he signed an executive order reducing the permissible levels of arsenic in drinking water. As Clinton had anticipated, his successor, the second president Bush, quickly rescinded the order, leaving him with the unenviable chore of explaining to Americans why he wanted more arsenic in their water. But for sheer spitefulness, it's hard to top Coolidge, who ignored simmering foreign-policy and economic problems while awaiting the inauguration of Hoover, who had campaigned on his experience as an engineer. When aides asked Coolidge what to do about a problem, he would reply, "We'll leave it for the great engineer."

The transition scandal that wasn't

It was the stuff of sensational news reports and indignant commentary. Departing Clinton staffers, the reports said, had shamefully vandalized the White House, destroying office furniture, leaving obscene greetings on voice-mail machines, and defacing walls with graffiti mocking incoming President George W. Bush. The Clintonites had even trashed Air Force One, wrote the late presidential spokesman Tony Snow, then a columnist, leaving it looking "as if it had been stripped by a skilled band of thieves." Except that it never happened. After a yearlong, \$200,000 investigation, government inspectors said White House offices suffered only ordinary wear and tear. Nothing was taken from Air Force One. And what little intentional damage had been inflicted in the White House was trivial, such as scraping the "W" off computer keyboards. "What often happens in Washington," Snow later explained, "is that gossip becomes news. That's not a good thing."

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