Presidential Transitions

Video Transcript

Wilson Jerman: Well, it's like losing part of your family. It's like that. You get used to these people. They become part of your family. And when they go, but you know that this time is gonna come. And so, you just prepare yourself for this.

Chris Limerick: It's very emotional. It is extremely emotional from the time of the election, particularly if it's a president that is trying to be reelected. From November on, it is a very emotional, sad time because you do become personally involved with the family no matter what your political views are. There are certain families that are everybody's favorites. I'll go back to when President and Mrs. Carter were *not* elected, all the tears that day, and I hadn't really been there that long. I started in '79, and that was in 1980. I hadn't gotten to know them as well as some of the other staff. But the Carters were very close to the housekeeping staff, and there was a lot of emotion that day. A lot of tears.

Roland Mesnier: I only worked one year for the Carter administration. But even though one year, that was enough time to get attached to the family, to Amy, her pets, the president, Mrs. Carter. And you get attached to the point that you want to see them there forever, really, because they are good people. You love serving them. But then comes the day when the election, don't lie. There's a new president coming in. But even though, you still don't believe it at this point. But the day of the inaugural of the new president and departure of the former president, it's—I would say it's a funeral. It's equally as bad as going to a funeral.

For me, I was tremendously upset to see the Carter family leaving. And for many weeks after that, I considered the Reagans imposters in the White House. They shouldn't be there! This is the Carters' home. What are they doing here?! You just did not like them there. And then a couple months pass, and then you get attached to the new president and family—just as good, just the same.

Nelson Pierce: Well, to get the old administration out, of course, you would pack things up ahead of time, and they are loaded on moving vans, and then at the last minute, there are last-minute things that have to go in. And that truck pulls off and any personal belongings that a new family wants to bring comes in and is in place and the beds made and everything ready for them as soon as they come in from the inaugural stand in the afternoon.

Nancy Mitchell: The first thing right off was that Mrs. Clinton somehow has lost her shoes to her evening dress, and so we spent at least an hour or more trying to find her shoes, and I guess

they ended up in some bedroom—oh, it was in Chelsea's bedroom—where they shouldn't have been, but anyway we found those shoes. And then they went out to the inaugural balls and came back very early in the morning, and President Clinton wanted to make a phone call, so I had gone upstairs with him, and I hear this roar from him, "Nancy," and I say, "Yes, sir." He says, "How do I make a phone call?"

Roland Mesnier: I remember, in one day, I mean, the president wakes up one morning in his house, still his house with his furniture and within a few hours later on, the moving van is here and one bed goes out, one new bed comes in, and boom, boom, boom, and then you have this new family come in. You know nothing about them or whatever told you—these people told you a few things about them is most of the time a lie. They don't know any more than anybody else. You have to find out on your own. But the departure of a family is just as bad as a funeral to me. And, of course, the whole different departure.

The Carters were very sad because, as you know, they had lost the election. They wanted to do really another four years. President Carter was still trying to get the hostages out of Iran and was working to the very last minute to do it, and, of course, in Iran there was all planned. They were going to humiliate the president by not doing so, releasing them after Reagan was sworn in. And your heart goes to them because you know how hard they work and how much they wanted it for the county and for everybody to turn out this way.

But then when Reagan left it was a different situation, because they had eight years. They were in a happy mood. I remember President Reagan and Mrs. Reagan coming into, because we usually assemble in the State Dining Room to say goodbye. All the staff, and they will come in and say goodbye. And I remember President Reagan coming in, and President Reagan always had a joke to tell, you know. And he says to every one of us, he said, "You know, the only problem about leaving the White House, when I will wake up tomorrow morning, how am I going to turn the electricity on? I haven't done it in eight years. You have done it for me all these years. How will I turn the switch on? I don't know." You know, and so that wasn't in a big time, you know, though we felt all very sad to see them go, but it's not the same. The same when the Clintons left. They had eight years.

Now, when President Bush left, they came into the room with Mrs. Barbara Bush, and President Bush totally started to cry. He couldn't speak. He was devastated. President Bush was a very loved president also. And Mrs. Bush had to talk, and then they left. So, that was a very, very sad moment there. And then after, when the Clintons left and I say goodbye to the Clintons, I knew already I had set my date for retirement. I said, I will never do that again. Because I will retire

before, if the Bushes don't stay eight years, four years, I'll leave before that. So I won't have to say goodbye [laughs].

Christine Limerick: Every inauguration, inaugural day, we gather in the State Dining Room and we have the opportunity to say goodbye to the family. And half the staff is in tears. The family is always in tears. And half the staff is in tears and the only ones that aren't are the ones that are worried about, you know, where they should be working getting ready for the next family coming in. It is again, very, very emotional and you have a lot of compassion for the people going out. I remember when the Clintons came down and Chelsea came with them, President and Mrs. Clinton. And they didn't say a word. And President Clinton just put his hands out, and he turned around—and I'll get emotional about this now—he looked at every person dead on in the face and said, "thank you." And the whole room just broke up, and then Mrs. Clinton went around, they shook everybody's hand and said goodbye.

Nancy Mitchell: I can't imagine a family coming in, and you got all these people working for you, and you don't know what on earth they do or how to treat them even, and it's kind of a real learning experience at first. We have a meeting usually in the State Dining Room, and one of the last things the current president does before he goes to the Capitol and before the new president comes in to have coffee or tea that morning is to meet with our staff, and I don't know anybody hardly that hasn't cried when the family leaves, because you get so accustomed to them and you get so protective of them. You see them more as a family than you see them as a Republican or a Democrat.

Gary Walters: That burden is ours on behalf of the First Family. We found that it normally took as long as two years, sometimes. Sometimes as short as six months. Of course, when we went from President Clinton to President Bush, President Bush had been there when his father was at the White House. He knew most of the staff by their names, but the rest of the staff that he brought along with him, the administration, wasn't as familiar. Certainly Andy Card and a few of the other people had been players in previous administrations, so they know what to expect. But a lot of the people that come are very untrusting of the Residence Staff because we do span one administration to the next. But in the Bush administration, that time frame was much reduced. Like six months or less to get comfortable.

And the Residence Staff knows when the comfortableness gets to the point where we can all kind of collectively say, "ahhhh." It happens usually with the butlers or with the ushers, when conversation is going on and you walk into the room and conversation doesn't stop. It continues. That's a collective sigh. We know we have proved that we can be trusted and that the families can understand that we're not there for any purpose other than to make them—

whatever we can do to assist them. We don't make them anything. We just assist in whatever we can do. And that is a difficult—transitions are a very difficult time.

You take the transition from 41, President Bush 41, to the Clinton administration. They were moving into a new house that they weren't that familiar with. They'd been there a couple times when he was governor, and the president obviously had a State Dinner for governors each year. So, President—at that time Governor—Clinton had been to the White House, but really didn't know the workings of the White House and didn't know the people. Hopefully he knew that it was run pretty efficiently. And every administration brings people that had been there before, so they have some idea of what goes on. But the Clintons were moving into a much larger house from the space they had in Arkansas, in the Governor's Mansion. They were bringing a young girl with them. As a mother, that had to be of some great concern. And I know Mrs. Bush sat down and talked with Mrs. Clinton before they came to the White House about that circumstance, about children living in the White House. But coming in and knowing, you know, what rooms are mine? Are there designated rooms that I have to live in, or, what can I change? What's available to me? So, those are all things that have to be discussed, and luckily each of the presidents and first ladies, once the election's over.

Whether they were involved in the election or not, invite the president-elect, the first lady, the incoming first lady to the White House early on, soon after the election. And there's usually a meeting, obviously, in the Oval Office between the president and the president-elect, and in the Residence between the sitting first lady and the incoming first lady. And, at that time usually the sitting first lady introduces the chief usher to the incoming first lady. And at that point, a dialogue breaks out that allows the chief usher to have a dialogue with the incoming first lady or her staff and can pass along a lot of information.

I would usually spend about eighteen months prior to an election getting ready for a transition. There were books to prepare, and we made photo maps of the house and various historical elements. Things like letting the president know what's in the Oval Office now. What can be changed. What are available to him. Does he want to borrow things? How does he want to. . . . because in recent years the decoration of the Oval Office has become something that each one of the presidents does in its entirety, and it really reflects the individual president. The first lady has to have an idea of what's available to her. Can she bring her own furniture? Does the White House have furniture if she doesn't? The White House is a pretty big house [laughs].

Up until around 1900, I think the White House was one of the largest houses, if not the largest house, in the United States, and the presidents had to furnish it. A lot of that hasn't changed. But, thanks to the efforts of people like Clem Conger, Mrs. Nixon, Mrs. Kennedy, a lot of people

working behind the scenes and wonderful, gracious Americans, we have enough furniture at the White House to entirely furnish the White House with high-quality furnishings, if the family wants to use those. If they want to bring their own furniture, there's a storage room where all that other furniture can go so that they are comfortable.