

## COMMENTARY

Samuel J. Watson

“  
**Transition teams serve a different purpose [from PDB briefers].... The work of the transition team [is] aimed at preparing the incoming president on the form, function, and activities of an agency.**  
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Samuel J. Watson was chief of staff of the Reagan/Bush transition team assigned to the CIA.

The article by Richard J. Kerr and Peter Dixon Davis in the Winter 1998-1999 unclassified edition of *Studies in Intelligence* on “Ronald Reagan and the President’s Daily Brief” caught my attention. What bothered me was the seemingly off-handed comment that “The transition team of incoming intelligence advisers installed at the Agency was out of the loop, having no contact with us [the PDB briefers] and possibly not being aware of the support we were providing and to whom. (This unusual circumstance did not seem to bother their bosses.)”

As a member of the Reagan/Bush transition team at the CIA, actually as its chief of staff, I’m not sure whether to agree or disagree with Kerr and Davis, or just to let their article stand as fact. Some perspective is necessary. Preparing a newly elected president, especially one with little experience in foreign affairs or intelligence matters, is a many-faceted effort.

An incoming president needs support in several areas, and Kerr and Davis have touched on one crucial area and misunderstood another. Reading their piece tells us of the crucial need to ensure a president-elect is well informed of the world in which he will exercise US power in pursuit of our interests and objectives. My own experience in later years while working for Vice President George Bush was that the PDB was an invaluable tool to keep

us informed. It was always an exceptionally well-done piece of work, and my hat was always off to the PDB staff. The PDB served its purpose, and the PDB staff that worked with President-elect Reagan did an exceptional job. But the PDB was not the only support in the area of intelligence matters that any incoming president needs. I might add that, while the Reagan-Bush transition team was not in contact with the PDB team, we were certainly aware that they were briefing Mr. Reagan.

Transition teams serve a different purpose. As the chief executive of the United States Government, a president has to look at the organization, function, and management of the government departments and agencies that will assist in carrying out his policies. In the case of the intelligence community, the direct support to the President and his staff is well embodied in the National Security Act of 1947, as amended. Herein is the role of a transition team. Even if there were no differences in philosophy or ideology that might affect how policies were made or carried out, a good look at the inner workings of the departments and agencies is called for when a change in administrations is about to occur. I do not think Kerr and Davis would advocate a president’s being inaugurated and then being handed a government organization manual as his first introduction to what the elements of the government do. This

fast-paced world requires more. All the work of the transition team was aimed at preparing the incoming president on the form, function, and activities of an agency, including those of the CIA and its Director.

Transition teams take a longer and broader look at the parts of the government. Their presence in an agency enables them to take a measure of its ambiance, flow, pace, tenor, tone, people, and sense of purpose.

On Kerr's and Davis's point, there is no need for a transition team to be involved with or part of the daily briefings to the president-elect, though it may be that he decides to have his advisers or even his potential intelligence advisers included in the briefings, or to be briefed.

To this observer, the intelligence analysis process is part of, but at the same time separate from, the function of a transition team. It matters less to a transition team whether or what intelligence product a PDB team is briefing the president-elect; their roles are different. What matters, and this is where transition teams are important, is how information is transformed into intelligence products to present to a president. It is important to know if there has been any "cooking of the books."

Many of my colleagues in the Reagan-Bush transition effort at other agencies reported that the incumbents in the agencies they were analyzing and preparing reports on failed to appreciate the

role of the transition team, even viewing the teams as the enemy. If a department or agency is part of the executive branch, and thus answerable to the president, it seems incumbent that they work with a transition team so as to tell the best story about the agency. This certainly would minimize the confusion and lost time in the early days of a presidency. In our work for President-elect Reagan, we found the CIA particularly cooperative and forthcoming. Yes, there were disagreements along the way. There were disagreements within the transition team and with the CIA. Some members of the team wanted to get into the operational details of ongoing activities in the field and held strong views that this was a proper role for our team; officers of the Directorate of Operations disagreed. That subject is best left to the professionals holding the responsibility to brief the president at the appropriate time. One mechanism we used to resolve the disagreements with the CIA was frequent meetings with my point of contact in DDCI Frank Carlucci's office.

It might be worth commenting on how the Reagan-Bush transition worked. We divided the team into a number of elements, each with its specialty. The team members spread out within the Agency to meet the various personages, to get briefings, ask questions, and become familiar with topical matters. In some areas, we did better than in others. In some areas, we did little or nothing. We tried to keep each other cross-briefed by periodic meetings, pointing out areas that other elements could

examine. In early December 1980, the transition team prepared a report and briefing for the president-elect and the vice-president-elect reflecting what had been done in less than a month. The team's work was essentially completed by mid-December, and my best recollection is that on 22 December the word came down from Ed Meese at the transition headquarters that the teams were to be disbanded.

Working on the post-transition team was an interesting time, too. Several former team members stayed on to assist Bill Casey in his transition back into the intelligence world: John Bross, Ed Hennessey, and Walter Pforzheimer. In that time after 20 January 1981, much of the team's earlier work was evident in the directions Bill Casey and the President took. Some of the deficiencies of our work showed through, too.

The 1980 transition team was made up of a variety of individuals with the full range of knowledge of intelligence requirements, analysis, activities, and operations. We had people from the Congressional oversight committees, others with axes to grind, job seekers, and others who wanted to get to know the new people in the administration. We had "graybeards," we had people who supported the intelligence community and were recognized as true intelligence intellectuals, and we had a number of retired Agency officers and military officers. At the transition team working level, we saw little of the "graybeards" who constituted a "senior advisers group."

Was such a breadth of persons necessary for a transition team to learn enough about an agency to prepare a report to the president-elect? No. A smaller team might have been better, with a stricter set of criteria for membership.

In short, a presidential transition team is a needed function as administrations change. A new president needs to be prepared—with substantive intelligence knowledge, and with knowledge of how his government works. The important point

for American intelligence is to work with a transition team, assisting in every way to ensure that its direct relationship with the president gets off to the best start possible.

