



SPECIAL PRESENTATION

**“PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS:
FROM CAMPAIGNING TO GOVERNING”**

**PANEL 2: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE WHITE
HOUSE TRANSITION PROJECT**

INTRODUCTION BY:

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PROGRESSIVE BLUEPRINT FOR THE 44TH PRESIDENT***

FEATURED PANELISTS:

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MS. MICHELE JOLIN: My name is Michele Jolin. I'm a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress Action Fund, and I'm going to introduce the next panel, which is focusing on the election through the first 100 days. What are the opportunities, the hazards? What can go right? What can go wrong? But first, I wanted to say a few things about some of the work that the Center for American Progress Action Fund has been doing to prepare for the transition.

Throughout the fall, we've had a number of events, panels, briefings, discussions, to talk about what can be done to effectively transition between one government and the next. We know this particular transition is going to be more challenging than others, and so there has been a number of things we believe we needed to focus on in terms of homeland security, national security and the economy.

Then, our big effort is going to be released on November 12 at a public event. It's a report titled "Change for America: A Progressive Blueprint for the 44th President." And this document makes agency-to-agency policy recommendations. We cover all of the major agencies in the White House. Specifically, what are the things that the new heads of these agencies are going to need to do on day one, the first 100 days, over the first year and over the longer term?

It's not a laundry list of policy recommendations, but rather, a set of priorities that our policy experts – we've had over 60 progressive policy experts write these chapters, and the chapters are giving specific recommendations as to the priorities, given that the challenges are going to be enormous and the things that are needed to be done are going require prioritization. And also it will look at sort of what are the specific tools that can be used to take action, the executive orders, legislative, regulatory actions, those kinds of things.

So we believe that this is an important contribution to the discussion about transitioning from one government to the next. It's going to be, I think, a useful policy guide on what is actually doable and achievable from the very beginning through the first term.

So I hope you'll join us on November 12 for the release of this document. We're going to have a public panel and some other activities around it.

For our panel today, we have Dr. Martha Kumar, who is professor of political science at Towson University and director of the White House Transition Project. She has a recent award-winning best-selling book called *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation* and she's written a number of other books on White House operations, the presidents in the transition.

We also have Dr. Terry Sullivan, who's a professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Professor Sullivan has served as an American Political Science Congressional Fellow and is currently the executive director of the White House Transition Project. Thanks.

MS. MARTHA KUMAR: Thank you very much, Michele. And thank you to the Center, as well. The Center has been interested for many years now in issues that are important to governing. John Podesta is somebody who certainly knows the governing process, as having served in the White House as a staff secretary and as chief of staff, and somebody who knows transitions well. He was there at the beginning of the Clinton administration and then he shut out the lights – turned off the lights at the end as chief of staff and has been interested in the governing agenda, as we've seen in his recent book, *Power of Progress*.

And also, we want to thank American University for its role in putting on this program. AU is known for the efforts that it makes in bringing together the governing community in Washington with the scholarly community. And Jim Thurber has – every January, I always watch the programs that you have, where you bring people like Pat and Gary. And they are together with students and it's important to bring together these two communities because scholars have a great deal to offer in the governing community, particularly in having an institutional memory. And that is what our project, the White House Transition Project, is about.

To tell you a little bit about it, it started in 1999. We were funded by the Pew Charitable Trust to build an institutional memory of seven White House offices that are important to a good start. One of the things that's surprising to people is when you come into the White House, into most of the offices there, NSC has some memory, but for most offices, the memory goes with the administration.

The trucks start pulling up in early December, the moving vans to pull out the records to take them to warehouses, so that they can be processed and opened up into – in the presidential library and that we ultimately get to see all those documents, but there's very little left behind. And so when a person comes in – John Podesta, for example, said that when he came in as staff secretary, there was a desk with a monitor, a central processing unit that had no hard drive in it. The hard drives had been taken out. That had to do with a court action. But even in the next transition on January 20th, there will be no files left from the previous administration unless people decide to make copies and provide them to the new people, but that makes it obviously very difficult.

One person that I talked to said that when he came into his office right after the inauguration, he said there were six phone lines and all of the phones were ringing. And he thought, "Well, if I answer them, what do I say," because he really didn't know much about his office because this was in the Clinton administration, and the senior staff were appointed approximately five days before the inauguration. And they really had little time to move, much less talk to their predecessors about what they needed to do.

So presidency scholars decided – this is a group of us who are part of the American Political Science Association and its Presidency Research Group. We decided to get together and see what we could provide as people who study the White House. And so in 2000, we interviewed people who had served as heads or deputies of critical White House offices for a good start. Now, those were offices like the chief of staff, the staff secretary, who controls the paper, personnel, communications, press, management and administration. That’s an office that controls the salary slots and office space in the White House, all important things.

And so we studied those offices, interviewed people, and then wrote essays about how those offices have operated over time, what the functions of the directors of the offices had been, and the responsibilities, and what lessons people have learned from their time there. We put them up – Terry created a website and he’s put up all the essays and in last – not this summer, but the summer before, at the Political Science Convention, the people who had worked on the project – and there were about a dozen – said they wanted to work on it again. And they wanted to update their essays and they asked us if we would be willing to work on it and we said that we would. And so that’s what we’ve been doing, plus adding – we’ve added three new offices, and one of them being legislative affairs and Jim, Pat, and Gary are doing an essay on that. And plus, we’re doing other essays that tell something about the environment of the White House for new people coming in. And Terry has a piece that looks at the president’s daily diary.

Terry is a professor at the University of North Carolina, who’s focused on bargaining and on presidential operations, looking at what it is that a president does during his term. And he has taken the president’s daily diary, which is different than looking at the public record, which most people do when they come into the White House and their transition theme’s look at the public record as to what has happened in previous administrations, how they started.

What Terry has done is something different, which is to go to the presidential libraries and get the diaries that are kept by the National Archives. The National Archives has a person who works in the White House, who is known as the president’s diarist, and the diarist makes notations of everything that a president is going to do, all the meetings he has, the phone calls, and who are in the meetings.

So the portrait that he’s going to give of those first 100 days is unique because he’s looked at seven administrations, although in this study, it reports on five. And so it will give a good idea, I think, of what a president can expect.

In our project – WhiteHouseTransitionProject.org is the website for it. And it’s the – the group of people are all – it’s a non-partisan operation and all of us are united in one thing. We want to see an effective White House. We want to see a president be able to come in and do what it is he wants to do and achieve his aims and so that’s what the project is about.

Well, in looking – I’m going to look at the part of the transition that goes from before the election, after the election to the inauguration, and then Terry’s going to tell you what happens from there.

Recently, Congressman Edolphus Towns, who is the chairman of the Government Management Subcommittee of the House Oversight and Reform Committee, held hearings about the presidential transition and his title was “Passing the Baton.” And he started with, I think, an interesting and instructive story. He talked about the Beijing Olympics and the men’s and women’s 100-meter relay in which, in both cases, the U.S. participants dropped the baton.

And it is a good metaphor because it’s something we just expect to happen. We expect that athletes are going to be able to do that in the same way that we expect that when a new president comes in, it’s going to be a smooth transition, but I think we can see in that little incident, there are consequences for not being prepared, and that preparation takes a lot. And that takes a lot not just from those people who are running in the campaign, the candidates themselves, but it takes a lot from the government itself and commitment from them, and in addition to having a team that’s going to support them with transition work.

But what difference does it make if you have a good transition? What are the consequences? First is that in having a good transition, you reduce mistakes, that mistakes are inevitable, particularly when you’re just coming in because you don’t know the lay of the land. It’s a lot different to look from – look at the White House from Capitol Hill than it is from being inside and mistakes are very easy to make. And if you don’t have your agenda in place, you’ll find that there are going to be a lot of groups that want to tell you what you should be talking about.

In the Clinton case, he ended up spending time on issues that weren’t his priority. For example, gays in the military became an early agenda item, but not something that they had intended to talk about. In addition, in reducing mistakes, I guess another example would be the amount of time that they ended up in the Clinton White House having to devote to the issue of an attorney general, of getting an attorney general. In part, I think that happened because they didn’t have in place all the people that you need to have, the council who does the vetting, a personnel operation that could look at what the consequences of somebody’s background might be, the political people, who could have measured all of the problems that you could get from a nominee that maybe was going to cause problems.

In their case, they spent days and weeks talking about Zoe Baird as a person to be attorney general who had hired illegals. They knew that she had illegals, but what they hadn’t thought of was the consequences of that because she would be the head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

In the Bush transition operation, they had an appointment operation in place that Clay Johnson was very involved in and they had set up their process. And they had told

people that if they knew what problems people had, that they would work with them, that they were going to be on an honor system. They were to provide all their information and then, if it turned out they hadn't been forthcoming, they were going to cut them loose, if they saw that there was going to be a problem.

And that happened with their nominee for labor secretary and she said that she had illegals and hired them. And she said, once it came out, that she understood. She hadn't been forthcoming and her days of publicity was too – not the long amount of the Clinton time on Zoe Baird.

The direction of government – a second way, I think, that a difference that a good transition makes is that you start off with a direction of government set where you want to go. In the Reagan administration, they worked early on, after the election, deciding what their big issue was going to be, which was going to be the economy. They worked together with their appointment process, with their legislative process, and with executive action, and had all of them focused around the same thing, which was the economy.

So before Reagan even went to the White House after his inauguration, he signed executive orders that related to economic issues, putting a hiring freeze on, and then later putting a freeze on buying of furniture and that sort of thing. That also was frozen.

Then I think another difference is presidential reputation. If you come in early on with an idea of just what you're going to do, you establish a brand of leadership and that was true in Reagan's case. He came in with that focus on the economy that went through his appointments, focusing on 87 positions that related to the economy. His executive actions, and then his legislative actions, focused on budget cuts and tax cuts and he developed a reputation as somebody who was a leader, and that helped carry him, and it also helped carry his legislation through in that first year. And it also, in the early period, in the transition, it makes a difference in the working relationships you have, as we heard from Pat and Gary, the difference it can make.

I remember in the early Carter days, Carter was meeting with members of Congress and one of them got up in this large meeting and identified himself. He said, "I'm Russell Long and I'm chairman of the Senate Finance Committee," which was something he shouldn't have had to do. He was just sending them a message that they hadn't established the kind of relationship they need.

It is also – I think it's a lost opportunity if you don't use the early days, especially now. There is a sense that things are different. There is a poll that came out today, a *USA Today*-Gallup poll today that came out that showed that 44 percent of the public polls said that the new president will face the most serious challenges of anyone in his position in the last 50 years. Only 14 percent said the problems were no worse than usual.

Well, in looking at the difference that you can make with the transition, what are some of the things that you need to do? What are some of the kinds of support and

actions that you need? And first, I think, is a climate of support, a climate of support for early work and we are now at a point where everybody recognizes, I think, that there should be transition work.

Government has taken steps way before some in their private communities had. The Congress passed in 2004 the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Act that provided for clearances for people on the transition teams right after the two party nominees were selected at their conventions. And that process has now begun.

There have been a lot of problems in the appointment process in getting people through, and this was one of the ways that the Congress and the executive branch wanted to see things improve because what that means is that there are no limits on how many people that could be put in by the two teams, nor exactly what positions they were for. It's simply for people who need national security clearance, which could be your chief of staff; it could be your counsel, in addition to people heading and working in the NSC.

Congress also provided – and the executive supported, the president supported as well, special work with the Department of Homeland Security because its first transition is going to be this time and they provided grants. The Council for Excellence in Government is working with people, training them.

Clay Johnson, as the management deputy at the Office of Management and Budget, and is somebody who's known transitions well, he worked on the Bush transition coming in, beginning in 1999. And he has worked in his position with people throughout the government and he wrote a memo that's from July 18th, in which he talked to people within the agencies about identifying knowledgeable, capable career officials that could coordinate transitions. He set up a whole timeline of when he expected things to be done. And that is a more thought-out process earlier than has been true in the past.

Josh Bolten, even earlier than that, had a memorandum that he issued to executive departments and agencies on May 9th that dealt with the issuance of agency regulations at the end of the administration. That has been, in recent years, one of the hallmarks of administration. As they go out the door, they want to make sure that they're – particularly if it's a change in party transfer – that some of the things that they think important are left through regulations.

And so Bolten said in his instructions, “We need to continue this principal approach to regulation as we sprint to the finish and resist the historical tendency of the administration to issue regulatory activity in their final months.” And so he said that he wanted all the regulations to be in no later than June 1st and even exceptional ones only after November 1st. There seem to be a lot of pressures for more regulations, but they have at least calmed down to some extent.

So you have a community of people within the government that had been supporting the transition process. One thing, though, that has been a problem is there is no 2009 budget, that it's a – that the government has been running on continuing

resolutions. And that makes it particularly difficult for a new president coming in of how is he going to get a hold of the budget because the budget comes in early February and that means you have to have your budget people in place.

So in order to handle what's coming up, in addition to having a climate of support – and I will say that the one area I thought that's fallen down in providing a climate of support has been the new media. I think there are a lot of reasons why such an interesting campaign, cutbacks in the news business, in the number of reporters there are, but in 2000, in May of 2000, David Broder wrote a column in which he talked about the importance of transition and that it was something that it was a necessity. It wasn't something that was a case of arrogance.

In late July, there was a reporter who wrote a piece. At that time, Podesta was mentioned in news articles as a possible transition person. And there was an article talking about whether a hubris watch should be established. And the reporter said, "After all, it's only late July." Well, Clay Johnson started in the spring of 1999 for a transition of January 20th in 2001.

The White House staff come first. I think, in addition to having a climate of support, the kind of supports and actions that you need, you need a White House staff, the senior people in place. And the reason why is you need a chief of staff who's going to be involved in setting up a decision-making system. You don't want to make big decisions like the cabinet, until you have a decision-making system in place, where you know what information the president wants, what information you think he needs, what – how you're going to staff out decisions coming up to him. And you do want that in place, so he doesn't make early mistakes.

The personnel operation has to be in place and consistent from the campaign into the White House, so that you know what positions you're going to focus on. A council you need for vetting nominees – you also need a council for setting up the ethics guidelines. How, say for example – either from McCain or Obama – how are their statements about lobbying going to be translated into ethics guidelines?

In the Clinton administration, very strong guidelines were issued very early on that didn't allow people to work for a foreign government after they left, and putting other restrictions on what kind of contacts they could have after they left the White House. The result was that on December 27th, right as he was about to walk out the door, the president rescinded his executive order. And he even got criticism when he issued the order of people who were in the community, like Paul (Liese?) complaining that it was going to be too difficult to then go out and recruit people.

You need press and communications. You need them because obviously, you want to be able to use the time period when people are listening and also you need them because when you come in, you're going to start making a lot of speeches. If you look over the last two administrations and put together not just addresses to the nation, but all the remarks that a president makes, all the Rose Garden speeches, the talks that the

president has made recently, a president makes about 500 speeches and remarks a year. And if you look at his contacts with the press, where he does interviews, short questions and answers sessions, or press conferences, he makes about 200 of those a year.

Now, Clinton was more. Clinton was more than 500 and Bush was around there most years, but under that for some. And Clinton was – he was around 200 in his responses to reporters. Bush was about 146. But that's a lot and you need a communications operation in gear right off.

When you come in, you're going to have to focus on those 1,200 presidential appointees who are going to go through the Senate, but how many of them realistically can you get? You're going to need to focus on 100. And you're going to need this whole team to be part of deciding who those 100 are going to be. As I said about Reagan, he knew he was going to focus on the economy and chose 87 of them. And I think you'll find, whether it's McCain or Obama, it's going to be two fronts. It's national security, as well as economic issues.

In looking at the early period, campaign commitments make a difference. When Clinton and Carter also committed to cutting the White House staff by 25 percent, once they won, they had to deliver on it and delivering on it meant that it was more difficult for them to govern, to deal with the agencies and they both later said that it was a mistake. But during the campaign, there are a lot of things that you – that seem attractive that may later turn out to be difficult.

We talked about – in the earlier session, they talked about the ethics commitment, and I think you could see that in the speeches that Obama has given, he has been very specific about what he would do and not do and who he would have in his White House. He said that, in fact, "I'll make it absolutely clear that working in an Obama administration is not about serving your former employer, your future employer, or your bank account. It's about serving your country. When you walk into my administration, you will not be able to work on regulations or contracts directly related to your former employer for two years and when you leave, you will not be able to lobby my administration, ever. I will also institute an absolute gift ban so that no registered lobbyist can curry favor with members of my administration based on how much they can spend on a fancy dinner."

So when you have a commitment that anybody who comes into the administration can't lobby their former employer, that is their expertise, and in a way, they're people who were brought in because they know something, and so you're saying that they can't work on whatever has been their expertise.

In – you can help yourself in your campaign commitments. You can harm yourself, but you can help yourself and one of the ways is by an agenda, a clearly articulated agenda and that helped Bush. When Bush came in, he had five things that he talked about in his campaign, and that's what he talked about when he came in –

education, faith-based, the No Child Left Behind, the faith-based, military build up, tax cuts, and budget cuts as well, and privatization.

And what that meant for him was that he could start out that first week, the first day, talking about his agenda. He didn't have to talk about the murky nature of the election. If he hadn't have had an agenda, they'd been clearly defined. He would have had a vacuum there that could have easily been filled by his critics talking about the election and the fact that Gore had received more votes than he had.

In that early period as you come in in the transition, identifying government support at this stage is important too. There are a lot of things that you can work through in a transition period that will serve you well later on. For example, working with the National Archives and Records Administration on a whole records-keeping system in the White House, that is something that's dogged the last two administrations – the lost emails, not just of the Bush administration, but Vice President Gore had trouble with that as well. And you can learn early what the rules are and what kinds of systems there are that can capture what you need and avoid a problem there and also focusing on bringing in budget people and making sure that you have that under control.

So there really are a lot of things that can be done during the period, some of it before the election, and then some of it between the election and the inauguration.

And now Terry can talk to us about what we see from the president's daily diary.

MR. TERRY SULLIVAN: Good morning. My name is Terry Sullivan and I'm on the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and I have handouts. I only found out too late that my world is a world of PowerPoint and this is the old way PowerPoint worked. So if you could – there's only about 60 of them. Sorry, my printer wasn't as fast as I needed it to be.

MR. : Terry, we'll have this up on the website, immediately also on our website.

MR. SULLIVAN: Sure, great. The White House Transition Project basically has three activities. What Martha has been talking about is what's called institutional memory. It's developing a description of White House operations and the lessons learned, both good and bad, from previous administrations.

We also provide some institutional services. In particular, for the 2001 transition, we provided a sort of turbo-text type software that allowed presidential appointees to fill out all the forms that they have to fill out in a less burdensome way. And then this is – for this session, we are adding a new activity, which I – for a lack of a better word – call institutional anatomy, and that is developing the details and databases necessary to describe the realities behind the White House operations.

I have – I’m teaching this semester a junior and senior class on White House operations and I had a student in my office the other day, who, like many of the students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the first person in her family to ever go to college. And when she – when it was announced that she had gotten into the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, everybody in her family, of course, was very proud, but her grandmother pulled her aside and said, “Well, this is wonderful that you’re getting to go there; too bad you don’t have a scholarship, but it’s a wonderful thing that you’re going. Just don’t come back an educated fool.” And to her credit, she said, “Well, grandmother, I’m not so much worried about that as coming back foolishly educated.”

The institutional anatomy program is designed to deal with the difference between the educate fools in the academic community and the foolishly educated in the practitioner community.

One of the things that we discovered working with people in the 2001 transition was that campaigns spend a good deal of time trying to figure out what their president ought to be doing in the first 100 days by looking at what they thought presidents ought to be doing or what they thought presidents had done in their first 100 days.

It turns out that, like many things, the founding fathers had something to say about this. Alexander Hamilton in “Federalist Number 72” talks about the important fact of the tenure of the president is that every president and every administration that comes into office has a great incentive to validate the choice of the people by proving how distinctively different the administration is from their predecessor.

And one of the consequences of that is that campaigns spend – to the extent that they plan for transitions – spend a good deal of time trying to figure out how to make themselves different from what their predecessors were like. And a problem with that is that they almost always use public available resources to do that, news accounts, public memoirs of previous staff, et cetera. And it turns out that there’s quite a substantial difference between what we think presidents do all day and what they actually do all day.

Just as a simple example, both the Reagan and Bush 43 campaigns developed a very detailed picture of what previous presidents had done in their first 100 days in order to build out plans for their presidents and what they would do in the first 100 days. And in many cases, especially having to do with legislative affairs, these estimates of what public – based on public records of what the presidents had done on the legislative side, were hundreds and hundreds of percentage points off of what presidents had actually done. So there was a vast underestimation of the kind of pressures that presidents would face when they come into office.

And a classic example of this, one of our sponsors, one of our participating institutions is the James A. Baker Institute at Rice University. And one of the things that White House chiefs of staff talk about is the need for orchestrating the president’s day, and one of the critical problems in the first 100 days is discovering that the congressional

leadership, in particular, of their own party, but of both sides, are constantly asking for time with the president when they were really expecting them to only see the president, say, two or three times during the first 100 days.

Almost all of that expectation of seeing the president three times during the first 100 days is based on the public records that these campaigns have amassed about what the presidents in the past 100 days have done. The record is much more alike seeing the president at least once a week and in several cases many, many more times.

So as a consequence, we're trying to replace this foolish education. It's a good instinct on their part to try to build up these pictures of what presidents have done in the 100 days. It's just that they did it badly and so we're trying to replace that with something that scholars can do, which is actually study this stuff.

So we discovered this in 2002, this problem of how inaccurate these plans were, and it's taken us until – I had a student asking me about this the other day. “When did you finish? You started in 2002. When did you finish preparing these 100-day pictures of what presidents had actually done?” And my answer was, “Well, last June” and it's taken us from 2002 to 2008 to put together this quite substantial database.

It's 50,000 observations of 20,000 events over the six elected presidents from Eisenhower through George H.W. Bush. That's all of the elected presidents whose records are available through the National Archives Presidential Libraries. And what these records are is there are three organizations in the White House that log the president's minute-by-minute activities. The Secret Service, of course, every time they speak into their cuff, somebody is on the other end at the command center, writing down what they're saying. The presidential appointment secretary, that operation keeps track of the president's appointments and logs the phone calls. And then the White House ushers, which are the domestic staff upstairs, keep track of the president when the president is in the residence.

So there are essentially two organizations, the Secret Service, and either the appointment secretary or the White House ushers, that are keeping track of the president's activities throughout the day. And then, once a week, the National Archives' diarist compiles a record from these three logs into what's called “the president's daily diary.” It's not really a diary like we about it, where that word came from, but it's a compiled log of the president's activities, and these records are available in the Presidential Libraries. You just have to go and dig them out.

And the diary for the Reagan administration, for the first 100 days of Ronald Reagan, is about this high, so it's several thousands pages long and it's quite a substantial effort to turn that into something that can be analyzed with statistics.

So by now, everybody should have – or many of you should have the handouts, as there are – let me just go over some of these. I'm sorry if we don't have an overhead projection where I can show this to you.

There are essentially two questions that we're interested in finding out about here. One is the anatomy of the president's workday, and that's essentially basic descriptors – how long is the president's workday? Does the president's workday extend out over 100 days? In other words, do White Houses learn how to be more efficient with the president's day? And then also, how do they accommodate this problem of getting more requests for the president's attention than they expected? And the consequence of that is when the congressional leadership comes to you and says, "We need some time with the president," and the president's day is booked, what do you do?

You weren't expecting this request, so you really have one of two options. You can either tell somebody that's already booked that they're going to be bumped, or you can make the president's day longer. Either one of those is – both of those are bad idea. The first makes you look incompetent, which is not a particularly good thing to establish on your first 100 days and the second makes the president's day longer. And of course, the president's day is already long.

So we're interested in finding out whether or not, over the first 100 days, White Houses learn and what they do with that learning. How much of it is spent making a president's day more efficient, and how much of it is spent making the president's day longer? And it turns out they do both.

The second group of things that we're interested in are five characteristics of the first 100 days and those are commitment – how much time does the president spend in different responsibilities? That is, what in political science, we call hats. How many hats does the president wear and which hat does he wear at what time? How much time does the president spend engaging others?

There's a great deal of concern about the president's advice, sources of advice. It's a common thing to complain that when you don't like a president's policies that he's just getting bad advice from somebody else, as opposed to what President Johnson almost always said, which was, "I get all the good advice I could get. I just made mistakes."

Isolation, how much does – what's the balance between president's engagement of outsiders from insiders? And then, one of the few things the president can actually make choices about, and that's the organizational structure. Do the choices available to presidents in organizational structure actually make a difference?

The most prominent choice that presidents are faced with is the choice between having a chief of staff or a hierarchical White House operation versus what's sometimes called the spokes of the wheel system, which allows for multiple access to the Oval Office. And does that choice actually make a difference?

We like to think the president has some control over his White House and that the White House is a reflection of a president, but there's also a huge job to do, and maybe that job drives the president more than the president drives the job. And so these

organizational choices that they actually have may be meaningless in terms of affecting the president's day.

And then lastly, of course, nobody comes to the White House just simply to mark time. They come to accomplish things and the question then is, does what presidents do during their 100 days actually affect how effective they are? And we have some pretty straightforward ideas about that.

So with that overview, let me just go through the handout.

The handout has on the front page takeaway points, so you can go through those if you'd like. I'm going to go through some of them, but there are a group of comparisons about presidents. I'll just mention one.

President Nixon was not the most isolated president. President Reagan was. And there are a group of those sorts of comparisons for those of you interested in good, short sound bites.

But let's go through the main questions. The anatomy of the president's workday, it's on Table 1 in the handout. The sort of important takeaway points from here are that there's a distinction between modern presidencies and not modern presidents. The not modern presidents are really before Johnson, so that means – well, you know who they are.

The modern presidents are post-Johnson. We normally think of Nixon as being a modern president, but here's another place where we're the educated fools. It turns out that Johnson's White House is considerably different from everybody before him and Nixon's White House is very organized, very consistent with Johnson's. And White Houses after Nixon are all pretty consistent.

In the modern era, the president's workday is about 13 and half hours. That's seven days a week during the entire 100 days. In some ways, that seems like a lot; in some ways, it doesn't. I always ask my students to take a week and during that week, log what time they get up and what time they quit working, just to figure out how their days is by comparison to what a president's workday is. And it's considerably shorter, even though they're going to a top-rated university and working really hard.

Pre-modern presidents average nine and a half hours and there's very little difference between these schedules.

One of the nice things about having 50,000 observations is that we have statistically valid, statistically precise – our margins of error are incredibly small. You're used to looking at margins of errors of plus or minus three points in Gallup polls. Our margins of errors are in the one-tenths of percentage and they're statistically very reliable. So there's a lot of good things that come from having this huge sort of database. We're able to make very precise comparisons.

So in terms of presidential workdays, the takeaway point is that every president is unique in terms of their workday, but they're almost all very similar. So for example, the difference between Eisenhower's average workday, which is a nine-hour workday, and President Kennedy's average workday, which is about nine and a half hour workday, those are – well, actually – I'm sorry. It's – President Eisenhower's is nine hours and 42 minutes long and President Kennedy's is 10 hours long. Those are precise differences, but they're not really all that different. There's a 20-minutes difference between President Kennedy, the 45-year-old president, and President Eisenhower, the 72-year-old president. So they don't really have that much choice.

The modern presidents, all average around 13 and a half, and there's really not that much difference between Ronald Reagan, the very old man, and Jimmy Carter, the very young and energetic man, although Carter is really the outlier. Ronald Reagan is the outlier on almost everything on the bottom end and Jimmy Carter is the outlier on everything at the top end. Jimmy Carter's average workday was 17 hours. So the man was a lunatic. (Laughter.)

And also in Table One is a description of the trend in presidential workdays over the 100 days. There the question is, are they more efficient or are they just made to work longer? And the answer is, even Jimmy Carter's 17-hour workday was extended over the 100 days.

So White Houses in general don't learn. They mostly slough off under the president, their inability to control the president's workday. Except for Richard Nixon, only president – almost all presidents' workdays get longer over their 100 days.

We have the data for their entire administrations – at least we have most of it – already developed, so we're going to eventually be able to answer the question: does that lesson learned ever get applied, and so presidents' workdays eventually get shorter. There's some evidence that they would, even in the 100 days, but we don't know the answer to that question yet.

So if you look on the second page, there are two figures about the president's workday over the 100 days. One is about the overall historical trend in the president's workday, which is essentially the president's workday has gone up. So from your perspective, over time, since Eisenhower, the president's workday has gone up like this, but over time, it has also started to curve over, and that's sort of secondary effect. In other words, there's a limit to how much you can make the president work and of course, the founders, again, talked about that.

The difference between the Congress and the president is the president has to sleep and the Congress doesn't – 435 members in the House and they can work in shifts, as they often do, and as a consequence, they can continue to work, and this is why the founders expected that Congress would be the powerful constitutional institution. That effect – the president does have to go to sleep, and also the institution, the more regular

institution of White House chiefs of staff, which I'll talk about in a second, has tended to pressure down the length of a president's day in historical terms.

It also, to some extent, has made a president's day a little bit more efficient. If you look at the second figure, it's the average length of meetings, small meetings – this is true of all presidential activities over the 100 days. Most presidents, other than Eisenhower – most presidents got – their staffs got more efficient at running meetings and moving the president through his schedule, so that they could accommodate more work during the 100 days by essentially making the president's – each meeting shorter and this is true of almost all presidents, other than Eisenhower. President Nixon had an incredible learning curve. His meetings got incredibly more efficient, but in general, all president staffs get more efficient.

Okay. As far as the second sort of general area having to do with responsibilities, engagement, isolation, organizational choices, et cetera, here are basically the notes here. Presidents' workdays are unique in terms of their distribution of responsibilities. President Nixon spent more time on national security than other presidents because he was fighting two wars at once, the Cold War and a hot war.

And so there is such a thing as the peace dividend, in terms of how much time the president devotes to national security issues. There's essentially a balance between national security versus economic and administrative responsibilities in the White House. Presidents spend more time on national security, wearing the hat of commander in chief or chief diplomat. If they do that, they spend less time on economic management and administrative interfacing with the executive branch. And so you can take from that what conclusion you might want to draw about our current situation, in which we're doing both, fighting two hot wars and one hot war inside the United States in terms of the economic collapse.

Secondly, there is almost no time spent by president on ceremonial or communications efforts. One of the things that we know from Martha's work is that an inordinately large amount of the White House operation is devoted almost exclusively to communications, but presidents spend very little of their day communicating. So if you – and you do – have a public image of the president as the president giving speeches and talking to the press and talking to the public through speeches in the press, that's an extraordinarily small part of the president's day.

It's about – on average – and there's not very much difference here. It's on average about 5 percent of the president's workday is spent in communications and that's not just delivering speeches. That's also working on speeches, talking to staff about the content of speeches. The fact of the matter is that the president simply doesn't have much time to spend on any particular issue. Communications and ceremonial events are two of those sorts of things that they don't spend a lot of time on.

What they do spend a lot of time on is national security, diplomacy, working alone. They spend a lot of time working alone and that's a good thing, I think, in general.

And then the last sort of takeaway point about unusual character – there are two presidents who spend the most time on legislative affairs and they are Jimmy Carter and Dwight Eisenhower, both presidents who had to face new leaderships in the Congress. And so there is, it seems to me, a pretty straightforward relationship between preparing the White House as a leader of the legislative branch and preparing the legislative branch’s own leadership for its functions in leading the legislature – the Congress in fulfilling the president’s agenda.

And because of that, those two presidents, because they both dealt with leaderships that were brand new, those two presidents are the ones who spent them most amount of time on managing the legislative activity. And even then, presidents in general only average about 30 minutes a day on legislative affairs.

So to the last sort of important – I guess there are two more important things to talk about. One is isolation. Isolation can be generally thought of as the balance between external advisors and internal advisors, in which presidents spend the most time with external advisors, and which spend the most time with internal advisors.

And then it turns out that because, as a matter of fact, presidents spend almost no time with external advisors, the average for presidents during their first 100 days spend 1 percent of their day with advisors from outside the executive branch or the government in general and that includes anybody, as long as they don’t have a government title. So in general, presidents spend almost no time talking to outsiders.

And if you turn it around and say, “Well how much time do they spend talking to people outside of the White House,” they spend a little bit more time doing that, but in general, almost all presidents spend all of their time talking simply to the people inside the White House and spend almost no time talking to anybody outside.

And we have – as academics are wont to do – we created an index and a measure for this. We call it the internal isolation measure and it’s on the third page of the handout, on the far right of Table 3. The distribution across the presidents is pretty staggering. Democrats, in general, turn out to be less isolated presidents than Republican presidents, exclusive of Dwight Eisenhower, who was an extraordinary president in terms of reaching out beyond the White House to get other kinds of advice.

The last thing I want to talk about is organizational choice and its effect on effectiveness. When the founders – of course, I’m an academic, you have to remember, so I’m going to go back to the founders. When the founders talked about what kind of executive branch to set up, there were a couple of choices from history, and they chose what they called the singular presidency. That is investing the executive branch authority in a singular act – in a single act, rather than a committee, for example, which was common in the revolutionary governments and in the Roman executive, for example.

They wanted a singular presidency because they wanted to accomplish what James Wilson, sort of the intellectual father of advocacy for the presidency, called “unity of purpose.” That is the one fundamental advantage they thought the executive branch would have over the legislative branch. The legislative branch main advantage was that it was a constant engine of activity and that it was closest to the public and they thought that would trump everything.

The thing they thought would be the president’s advantage, they would keep the presidency from being sucked into the legislative branch, was unity of purpose. And it turns out that unity of purpose is actually something that we can observe in terms of external and internal advice and isolation. And it turns out that is something that actually has an impact on how quickly, during the 100 days, or during the first year, the president’s policy agenda gets cleared by Congress, that is, considered either passed or defeated. And if you look at the last page, we can go through that.

The statistics are the following. The things that are most related to how quickly Congress considers the president’s legislative agenda and clears it are how isolated the presidency is from – that is, this balance between the White House advice and external advice – how much the president leans towards external advice and how much time the president spends with his cabinet or her cabinet.

And the idea there is the more time – in the previous panel, Gary talked about adapting the agency agendas to fit the president’s focused agenda. That essentially is creating unity of purpose in the executive branch. It is focusing the – it’s focusing the agencies, which are this powerful lobbying effort, on the president’s agenda through a variety of activities.

So it turns out that if the president spends time on that, it actually has a payoff. And this is an important lesson to be learned because presidents in general spend a lot of time eschewing contact with their cabinets.

So I’m going to stop there, so we can take questions.

MS. JOLIN ?: Who has a question?

MR. : Let me announce that we’ll make extra copies of this, since you only had 60. We’ll have them made and they will be on the outer table before they leave.

MR. SULLIVAN: And the general study from which this is drawn is on the WhiteHouseTransitionProject.org.

MR. : And we have a link to that from my website. It’s – (off mike).

MS. JOLIN: Let me ask a question and that is, the president’s changes in his habits on meetings, that meetings become shorter, and we remember in this administration, it came out pretty soon that President Bush didn’t like long meetings and

he pressed himself for that. Is that usual? Is it usually the president himself who decides that the meeting should be shorter? Is it the chief of staff? Do you have any ideas of that?

MR. SULLIVAN: Okay. I think this is one of these questions that are asked of academics in which the right answer is we have no earthly idea, which academics are wont to not say, so I will say two things. One is, we have no earthly idea. Then that notwithstanding, I have an idea and that idea is this. White House chiefs of staff spend a good deal of time thinking about – because this is their experience. President Bush calls this “necktie events.”

Andy Card, his deputy chief of staff, told us in – told the White House Transition Project that one of the big problems with being deputy White House chief of staff is that you have to sit out in the anteroom of the Oval Office and listen to all of the things that people are going to say to the president once they get inside that Oval Office. They are going to tell the president how the cow ate the cabbage and what he needs to do and what mistakes he’s making. And then, when they get into the Oval Office, what they do is compliment him on his necktie. (Laughter.)

And presidents over time have this experience over and over again and then, of course it becomes the deputy White House chief of staff to deliver the bad news to the president because when those people come out of the Oval Office, having turned into a bowl of jelly in front of the president, what they do is they turn to the deputy chief of staff and they say, “You’ve got to tell the president my message.” I think that’s a situation in which chiefs of staff and their operations spend a good deal of time thinking about how to orchestrate these meetings so that that necktie event doesn’t happen.

And I know, for example, in the Bush White House, one of the things they found was that meetings in the Oval Office took longer than meetings in the Roosevelt Room, the same kind of meeting.

MS. JOLIN: Is that George H.W. Bush?

MR. SULLIVAN: No, W. And so they tried to move the president’s meetings out of the Oval Office into the Roosevelt Room because they felt like they could get things done more quickly because there was less necktie talk in the Roosevelt Room than there was in the Oval Office.

Now, it turns out that that’s not – that was an interesting perception, but it happens to actually not be true that meetings in the Roosevelt Room with the president, the same size meetings, the same kinds of meetings, in the Roosevelt Room or the Cabinet Room, turn out to be longer than meetings in the –

MS. JOLIN ?: In previous administrations, yes, sure. Jim?

Q: Sorry, I am part of this, but I can't help. Sorry, I shouldn't be taking the first question, but we've all heard the LBJ tapes talking with the chair of the Rules Committee about having a closed rule on a bill and really getting down into the details of the – (unintelligible) – process. I assume you have data, not only in terms of the number of hours on meetings with congressional leaders, but also telephone calls. So how many hours – do you have hours – do the presidents spend the first 100 days – I don't have the handout – talking or meeting with congressional leaders over time?

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, okay.

Q: It's another way of cutting it.

MR. SULLIVAN: Yes, presidents spend – well, actually, LBJ was a little unusual about this. LBJ made about 1,200 phone calls during his first 100 days. No president in this group of elected presidents – I think H.W. Bush made about 600 phone calls, so there's quite considerable difference between LBJ on the phone and everybody else.

I guess the answer to that question is we have data on that, but I haven't done that kind of analysis of how much time is spent with congressional leaders on the phone as opposed to being in person.

Q: Or just total time with them –

MR. SULLIVAN: Right.

Q: – rather than percentages. You could figure this percentage out.

MR. SULLIVAN: Well, the total time that presidents spend on an average – the average amount of time they spend in a day is about 30 minutes with congressional leaders in an average day during the –

Q: Average day, okay.

MR. SULLIVAN: So you can figure they spend 100 times 30; 37 is the average.

MS. JOLIN: Is that concluding Sundays, where you were –

MR. SULLIVAN: Yes, that's 100 days. That's 100 days. They're – pre-modern presidents had Saturday and Sunday off. Post-modern presidents, some of their time on Saturdays and Sundays, if they go to Camp David, is less hectic and often not well recorded because then there are only the Secret Services there, and the Secret Service does not want to record these sorts of activities when they're the only ones doing that for security reasons, which for security reasons is one of the reasons H.W. Bush is the last president that we have data available. They don't want this information out too contemporaneously. Yes?

Q: I'd be interested in a comparison between the first 100 days of the Kennedy administration and the Johnson administration. My perception and my memory was that in the Kennedy administration, they had a kind of hub and spoke arrangement, where there was wider access. But my recollection of the Johnson administration is that after he brought Marvin Watson out from Texas, where Marvin Watson had been the Texas State chairman, then they ran a very different kind of operation. So is there any comparison that is available there?

MR. SULLIVAN: Yes, President Johnson's first 100 days, which did not include Marvin Watson. He didn't come in until January 1965, so his first year was without a White House chief of staff. His first 100 days were very similar to Kennedy's, only on steroids. So he had a crisis. So his workday – Kennedy's average workday was 10 hours; Johnson's average workday was about 13. So he just kicked up.

The distribution across that workday was essentially the same. So he just did like Kennedy but more, except for the phone call thing. He spent considerably more time – I think one big difference, but this is actually something I have spend 25 years working on, is congressional leadership from the White House. President Johnson and Kennedy had a complete – there are basically two models of legislative affairs from the White House, the Bryce Harlow model and the Larry O'Brien model – not that Larry O'Brien invented it; he just took the advice of some people, but they are completely different operations.

Bryce Harlow's model is essentially all about respecting the difference between – respecting the constitutional gap. You heard it described here by Gary as, you have to remember there is a gap, constitutional gap, between the president and the Congress. And so the congressional relations operation is essentially the ambulatory bridge across that gap, the walking bridge across that gap. And that's of course a reality. There is a constitutional gap.

And the question is, well, how do you deal with that constitutional gap? And there are basically these two models. One is you respect it and the other is you don't. And President Kennedy and Johnson's model is essentially, you don't. You spend all of your time trying to figure out how to get around it, rather than respecting it – how to deal with it, rather than – how to deal against it, rather than with it – how to lead from the presidency in the legislative branch, rather than how to respond to the legislative branch as a separate organization.

So one obvious – when you listen to these Johnson tapes, one obvious difference is when he's talking to congressional leaders, congressional leaders were almost always talking about what they can't do. We're bound by processes of accommodation. If you think about what's the second – the first law of a legislative branch, I tell my students, is what Lyndon Johnson said, which is, "You can tell a man to go to hell, but you can't make him go." And that's the first lesson of all legislative affairs.

Politics in the legislative branch is about accommodating people's interests. So everything in the legislative branch, all of its organizational dynamics, are built around accommodation, respect for expertise and reciprocity. Those are all elements of a legislative branch.

And if you're a legislative leader, you sort of respect the second lesson of politics, which of course, comes from another Texan – because they are good about this stuff – Sam Rayburn, and that is if you want to get along, you have to go along. And that's not about accommodation, which is what most people think it's about. It's really about the rule for how to become a leader. If you want to get along in the system, if you want to move up in a system, then you have to learn to go along in that system.

So the conversations that President Johnson has with congressional leaders are almost always about the congressional leaders saying, "We're trapped by some sort of system of accommodation and reciprocity and expertise," and the president saying, "Do it. Get out there. Push these guys. Make them do this." And the difference is President Johnson's not elected by those legislators. McCormick (sp) is, and so McCormick and Carl Albert and all those people essentially are telling the president what their problems are in accommodating their members. And the president is all about pushing and I think that's an important distinction.

The Harlow model would spend a lot of time trying to appreciate the problems of accommodation and the O'Brien model spends a lot of time about trying to figure out how to get around it. And one way you can get around it is making the president advocate for action, rather than accommodation.

(Barbara O'Connell?) had this great saying, "We have a hedge clipping service in this institution. Any member who sticks his head up above the hedge, eventually somebody's going to come along and take it off." And I think that's a problem that every leader in the legislative branch has to deal with. The presidents have the luxury of not having to deal with it.

Q: I'm Denise (Garner?). I'm a political scientist and I have a question about presidential leadership in new areas. You talked about continuity in transitions from what other presidents have done. I'm thinking particularly about performance management, which those of us who are educated fools think is probably the most significant thing any president does in terms of making sure his agenda works, is being able to manage the federal government, particularly with the decimated and very discouraged civil service that we have right now.

And what we've seen with Clinton – and he didn't do a permanent model. He set it up in the office of the vice president under reinventing government. Bush 43 did it in the OMB, using the Program Assessment Rating Tool. Now we have heard very little from John McCain about what his plans are. I found a speech in May of 2007, where he says he's counting on 40 percent retirement of civil service in the next 10 years to really reduce down the civil service because it – (inaudible) – are ineffective.

Barack Obama gave a speech a couple of weeks ago, where he had laid out a systematic plan and one – part of which is he wants to create a new office in the White House with a SWAT team and a performance czar, and that sounds like a very new innovation, apart from the existing offices.

I wondered if you could address how presidents might deal with this in the transition and what guidelines you might suggest.

MR. : In the past, have you found –

MR. SULLIVAN: Gate to gate –

MS. KUMAR: No, no, no, I'm just wondering what you found in the past.

MR. SULLIVAN: Presidents, during the first 100 days, spend very little time on managing the executive branch. Of course, they spend very little time on almost everything, but among the things that they spend very little time on, this is one of the bottom. So I guess my response is –

MS. KUMAR: Yes.

MR. SULLIVAN: – presidents aren't going to spend very much time on that at all. Maybe White House chiefs of staff might spend some time on that, but I really don't think – performance in the executive branch does not rise to a level of the president's desk.

MS. KUMAR: But I think one think one thing that's going to be different is you have two people who have been in the Senate and who have dealt with issues of government performance. And so I think that it might be something that's going to end up on their scope a bit earlier because they're going to have to deal with all of the different budget priorities. So management is going to be tied in with all of their budget issues, but they will focus on the financial crisis and national security first. They have to do that first.

But in it, they're obviously going to be focusing on some management issues as well because cross-agency work is going to be critically important to using the talent that exists in the federal government because in a financial crisis, you're going to be stretched for getting people who really know how to deal with it. And so a lot of interagency work is going to be important.

MR. : Thank you very much and, of course, just let me add that he will be hiring someone to handle management at OMB. And if he empowers that person – and Clay Johnson has that job – if he empowers that person, that person can be a surrogate for that particular activity. You're just talking about what the president actually is doing.

MR. SULLIVAN: I think, just like in communications, the White House and the administration spends a lot of time on communications and the reason they do that is because the president doesn't.

MR. : Right.

MR. SULLIVAN: And frankly, we don't want the president spending a lot of time on that. That's just show. We want him doing other things.

MR. : Right. Terry, Martha, thank you very much.

(END)