

PSCI 287

Or, exploring the significance of presidential transitions with Vanderbilt students. By ROY NEEL, BA'72

I LEFT MY LAST JOB IN MID-2000 to put together Vice President Al Gore's transition operation in anticipation of his election. Both Democratic and Republican nominees must make this preparation in case they win, but in our case, we actually had to conduct a transition process during those five weeks between the election and the end of the Florida recount nightmare. It was a quixotic, exhilarating and, in the end, a totally draining and surreal emotional experience.

Still licking my wounds 10 months after the 2000 presidential election debacle, I stopped by Kirkland Hall to meet Vanderbilt's new chancellor, Gordon Gee. My old friend Jeff Carr, the University's recently retired general counsel, had set up the meeting with the chancellor and Michael Schoenfeld, Vanderbilt's vice chancellor for public affairs.

Chancellor Gee quickly got to the point, suggesting that I put the experience of two presidential transitions, working in the White House, and 16 years as a senior staffer for Congressman, then Senator Gore, to work by teaching a course at the University. He asked Schoenfeld to help make it happen. Vanderbilt Law School Dean Kent Syverud, who was also acting chair of the political science department, arranged for me to teach a new course on presidential transitions jointly with political science professor John Geer. PSCI 287 would "examine how presidential transitions work, how they have changed over the course of American history, and why they are important to the study of American politics."

To our knowledge, this topic had never

been taught anywhere, at any level. Presidential transitions have been treated as little more than a footnote in the political realm.

After researching the most recent six transitions, from Kennedy to Clinton, in my role as Gore-Lieberman transition director, I was convinced that this critical period following presidential elections was sorely overlooked. Moreover, the process of presidential transitions, beginning with the moment a candidate believes he can win and ending when his administration is mostly in place, is one that can make or break a successful presidential term. Decisions made or avoided during presidential transitions have helped define an entire presidency—witness Reagan's supreme delegation of virtually all startup tasks, Bush 1's determination to push out Reagan conservatives, Clinton's inability to build a solid White House team that quickly could have averted the travel office debacle and, more important, the disastrous health-care reform initiative.

The course began smoothly enough—I would give a lecture covering the evolution of an incoming administration and how it affected the president's success in governing, the background color, politics, economic conditions, wars, international turmoil, all the things that influence how a new president goes about organizing his government. Then John Geer would translate my stream of factoids and political anecdotes into the context of political science.

But after four weeks it became obvious that these bright, disciplined students deserved more than my windy monologues. We decided to get more voices into the classroom.



While it was unrealistic to bring scholars and former and current public officials to Nashville to speak to the seminar, I knew many of those who had actually managed presidential transitions, covered the news, and helped presidents get elected and govern. John and I decided to invite some of them to speak to the class by telephone, a simple technique I had used countless times to bring cabinet members, governors, and other busy or distant officials into White House planning sessions.

As the class dove into the Eisenhower years, I reached David Halberstam in New York, where he was finishing his book on the heroism of the 9/11 firefighters. A former Tennessean reporter with longtime ties to Nashville friends, David agreed to talk about the political and social environment Eisenhower faced when he took office in 1952. He was mesmerizing and charming, no student fell asleep, their questions of Halberstam were thought

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ful, and I was relieved that the idea worked.

We turned to Kennedy's transition in 1960, and I tracked down the pre-imminent Kennedy scholar, Richard Neustadt, at his home in London. Neustadt had provided confidential transition advice to practically every incoming president since Kennedy, and wrote the essential book on the subject. By telephone between evening social engagements in London, Neustadt captivated the students with stories of flying to Hyannisport to meet alone with a newly elected Kennedy trying to figure out how to get started.

A pattern had set in: We would discuss the essential facts of a new administration taking office after an inter-party change of power, then take a speakerphone call from a guest speaker, who would hold forth for 10-15 minutes, followed by as much as an hour of questions from the students.

Nixon's 1968 transition presented a quandry. At the time it was judged smooth, professional, and successful, a product of Bob Haldeman and John Mitchell's airtight control. Years later it would be portrayed as a failure to recruit independent voices into the White House that could better serve an isolated president. To add texture to this scene, David Gergen the journalist and erstwhile advisor to presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton, called in from his teaching post at Harvard to talk about his personal experiences with Nixon as a young speechwriter. I had served in the Clinton White House with Gergen and knew he would provide an entertaining but remarkably objective perspective on one of our most gifted, but tragically flawed presidents.

For a close-up view of Jimmy Carter's transition, we called Jack Watson, and old friend and fellow Vanderbilt alumnus who planned Carter's transition from his Atlanta law office in 1976 and later served as Carter's chief of staff. The class was highly impressed by Jack's candor about what went right and wrong in those early Carter days, when internal power struggles nearly immobilized the White House.

Mike Schoenfeld, who months earlier had helped make the class a reality, lined up his former colleague Chase Untermeyer, who ran the Bush transition in 1988-89 and later served as White House Director of Personnel, a particularly difficult and often thankless job in any White House. Untermeyer, the consum-

mate professional, showed the class the inside workings of the highest levels of the White House personnel process, the nerve center of presidential transitions and staffing.

As chief of staff for Vice President-elect Al Gore, I experienced the 1992-93 transition firsthand. When President-elect Clinton gathered a small group in Little Rock the morning after the 1992 election, he graciously included me as Gore's top aide. For a month I sat with Clinton, Gore, transition chairman Warren Christopher, top Clinton aide Bruce Lindsey, and a few others—usually Hillary Clinton, Mack McLarty or Vernon Jordan—who would rotate into the discussions around a dining-room table in the governor's mansion. They approached their task—finding the best men and women to manage the Clinton-Gore agenda—with more than a little hubris but with deep integrity and remarkable objectivity. I contributed little but learned mountains about the process of starting up a new presidency.

So as PSCI 287 approached the Bush-to-Clinton transition, I indulged myself two extra sessions devoted to this period. To discuss how Bush lost that election and how Clinton would approach governing, we enlisted the irrepressible James Carville, the "ragin' Cajun" who ran the famous Clinton campaign "War Room" that kept the team inspired and ahead of the election battle. Carville is, to say the least, outrageously candid, irreverent and terminally opinionated, but he is also one of the most insightful minds working in American politics today. The students, even the staunch Republicans in the class, loved Carville's non-stop reminiscence.

The following week George Stephanopolous joined us from his office at ABC television in New York, where he is a fast-rising political commentator, soon to take over the coveted host role for the network's Sunday morning talk show. Stephanopolous was perhaps Clinton's most influential staff advisor for much of the first term, and his book was rough on the President. He is a man of deep personal conviction, with a remarkable talent for analysis. The class peppered him with questions about the media's influence on governing.

As the architect of George W. Bush's early transition planning, Texan Clay Johnson had the toughest assignment of anyone once the 2000 election was decided in the courts. Johnson and the Bush team had only five weeks to

put together its top administration team. They ran perhaps the most efficient and successful transition ever, giving President-elect Bush a functioning executive branch in record time. Johnson took an hour out of his overwhelmingly busy day to talk to the class about how the Bush team managed this feat, and how the job of staffing the Bush administration works behind the scenes. Like all others who have labored to build a new federal administration after a presidential election, Clay has concluded that the morass of background checks, financial disclosure forms, Senate foot-dragging and sheer bureaucracy have ground post-inauguration transitions to a snail's pace, thus seriously handicapping the new government.

With the course drawing to a close, John and I pulled out the biggest of the big guns to talk to the class. On Wednesday morning, April 24, the seminar waited for a call from President Clinton from his New York Harlem office. His staff had earlier canceled the call twice before finally agreeing to 20 minutes, "not a minute more," they said. I knew better. Clinton doesn't do anything in 20 minutes, especially speak to students.

President Clinton came on the line to discuss a breathtaking range of subjects, from his packed political schedule to his work on AIDS in Africa to a candid view of his own presidency, the 2000 election outcome, and the problems of his own presidential transition ("I should have simply told Warren Christopher that he was going to be the White House Chief of Staff, not Secretary of State.")

The students were mesmerized by the former President, but they asked him probing, even difficult questions, which he handled with deft knowledge and great charm. The session was taped and later broadcast on the University radio station, a fitting end to the classroom work for PSCI 287.

But we had one last guest. Vice President Gore, the person who brought me to Washington 25 years earlier, has moved back to Tennessee, where he is completing a book with his wife, Tipper, teaching at Fisk University and Middle Tennessee State, and lecturing throughout the world. On the last day of class for PSCI 287, he joined the class for lunch at the Law School where Gore was studying when he ran for Congress in 1976.

Gore spoke about the 2000 campaign expe-

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patient's own DNA, her immune system would have no reason to reject it.

Clayton shrugs. "But do I think that we're anywhere near therapeutic cloning in humans? No." She points out that all these goals are still in their infancy, and that scientists aren't even sure if stem cell research—assuming that Congress doesn't ban it in the U.S. entirely—will live up to expectations. "It seems to me that, unless you're driven entirely by the notion that you can't destroy an embryo *ever*, then *if* it turns out to be effective, we really do have to think about what to do about somatic cell nuclear transplant for therapeutic purposes."

One misconception that Clayton sees growing in force among the public, thanks to extensive (if not always careful) media coverage of

genetics, is "the idea that it's creating among people that if you just know your genes, you know what's going to happen to you. Now that's simply untrue," she insists of this different sort of Frankensteinian vision. "I'm an anti-determinist. I certainly don't think Genes-R-Us. So I am much more open to the notion that the genes give us a range of opportunities, and we have to figure out where we're going to be within that range."

Ellen Wright Clayton is used to offering informed opinions. She leans back in her chair and quietly declares a position based upon experience that goes back to the early days of this challenging and still young discipline: "I'm not even a philosophical anti-determinist. I just think the biology tells us that environment makes a huge difference." ▼

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guide, *LaRousse Gastronomique*, this one in its original French language.

Celebrities, both real and fictional, take turns in the kitchen: *Peter Rabbit's Natural Food Cook Book* (with Beatrice Potter illustrations); *Dining With Sherlock Holmes*; *The Pooh Cook Book*; *Hotel Bemelmans* by Madeleine author and illustrator Ludwig Bemelmans; and an impressively bound and photographed volume of recipes from famous restaurants around the world compiled and published in 1965 in *A Treasury of Great Recipes* by Mary and Vincent Price.

Budding young chefs are not forsaken: There is a whimsical children's book—*Mud Pies and Other Recipes*, and *The Teen-Age Cook Book* with recipes for a Sunday dinner they might prepare featuring roast mutton. Some of the titles are not quite so appealing: *The Mayo Clinic Renal Diet Cook Book*, *The Prudent Diet*, *The I Hate To Cook Book*, and *The School Lunch Cook Book*.

But certainly the collection as a whole will whet the appetites of cooks and gourmands and would prove invaluable in undertaking Brillat-Savarin's final aphorism: "To invite people to dine with us is to make ourselves responsible for their well-being as long as they are under our roofs." ▼

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rience and election outcome with insight and humor, noting that he is working to mend political fences in Tennessee and staying involved in national politics and issues. Again, the students put tough questions to the Vice President, and he pulled no punches. It was a great finish to the course.

I had begun this class with an idea, helped along by John Geer's tutoring in the art of the classroom presentation, University politics, and the challenge of grading student's papers. It was thrilling to be back on the campus and gratifying to teach with one of Vanderbilt's finest professors. But I especially enjoyed getting to know these students and watching them dive into a new subject with great interest.

Early in the course one of our best students told me of her new-found passion for political science. This young woman works as a waitress during every school break throughout the year to help pay Vanderbilt's hefty tuition. She thought this class was worth her hard work, and that was all the reward I needed in my return to the University. And, yes, she got an A in the course.

Roy Neel BA'72 is Chairman of the Jackson Group, a consulting company specializing in corporate strategic planning for public policy initiatives. During 2000, he was Director of Vice President Gore's presidential transition planning, and managed transition efforts during the post-election challenge in Florida. ▼

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cities are as segregated as the deep South ever was. However, people who say we haven't made progress should try to imagine the South of the 1950s. The fact is that we had a system of apartheid almost as rigid as that in South Africa. Water fountains, restrooms, waiting rooms at bus stations and movie theaters were just as segregated as were our schools. When it came to things like hotels and restaurants, most were simply not available for African Americans. While young African American students today have hurdles to overcome that are greater than their white counterparts, the fact is that the hurdles facing young African Americans in the segregated South were so high that only a very few could overcome them, and they were usually people with extraordinary talent, like a Leontyne Price or a Hank Aaron.

As for the situation at Vanderbilt today, my biggest disappointment, and one that is shared by a large percentage of the faculty, is the difficulty we face in significantly increasing our African American population here. In that regard, the position of people who are opposed to affirmative action seems difficult to defend. We kept people in chains for 200 years, then put them in a segregated society not that much better than slavery, and then grudgingly tore that down only two generations ago. And now we don't want to give any special provisions to try to help members of that group catch up. The analogy that has often been used, but which is true, would be that of a race in which one runner has his legs tied together while the other runs halfway around the track. At that point, the ropes are untied, and from then on it is regarded as a fair race. That just doesn't hold water.

Fortunately, the current leadership at the University is committed to diversity, and rightfully so. They know that Vanderbilt's goal of being in the top tier of American universities will never be realized until our student body and our faculty begin to mirror the make-up of the nation as a whole. Then again, they also know that developing a more integrated, inclusive university is simply the right thing to do. ▼