

“Trouble with the Transition: The Transfer of Power from Carter to Reagan“

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***Abstract:** The transition between presidents – especially when changing parties – is a wildcard in U.S. foreign policy that often confuses or concerns nations engaged with the United States. Though there are systems in place to ensure information gets passed from one administration to another, ideas and their execution can change dramatically when a new president takes office. Using the Carter-Reagan transition as a case study, this paper explores how the successes and failures in presidential transitions had long term effects on U.S. foreign policy, grand strategy, and international position, such as the definitive end of détente and a more hardline foreign policy.*

***Keywords:** presidential transitions, U.S. foreign policy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan*

During the 1980 presidential election, both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan angled to convince the nation that they were the best man for the job. As with most modern campaigns, that meant convincing the electorate that their opponent was not capable of successfully leading the country. Already the Great Communicator, Reagan got loud laughs from the crowd when he repeated one of his go-to jokes on the campaign trail: “Recession is when your neighbor loses his job. Depression is when you lose yours. And recovery is when Jimmy Carter loses his.”¹ While many voters were understandably focused on the economy and other domestic issues (and

1 William E. Schmidt, “President Praises Carter at Library” *The New York Times*, October 2, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/02/us/president-praises-carter-at-library.html>.

therefore enjoyed repeating this witticism), President Carter was perhaps most concerned with the impact that the election would have on foreign policy. While he had dealt with some serious setbacks, Carter was proud of his focus on human rights and his accomplishments such as the Camp David Accords. He spent much of the campaign and transition period fearful that Reagan would undo all of his work. Referencing how he felt about Reagan “playing the nuclear arms race card,” Carter warned in a campaign speech: “This is a critical election for our nation, not just over whether Governor Reagan or I win the election. Our philosophies and beliefs are so vastly different, the futures we see for America so diverse that this election will have profound consequences on both present and future generations.”²

When Carter lost to Reagan, he vowed to try to help the president-elect have a smooth and constructive transition period. In reality, at least according to Carter, the transition was a disaster and had a negative impact on the foreign policy of the United States. The transition between presidents – especially when changing parties – is a wildcard in U.S. foreign policy that often confuses or concerns nations engaged with the United States. Though there are some systems in place to ensure that critical information gets passed from one administration to another, ideas and their execution can change dramatically when a new president takes office. Using the Carter-Reagan transition as a case study, I begin to explore how the successes and failures in presidential transitions can have long term effects on U.S. foreign policy, grand strategy, and international position, such as the definitive end of détente, a more hardline foreign policy, and the changing role of the National Security Council. The 1980-81 transition was contentious and brings to light many questions such as: Are personalities actually the most important piece of the transition puzzle? How could the transition process be improved? And finally, how does it impact foreign policy? While I don’t claim to definitively answer each of those questions in this brief article, I explore what a change in administrations looks like when the incoming president is ready to make big changes and is not looking for guidance from the outgoing president. This is often times the case when one party is handing off power to another party. As James Pfiffner explained in the still useful, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running*, transitions

2 Speech. Jimmy Carter, October 8, 1980. Folder: 10/8/80. Container 180. Presidential Files: Office of the Staff Secretary. Jimmy Carter Library. 148878.

in the United States are more difficult in the United States than in similar democracies, as there is no shadow government preparing and waiting to take office. This difficulty is particularly pronounced after what is often a contentious election when the transfer of power occurs between parties.³

Although Carter and Reagan both believed they were inherently different in terms of foreign policy, there were actually more similarities than they realized. This particular transition period was heavily influenced by emotions, as it was marked by Carter’s anxiety and Reagan’s hubris; it could have been more effective if they had found a way to put emotions aside and focused on smoothly transferring U.S. foreign policy into a new decade.

The transition period might sometimes go relatively unnoticed by the general public and even many scholars. After all, it’s a pretty short period of time and often involves a “lame duck” seemingly unable to get much work done. However, transitions are a key period for both the incoming and outgoing administrations. It is a time to try to make sure some policies will continue and also to begin forming (or cementing) a legacy, depending on whether you are entering or leaving office. It is therefore interesting that for much of the country’s history, there has been no concrete set of guidelines to ensure a successful transition. Instead, both new and old administrations trust tradition to ensure a smooth transfer of power and guidance on policy planning. During the Cold War, Congress signed the Presidential Transition Act of 1963 into law, which indicated that lawmakers did recognize the importance of having a more regulated, effective transition, by stating, “Any disruption occasioned by the transfer of executive power could produce results detrimental to the safety and well-being of the United States and its people.”⁴ Driven by Cold War fears, this Act was a step in the right direction of codifying the transition. However, the law was somewhat vague and did not really offer a lot in the way of enforcement.

In the 21st century, lawmakers once again turned their attention towards improving the transition process. After the long election of 2000, George W. Bush had an even shorter official transition period than usual, since he was not formally declared the president-elect until mid-December of that

3 James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1988). For further insight on transitions, see Charles O. Jones, ed., *Preparing to Be President: The Memos of Richard E. Neustadt* (Washington, D.C.: The AEI Press, 2000).

4 U.S. Congress, House, Presidential Transition Act of 1963, March 7, 1964, H.R. 4638. <https://www.gov-info.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-78/pdf/STATUTE-78-Pg153.pdf#page=1>

year. When the attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred only eight months after the inauguration, the Bush administration realized that if a new team was not fully prepared to tackle a crisis, the safety of the nation could be in peril. This led the Bush administration to put a lot of effort into transition planning, beginning long before the 2008 election. According to scholars on the subject, the 2008 transition was one of the smoothest and most effective in history. Martha Joynt Kumar argues that due to “unprecedented early transition planning and actions by the George W. Bush administration” and “the early attention of Senator and then President-elect Barack Obama to the need for transition planning and his assignment of experienced and knowledgeable people to handle studies of White House staff structure, agency operations, policy development, and staff selection” resulted in an unprecedented level of coordination and cooperation between the two administrations.⁵ This positive experience led President Barack Obama to push for even more codification of this essential period of time, signing an executive order and a law that established further guidelines.⁶ The Presidential Transitions Improvement Act of 2015 directed the outgoing president to establish a White House transition coordinating council at least six months prior to the election and to appoint senior career employees from each agency to oversee the transition.

We are probably a little too close to the event to objectively evaluate whether this made a positive impact on the Obama-Trump transition during and after the 2016 election, but it will be interesting to evaluate that and future transitions to see if the process has truly been improved. From early assessments, we can assume that the Obama-Trump transition did not involve the same level of cooperation and sharing of information as other modern transitions. In *The Fifth Risk: The Undoing of Democracy*, Michael Lewis paints a picture of a president-elect who does not even want to have a transition team. With fascinating detail, Lewis explains that Trump did not seem to understand why one would need to prepare to be president, and that he did not plan to have a transition team until Chris Christie told him that it was legally required.⁷

5 Martha Joynt Kumar, “The 2008-2009 Presidential Transition Through the Voices of Its Participants”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, no. 4 (2009), 823-858.

6 Russell Berman. “‘The Most Important Takeover of Any Organization in History’: Inside the Years Long Push to Perfect the Presidential Transition”. *The Atlantic*, April 22, 2016.

7 Michael Lewis, *The Fifth Risk: Undoing Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018).

Kumar’s analysis of the Bush-Obama transfer of power indicates that personalities and individual commitment are key to a successful transition and shows that the process can indeed work. However, more chaotic transitions, like the Carter-Reagan hand-off, occur when one or both actors are not fully committed to communication and cooperation, or when they allow emotions to guide the process. During the 1980 transition, both were factors. Additionally, these guidelines were not in place as the 1980 presidential election approached, and the campaign rhetoric from both camps made it clear that the candidates approached foreign policy from very different viewpoints. While this isn’t unusual, divergent ideologies can cause communication during the transition to be less frequent or not as thorough.

Even before the transition began, both Carter and Reagan had denounced the other’s ideology. Through his many foreign policy challenges, Carter proclaimed the championing of human rights to be the primary tenet of his world view. During the campaign, Reagan claimed that not only was this one of Carter’s multiple flaws but that he wasn’t even able to implement a human-rights based foreign policy. In a speech about the Helsinki Accords, Reagan charged that Carter supported Pol Pot and cowered before the Soviet Union, amongst other egregious failures. Candidate Reagan stated, “This is not a human rights policy. This is not in the tradition of America’s great freedom principles. Instead, this is gross hypocrisy--boasting of human rights at home while being intimidated by violators of human rights abroad.”⁸ This criticism was aimed directly at the core of Carter’s foreign policy agenda, which certainly aggravated the president.

Carter and Reagan’s differences did not begin when they went head to head in the 1980 election. It is useful to look at the roots of their animosity to understand some of the agitation during the transition; they disagreed on foreign policy during the 1976 campaign, when Reagan challenged then-sitting President Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination. For example, although Carter and Reagan vociferously disagreed with Ford’s choice to follow the Nixon-Kissinger version of *détente*, historian Yanek Mieczkowski explains, “*Détente* became unpopular enough that both a Democrat (Carter, criticizing its weakness on human rights) and a Republican (Rea-

8 “Statement by Governor Ronald Reagan on Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords”, October 17, 1980. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 143. Ronald Reagan Library.

gan, claiming that it relegated the United States to military inferiority) won the White House while flailing away at it.”⁹

Although Ford managed to keep the Republican nomination out of Reagan’s grasp in 1976, Reagan made it clear that he was not leaving the national stage anytime soon. He attacked Carter’s foreign policy choices from the outset, criticizing his proposed cuts to defense spending and calling on him to refuse to cede the Panama Canal Zone to Panama. Reagan inserted himself into both public and private talks of policy from 1977 forward, and had strong reactions to most of Carter’s foreign policy speeches.¹⁰ In one notable address, Carter, speaking at Notre Dame in the spring of 1977, affirmed his support for his version of detente and reiterated his belief in a human rights-based foreign policy, stating, “I believe in detente with the Soviet Union. To me it means progress towards peace,” and “What draws us together, perhaps more than anything else, is a belief in human freedom. We want the world to know that our nation stands for more than financial prosperity.”¹¹ Author Craig Shirley argues that the speech disgusted Reagan because he believed that, “President Carter had just canceled the principle underlying America’s foreign policy since the end of World War II, a policy based on an educated fear of the Soviets, given their history of mass murder, betrayal, corruption, treachery, and villainy.”¹² Although Carter had earlier voiced displeasure about detente and would eventually become critical of detente (as was Reagan), Reagan could not find any positives with Carter’s world view or policies.

Of course, this was extremely frustrating to Carter. During the summer of 1980, he began to verbally spar with Reagan in the media and during debates. One of Carter’s main issues with Reagan was that he viewed his opponent as simply performing the part of a politician, rather than actually

9 Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 288. Mieczkowski offers a useful analysis not only of the Ford administration, but of the 1976 election and the public mood towards politics in general. See also Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2019); Scott Kaufman, Ed., *A Companion to Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

10 Craig Shirley, *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 50-51.

11 Jimmy Carter, Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/243018>, Accessed 1/10/2020.

12 Shirley, *Reagan Rising*, 68.

having any convictions of his own. Carter complained of Reagan's debate performance, "Reagan was 'Aw, shucks'...this and that...'I'm a grandfather, and I would never get this nation in a war'...and 'I love peace...' He has memorized tapes. He pushes a button, and they come out."¹³ Carter truly believed that Reagan was not qualified to be president and presented a danger to the safety of the nation. Reagan, for his part, thought essentially the same about Carter.

Nevertheless, both had a duty to try to have a cooperative transition. It should be noted that when we talk about the transition period, it is not just those weeks between the election in November and the inauguration in January. The work of the transition must start during the campaign. As such, Carter began sharing intelligence with Reagan several months before the election. Reagan received daily updates about current issues and Carter's handling of them. Most of the memos Reagan's team prepared for him were critical of Carter's decisions and suggested ways that Reagan might do things differently when he became president.¹⁴

Reagan particularly disagreed with Carter's handling of the hostage situation in Iran. This precarious situation involving American citizens made the success of the transition period even more critical. Reagan wanted to deal with Iran in his own fashion and felt Carter had been too weak. As election day neared, the Reagan camp grew concerned that Carter would make a last minute move that could hamper Reagan's ability to change policy when he took office. There was speculation that a legal loophole would allow Carter to send funds to Iran from the Shah's assets. Obviously, this would look like a delayed ransom and would go against Carter's promises. The Reagan team fully expected Carter to reject the idea; in doing so, they believed that "...he will be widely perceived as having engaged in a desperate last attempt to manipulate the hostages again for political benefit and to have once more bungled it." This, the memo suggested, would be good for Reagan. Bill Casey, the soon-to-be Director of the CIA and the author of the memo, concluded, "If this analysis is correct, we should say very little and leave it that way."¹⁵ Although Reagan was fairly confident of winning

13 Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 469.

14 Memo for Ronald Reagan from Policy Coordination. "Foreign Affairs Updates (August 19-20 1980)". August 21, 1980. File: Transition: Garrick, 1980 Campaign. Reagan, Ronald, Transition Papers, Series VII, Box 191. Ronald Reagan Library.

15 Memorandum to Ed Meese and Ronald Reagan from Bill Casey. November 2, 1980. File: Transition, Gar-

at this point, he still didn't want Carter to have a last minute foreign policy triumph, such as coming to terms with Iran.

After Reagan soundly defeated Carter, the transition began in earnest. Carter gave his team instructions to facilitate "the finest transition ever". Jack Watson and Al McDonald took the lead for Carter and reported that they were getting along well with their counterparts, Ed Meese and Bill Casey. One week after the election, both transition teams met at the White House. Reagan's people received a very thorough briefing book put together by the outgoing administration. In it was an overview of procedures regarding everything from White House staffing to issue monitoring from specific officials in the Carter administration.¹⁶

Carter and his team would continue to reach out to the president-elect, but they were not met with great enthusiasm. Reagan did not seem particularly interested in immersing himself in the details of the presidency, even though he would soon be in the Oval Office. In his still useful analysis of Reagan's personality and motivations, Reagan biographer Lou Cannon offers great insight into why Reagan was reluctant to spend much time being briefed on critical issues. He argues that while Reagan had many beliefs about foreign policy, he was rarely interested in the details. Part of this, according to Cannon, had to do with Reagan's particular type of intelligence, pointing out, "...Reagan lacked a technical grasp of any issue, and he was usually bored by briefings. While he valued compromises and had the temperament of a negotiator, he rarely knew enough about the substance of a dispute to be able to understand the sticking points. Most of his aides thought of him as intelligent, but many also considered him intellectually lazy."¹⁷ Reagan's lack of interest in policy details was certainly part of why he was not dedicated to learning those details during the transition period.

If Carter's primary emotion about leaving office was anxiety at having

rick, 1980. Reagan, Ronald, Transition Papers, Series VII, Box 191. Ronald Reagan Library.

16 Transition Briefing Book. Folder Citation: Collection: Office of Staff Secretary; Series: Presidential Files; Folder: [n.d., c.a. 12/8/80-Transition Briefing Book]; Container 185. Jimmy Carter Library.

17 Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 56. Cannon's analysis of the performative nature of Reagan's presidency and his keen insight about his emotional motivations make this one of the key works in understanding Reagan as a person and politician. For other assessments of Reagan, see James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Rick Perlstein. *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

his foreign policy dismantled (coupled with anxiety about the Americans held hostage in Iran), Reagan's primary emotion was confidence. Since he ideologically disagreed with Carter's worldview, Reagan was not too concerned with getting information from Carter and his people. He had confidence not just in himself, but in his team. However, his transition team was as inexperienced as Reagan himself, and this was especially evident in the appointment process, which moved very slowly. Indeed, as Cannon notes, "Reagan did not seem to care. He said he wanted to appoint 'the best people' and would take the time he needed to do it. He was not a traditional president-elect, and he did not feel the need to do things in a traditional way." This remoteness would portend Reagan's "delegative presidency", in which he would often leave work to others and appeared disengaged in the decision-making process.¹⁸

While Carter and his team did earnestly want to facilitate a smooth transition, there are inherent problems in trying to do so. In this case, the outgoing and incoming administrations were working at somewhat cross-purposes in terms of foreign policy. Carter certainly wanted Reagan to not only keep most of his policies in place, but he also thought that his system for crafting policy was the way things ought to be done. Not surprisingly, Reagan not only had different ideas for policies, but he was ready to drastically change the policy-making process.

While Carter's team kept sending memos and trying to facilitate meetings, Reagan's team was solidifying plans to make "significant structural changes in the Executive Branch." They identified four key areas for the most immediate changes. The first was "Improving the Information Programs to Convey America's Message Abroad", which involved more effective communication programs and coordination from organizations like the CIA and State Department. This was clearly in keeping with Reagan's belief that image was of the utmost importance in foreign policy. The second change was to implement "A Capability for Targeted Political-Economic Action Programs", and was categorized as a reorganization of "a broad range of foreign policy instruments, going beyond diplomatic messages, but falling short of the use of military power." The third structural change was to involve "Industrial Preparedness for Mobilization". This entailed increasing America's ability to expand defense production, which was judged, "to be in bad shape today." In this memo, the transition team acknowledged

18 Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, 72-73.

that the Department of Defense was primarily responsible for this area, but that in order to have the desired expansion, other agencies such as FEMA, Commerce, and the IRS needed to get involved. The author of this memo noted, "The Carter Administration started a fresh coordination effort, but it has been much too feeble and too slow to move the country out of the present, dangerous situation."¹⁹ The fourth area identified for immediate change was oil emergency preparation, which the incoming administration felt was too big of a job for the Department of Energy alone.

While plans to make big changes continued privately, another issue of concern was what public statements if any, president-elect Reagan should make about present foreign policy issues. For his most part, Reagan "made it clear that he wants the Carter Administration to retain responsibility for foreign affairs until the Inauguration" and did not wish to state his views on many issues. However, there was a concern that if Reagan didn't speak on certain topics, "decisions by the Carter Administration might commit the Reagan Administration to such an extent that it becomes necessary for the President-elect to take a position..."²⁰ Some examples included the hostages in Iran, the Helsinki Accord Conference in Madrid, and the NATO Ministerial.

One of the greatest areas of concern was the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Some of the most significant problems included how to address the unrest in Poland and the possibility of Soviet intervention, Afghanistan, arms and arms control, and economic relations.²¹ Reagan needed to figure out how to begin dealing with the Soviets without stepping on Carter's toes. To make matters worse, there were concerns that the Soviets were trying to use the change in administrations to their advantage. A memo to Reagan warned, "In particular, the attitudes and positions that will be conveyed to the Soviet leaders must be developed with care. The Soviets are evidently trying to force the Reagan Administration into premature positions on SALT and other issues by manipulating the

19 Memo: "New Policy Initiatives Requiring Major Organizational Changes for the Reagan Administration." File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 143. Ronald Reagan Library.

20 Memo: "Issues Requiring A Position Prior to Inauguration or During The First Two or Three Months of the Reagan Administration. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 143. Ronald Reagan Library.

21 Memo: "Issues Requiring A Position Prior to Inauguration or During The First Two or Three Months of the Reagan Administration. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 143. Ronald Reagan Library.

American media and our allies.”²² Reagan was intent on establishing his own relationship with American allies, too. It was decided that it would be appropriate for President-elect Reagan to “state his general views on... NATO.”²³ He also wanted to do a tour of European capitals and meet with as many leaders as possible to begin his own style of diplomacy.

One of the biggest changes Reagan envisioned was altering the structure of the National Security Council and how it was used to craft policy. He felt that foreign policy should be centered in the State Department; the NSC should be mainly for “coordination and review.”²⁴ In the month prior to his inauguration, Reagan was primarily getting intelligence information from his Interim Foreign Policy Advisory Board. One of their primary tasks was to assess which policies they wanted to continue and which they wanted to change. They approached this by asking the members of the National Security Council Transition Team to review “all Presidential Review Memoranda and Presidential Directives which were issued during the Carter Administration.” They also looked at the actions of Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford to see how their agenda related to Reagan’s foreign policy goals.²⁵ The Carter transition team was also keen to help the president-elect understand how the NSC had traditionally functioned. The Staff Secretary for the Carter administration, Christine Dodson, put together a thorough briefing book devoted solely to the NSC. In a personal note to Reagan’s team, she told them, “A lot of what follows will make little sense until I walk you through what an ‘action folder’, etc. is. But read it anyway to get a flavor of this backbone operation within the NSC.”²⁶

22 Memo: “Issues Requiring A Position Prior to Inauguration or During The First Two or Three Months of the Reagan Administration. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 143. Ronald Reagan Library.

23 Memo: “Thoughts on Transition: NATO”. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 143. Ronald Reagan Library.

24 Memo: “The Staff of the National Security Council”. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 145. Ronald Reagan Library.

25 Memo: “The Staff of the National Security Council”. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 145. Ronald Reagan Library.

26 Memo: “The Staff of the National Security Council”. File: Transition, Foreign Policy. Reagan, Ronald, 1980 Transition Papers, 1979-1980. Series V: Foreign Policy (Richard Allen). Box 146. Ronald Reagan Library.

Despite their study of how the other Cold War presidents used the NSC, Reagan and his team chose to make big changes. Reagan elected to have a more reserved National Security Advisor; his appointment of Richard Allen was a return to the pre-Kissinger era of this role. Reagan ended up appointing six National Security Advisors, a record number. He seemed to have trouble working with advisors on foreign policy. He could not get as comfortable with his foreign policy team as he did with his domestic advisors. As such, Reagan failed to exert strong leadership in the NSC and did use them in a more operational role. That would prove to cause some of his biggest issues in creating, implementing, and overseeing policy, including the debacle of the Iran-Contra scandal.²⁷

By contrast, Carter's approach to foreign policy had been to rely heavily on the National Security Council to help with policymaking and important decisions. He articulated the importance of the NSC at the outset of his administration, stating that it "would be the principal forum for international security issues requiring Presidential consideration" and would aid him "in analyzing, integrating and facilitating foreign, defense, and intelligence policy decisions."²⁸ While Carter had little foreign policy experience to speak of when he entered office, he was invested in appointing experts to help him put his vision in action. That meant appointing Zbigniew Brzezinski, who had counseled Lyndon Johnson on international relations, as National Security Adviser. Brzezinski exerted control over many of Carter's decisions and, some argue, led him down the path towards a more anti-Soviet direction in policymaking instead of adhering more strictly towards Carter's human-rights based ideals. Cyrus Vance, Carter's Secretary of State, did try to help him fulfill his more "idealistic goals", but Brzezinski often blocked him, due to his greater access to Carter and his ability to recruit important allies within the administration to help him with his agenda.²⁹

27 Ronald J. Granieri, "Beyond Cap the Foil: Caspar Weinberger and the Reagan-Era Defense Buildup" in Bradley Lynn Coleman and Kyle Longley, Ed., *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981-1989* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 60-61.

28 Jimmy Carter, Presidential Directive/NSC-2. January 20, 1977. Jimmy Carter Library, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/directives/pd02.pdf> Accessed January 11, 2020.

29 Betty Glad. *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1. For more on Carter's foreign policy, see Scott Kaufman. *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009) and Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

The battle for influence between Brzezinski and Vance led to many feeling that the unstable situation in the White House could not possibly lead to a strong foreign policy. The hostage situation in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan only increased this crisis of confidence. Carter's intent was to use both the NSC and the State Department to gather as much information as possible so that he could make the most educated decisions. However, he ended up creating an atmosphere that was not conducive to coherent policymaking.

Reagan's use of the NSC is one of the more visible ways that he and Carter differed in crafting foreign policy. Perhaps taking a lesson from Carter's mismanagement, Reagan chose to reduce both the size and the importance of the NSC. Reagan and his advisors chose to limit the national security adviser to an advisory role, "responsible for coordinating the paper flow rather than being a source of new policy ideas." Although Carter and Reagan used the NSC very differently, both of their methods yielded poor results. During the 1980s, for example, there was a constant turnover of NSC staff, which led to uncertainty about their role in the administration. This meant that it was difficult for the Reagan administration to have an efficient national security structure.³⁰ It does not seem as though Reagan and his team learned much of a lesson from their analysis of Carter and his NSC. Instead, it seems that Reagan's choice to utilize the NSC in a different way was based more on his own ideas about how foreign policy should be formulated.

This is one area where more open communication between Carter and Reagan could have resulted in better policy making. Carter could have acknowledged the failings of his system while impressing upon Reagan the value of utilizing the NSC. However, one of the main problems in a transition is that the outgoing administration is mandated to provide information. But that does not ensure that the president-elect will be receptive to that information. From the outset of the transition, Carter was wary of Reagan's commitment to crafting a strong foreign policy, and also had concerns about his ability to do so. He felt that Reagan was going to back off of most of his campaign promises, such as lifting the grain embargo against the Soviet Union. When the two met one on one, Carter characterized their conversa-

30 Ronald J. Granieri, "Beyond Cap the Foil: Caspar Weinberger and the Reagan-Era Defense Buildup" in Bradley Lynn Coleman and Kyle Longley, Ed., *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981-1989* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 60-61.

tion as “friendly and unrestrained,” but noted that (in his opinion) the only comments Reagan made were lifted straight from his campaign speeches. Instead of having a productive back and forth, Carter used Reagan’s relative silence to inundate him with advice on details (which Reagan was not interested in: “I told him he ought to set aside a day and a half or two days to be briefed on his responsibilities under the SIOOP [Single Integrated Operational Plan, the procedure for deployment of nuclear weapons]; described special arrangement on intelligence with the People’s Republic of China ...etc..”³¹

Reagan’s view of the meeting was that it had actually been quite pleasant. But he did agree with Carter’s assessment that it was not particularly useful. Lou Cannon relates: “Carter’s interests were so broad that he often seemed to lack focus, even in private conversation. Reagan’s range was narrow, but his agenda was compelling. He wanted to get on with the business of cutting domestic government spending, reducing income taxes and building up the military. All other policies seemed to him beside the point.”³² Reagan and Carter had different priorities and did not try to reach common ground on how to have a conversation that would ensure a smoother transition.

As the inauguration neared, Carter grew more and more frustrated with what he viewed as Reagan’s lack of commitment to important issues. In early December, he bemoaned the fact that Reagan had not met with his senior advisors for ten days, calling that “inconceivable.”³³ At the beginning of January, Carter was still dealing with Iran, and was even contemplating asking Congress to declare war. He felt that the Reagan camp should know what was going on, and was furious that, “[Soon to be Secretary of State Alexander] Haig and [National Security Adviser Richard] Allen have refused to be briefed on the Iranian situation! We’ve had no contact with the Reagan people in Defense. [Designated secretary of defense] Cap Weinberger has not even been to the Pentagon and has not designated any deputy...”³⁴. One week before Carter left office, his anxiety was at a peak: “At the staff meeting we deplored the lack of preparation Reagan’s making for taking over next week. They probably won’t have a secretary of state, haven’t named

31 Carter. *White House Diary*, 486-487.

32 Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, 106.

33 Carter. *White House Diary*. 491.

34 Jimmy Carter. *White House Diary*. 504.

the deputy, only four NSC staff members have been named, et cetera. This is completely different from the way we handled things when we were coming in.”³⁵ In Carter’s view, the transition was not effective.

Was Carter correct in his prediction that the 1980 election would “have profound consequences on both present and future generations”?³⁶ Yes. But there was not a 20th-century president from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Bill Clinton who didn’t make a significant impact on America’s relationship with the world. A better question is actually whether or not Reagan undid Carter’s accomplishments and led the nation down a disastrous path towards a dangerous foreign policy. While Carter did have great success negotiating the Camp David Accords, he was unable to adhere to his ideology in most of his foreign policy goals. For example, by the time Carter left office, he had actually shifted from being a strong advocate of detente to taking a more hard-line stance towards the Soviet Union, namely by punishing the Soviets over their invasion of Afghanistan and eventually increasing defense spending due to the perceived increasing military threat by the Soviets.³⁷

Based on Reagan’s disdain for Carter’s policy, many expected a completely new direction in U.S. foreign policy. Many historians would argue that did indeed happen.³⁸ But while Reagan initially stuck to his hardline ideology, he was the president who would eventually work most closely with the Soviet Union. During his second term, he fostered a strong working relationship with Gorbachev that indicated that Reagan was actually much more open to diplomacy with the Soviets than he had previously led people to believe. Lou Cannon points out that since Reagan considered the presidency his “greatest role”, the bluster and hardline rhetoric were likely just a part of playing that role. Although scholars are engaging in Reagan revisionism and producing valuable works in the field, we are not

35 Jimmy Carter. *White House Diary*. 509.

36 Speech. Jimmy Carter, October 8, 1980. Folder: 10/8/80. Container 180. Presidential Files: Office of the Staff Secretary. Jimmy Carter Library. 148878.

37 Strong, *Working in the World*, 260-261.

38 For an analysis of Reagan’s formulation of foreign policy ideology and the differences between Reagan’s ideas and Nixon and Carter’s ideas, see Paul Kengor, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*, (Harper Perennial: New York, 2006). Kengor argues that Reagan’s goal was to disrupt the existence of the Soviet Union rather than attempt to get along with the Soviets.

yet able to truly understand the inner-workings of the Reagan White House and foreign policy formulation, as thousands of documents are still being declassified each month. Historians will be processing the treasure trove of documents at the Reagan Library for years to come and continuing to add to the literature on Reagan's foreign policy.

What we do know, thanks to the recently opened transition collection at the Reagan Library, is that this transition was not as productive as it might have been.³⁹ While the "success" of a transition is certainly open to different interpretations and criteria, we can work under the assumption that a transition is most effective when both sides cooperate and learn from one another. This can happen even when there are divergent ideologies, as was the case with Carter and Reagan. Reagan clearly disagreed with Carter's foreign policy ideas and his methods of crafting policy. As such, the Reagan transition team seems to not have spent as much time as possible learning from Carter and his team. If Reagan had been more receptive to learning from Carter and his team, he might have gained some interesting insights. Perhaps he may have even decided to utilize the NSC differently. Although Reagan is certainly lauded for making many Americans feel proud again (particularly in public memory), his foreign policy was not without serious issues. Exploring those issues is part of a larger project, certainly. But it is worth asking whether the transition, when it does not go smoothly, can have a negative impact. For example, the Eisenhower-Kennedy transition was certainly contentious and that had severe consequences when it came to the formulation of policy towards Vietnam. It can certainly be argued that the Johnson-Nixon transition also created problems in terms of American foreign policy. While it might be a little early in terms of declassification of sources and new scholarship to make a clear, objective determination about the successes and failures of Reagan's foreign policy, it is logical to assume that when both the outgoing and incoming presidents are committed to clear communication and a respectful transition, the continuation of a coherent foreign policy is much more likely. Unfortunately, that was not the case with Carter and Reagan.

39 The transition collection at the Reagan Library is not comprised entirely of previously unseen documents. Its true value lies in this collection making it much easier to tackle the important study of Reagan's transition into the White House.