NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Measuring the Drapes

Tevi Troy

For decades, one common cliché of American campaign rhetoric has been the criticism that presidential aspirants are "measuring the drapes." When news leaks that a candidate is contemplating his future cabinet, or readying a policy agenda for the first 100 days of his administration, such advance preparation is typically exploited by his opponent as evidence of unbecoming hubris. Our presidential contenders have thus had to tread very carefully, caught between two unpleasant choices: entering the Oval Office underprepared, or risking criticism for seeming to presume a victory not yet won.

This difficult balance was on my mind when, in July of 2012, I was invited to a meeting at the Washington headquarters of the Romney Readiness Project. Known inside the Romney campaign as R2P, the project (which I soon joined as director of domestic policy) was an all-out transition team, assigned to help Mitt Romney prepare for the early personnel and policy decisions he would face if he won in November. Although Romney had long since secured the needed delegates to clinch the Republican nomination, when I attended my first R2P meeting, the GOP convention was still six weeks away and the election was fully four months away. Wasn't it much too soon to start transition planning?

As I quickly learned, however, the project was a function not of hubris but of a new federal law that will forever change the character of presidential transitions. In an effort to address precisely the impossible choice that presidential candidates face between seeming arrogant and being unprepared, Congress passed the Pre-Election Presidential

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Transition Act of 2010. The law provides government support—in the form of office space, technology, vetting for security clearances, assistance from federal-agency staffs, and funding—to help presidential challengers begin transition efforts upon receiving their parties' nominations. Previously, federal transition support had been available only after the election was over. The law thus moved the transition timetable up from November to summer, offering several more weeks of crucial preparation time.

The law was also meant to help change attitudes. Our government takes in nearly $2.5 trillion a year in taxes, spends more than $3.5 trillion, employs roughly 4.4 million people, and stands at the center of global diplomatic, military, and financial affairs. The moment a president-elect takes the oath of office, he inherits enormous responsibilities for which we would wish no president to be unprepared. As one of the co-sponsors of the 2010 law, Ohio Republican senator George Voinovich, explained, "Candidates taking deliberate steps to ensure a smooth transition should not be criticized as arrogantly 'measuring the White House drapes' before Election Day: such planning should be encouraged and supported."

The Romney campaign was the first, and so far the only, campaign to be covered by the new law (since the incumbent president does not require a transition effort), and it sought to take its charge seriously and to make the most of the opportunity the law made available. Every non-incumbent campaign in the coming years—including those of both parties' candidates in 2016—will face a similar obligation, and a similar opportunity. It is therefore worth looking at the experience of presidential transitions, and especially that of the Romney Readiness Project, to assess the wisdom and the challenges of "measuring the drapes." In evaluating both the benefits and pitfalls of our approach to presidential preparedness, we can see how prolonged transitions might serve the cause of good government—and why voters may wish to be more forgiving of presidential candidates seeking to be as ready as possible on day one.

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS

It is helpful to think of the history of presidential transitions as divided into three phases. The first phase, which covered most of our history, was one in which transitions, to the extent they existed, were haphazard and informal. This was an era of smaller, less complex government, but also one in which there was generally a four-month period—from Election Day in November to Inauguration Day in March (as it was until Franklin Roosevelt's second inauguration in 1937)—during which outgoing presidents departed and incoming presidents moved to town.

Just after the very first transition, from George Washington to John Adams, President Adams wrote a letter to his wife, Abigail, bemoaning the state of the President's House in Philadelphia, which served as the executive residence while the White House was being built. "There is not a chair to sit in," Adams complained. "The beds and bedding are in a woeful pickle. This house has been a scene of the most scandalous drinking and disorder among the servants that I ever heard of. I would not have one of them for any consideration." Four years later, Adams found himself on the other side of the transition process, as Thomas Jefferson, his own vice president, had ousted him from office in the election of 1800. Adams did not handle the situation gracefully—he left Washington without participating in any of the inauguration events—but his acceptance of the peaceful transfer of power from one party to another was a significant first in modern history.

Throughout this first phase, transitions did not follow a predictable script. Some transition periods were particularly eventful, such as the one in which Andrew Jackson lost his beloved wife. The most dramatic transition was surely Abraham Lincoln's, during which many Southern states seceded and the nation moved ever closer to war before the new president could take the reins of power.

As communication and transportation improved, the extended lame-duck period originally established by the Constitution began to seem increasingly outdated and at times awkward. Franklin Roosevelt's transition period took place as the Great Depression was worsening, and, during the waning days of Herbert Hoover's presidency, Roosevelt let his outgoing rival dangle without any input on what policies he thought should be implemented to respond to the crisis. Historians believe F.D.R.'s aim was to be able to lay full blame for the economic situation at Hoover's feet—a stratagem that clearly succeeded. According to the University of Vermont's John Burke, "F.D.R. didn't want to get enchained by any type of policies coming out of the Hoover administration." Roosevelt was the last president to be inaugurated in March; 1933's 20th Amendment reduced the transition period to 11 weeks from 17 (and also clarified the issue of vice-presidential succession).

Because F.D.R. was elected to four terms and then died in office — clearing the way for his vice president, Harry Truman, to serve nearly two full terms — the next post-election transition did not take place for 20 years. When it did, after the election of 1952, a great deal had changed. Not only would Dwight Eisenhower's inauguration take place in January, but the post-Depression, post-New Deal, post-World War II government he inherited was much larger, more expensive, and more complex than the government F.D.R. had taken over in 1932.

Another change was the creation of a White House staff, stemming from the judgment of the 1937 Brownlow Committee that "the President needs help." This still wasn't much of a staff: In addition to providing for the three personal secretaries and one administrative assistant that presidents had previously been permitted, the law resulting from the committee's recommendations allowed for the hiring of six "assistants to the president," each to be assigned to a specific subset of the chief executive's broad responsibilities. Furthermore, several outside agencies — including the Bureau of the Budget (later renamed the Office of Management and Budget) and the Liaison Office of Personnel Management (now known as just the Office of Personnel Management) — were brought into a new Executive Office of the President that was intended to answer directly to the chief executive. The president had more to manage by 1952, and more resources with which to manage it, though that also meant there was more to do in the shortened transition period allowed a newly elected president.

But Eisenhower, it turns out, did not need much in the way of transition resources. He settled into the White House with military-like efficiency, selecting a budget director, a chief of staff (a new innovation), and cabinet members quickly and with little fanfare.

Better remembered is John Kennedy's transition, the last to take place before the 1963 Presidential Transition Act (PTA), which passed in 1964 and provided for post-election transition funding. Kennedy famously consulted Columbia professor and presidential scholar Richard Neustadt for guidance on how to undertake a presidential transition, part of the president-elect's groundbreaking and effective outreach to the nation's intellectual community. Neustadt gave a fascinating overview of the opportunities and powers available to the incoming president; his memos (which are viewable in their original form online at the web site of the Kennedy presidential library and museum) explain that the transition is a full-time job and lay out the key positions that need to be filled. Neustadt's list is a revealing historical snapshot: He refers to a "Number-one Boy" among presidential aides, but makes no specific mention of a chief of staff (Kennedy did not end up having one). He also puts the post of science advisor to the president on par with the national security advisor. Needless to say, in a modern White House, the chief of staff position is often the first one filled. The national security advisor has one of the top jobs in government; with the space race a distant memory, however, the science advisor has diminished in importance.

The PTA itself was an important legacy of the Kennedy transition. Kennedy had spent approximately $300,000 of his own funds on the transition effort and had also tapped the Democratic National Committee for support. Recognizing the need for transition resources—and the fact that other presidents-elect would not be as wealthy as he was—Kennedy set up a commission to make recommendations for future transitions, leading to the PTA's passage. For perspective, the PTA called for a limit on transition spending of $900,000, the equivalent of about $6.7 million today. (President Obama's transition, by comparison, cost roughly $12 million in 2008.)

The first president to have access to this new government funding, and thus the first president in what might be considered the second phase of presidential transitions, was Richard Nixon (though he also raised an additional million dollars in non-governmental funds for the transition). Since Nixon had previously served eight years as Eisenhower's vice president and was therefore familiar with the White House, he had relatively little need for a lengthy transition. Still, his transition was not uneventful: After the 1968 election, outgoing President Lyndon Johnson showed Nixon some key features of the White House, including the taping system that would get him into so much trouble. Nixon apparently did not much like the taping system when he saw it, but this aversion obviously did not stop him from using it as president.

The passage of the PTA largely standardized the presidential-transition process, though each change of administration still had its own distinguishing features. Jimmy Carter began planning his transition in April 1976, as far back as the Pennsylvania primary, when a clear path to the nomination emerged even though he had not yet officially become the party's standard-bearer. The transition, headed by Jack Watson, did the usual work of drawing up lists of nominees and sketching out position papers. It is most remembered today for the feuding between the transition staff and the Carter campaign team, particularly campaign manager Hamilton Jordan.

On the Republican side, Ronald Reagan's transition notably collected policy ideas from conservative think tanks, especially the Heritage Foundation. Heritage compiled more than 2,000 policy recommendations for Reagan in a publication titled *Mandate for Leadership*, which served as a blueprint for the new administration. George H. W. Bush's intra-party transition of 1988 angered conservatives who felt that they were not getting the same respect they had from the Reagan team. Whereas Reagan had sought to tap into an ideological movement, Bush and his people preferred pragmatists who would solve the specific policy problems affecting their constituents. As one unnamed Bush transition official told the *Washington Post*, "Our people don't have agendas. They have mortgages. They want jobs."

Bill Clinton's 1992 transition from Little Rock, too, is remembered for its missteps, particularly the series of attorney-general picks who did not make it through vetting (both Zoë Baird and Kimba Wood withdrew their nominations after the discovery that they had employed illegal immigrants as household workers). Still determined to name the first woman attorney general, Clinton eventually went with Janet Reno, who served all eight years of the administration but was manifestly not a White House favorite.

George W. Bush had both the longest and shortest transition of elected presidents in the post-PTA era. It was the longest transition in the sense that Bush had asked Clay Johnson, his close friend since high school, to start thinking about the transition as early as 1999; it was the shortest because the 2000 election recount meant that government funding for transition efforts did not come through until after the election result was settled by the Supreme Court, a full five weeks after Election Day. One former Bush White House colleague of mine remembered the truncated 2000 transition as "a bunch of chickens running around without heads." Staffing decisions had to be made late in the process; one relatively innocuous — but nevertheless telling — consequence was that, on the first day of the administration, there was no White House phone book listing the assorted staffers and where they could be located. First-day Bush staffers recall very senior aides wandering around the White House complex trying to find the colleagues they needed to consult with in order to resolve important issues.

Barack Obama's 2008 transition went more smoothly, but it also took place against the backdrop of the financial crisis that lent greater urgency to its actions. In addition, the severity of the crisis, as well as the electoral rebuke Republicans had experienced that fall, led to a relatively high level of deference by the Bush administration to the incoming Obama team. This deference stood in stark contrast to the much rougher relations that existed between F.D.R. and Hoover as well as to other cross-party transfers of power (including, in some respects, the Clinton administration's treatment of George W. Bush's team in 2001). Obama's transition is also known for its greater reliance on technology, particularly the integration of web resources, which allowed the transition team to process some 300,000 résumés of interest in a short time.

The Obama transition team was the last to receive government funding only after the presidential election. For the first time in our history, 2012 saw a pre-election transition effort that was not only sanctioned by federal law, but was also supported at least in part by federal dollars and, following the nominating convention, housed in federal office space provided by the General Services Administration. This new, pre-election transition was the fruit of the 2010 law, itself the result of a bipartisan effort by legislators who were concerned that, in the era of modern government, post-election transitions were too short. The Pre-Election Presidential Transition Act thus ushered in the third phase of presidential transitions.

FILLING THE RANKS

The experience of the Romney Readiness Project offers important lessons about what Americans can expect in this new era of prolonged presidential transitions. The Readiness Project was established in the summer of 2012 and headed by former Utah governor Michael Leavitt. Leavitt was a seasoned administrator — in addition to his tenure as governor, he had served in the Bush administration as both administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency and secretary of Health and Human Services — and was known for taking a thoughtful, deliberative approach to policy work.

Under Leavitt were Christopher Liddell and James Quigley, two senior managers with extensive and impressive corporate experience. Liddell, who had been the CFO of both Microsoft and General Motors, headed operations; Quigley, former head of the financial-services firm

Deloitte LLP, led the policy groups. Leavitt asked me to head the domestic-policy group in Quigley's operation. In this role, I was tasked with selecting and supervising the eight team leaders for the domestic-policy agencies (which included the departments of Health and Human Services, Justice, Labor, Housing and Urban Development, Education, and Transportation). Quigley also oversaw two other policy groups, one responsible for national security (headed by former World Bank president Robert Zoellick) and the other for economic policy (headed by former Bush economic advisors Allan Hubbard and Glenn Hubbard).

Leavitt's approach to the pre-transition work was characteristic of his judicious style. He wanted policy analyses to be "narrow but deep," and asked all of the senior officials in R2P to draft "charters" detailing specifically what work they would do and when they would complete each task. Implicitly, defining the work that *would* be done meant also defining what an official would *not* be doing (any activity not listed in the charter). The transition would, in other words, be a focused effort with clearly delineated lines of authority and metrics for success.

One of the most important pre-election tasks was to identify the people who could staff the highest ranks of a Romney administration, particularly those whose jobs would require Senate confirmation. The confirmation process has become lengthy, burdensome, and overly partisan; recognizing this trend, R2P wanted to have short lists ready so that the president-elect could choose candidates for the most important positions almost immediately after the election, giving the confirmation process a nearly ten-week head start before Inauguration Day. The confirmation process would still be long, but at least now there would be a chance that the new president would have his very top people in place near the beginning of the administration.

Compiling these short lists was no easy task. For each R2P policy group, this meant identifying five candidates who might be able to fill each of the top ten presidentially appointed, Senate-confirmed slots for each cabinet department under its jurisdiction. The math was daunting: Each team leader had to come up with 50 prospects, which meant that each of the three policy groups—domestic, economic, and national security—had to provide approximately 400 names that could potentially take top-level positions at the eight or so agencies under its purview. Quigley, as head of the entire policy operation, would be presented with about 1,200 names, which he would then share with the presidential-appointments group, which would take in even more names from other sources, conduct background checks on all recommended job candidates, and prepare and process the final lists of names to go to the president-elect and a small circle of advisors for final decisions.

Obviously, no one at any of these levels could personally know all of the people being recommended. The only way to come up with that many names that quickly was to search on the basis of a template or criteria by which to measure potential candidates. For the domestic-policy group, I impressed upon the team leaders the importance of a five-point test for potential high-level staffers. The test was adapted from the list E. Pendleton James, Ronald Reagan's transition chief, used to assess candidates for the Reagan administration.

The test's first criterion was philosophical alignment with the candidate's view of the role of government. If a potential senior administration official fundamentally disagreed with Romney on key policy issues, then that job prospect would consistently cause problems once inside government. Such internal conflicts are, unfortunately, all too common. One prominent example can be found in Ron Suskind's misleadingly titled *The Price of Loyalty*, written with the obvious cooperation of former Treasury secretary Paul O'Neill. Suskind reveals that O'Neill was working to undermine President-elect George W. Bush's proposed tax cut even before the administration began. This kind of behavior was not only unacceptable, but also damaging to the administration O'Neill was supposedly seeking to serve.

In order to avoid this kind of problem, R2P's goal was to find talented people who agreed with Romney — period. There are certainly instances in which an administration chooses high-level officials who disagree, or are from the opposite party, for reasons of unity or to meet some kind of special need. But in our case, those exceptions would have to be determined by Romney himself. I instructed my teams to find people who believed in the mission; candidates with contrarian views could come in through different channels.

The second major criterion was integrity. Job candidates absolutely had to live up to the highest ethical and legal standards; otherwise, they had no business serving in government. R2P had an aggressive vetting operation that combed through the backgrounds of potential nominees searching for any signs of inappropriate behavior. These days, the internet and other electronic resources make extremely thorough searches of job candidates' backgrounds very easy. I saw vetting documents that included information on traffic tickets, lobbying registrations, social-media content, and any and all court proceedings. Such searches cannot guarantee that all candidates will behave appropriately as government employees, of course, but they can certainly remove a lot of bad apples from the barrel. They also offer a lesson to all of us to be careful of what we do at all times. The growth of a Facebook and Twitter culture will not make confirmations any easier in the future, especially for indiscriminate "updaters." In fact, R2P had a rule prohibiting tweeting by staffers. "Even if it's just to say it's a nice day outside?" one twenty-something asked at an orientation session. "Even then," was the reply.

The third component of the test was toughness. Making unpopular decisions as a political appointee in Washington is hard: One may encounter resistance from career officials, interest groups, members of Congress, rival appointees, and, in many cases, all of the above. For this reason, it was essential to find candidates who would not wilt under pressure, and who would be willing to make tough decisions in the face of significant, and even unfair or inaccurate, criticism. On this front, merely asserting a willingness to be tough was insufficient. Candidates needed demonstrable experience in taking heat over difficult decisions.

The fourth measure was competence, as almost all of the positions we were looking to fill required some kind of technical expertise. Notwithstanding the tenure of Michael "Heckuva Job Brownie" Brown — whose professional background before heading the Federal Emergency Management Administration during Hurricane Katrina was largely in Arabian horses — the vast majority of political appointees to Senate-confirmed positions have demonstrable skills relevant to their posts. This meant that political operatives had to be passed over in favor of technical experts. Romney often stressed the importance of his own "real world" — meaning business-world — experience. One thing we found on the transition, however, was that while private-sector experience was indeed important, the knowledge possessed by people who had previously served in government was invaluable, particularly for jobs below the very highest circle of decision-makers. Republicans often extol the virtues of business experience, but time and again, we have seen those who understand government and its processes run circles around officials unschooled in the methods of the bureaucracy.

The fifth criterion, and one of the most difficult to assess, was whether the job candidate was a team player—someone willing to put the future president's agenda above his own interests. Washington is filled with people who accept administration positions to promote themselves rather than to serve their country. Such people not only tend to do their jobs poorly, but also generally fail to play well with others. They create management headaches of the sort that the Romney team wanted to avoid, especially given everything else that would have been on the president-elect's plate. But sorting the team players from the self-servers can be tricky: In order to be known and noticed for his skills, a candidate would need to have at least some ability in the self-promotion department. The key was to find individuals capable of demonstrating their talents without making their work about themselves.

These characteristics were valued more or less equally, and a failure to possess any one of them was sufficient to remove a candidate from the list. Given these high bars, finding five people for each slot—let alone 50 for each agency and 400 for each policy group—was an intense and time-consuming challenge. Fortunately, R2P had a talented and hard-working—and almost entirely unpaid—staff willing to take on the challenge. And, crucially, R2P had the benefit of time, made possible by the 2010 transition law. The experience suggests that any administration hoping to apply the highest standards in hiring for senior positions would be wise to start early.

THE AGENDA

Once the initial personnel recommendations were submitted to the presidential-appointments team for processing, the focus shifted to policy. This was complicated work, for a number of reasons. First, the R2P team was not *setting* policy for the new administration. The policy platform was being established and sketched out by Romney, campaign policy director Lanhee Chen, and the rest of the campaign policy team in Boston; our job was to come up with plans to implement those policies. Second, we were embroiled in a heated political campaign that, at the time, we still had hopes of winning. We wanted to make sure that the R2P effort did not generate any policy news (or other headlines) that could have damaged Romney's prospects for success. This was always a problem in perennially leaky Washington. Fortunately, while there were some leaks—many of them inaccurate—about who was doing what for the transition effort, the policy materials remained a closely guarded secret.

We began our effort to produce policy-implementation plans by looking at the federal agencies in our purview to get a sense of what needed to be accomplished at each one. Each team wrote a short report about each agency, briefly summarizing the department's general mission, identifying actions that took place during the previous administration that a new administration should undo or change, and explaining controversial issues that a new team would need to address. The report also set out a new vision for the department that promoted a limited, but effective, federal government.

Each of the memos was to be brief, consisting of two or three well thought-out pages. This concision requirement stemmed from conversations with people who had served in previous administrations and found that, too often, transitions produced reams and reams of paper that ended up gathering dust once the administration began. Our aim was thus to produce overviews short enough that the cabinet secretaries and other top officials could realistically be expected to read them instead of just filing them away. Upon arriving at their agencies, these newly appointed officers would of course be buried under a barrage of memos from career officials. At the very least, however, the new secretaries would be reading those memos after having absorbed our guidance, and after having acquired the appropriate perspective through which to understand their agencies.

In addition to the brief agency overviews, we needed to come up with plans for implementing the specific policy promises made by the candidate and the campaign. In this, we worked from the "Romney 200 Day Plan," a listing of Romney's top policy initiatives. While the "first 100 days" was the standard time frame for launching major presidential initiatives, Washington had become so dysfunctional that we hoped to extend the window for realistically achieving policy results.

The first goal we had was to use those 200 days to inject confidence and certainty into a struggling economy. Economists had long discussed the trillions of dollars that businesses and investors had been keeping on the sidelines, and the idea was to coax that money into the economy by showing serious commitment to regulatory reform, debt and deficit reduction, and lower tax rates. By focusing on these three priorities, the administration would help revive the economy, giving the new president more latitude to accomplish the other elements of his agenda.

Taxes and deficits would be largely in the hands of the Congress and the new administration's budget negotiators. R2P did have a separate budget team working on a plan to cut non-defense discretionary spending by 5% and to get spending levels down to about 20% of GDP by 2016 (a far more manageable level than the current figure, which is more than 22%). With the goal of cutting spending in mind, we started to work on alternative metrics for a successful presidency beyond the simple distribution of federal funding. Every year, the president's State of the Union address includes a laundry list of all the money his administration has called for spending on a host of projects — as if spending taxpayer dollars in and of itself was worthy of applause. In our era of hyper-extended budgets and out-of-control debt, R2P believed there should be new metrics for an effective presidency — such as how an administration reduces government paperwork required of citizens, businesses, and institutions; how many regulatory burdens it has eliminated; or how many key government programs on the brink of bankruptcy it has made solvent.

One particularly appealing measure was the degree to which the administration's actions led to increases in private-sector activity — the degree to which businesses, foundations, charitable organizations, and citizens took increased responsibility for things that had previously largely been done by government. This measure built on an idea captured by former Minnesota governor (and unsuccessful 2012 presidential candidate) Tim Pawlenty in his "Google Test," which held that any service a person could find a private firm offering on the internet should not be performed by government. Measuring success in these ways would not only lessen the pressure to spend more, but would also establish a politically advantageous means of demonstrating budget cutters' accomplishments.

Another advantage of these metrics was that a number of them could be met through executive-branch activity alone, without requiring the support of Congress. This was particularly true of reducing the regulatory burden. The Obama administration had already imposed approximately $50 billion in new annual regulatory costs on our fragile economy, so containing the spread of regulations was a real way to reassure Americans of the economy's potential for growth.

One of the most creative ideas under discussion, promoted by regulatory expert Jeffrey Rosen, was a regulatory cost cap—an executive order telling the agencies that, in the upcoming year, the net cost of new rules must be zero. This concept differs from cost-benefit analysis, which calls for rules to have more benefit than cost, but does not limit the overall increase in cost if regulatory officials can find studies purporting to show sufficient levels of benefits. The R2P cost cap, on the other hand, would communicate to officials that the regulatory costs they could impose on the economy were limited. If they wanted to promulgate a new rule that cost $1 billion, they would first have to get rid of $1 billion worth of existing regulatory costs if they wished to proceed.

Another idea was to create a senior regulatory official on the White House staff who would proactively seek to reform or eliminate costly or outdated regulations. Regulatory experts know that the Office of Management and Budget already has an official in charge of regulations for the federal government—the director of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. Though the head of OIRA plays an important and useful role, he faces two disadvantages that create the need for this new, supplementary regulatory official. First, the OIRA slot is at OMB, not in the president's immediate circle; the OIRA head is thus a few too many degrees removed in the organizational chart to have regular interaction with the president. Second, and perhaps more important, OIRA's purview is so overwhelmingly broad that the director of OIRA must often be *reactive*, working to improve regulations that are already on the agenda and making their way through the regulatory processes at the various executive agencies and departments. Having an official focused on the *proactive* role of eliminating or scaling back existing regulations would both ensure that the administration engaged in regulatory rollback—rather than mere regulatory management—and emphasize the message that the administration was serious about creating a climate for economic growth. These and other proposed steps would have created certainty for the economy and spurred economic improvement in 2013 and beyond.

Beyond general fiscal and regulatory issues, the Romney 200 Day Plan contained a host of proposals related to specific federal agencies. One key campaign promise that affected the Department of Health and Human Services was the pledge to repeal Obamacare. This promise elicited widespread skepticism, because even in the optimistic scenarios that had Romney winning the presidency, the prospects for a GOP majority in the Senate were plummeting fast (and the odds of a GOP supermajority of 60 votes were zero). Without full control of both houses, a straight-up, all-out repeal was unlikely.

In response to this challenge, the R2P team, which included some of the GOP's top health-care thinkers, came up with an aggressive approach that would have both stopped and rolled back the implementation of Obamacare in such an overwhelming way that Senate Democrats would have had to come to the table to discuss some kind of repeal package. The law gives HHS enormous leeway to make a large number of key implementation decisions, and in the hands of an administration eager for repeal, our experts concluded that this leeway would make it possible to effectively nullify the new system through a carefully choreographed series of executive actions. The regulatory rollback would have been so complete that we were confident Obamacare never could have gotten off the ground and that a path toward real, market-based health-care reform would have been opened.

Another complicated element that required extra transition time to sort out was how to handle the campaign promises that went beyond what one agency could deliver. There were a variety of promises — on education, job training, immigration, and so forth — that would have required the coordination of multiple agencies in order to fulfill them. For this effort, R2P created a grouping of policy-strategy teams in order to come up with implementation plans based on input from representatives of each of the relevant agency teams. One example of this coordination was R2P's efforts surrounding Romney's promise to significantly reduce the bureaucracy standing between job seekers and job-training opportunities. Together, staffers from the Department of Labor and Department of Education teams designed a voucher program through which unemployed Americans could pursue job training at community colleges, technical schools, and professional schools, with guidance from local employers about what skills to develop to become more hirable.

As with any transition, the R2P effort was far from perfect. There were many bureaucratic obligations — including weekly spreadsheet submissions demonstrating where we stood on various assignments — that senior managers did not have the time to deal with. In addition, certain key R2P personnel questions — such as lobbyist participation, compensation for staff, full-time versus part-time status, and ethics requirements—were not sorted out until too late in the process. Furthermore, R2P did not have a communications staffer (or even a communications strategy) until the very end, preferring instead to leave all communications to the campaign team in Boston. The Boston team, however, was understandably preoccupied with the more pressing matter of trying to get Romney elected. Since this is certain to be the case with future presidential-campaign press shops, future transition projects need to recognize that the press is part of the equation and must be dealt with in a more deliberate way going forward.

These complaints, however, were minor. R2P was an impressive and well-conceived operation. It brought in much of the GOP's—and the conservative movement's—top talent and had a serious and achievable plan for putting Romney's proposals into action. If there had been a Romney presidency, R2P would have had the new administration as ready as any in history.

FORTUNE FAVORS THE PREPARED CANDIDATE

Of course, with President Obama's victory in November, none of these plans will now be put into effect—raising the important question of whether it was necessary or even appropriate to spend tax dollars on an endeavor that led to naught. Republicans and Democrats both need to consider this question, as President Obama's constitutionally mandated departure from the White House in four years means that both candidates in the 2016 election will have government-funded transitions beginning around the time of their conventions. Whatever happens, at least 40% of voters will be in the position of having contributed taxpayer dollars to develop policy positions that they will vote against in November. Furthermore, about half of the overall spending will be wasted, as one of the transitions' efforts will be destined for trash bins rather than presidential archives.

Are pre-election transitions worth the money going forward? In 2012, the cost to taxpayers of the Romney transition project was $8.9 million, according to the GSA—a figure that is likely to climb in future years. In addition, extending the period of government involvement in the transition process brings with it bureaucratic encumbrances, as witnessed in the Romney 2012 operation. Staff members must fill out forms galore, and the FBI begins working on security clearances for people who may never need them. Furthermore, the weightiness of official federal involvement brings a seriousness to transition operations that, while important and perhaps necessary, could be stultifying and even detrimental to organic policy development.

It might also present future campaigns with serious political problems. Journalists covering future campaigns, and voters paying attention to them, will now know that a transition is going on in the background throughout the crucial summer and fall months of the election year. Should they not demand to know what people and what policies the prospective president is planning to bring to Washington beyond what the candidate might be telling them in campaign statements and speeches? Would not such uncomfortable questions about the transition then limit the planning that campaigns actually do?

On the other hand, the pre-election transition brings with it some enormous benefits. It will better enable future presidents to prepare for the immense responsibilities they will assume on Inauguration Day. A winning presidential campaign will have rightly focused its resources on the tough and uncertain task of winning the election, which means that, without federal funding and support, it would be unlikely to prepare itself adequately for governing. A legal mandate and modest public resources can make a huge difference in enabling such preparation.

Moreover, there will never again be a truncated transition such as the one that took place after the muddled election of 2000. Regardless of any future electoral confusion, both teams will continue their preparations, and either team will be reasonably prepared to take over whenever the clouds of uncertainty disappear. These kinds of elections may happen very infrequently, but when they do happen, they will not prevent whoever assumes the presidency from being ready to govern.

Another advantage is the increased transparency government sanction brings to a transition project. While the Romney transition team does not anticipate that its files will become public records, they would have become public had Romney won. Furthermore, there is always the possibility that, over time, people will demand disclosure of losing campaigns' transition documents as a condition of taxpayer funding. Gaining these additional insights into the inner workings of transition teams would be useful to historians and beneficial to open government.

But perhaps the most compelling argument in favor of pre-election transition spending is an unfortunate one. The 21st-century federal government is so enormous that even the 80-day transitions of the pre-2010 era are insufficient to the task of preparing candidates and their teams to run an institution of such massive size, scope, and reach. As long as we have a federal government of this magnitude, incoming administrations will need all the preparation they can get.

Of course, the 2010 Pre-Election Presidential Transition Act is by no means a guarantee that transition dollars will be spent wisely. But it does offer greater opportunity to ensure that the men and women entrusted with the reins of government will be better prepared to take on those challenges than they have been in the past. The hope is that those future administrations will be able to benefit from this new support, and also from the experience of R2P as it ushered in a new era of presidential transitions.