

Prepared remarks of

JAMES B. STEINBERG

Dean

Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs
The University of Texas at Austin

To the

FRIENDS OF THE LBJ LIBRARY

Austin, Texas

Monday, March 24, 2008

**DIFFICULT TRANSITIONS: THE PITFALLS OF MANAGING NATIONAL SECURITY
DURING A PRESIDENT'S FIRST YEAR IN OFFICE**

The next President will take office at an extraordinarily delicate and dangerous time in American history. He or she will face an ongoing conflict in Iraq with US troops still engaged, our ground forces over-extended, and few good options on how to stabilize the situation there and prevent wider conflict. There remain active nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea which threaten to destabilize their regions and undermine the global non-proliferation regime. Our nation faces a continued high level terrorist threat, fueled by the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, and social, cultural and religious divisions from Europe to South East Asia.

We see an intensification of instability in Pakistan, which contributes to the terrorist threat and risks an internal meltdown in a nuclear armed state. Behind these immediate headlines are the longer-term challenges of an increasingly assertive Russia, an economically and militarily more powerful China, and grave long term dangers like climate change, energy security, and pandemic disease.

Throughout our history, the first year of a new Presidential Administration has posed particularly acute challenges, and since the dawn of the nuclear age, these challenges have had a life or death quality. I am going to talk today about why it has proved so difficult for new Administrations to come in and take charge effectively, and how the next administration – whether it is Democratic or Republican – might do better in dealing with challenges that I have just outlined for you.

In talking to you about the problems and possible solutions, I will try to bring you something more than a “scholars” perspective – as participant in four presidential transitions – two “in” (Ford to Carter and Bush to Clinton) and two “out” (Carter to Reagan and Clinton to Bush 43) – I have had a chance to experience the challenges first hand. And I do not think it will be hard to convince you that while there are some elements of “inside baseball” to this story, the issues I am going to talk about have profound consequences far beyond the Beltway, and even beyond our borders. I am

going to focus on foreign policy because that is what I do, and because the promises and perils of transitions are particularly acute in the national security arena. And I am going to try to relate this to some of the specific policy challenges that are front and center on the national agenda.

I would like to suggest that there are three kinds of problems that complicate the advent of a new Presidency. The first kind is a product of the legacy of the campaign – what I call the problems of “coming in” to office. The second concerns the challenges of organizing the decision making machinery of government – what I call “setting up”, and the third concerns the problems associated with the early days of governing – “settling in”. I know this sounds very abstract, so let us turn quickly to what it means in real life.

Campaigns, of course, are about sharpening differences and eliminating nuance between the two candidates and their policies. The incumbent, or the incumbent party, has powerful incentive to tout its achievements, downplay its mistakes, and focus on the dangers of change represented by the challenger. The challenger, of course, has the opposite strategy – denigrate everything that has come before, hype the danger of the current approach, and offer appealing, simplistic alternatives to the messy complexity and unsatisfactory compromise of real world policy.

I think this is probably a pretty familiar story to you. In 2000, Governor Bush attacked Vice President Gore and the Clinton Administration for excessive focus on nation building, advocated a more “humble” US foreign policy, and criticized Clinton for appeasing North Korea in agreeing to the 1994 Agreed Framework. In 1992, Governor Clinton excoriated President Bush for coddling the butchers of Beijing and failing to arm the Bosnians in their fight with Serbia. In 1980, Governor Reagan attacked President Carter for misguided pursuit of arms control with the Soviets that conveyed weakness and for failure to support Taiwan against Communist China. Nixon and the Vietnam War, Kennedy and the Missile Gap, Eisenhower and Korea – This list goes on.

In every one of these cases, once the new President took office, things began to look different. In part, this is a function of knowledge available to the incumbent compared with the challenger. Although Presidential challengers nominally get intelligence briefings during the campaign, I can tell you from my own experience that in practice much of the intelligence is not known to the challengers. Moreover, the incumbent Administration is loath to share “bad news” with the challenger, for fear of handing the opponent a stick with which to beat the incumbent. And to some extent, the challenger has an incentive to remain blissfully ignorant of facts that might complicate or undermine his or her critique of the incumbent.

What does this mean for the current campaign and the incoming Administration? It is easiest to see in connection with Iraq. For the incumbent party, the emphasis is understandably on establishing the success of the policy, the need to stay the course, and the danger of any deviation. The surge is working and a pullout will lead to civil war, regional conflict, and a safe haven for anti-American terrorists. For the challenger, the object is to undermine that claim by challenging the credibility of Administration

spokesman (think of the attack on General Petraeus) and to offer increasingly black and white policy prescriptions (withdraw from Iraq) while challenging the dire predictions of the incumbent.

Now, one of the candidates is going to win – at least eventually. If a Republican wins the election, staying the course and “winning” in Iraq is going to prove very hard if not impossible to execute. We do not have the troops to sustain a long term engagement, the conflicting parties in Iraq deeply mistrust each other and are far from a *modus Vivendi*, and the regional neighbors remain rivals for influence rather than committed to cooling down the conflict. If a Democrat wins, he or she will find that it will be difficult to extricate the troops quickly in a way that protects their safety and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have been working with us, and without triggering scenes reminiscent of the US withdrawal from Vietnam.

The real world options are much narrower and much less satisfactory than either side can afford to admit in the campaign. What makes the situation worse is that there will be a need for real bipartisanship to navigate these shoals next year, yet the black or white campaign debate is likely to be carried over into the next Congress, where the opposition party is likely to challenge the new President from day one.

Now, you may ask, can anything be done about this? I will come to that in a minute. But I want to spend a few minutes on two other critical challenges that may be affected by the dynamics of the campaign rhetoric – two areas that have historically posed acute problems to the transition between campaigning and governing. The first is China. It is rather surprising, in some ways, that China has been such a contentious subject in US foreign policy for most of the past 60 years. Of course, there are deep and important ideological and value differences that emerged following the Communist Party’s successful takeover in 1949, but, at least with the end of the Korean War, it is less clear why China mattered that much to the United States – a desperately poor nation racked by unfathomable internal struggles that was at least as pre-occupied with the neighboring fellow communist country – the Soviet Union – as with the United States and its allies.

Of course, our support for Taiwan and our alliance with South Korea put us at odds with the PRC, but this was not like the US alliance with like minded democracies in Europe in which the struggle was one of values as well as power. And while Mao’s China made friends with a small number of revolutionary regimes in the developing world, the real global competition remained between the US and the Soviet Union. Even in Vietnam, it was the Russian patron, far more than the closer China, that stood behind the scenes of America’s most bloody war since Korea.

Yet even in the heyday of realpolitik cooperation with China – from the time of Nixon’s visit until the events in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989 – China policy was contentious – just consider the fight over the abrogation of the security treaty with Taiwan and the positions stake out by candidate Ronald Reagan – and later modified by President Ronald Reagan. Indeed, if you look at the Presidential campaigns from 1972, you get a pretty good indication of how savvy American politicians see US-China

relations – from Reagan’s campaign pledge – quickly retracted – to re-establish official relations with Taiwan; to George HW Bush’s last minute sales of F-16’s to Taiwan; to Clinton’s attack on the butchers of Beijing; and to GW Bush characterization of China as a strategic competitor. No one ever seems to believe that they can score political points by advocating closer ties between Washington and Beijing. And in the even more politicized context of the US Congress, the membership in the US-PRC caucus is slim indeed.

Of course, it is equally true that once assuming office, the rhetoric of the campaign has invariably been tempered by the experience of office, beginning with Nixon himself. After all, it was Reagan who signed the third communiqué agreeing to reduce US arms sales to Taiwan, Clinton who spent eight days in China, and Bush who stood shoulder to shoulder with China’s Premier to criticize the destabilizing policies of Chen Shui Bian.

But the problem of extricating policy from campaign pledges meant at worse a year or more delay in providing a stable basis for policy, and in some cases risked a major crisis. After a year of increasingly tense relations, President Clinton was forced to retreat from his commitment to link MFN treatment of China to human rights. President GW Bush initially vowed to do “whatever it takes” to defend Taiwan, but after the EP-3 incident and growing cross-strait tensions, found himself within two years shoulder to shoulder with the PRC’s Prime Minister denouncing Taiwan’s President.

Will it happen again? So far, China has not played a major role in the campaigns. But with growing focus on problems in the US economy, and the Olympic spotlight on a range of China’s policies from Sudan to Tibet to energy and environment, the chances are good. For conservatives, especially Republicans, Chinese military modernization and persecution of Christians are an attractive hot-button issue. For Democrats, focusing on China’s trade and currency policies, labor rights, and China’s carbon emissions could energize important constituencies. I predict to you we are going to hear a lot more in the coming months – and most of it critical of the current Administration for being soft on China. So the prospect of a replay of the historical pattern remains strong. Yet at the end of the day, developing constructive relations with China and managing its rise will be one of the most important tasks for the next President. So, how this issue plays out in the campaign could have important long-term consequences.

Another example is trade – an additional area where the structural politics of campaigns cuts against the broader considerations of governing. The globalization of economy has tended to create concentrated pockets of high impact “losers” versus a diffuse and poorly self-defined group of “winners”. How many people vote their identity as a consumer versus their identity as a worker? Once in office, the value of open trade – both for our economic well being as well as for stronger political ties with our trading partners – becomes more apparent. Congress remains a problem of course, because the structural problems of campaigns and trade persist even after election for district based Congressman.

We are already hearing quite a bit from the Democratic candidates questioning not only the desirability of new trade agreements, but even whether we should stick with some of the high profile agreements we have already reached including NAFTA and the recently negotiated Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. You all remember that in 1992, candidate Clinton criticized President Bush on trade and overseas investment by US firms, and had to scramble once elected to adjust his approach.

A final area to watch, where the dog has not yet barked in this campaign, is Iran. A few months ago, Iran figured to play a major role, not least because of the deep internal divisions within the Administration over whether to pursue a confrontational or diplomatic approach. The confusion over the National Intelligence Estimate has blunted the debate. But Iran policy poses a risk of a particular acute version of the problem of transitioning from campaign to governance – the danger of creating a credibility problem even before taking office. It is tempting for candidates to make flat assertions like “we can never let Iran develop nuclear weapons” – which will have a strong appeal on the campaign trail, to show that we are against a very bad regime. However, these assertions are divorced from a serious assessment of what it would take in reality to make that pledge come true.

Once taking office those kind threats come back to haunt – with the danger that the new President will be faced with the unhappy choice of feeling the need to act to retain credibility even if acting on the threat appears counterproductive in reality – or backing down and appearing to display weakness at the outset of a new Administration, with the risk of crippling the Presidency even before it got started. This is the problem that confronted President Kennedy in the first years of his Administration as a result of the campaign language on the missile gap, China and Cuba. While Iran is not front and center today, its continued pursuit of uranium enrichment could precipitate a crisis later this year or certainly in the early months of a new Administration.

So this credibility issue could quickly become a real problem. These examples give you some flavor of the pitfalls that campaigns pose for the challenge of governing – which will have direct implications for four of the most important foreign policy challenges facing our country in 2009. Of course, it is important to remember that the problem of transitioning from campaign to election is not limited to the foreign policy sphere – just remember “read my lips”.

I now want to talk for a few minutes about some of the structural problems that begin only after the campaign has ended and the prize of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is in hand. I’ll begin with the “who” and the “how” of governing.

There is rich literature on the history of national security decision making in the United States, with a particular focus on the machinery of government since the enactment of the National Security Act of 1947, which created the Department of Defense, the CIA, the National Security Council and the position that has become known as the National Security Advisor to the President. There has been endless debate over different models – Cabinet Government, Strong President, Strong Secretary of State, Strong National

Security Advisor – but few Presidents come to office with clear convictions about which of these models is best suited for governing. Why? Well it is not surprising. With rare exceptions (as with sitting VPs who become President) – few have any experience with national security decision making. Those who come from Congress have little experience in any executive decision making. But even those who have been governors do not have much relevant personal experience comparable to the high stakes, esoteric and frequently time urgent problems of national security and diplomacy.

Nor do candidates give much thought to this question during the campaign – first, they are busy, second, they do not want to antagonize any supporters or create a campaign issue by tipping their hand before they are elected, and even worse, do not want to be accused of taking their election for granted by creating an active transition plan that inevitably will be leaked to the press. Now, I don't want to imply there is no transition planning. But it rarely involves the putative president making meaningful decisions – much more a shadow “options” exercise to be available if and when the candidate is elected. And if anyone tells you they think they know who Clinton or McCain or Obama or Romney will pick as the Secretary of State, take it with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Then the moment of glory arrives and the rush is on. The first question of course is who is going to hold the senior positions in the national security apparatus. There are strong pressures to act quickly to name the national security team to reassure friends and deter foes who might seek to take advantage of any uncertainty. But unlike the “political” side of the White House, where Presidents bring in their long time political advisors – Think Ed Meese, George Stephanopoulos, Mac McClarty, Karl Rove and Karen Hughes – Presidents are unlikely to have the same long-standing personal relationship with individuals who are mavens of the national security community. Even Richard Nixon, who had been Vice President and deeply involved in foreign affairs, turned to Henry Kissinger, who had been an advisor to Nelson Rockefeller, and barely acquainted with Nixon at the time he took the position. Most typically, the President Elect turns to the campaign's foreign policy advisors, with whom the President has had some personal contact, but rarely extended involvement. Think Tony Lake and Warren Christopher in President Clinton's first term; the “Vulcans” – Condi Rice, Steve Hadley, Paul Wolfowitz – for President Bush; and Zbig Brzezinski played this role for Carter during the 1976 campaign.

There are exceptions of course. Reagan had a close relationship with Casper Weinberger, and Bush 41 was a very special case, since his foreign policy teams were all veterans of the Reagan Administration – Baker, Scowcroft, Powell, and Cheney – An example I'll return to in minute.

If the first choice is the campaign team, the second choice is to go for the “all stars” – Kissinger, Cyrus Vance for Carter; Al Haig for Reagan; Les Aspin and Jim Woolsey for Clinton; and Colin Powell for Bush 43 – Figures with national reputations, often seen as non-partisan or bipartisan, to balance the flavor of the campaign turned government.

Now each of these strategies has benefits and risks. By drawing on the campaign advisors, the candidate has had at least some personal exposure to the advisors. And there is a pretty good chance that there is basic agreement among them – and between them and the President Elect, on the basic approach to national security, as well as how to handle the immediate issues of the day. All of which tends to mitigate debate.

The downside? First, they are obviously deeply committed to the positions taken during the campaign – with all the attendant risks I have just described. Second, there is an element of group think, since the campaign insiders tend to have a fairly homogenous view of the world (even if the more extended campaign advisory network is more diverse). Finally, they are not necessarily the best qualified – both because many qualified individuals can not or will not work on campaigns, due to time and other professional responsibilities, and others may have worked for the opposing candidates at least during the primaries.

The “all star” model of course has the opposite problems. Although arguably the best “talent”, they may have had little or no contact with the candidate or other senior members of the inner national security circle. Chemistry between them, the President and their peers is uncertain, and frequently they have divergent policy views, precisely because they have no personal stake in or commitment to the positions taken in the campaign. History suggests that this model has rarely worked well – Again, think Haig, Aspin, Woolsey, Powell – though it is not guaranteed – again, as the case of Kissinger shows. Even more problematic is the blending of the two models, which seems almost invariably to produce conflict – Think Brzezinski versus Vance, and Powell versus Rumsfeld and Cheney.

Given this analysis, it is not surprising that the Bush 41 team is widely seen as the most successful – precisely because it was able to get the benefits of both approaches – a group of individuals who had long experience with the President Elect and with each other, and who were also seen as both experienced and relatively less political (remember we are talking the early Dick Cheney, not his later incarnation in the Bush 43 administration). But even here, there was one flaw that flowed from this approach – their long mutual association created a group think that did well in dealing with some issues – particularly German unification and the 1991 Iraq war – But less well when a post-Cold War paradigm was needed – Yeltsin in Russia, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Balkans.

Closely related to the “who” is the “how” – of decision making. Here again, the fact that national security decision making is a novelty for almost all President Elects poses an acute challenge. For those who come to the Presidency from being a Governor, there is a strong tendency to import their “gubernatorial” style – either strong personal leadership (Carter) or Cabinet Governance (Reagan). Ike brought his experience from the military which deeply colored his very formal and hierarchical approach. But each of the choices has benefits and pitfalls – a formal, horizontal approach with all members of the Cabinet empowered may ensure more thorough deliberation and avoid group think, but at the cost of delay, paralysis or death by details. A more informal, streamlined process can be quick

and responsive, but may shut out opposing views and inconvenient facts. This problem can be exacerbated by the tendency to increasingly circle the wagons as the honeymoon wears off and press and politics begin to challenge the competence of the new team.

The problem of the “who” and the “how” is complicated by the appointments process. With rare exceptions, the appointment of the “principals” goes fairly smoothly and quickly. Congress is usually willing to give a President the Cabinet he wants, and the FBI is not likely to impose significant barriers to the President’s most important choices, even in the national security area. The problem comes at the next level down – the Deputy, Under and Assistant Secretaries. Here the process has reached near paralysis.

As my former colleague at the Brookings Institution, Paul Light has written:

Every administration since 1960 has been just a little later than its predecessor in putting its cabinet and sub-cabinet in place. Whereas the Kennedy administration took an average of two-and-a-half months to get its appointees sworn in, the Nixon administration took three-and-a-half, Carter four-and-a-half, Reagan five-and-a-half, the first Bush administration just over eight, and Clinton eight-and-a-half. Almost half of the senior-level appointees who served from 1964 to 1984 were confirmed within two months after entering the process, compared to just 15 percent of the appointees who served from 1984 to 1999. [The Bush 43 administration] passed the halfway point in the confirmation of its top 500 appointees [about eight and half months taking office].

This phenomenon illustrates the problem I call “settling in”. Why does it matter, if the top national security officials are in place as there are legions of career officials who remain through changes in Administration? The answer lies in the critical role played by the second and third tier of officials – what has become known as the Deputies and working level interagency processes. Now you may think that because I am a former deputy, it is predictable that I would say this.

But there are some structural reasons behind this argument. First, at the beginning of a new Administration, there is a deep disconnect between the career officials and the top political appointees. Often the career officials are unknown to their incoming boss. They have worked, loyally, for an outgoing administration whose policies the new crowd intends to remake. But the new principals can not handle the range of challenges on their own. Their bandwidth is limited, and typically they become engaged in the crisis du jour, which is often not the most important issue facing the country – think Somalia and gays in the military in the Clinton Administration.

The Deputies and Assistant level processes are vital. First, to make sure the Principals decision are well prepared; second, to handle the full range of issues that do not rise to the level of principals, to oversee implementation of policy decisions made by the principals, and to prepare the ground for long-term strategic policy. Without these officials in place, no wonder the process flounders, with potentially cataclysmic

consequences. Just as President Kennedy paid dearly for carrying out his predecessors plans for the Bay of Pigs, President Clinton went down a path in Somalia started by Bush 41, without the staff analysis that would surface the pitfalls of deepening engagement.

And the problem of overload and “settling in” surely contributed to the fact that in the Bush 43 administration there was no serious look by the Principals at the anti-terrorism strategy until the summer of 2001, notwithstanding the urgent pleas of holdover official Dick Clark. One thing is clear, though, given the critical choices facing the country – there is little time for a learning curve, or for painstaking consensus building in the face of potentially imminent crises like Iran or Pakistan.

This is just one of the many problems an Administration faces in “settling in”. Another is the impulse of a new administration to move quickly to set its mark on policy, often by quickly discarding the policies of its predecessor and putting its new theory into practice. Examples are legion – Clinton on Haiti, where a decision to change Bush 41’s policy on returning Haitian refugees had to be reversed even before Clinton took office. In the Bush 43 Administration, the ideological aversion to Clinton’s engagement strategy with North Korea led President Bush, just two months in office, to repudiate the policies of Korean President Kim Dung Jung during his visit to the White House, precipitating a crisis in US-ROK relations and setting in motion a set of actions that led to North Korea’s nuclear test. Bush 43’s repudiation of Kyoto without an alternative strategy is another example of precipitous repudiation of the past without a well thought out strategy of how to proceed. Similar observations could be made about the Bush administration abandonment of the US role in fostering the Israel-Palestinian peace process.

The problem is complicated by the profound distrust the incoming officials feel toward their predecessors. I know – I have been there. At the end of the Carter Administration, incoming Reagan officials were often under orders not to talk with us, their predecessors. And while I had a chance to talk with my successors on leaving the Clinton Administration, it is pretty clear that they took the view that everything we had done was discredited and therefore not worth more than a pro forma transition briefing.

This problem of “settling in” also accounts for why no administration has met is Congressionally mandated requirement of publishing a national security strategy during the first year in office, leaving Congress and public and administration officials without the kind of clear guidance they need to develop and execute national security strategy.

So what is to be done? The first and most obvious point is the critical importance of candidates taking seriously the prospect that they might actually win and therefore have to govern. Policy switches once in office may be embarrassing for domestic policy, but they can be catastrophic for national security – conveying indecisiveness and vacillation in a world that needs steadiness in the sole superpower. But slavish devotion to rash campaign commitments poses an equal danger. So candidates need to resist the need to make excessively concrete proposals until they are in a position to fully understand the facts, including the perspective of key international partners, and to build a broad based consensus for their policies.

Second is the need to think through the operations of government even before getting elected. It is imperative that the candidate talk to advisors and outsiders about their views of how to organize and run the national security apparatus.

Third, walk – do not run – in the first months in office. Focus on filling the key jobs and carefully getting up to speed before rushing to implement new policies. Although honeymoons are short, they can be made even shorter by early blunders. Consult, with Congress, with key allies – and with your predecessors, who, surprisingly, may have actually gotten some things right, even if they were from the opposite party. As my late colleague Elspeth Rostow often said, echoing Dean Acheson, sometimes the right response is “Don’t just do *something* – stand there”.

Why have I gone on at such length on these challenges? Change is particularly critical in our national security policy today, because America’s global standing has plummeted in response to an Administration that has taken a short-sighted view of our national interest, been too willing to act on its own, and ignore the needed advice and counsel of our friends and allies. If we are to prevail on the most urgent challenges of our time – halting the spread of nuclear weapons, building a global alliance against the terrorists, addressing the problem of climate change, and sustaining a prosperous, open global economy – we will need to act quickly and decisively to change course.

But as a practitioner and a student of the process, I fear another Groundhog Day – that a new Administration in its understandable zeal to correct quickly what I believe are the clear mistakes of the current Administration will repeat the mistakes of the past. So it is important for you, as influential members in your community and the country, to convey your own expectation that at least, when it comes to national security, the candidates need to address these critical questions of how they will govern. It also is important for you to understand and support the kind of careful transition that I have outlined here.

I hope this has given you some insight into the challenges, and I look forward to your questions.