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PAPERS ON PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS AND  
FOREIGN POLICY  
Volume IX

# WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION?

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and  
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to improve relations existed. Relations between the two branches had soured due to the Iran-contra affair. On the one hand Bush seized that opportunity as evidenced by the informal agreement worked out with Congressional leaders over continued funding of the contras. On the other hand, in its insistence on keeping the Tower nomination alive and in the controversy over sanctions against China in the wake of Tienanmen Square the Bush administration reverted to a confrontational style that is unlikely to produce a foreign policy consensus.

The net result of these failings was to place U.S. foreign policy in a reactive mode and allow others to position themselves so as to influence events. Such a posture is readily defensible if it is the product of a deliberate decision based on a recognition of limitations placed on U.S. foreign policy due to economic constraints but this was not the case. As such, one could argue that the Reagan-Bush transition produced continuity by default more than by design and that an opportunity for change existed that was not seized.

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## 6.

# Complexifying the Analysis of Transitions

Laurin L. Henry

The Clinton-Lang paper is broad-ranging, informative, and insightful, and stimulates reactions on many points. However, I will forswear detailed comment and critique in order to focus on what I take to be the paper's principal contribution: its proposed scheme for analyzing the experience of a presidential transition in terms of the interests—needs, objectives, behaviors—of the principal categories of participants, and for evaluating the total transition experience according to how well those several interests have been "mutually accommodated."

The approach strikes me as useful but not totally satisfying. I would suggest modifying it—complexifying it—in a couple of respects.

First, I would redefine and extend somewhat the list of participants. I would like to see "The Career Services" as a category broadened beyond attention to the fates of individuals to take in the total complex of slowly changing personnel, processes, and institutions that might better be identified as "The Administrative System"—or, if we must, "The Bureaucracy." Whether individual careerists survive, receive appropriate new appointments, or get consulted in policy redefinition are useful indicators but may not tell the whole story of whether the system was capable of, or permitted to, make appropriate contribution to certain broader objectives

(which I will come to in a minute), and whether the transition experience served to preserve, enhance, or damage the future capabilities of important parts of that system.

For example, it frequently has been observed that administrative organs dedicated to integration and future-sensing, such as policy research and evaluation staffs, have the potentiality to be especially helpful to new leadership during a transition, but, unfortunately, tend at such times to be highly vulnerable to undermining and score-settling by more particularistic parts of the bureaucracy, as well as to casual demolition by new administrators interested only in their own myopic preconceptions about present reality and future possibilities. Something like this was what I had in mind when I said at our conference that "Institutions as well as individuals have value."

Speaking of career services, let me note in passing that this paper, like most other analyses of foreign affairs transitions, tells us a good deal about the experiences of the Foreign Service but says almost nothing about another career service which must play an important role in, and be considerably affected by, the transition—namely, the military officers. The neglect is understandable, since the world of the senior military is much less accessible to civilian scholars than that of the Foreign Service, but is it really as impenetrable as most of our scholarship would seem to indicate?

Further with respect to the categories of participants: it seems to me that one can hardly leave out the communications media. The press (broadly defined) is more than a passive observer and recorder. Its expectations shape other participants' understandings of what they are expected to do, its reporting of current events provides feedback that strongly influences subsequent behavior of other actors as the transition unfolds, and certainly its interpretations of events after the transition is over provides rumen for our leisurely academic digestion.

To round out the list of participants, one might also include the more amorphous categories of political parties and interest groups. (Given the difficulty of separating foreign and domestic, public and private, these days, one might even subsume "Foreign Governments" as a sub-category of "Interests"—although perhaps in a paper emphasizing foreign policy they have to be treated separately!)

I doubt that there is much point in quibbling whether these various participants are "major" or "minor." The outgoing and incoming presidents, I suppose, will always be major; the others may be either depending on the circumstances and events of a particular transition, or the analytical interests of a particular observer. In any case, all of these groups have potentiality for influencing the behavior of other actors and the overall course of events; the scramble among them for position, influence, achievement, and reputation is the essence of the grand rearrangement of political power that we call the transition. Needless to say, none of these categories is monolithic. Within each there may be some objectives broadly in common but many purposes in conflict among sub-elements of the category.

My second main area of comment is on the evaluation criterion. Clinton and Lang propose "mutual accommodation of interests" as a workable procedural standard for evaluating the success of a given transition without waiting for history to apply the vague "national interest" standard at some indeterminate future point. Perhaps we can do better than that, and sooner. I would accept "mutual accommodation" as a yardstick if "interests" of the participants could be defined more broadly than their immediate, short-run objectives. For this purpose, "interests" should include the various actors' responsibility for, contribution to, and future potentiality for advancement of a couple of balancing transition goals that I think we all could agree on. Specifically, I would suggest the goals of continuity and change. And maybe to each of these should be added a qualifier, perhaps "useful" continuity and "responsible" change.

Each of the several groups we are concerned with has its appropriate contributions to make to both continuity and change, although in different ways and not necessarily in the same proportions. Thus we tend to identify the bureaucracy mainly with the value of continuity but worry about its resistance to change. We look to the outgoing president for leadership in maintaining continuity, and to the incoming president for initiating change, but neither of them can (or should) focus exclusively on one or the other. Neither continuity nor change is an unqualified good but must be appropriate to the institutional role and the circumstance. A bureaucracy that clung determinedly to outworn procedures would not be providing useful continuity; one that produced and was

allowed to present serious ideas for policy adjustment compatible with the new administration's overall approach would be contributing to responsible change. It is good for a new president to be able to formulate and get congressional attention to a coherent legislative program; but a president who got his own way in foreign policy only to embroil the nation in futile military adventures abroad would hardly be making responsible change. Too narrow a view of the "interests" of the outgoing and incoming presidents may miss the critical question of whether their respective preparations and the understandings between them were conducive to informed, responsible decisions in the event of a serious economic or foreign policy crisis requiring urgent attention during the transition.

The criteria of continuity and change are broad enough, goodness knows, and adding the qualifying adjectives injects even more subjectivity into any attempt to apply them. But I do think it might be possible to analyze the interest of each participant group in this broader way, and that such a reduction exercise might provide a basis for achieving a considerable amount of consensus about the extent to which those several interests have been advanced, preserved, or damaged in a particular transition. And after such an assessment we could look at their mutual accommodation in a more sophisticated way and come to a judgment about the national interest with a little more confidence that history will validate it.

A final observation. The authors of the paper make the important statement that the transition experience represents a sort of compression or microcosm of the political system, revealing its essential properties and both functional and dysfunctional elements. If so, then "transition difficulties" such as the increasingly severe delay in making key appointments may point to systemic problems requiring analysis and reform more fundamental than merely streamlining procedures. It seems to me that the difficulties about such appointments suggest a need for rethinking our premises about the origins and functions of those officeholders. I doubt that our political system at present produces enough well-qualified recruits for such positions, or that the political interests who now have a say in the matter will let through the screen enough of those who are qualified. If this be so, then either we need to do some imaginative institution building to invent and nourish careers for a new type of

political activist, or we need to give up trying to fill most of those positions on a political basis and get them into some kind of career service. The latter approach, which of course would be favored by most public administrationists, would in my view require development of a somewhat differently motivated, more politically sophisticated, senior civil service than we have at present.