

Extra Feature Story

Transition From Bush to Obama Presidency Presents Challenges

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President-elect Barack Obama began announcing plans for his new administration just days after winning the election, but he doesn't officially become president until he takes the oath of office at noon on January 20.

Mr. Obama inherits a wealth of problems as he noted in his acceptance speech: "two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century."

But he doesn't get to tackle them immediately, as he would in most countries where the change takes place the day after the election. Instead, there is a period of 77 days when the country has a president-elect and a president.

"It's a little bit like having -- somebody just gets married, but the person they've divorced stays in the house for the next two-and-a-half months. It's a little difficult to figure out how you're going to make your way around through the kitchen, the bathroom, and all of these other things," explained Norman Ornstein, a political analyst at the American Enterprise think tank, on the NewsHour Thursday.

Announcing the Team

On Nov. 6, after breakfast with his family and a quick work out, Obama and his team revealed his pick for the new chief of staff: Illinois Representative Rahm Emanuel.

The chief-of-staff is the highest ranking member of the office of the presidency. Emanuel is a former senior advisor to the Bill Clinton White House and is known for his fiery words and tactics.

Republicans were quick to criticize the choice.

"This is an ironic choice for a president-elect who has promised to change Washington, make politics more civil and govern from the center," Republican leader in the House, John Boehner, said in a statement.

But political analyst Ornstein says Emanuel is good choice because he can get things done and play bad cop to Obama's good cop.

President-elect Obama held a press conference on Friday, stating that he wants to make decisions about the rest of his Cabinet very slowly and carefully.

Over the next few weeks, the Obama team will fill 2,600 positions in the so called "Plum Book" of political appointments.

"I'm sure that the Obama team has been deluged -- and Barack himself -- with 100,000 resumes from every relative, every person he's ever met, everybody who contributed to the campaign, every member of Congress and alderman looking for jobs for themselves or their children or their friends," Ornstein said.

Stephen Hess, who wrote a book about past transitions, warns Obama not to focus on the people who helped him in Chicago.

"Poor Jimmy Carter. He picked his first eight positions in the White House; seven of them were Georgians, and only one of them had ever had any service in Washington," Hess said, adding that such inexperience led to deep disagreements with members of his own party in Congress.

Peaceful Transition of Power

Although the election ended Nov. 4, preparation for the complex transfer of power has quietly been unfolding for about a year.

In fact, for the first time ever before Election Day, about 100 people from both the Democratic and Republican camps were given top-secret security clearances to ensure that the winner could immediately start getting national security briefings.

As of Thursday Nov.6, President-elect Obama has access to the same highly classified presidential briefings as President Bush. The White House is also helping connect him to many world leaders.

The General Services Administration, the office in charge of the transition since the Presidential Transition Act of 1963, has turned over 120,000 square feet of office space in downtown Washington to the Obama transition team. They are not yet federal employees but they have been given access to shared servers and e-mail.

Failed Transitions

Previous transitions, especially those from one party to another, have often been marred by distrust and missteps.

The incoming administration may be wary of the information of the other because of party prejudices or bad blood from campaigning.

Some historians argue that communication about al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden was bumbled between the outgoing Clinton administration and incoming Bush administration in 2000.

The White House Transition Project, a non-partisan group, urges new administrations to be "wary of plans that have been developed by executive agencies during the previous administration and are placed before them, in the early weeks and months, urging quick action."

"Obama has got to be very careful about not letting himself be pushed over beyond that line, which has happened repeatedly to presidents in the past," Hess warns.

"An example might be George H.W. Bush, says, 'Oh, I've got a great idea. I'm going to send some troops to Somalia.' Bill Clinton says, 'Hey, that's a nice idea.' He said, 'Yes, and they'll be out by the time you get around.' Well, of course, they're not out by that time, Black Hawk down, and [Clinton] pays a price for that. So you've got to be a little careful."

Both President Bush and President-elect Obama say they are working together and will discuss the economy and other key issues next week as they work on the first wartime presidential transition in four decades.

-- **Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra**

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