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# From Electioneering to Governing: Obama's Transition as Legitimation Ritual

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Danielle Wiese Leek<sup>1</sup> and Bruce E. Gronbeck<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This essay reviews Barack Obama's 2008-2009 transition from president-elect to president. Not only must the new and old presidents coordinate practical, bureaucratic matters, but in the United States, the president-elect is put through an 11-week legitimation ritual. As his status is transformed from campaigner to president, his words and actions in various situations are viewed as tests of strengths, weaknesses, vision, prudence, negotiative skill, humanity, fiber, and resolve. Not only is he tested but his words and actions are read by the press, commentators, and bloggers as signs of good or bad fortune for the country, just as the augurs of old read natural signs before momentous events. In general, Obama passed the tests and for the most part, an era of good fortune was predicted.

## Keywords

Barack Obama, presidential campaigns, presidential inauguration, presidential transitions, ritual communication

In this gap between ordered worlds, almost anything can happen.

Victor Turner, 1975

Two magazine covers framed the political-cultural space within which a successful Barack Obama transition from presidential candidate to president-elect would have to operate. The November 17, 2008, cover of the *New Yorker* pictured the Lincoln

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Memorial at night, spotlights on the edifice and enough moonlight to illumine the memorial's image in the Reflecting Pool. That issue was filled with Campaign '08 retrospectives: Ryan Lizza's (2008) exposition on the brilliant battle plans executed so competently by the Obama team, David Grann's (2008) postmortem of McCain's shift from "the honorable way" to a campaign filled with "moral compromises," David Remnick's (2008) reconstruction of Obama's campaign encounters with the politics of race, and George Packer's (2008) harkening back to Franklin Roosevelt's accession in 1932-1933, looking for the "New Liberalism." Obama became Lincoln; McCain, Lincoln's opponent, Stephen Douglas; the mid-19th century's struggle with race was updated, and Lincoln's challenges in governing a country near collapse, along with Roosevelt's demand for wartime powers in his first inaugural, were reiterated and then morphed into a new age to be born on Inauguration Day 2009. (The *Newsweek* cover from November 24, 2008, also went for a Lincoln allusion.)

During Thanksgiving week, *Time* (2008) was more blunt with the Roosevelt evocation, using Arthur Hochstein and Lon Tweeten's Photoshopping of the famous photograph of FDR smiling behind the wheel of a convertible, hat brim turned up, cigarette holder and cigarette tilted up rakishly, a toothy grin beaming over his right shoulder as he looked at the parade crowd. But now it was Obama's face, not FDR's, that radiated off the cover, framed with this headline from Peter Beinart's (2008) story, "The New New Deal: What Barack Obama Can Learn From F.D.R.—And What the Democrats Need To Do." A flurry of stories followed in the issue: Joe Klein's (2008) advice on how to restore the economy through funding a green revolution; Karen Tumulty's and Jay Newton-Small's (2008) review of the transition team's primary players; Beinart's "The New Liberal Order," built on contrasts between Democrats' downfall in 1968 and their ascendancy 40 years later; Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2008) commentary on the Messiah myth and the Black community; and two pieces on whether to save General Motors (Saporito & Szczesny, 2008) and how big government stimulus packages need to be (Fox, 2008).

And so the political-conceptual space within which the Obama transition from electioneering to governing was framed: with the principle-based presidency of Lincoln that drove him to great unpopularity during the Civil War and an assassination on one edge and FDR-style visions of a radical sort of social democracy constructed around centralized social-economic programs on the other edge of that space. Obama's transition would be reviewed for its resonance with Lincoln and FDR, evaluated for indications of partisanship after a divisive campaign, and assessed for the hopes etched in projected policies and the preinaugural steps to put them into action. To be read positively, the president-elect would need to think both pragmatically and symbolically.

Yet few of us can gauge the wisdom of this or that appointment, a meeting here and a public statement there. Practical outcomes of president-elect actions per se are really impossible to assess ahead of plans and policies actually being launched. But to observing citizens, members of Congress, press, and commentators, the president-elect's appointments, meetings, and dealings can be assayed for what they seem to illustrate

about judgment, savvy, decision making, and adaptability. The president-elect's actions during the transitional period are viewed as tests of the strengths and weaknesses that he will exhibit, observers are wont to note; test results are rationalized by his own life-as-known-publicly and by the party and party operatives who are assumed to have directive power in his thoughts and actions. They can be taken as what Aristotle (*Prior Analytics* 70a) saw as arguments from sign: as markers or indicators, here of good or bad times ahead for the new leadership. Such signs are attributed to the president-elect and interpreted through the political context of the time, much like the Roman augurs did before important battles, changes in leadership, or times of calamity or celebration (Gronbeck, 1986).

Practically, a candidate must shift his and his team's focus from issue positions, campaign strategies, and fund-raising to preparation for office. Team members' positions and duties must be redefined, realigned, and supplemented by experienced institutional operatives. Cabinet members, directors, and secretaries and undersecretaries must be floated in preparation to manage the sprawling executive bureaucracy. Endless meetings between the current administration and the incoming figures must make the transition as smooth as possible so as not to jeopardize domestic tranquility and foreign affairs. In 2 months' time, a mind-blowing amount of work must be executed, especially when changing party executives and especially in times of such critical international struggle and internal economic chaos as marked late 2008.

Practical preparations are there to ready the president-elect and his constituencies for the transformation of a mere person, a politician, into a president, a leader superior (citizens hope) to themselves and the problems that the country and the world face. Think of the pressures faced by Lincoln, contemplating the challenges of sectionalism; by Wilson, beleaguered by the prospect of American involvement in a world war; by Roosevelt, contemplating economic collapse; by Kennedy, encountering a cold war marked by MAD technologies of mutually assured destruction; or by Nixon, squaring off against the same level of domestic turmoil that had brought down Johnson. Electioneering seldom equips politicians with the wisdom, sagacity, short- and long-range game plans, and transcendent vision needed by presidents. Such attributes come from self-reflection on one's place in time and space, consultation with both committed activist-ideologues and detached observers of the human condition, the public reception of one's first decisions on personnel and policies, and constant judgmental feedback. A rite of passage is central to that transition. And so, for the president-elect, the transition period is not only practically preparatory for reforming the executive branch but also a rite of passage with symbolic importance.

The president-elect exists in a liminal state when traversing this trail from politician to leader, from mundane citizen to sagacious governor. In that liminal state, the president-elect still is marked as politician and yet is tested as governor, living a life as neither in that period, as do all beings put through a rite of passage (Turner, 1975). As the president-elect proceeds with the activities needed to change his status and (for most citizens) even his character from an ordinary personage to Mr. President, the legitimation

ritual unfolds. The skills needed to survive the gladiatorial contests of the primaries and caucuses now must be evaluated less as those of a general than as the requirements of governorship—for a man less a warrior than a larger-than-life personage of vision, prudence, negotiative skill, humanity, fiber, and resolve (Neustadt, 1990; Woodward, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

In this study, therefore, we seek to better understand the range of culturally attuned tests and evaluations a president-elect must go through in the United States if he is to start his presidency with broad public and institutional support. We will focus on the testing and the reading of the auspices that occurred in late 2008 and early 2009 as Barack Obama worked through the change in nature and change in stature that characterize an ascension ritual in politics (Garfinkel, 1956). We have selected five events during the transition period that tested the president-elect's vision and skill and served to legitimate both the office of the presidency and the man who would soon occupy the Oval Office. We first examine these tests and then the readings of the auspices, including reflections on Obama's transitions in televised news, newspaper, and magazine commentary; talk radio broadcasts; blogosphere discussions; and some ironic teases drawn from Comedy Central skits and other nonnews sources of political assessment. Finally, we offer some tentative conclusions that emerge when framing the transition period between American presidents as a liminal period marked by a legitimation ritual.

## **The Testing of President-Elect Barack Obama**

Among the events that received considerable commentary as tests and matters for evaluation of President-Elect Obama, we have selected five for examination: (a) talk about his 1st week as president-elect, from his election night address to his first press conference the following Friday; (b) discussion of reported relationships between the sitting president, George Bush, and the incoming successor; (c) evaluations of some of his cabinet-level personal staff and secretaryship-level appointments; (d) rumors surrounding his and his staff's contacts with Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich, the most serious possibility for scandal in the transition period; and (e) reviews of the Obama team's effort to develop technology policies and practices consistent with campaign goals to make government accountable to the American public.

This list is by no means exclusive. Each day of the transition offers opportunities for the president-elect to succeed, or fail, at proving himself worthy and ready to govern. Yet these choices reflect prominent story lines that emerged during Obama's legitimation and, in their recounting, echoes of the history of expectations for leaders who will guide the United States in domestic and international affairs. Overcoming political divisiveness, adopting a public persona that would be presidential yet not preemptive of the Bush administration, and proving that he was not only eloquent but also a practical negotiator and decision maker would frame the principal tests that Obama would face in the ritual running from Election Day to the inauguration. The initial tests would come during the rest of that first postelection week in November.

## *The First Week*

Democratic presidential candidate Obama did not spend even Election Night savoring the outcome of his 21-month campaign. In front of thousands of cheering supporters and fans in the Chicago Loop's Grant Park, accompanied by his family inside a shelter of bulletproof glass, he thanked those who financed the campaign and worked the wintry states of Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina and praised all

who had been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what [they] can achieve [when they] put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. (Obama, 2008)

And then, with the rhetorical turn "I know you didn't do this just to win an election and I know you didn't do it for me," (Obama, 2008). Obama assumed the role of president-elect addressing his citizens-to-be and began the 11-week transition process. His themes were simple: unity in service and responsibility, transcendence in vision and collective achievement, and pragmatism in operationalizing the American dream.

The unity leitmotif was the same one associated with Obama since his 2004 civil rights night address to the Democratic National Convention: the desirability of (re)uniting the country by suturing its demographic divisions, here articulated as the electoral response to questions about a fading American vision. This night, his election was

the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled—Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America. (Obama, 2008)

Yet appeals to unity but assemble demographic segments into a people—important following electoral contestation, but not enough. A successful candidate and his supporters must forge a new relationship after the election—one existing between a governing executive and the citizenry that is to be governed. That Obama was sensitive to this transformation can be seen in the half of his speech devoted to the postelection period, where

the road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. . . . There will be setbacks and false starts. . . . This victory is not the change we seek—it is only the chance for us to make that change. (Obama, 2008)

That change he captured in a transcendent vision founded on Lincoln's Republican values of "self-reliance, individual liberty, and national unity." Then he spoke these words:

These are values we all share, and while the Democratic Party has won a great victory tonight, we do so with a measure of humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress. As Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, We are not enemies, but friends . . . though passion may have strained it [we] must not break our bonds of affection. And to those Americans whose support I have yet to earn—I may not have won your vote, but I hear your voices, I need your help, and I will be your President, too. (Obama, 2008)

And so Obama articulated his ascension from party candidate to national executive, his plea for virtuous government, concluding with the sentiment “Our union will be perfected. And what we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow” (Obama, 2008).

But transcendent vision, like social unity, is not enough for a successful politics. That success requires action—practical, individual, and collective political action that results in a sense of progress. Action was to be grounded in unity associated with “a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other” (Obama, 2008). And to illustrate what political pragmatism can yield, he finished the speech with still another “yes we can” litany, this time built on the social and political progress that had been experienced by 109-year-old Ann Nixon Cooper, doubly disenfranchised as a woman of color. Cooper had witnessed the Dust Bowl and the Depression yet also the New Deal, with its jobs and “new sense of common purpose”; Pearl Harbor and the greatest generation’s response to it; “the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma, and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that We Shall Overcome”; a landing on the moon, the fall of the Berlin wall, the digital revolution, and her own vote at age 106 for Obama: “Through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes we can” (Obama, 2008). Unity in service and responsibility for each other, a presidential vision and a people who would work to make it real, practical actions that drive the dream through time—these were the themes even on Election Night, themes that pushed the transition ritual into high gear.

On Wednesday, November 5, Obama announced the leadership troika for his transition: John Podesta, a former White House chief of staff for President Clinton; his longtime adviser Valerie Jarrett; and his Senate chief of staff, Pete Rouse. On Thursday came the announcement of his own chief of staff, an Illinois adviser and, again, a former Clinton warrior, Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-IL). Emanuel was the fourth-ranking Democrat in the House, had managed the national Democratic congressional campaign, and was known to some as “Rahmbo” for his hard political gamesmanship (Craig, 2008). Obama was drawing on experienced Democratic staff leadership. Emanuel’s statement at the time of appointment spoke of his wish to pursue Obama’s hope for political cohesion:

I want to say a special word about my Republican colleagues, who serve with dignity, decency and a deep sense of patriotism. We often disagree, but I respect their motives. Now is a time for unity, and Mr. President-elect, I will do everything in my power to help you stitch together the frayed fabric of our politics, and help summon Americans of both parties to unite in common purpose. (quoted in Craig, 2008)

Then came Friday and President-elect Obama's first postelection press conference, which followed a meeting of Obama and Vice President-Elect Biden with the transition economic advisory board. Both the meeting and the substance of Obama's opening statement all signaled his perception that the country was most interested in his work on the financial crises. He ticked through the loss of jobs in 2008, the credit crisis, and the need for growth and a return to prosperity; he followed with calls for a middle-class rescue plan, help for small businesses, support for state and municipal governments, responses to global difficulties, particular help for the auto industry, implementation of the Bush TARP (Troubled Assets Relief Program), and the setting of priorities for tackling all of these nasty issues. Early in the review of these matters came a key statement that would foreshadow the Obama approach to the Bush administration: "Now, the United States has only one government and one president at a time, and until January 20th of next year, that government is the current administration" (quoted in McLaughlin, 2008).

There followed the Q&A, with questions about what he could accomplish in a hundred days (recalling Franklin Roosevelt's fabled focus on 100 days to restore the economy), the possibility of a stimulus package during the lame-duck session of Congress, Iran, his upcoming meeting with President Bush, his possible cabinet choices, his effort to influence his successor in the Senate, Chicago reporter Lynn Sweet's shoulder (broken during his speech on Election Night), his contacts with living former presidents, personal matters about school for his kids and the choice of First Dog, his reaction to security briefings, and his campaign proposal for tax cuts. Throughout, he maintained his optimism in being able to affect public confidence even in his first days in office, refused to second-guess President Bush, deflected family questions, revealed nothing about his cabinet choices or the security briefings, and reemphasized the importance of middle-class and small-business tax cuts. He survived his first press conference, generating some laughter and appreciation for his knowledge about reporters' needs, and reiterated his place as not president but president-elect.

### *Out With the Old, In With the New*

In 2001, after an acrimonious end to the election, the Bush administration came into the West Wing to discover \$13,000 to \$14,000 worth of damage, missing doorknobs, and the *W* keys missing from 60 computer keyboards. Clinton's press secretary, Dee Dee Myers, called the undisciplined 1993 transition "hell," and the twice-failed attempts to get an attorney general confirmed (because both nominees had employed



illegal aliens without paying Social Security taxes for their work) only made the transition rougher. In 1989, the elder Bush was unable to get fellow Texan John Tower confirmed as defense secretary amid charges of drunkenness and womanizing; in 1991, Ronald Reagan lost his labor adviser because of alleged Mafia connections; and Carter could not get the Kennedy speechwriter Ted Sorensen confirmed as head of the CIA—negative marks on their transition records all. Similarly, the Hoover-Roosevelt transition was described as a “naval engagement on a foggy night between two opposed fleets,” only deepening the Depression (Brillman, 2008). Stories from 19th-century transitions are no less contentious.

Thus, in a time when economic upheaval and international warfare weighed heavily on Washington, a misstep in presidential and bureaucratic succession could prove disastrous. Even before taking residence at the White House, Obama would need to manage transitional interactions in the postelection period. Preempting a sitting president would be frowned on, yet Obama had promised to start work immediately following his victory. Obama obviously sensed the perils and so scheduled his first meeting with the incumbent only 6 days after Election Night. And 4 days after the election, both men in their Saturday radio broadcasts pledged to work together—Obama stressing that there can be only one president at a time, Bush saying that his people had been preparing a year “to make sure the next administration can get off to a quick start.”<sup>2</sup>

And then they, their families, and chief personnel met on Monday, November 10. The leaders talked for 2 hours about domestic and foreign affairs and difficulties, the women toured the family quarters, and—perhaps most important—Bush’s chief of staff, Josh Bolten, met with John Podesta (of Obama’s transition team) and Obama’s press secretary, Robert Gibbs. The leaders could discuss policy; the key heads of staff and publicity could start working on changing the operators of the government machinery. Verbal commitments translated into action.

More than that, the Obama team made the transition as transparent as possible, with his office putting out bulletins on its website, *Change.gov*. That meant that the press and citizenry could follow the president-elect’s policy statements and moves through the appointment process. The team could hardly be accused of orchestrating deals behind the back of a sitting president. A month later, a CNN–Opinion Research Corporation survey gave Obama a 79% approval rating for his handling of the transition, with 78% identifying him as a uniter and with experts astounded that he could achieve such a rating before the inauguration (Steinhauser, 2008). For his part, President Bush and his department heads prepared more than a dozen contingency plans in case of international terrorism, and the Department of Homeland Security trained 100 career officials in crisis management to provide bridging until the Obama appointees were approved by the Senate (Baker, 2008). Similarly, federal staff at the Environmental Protection Agency and other energy offices agreed that the Bush administration had been most helpful in preparing for a new team, even though Obama’s people would be redirecting many of the environment & energy (Eenews.net, 2009) programs built in the previous 8 years.

It would not be an overstatement to assert that the United States had never seen a more carefully conceived, systematically executed transfer of power within the 21st-century complexities of the executive branch. Both the president-elect and the incumbent received high marks for their orderliness and openness. The bureaucratic transition eased any public concerns about the ideological gap between the two executives.

### *Appointments and Nominations*

Speculation about Obama's choices for top positions began even before election results established him as president-elect. The stakes were high. Obama would need to not only make choices that reflected a campaign promise of bipartisanship but choose individuals who would quickly pass scrutiny after the inauguration; risking gridlock concerning appointees would complicate an already perilous delay on the U.S. economy. Two days after his victory, the Dow had given up any gains made on Election Day (Weisman & Solomon, 2008), and thus Obama's choices would be symbolic not only of the transition to power but of the president-elect's ability to handle America's financial crisis. As it had at other points in American political history, such as FDR's efforts following the Great Depression and Ronald Reagan's response to a stagnant 1970s economy, economic concerns would mark the boundaries of what would count as Obama's successful performance of the legitimization ritual during the transition between the election and Inauguration Day.

Evidence could be seen in Obama's first cabinet-level pick, Timothy Geithner for treasury secretary. Geithner's past experience as president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York generated questions about his experience with national financial regulation, but Geithner's Ivy League education; commendations from economic heavyweights, such as former Federal Reserve chair Alan Greenspan; and the sheer speed and pointedness of Obama's attunement to the fiscal crisis marked the treasury secretary's appointment as the specter of the president-elect's sound decision-making skills.<sup>3</sup> Obama's announcement of Geithner came on November 24, a little more than 2 weeks after the election, and was packaged as part of an official slate of Obama's grand-slam economic team, which also included Larry Summers, Harvard University economist and former deputy treasury secretary, as director of the National Economic Council; and Berkeley professor Christina Romer as the director of the Council of Economic Advisors.

A day later, Obama followed with his pick for budget director. Peter Orszag had already served as the director of the Congressional Budget Office and, according to the president-elect, knew "where the bodies are buried" (Fouhy & Kuhnhenh, 2008). Obama's November 26 announcement that Paul Volcker, past head of the Federal Reserve, had been chosen to serve as chair of the president's economic recovery advisory board solidified the week's proof that the president-elect would move quickly to act on the economy. Moreover, the collective experience and perceived intellect of soon-to-be President Obama's team of economic advisors could (and would) be seen

as evidence that Obama was attacking head-on the serious business required of a man who wished to move from campaigning to governing.

The bellwethers appeared to respond that week, with the Dow gaining 9%. Pundits speculated that “perhaps investors were reassured by Mr. Obama’s cabinet choices” and confidence in Washington would return (“Going on the Offensive,” 2008). Here we see the testing of Obama’s metonymic possibilities, as already the president-elect’s selection of knowledgeable and competent financial officials was read as the decision-making prowess of “the” White House and the Beltway. The dual symbolism, of the nomination and appointment process as representative of the president-elect and as emblematic of the nation, was perhaps no more evident than in the expectation that members of Obama’s team would be not only brilliant but illustrative of America’s rich ethnic and racial diversity. The legitimization ritual was (as it always is) a balancing act; the president-elect would need to avoid charges of tokenism while producing an all-star team and “cabinet that looks like America” (West, 2008, p. 13A).

The president-elect’s promise to heal the divisions produced by America’s racism was emphasized in his December 1 announcement of the national security staff. Eric Holder’s nomination for attorney general proved Obama’s commitment to diversity was more than words; if confirmed, Holder would be the first African American to hold the post. Obama named a Hispanic woman, Hilda Solis, as labor secretary, and nominated two Asian Americans for other cabinet positions. Down the line, Obama’s picks seemed to navigate historically difficult terrain while raising up the American spirit. Blacks, women, Asian Americans, individuals from mixed-raced families, and early on, Hispanics, were represented not only in form but in substance.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing sentiment—that Obama’s team was chosen for its excellence, not its collective identity—seemed to manifest the American dream: in the absence of prejudice, all Americans can achieve greatness. Obama’s move from candidate to president-elect, and soon, to president, also envisaged the specificity of the transition process; although all presidents-elect nominate and appoint in the context of the political scene, what was required for the first African American president of the United States imprinted the contours of expectations for Obama.

Obama’s December 1 announcement of the security team was also framed as evidence of bipartisanship, yet the register of value clearly pointed to proof that the president-elect would follow through on the promise to promote informed discussion and vigorous debate within the administration. Obama would build “a team of rivals,” invoking a reference to Doris Kearns Goodwin’s (2005) best seller that documented Abraham Lincoln’s historic cabinet appointments, which had included voices of harsh opposition. Defying tradition, Obama personally interviewed all of the candidates for top positions (Baker & Cooper, 2008) and selected his primary rival, Hilary Clinton, for secretary of state and two prominent conservatives for the security team, Robert Gates as defense secretary and former NATO commander and Marine General James Jones as national security adviser. CNN correspondent Bay Buchanan’s (2008) public statement summarized a vocal public sentiment, that “it’s a tribute to Barack Obama that he’s hiring people, bringing people around him that are strong. That shows that he

is strong himself. He is not going to be intimidated. He doesn't need yes-people around him." For Obama, multiculturalism and ideological variety in the cabinet and his administration were symbolic both at home and abroad. Foreign audiences listened to Obama the candidate; international publics witnessed the president-elect pay service to the value of diversity.

The speed of the process only heightened the sense of Obama's commitment. One month after his election, Obama had "announced his selections for 13 of 24 most important positions in a new administration," moving more quickly than any other contemporary president-elect (Baker & Cooper, 2008). His actions stood in marked contrast to those of the last Democratic president; Bill Clinton had taken office with a number of appointments still up in the air.

### *Blago: A Whiff of Scandal*

*Scandalum* (from the Greek *skandalon*) is Latin for "trap" or "stumbling block," and all classic rites of passage have tests not only for courage, strength, and endurance but also for the anticipation and cleverness needed to recognize and then avoid or escape traps. Presidents, presidential candidates, and presidents-elect alike are hunted by trappers (Gronbeck, 1998). Barack Obama was no exception.

The trap was baited when radio station KHQA (Chicago) reported a meeting between the president-elect and Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich the day after the election and when Obama's chief strategist, David Axelrod, confirmed on November 23 (to Fox News Chicago) that the two had discussed several names for possible successors to Obama as an Illinois senator. The trap was sprung when knowledge of a criminal complaint against the Illinois governor spread across the news on December 9, following statements from U.S. attorney Patrick Fitzgerald; Fitzgerald assured his press conference attendees that nothing in his wire taps of the governor linked Obama or his team to a scheme to sell Obama's Senate seat. No matter; a feeding frenzy began.

John Carey of *Business Week* ran the headline "Will Blagojevich Taint Obama?" citing a Bush administration source that "this is bigger than the news media has yet picked up on," with a "GOP source" adding that the president-elect "has got himself a potential scandal" (Carey, 2008). Obama responded to the charges: "I am saddened and sobered by the news that came out of the US attorney's office today," (quoted in Trapper, 2008) denying any contact with the governor and refusing to comment on an ongoing investigation. Jack Trapper, ABC News's senior White House correspondent, heard Obama's statement but wondered how Blagojevich knew that Obama would not be part of a "pay-to-play" scheme if there were no contacts (Trapper, 2008). The next day, Republican National Committee (RNC) chairman Mike Duncan pushed a party line farther: "President-elect Barack Obama's carefully parsed and vague statements regarding his own conduct and that of his team with Governor Rod Blagojevich are unacceptable," (Politicsusa, 2008) Jim Geraghty of the *National Review* added, "There was no glimpse of anger at the governor, no sense of betrayal in the tone of his words.

... Why doesn't he do what almost every other Democrat in the state did, and call for Blagojevich's resignation?" (quoted in Whitney, 2008).

The president-elect promptly announced an internal investigation of his team under the direction of his legal counsel, Greg Craig. The next week, both Obama and two of his top advisers were interviewed by federal prosecutors (December 18 to 20), and then on December 23, Craig released a five-page memo. The memo assured reporters that the prosecutors found no illegal activity among members of the transition team and no contact between Obama himself and Blagojevich; that a discussion among Obama, Emanuel, and Axelrod of possible senatorial candidates occurred after Valerie Jarrett accepted a White House job; that Emanuel made phone calls to Blagojevich (November 6 to 8) telling the governor that he was accepting a White House job, conveying some of the names talked about, and asserting that no cabinet position or any other job for the governor was mentioned; that Jarrett had talked to Tom Balanoff, head of the Illinois chapter of the Service Employees International Union while she still was a candidate for the Senate seat but that Balanoff was not a member of the governor's staff; that Axelrod talked to no one except the team; and that Obama's friend Dr. Eric Whitaker was contacted by deputy governor Louanner Peters to find out who spoke for the president-elect on this topic, later relaying to her that Obama told him nobody did (Craig, 2008).

The trap could not be sprung. Jonathan Weisman of the *Wall Street Journal* wondered at the timing of the memo's release and was told by Craig that U.S. Attorney Fitzgerald requested the delay (Weisman, 2008). RNC spokesman Alex Conant asked for internal documents and e-mails that would corroborate the memo's findings, to no avail. Carl Lavin of *Forbes* picked at the memo, wondering why Emanuel kept saying that there was no effort by Blagojevich "to extract a personal benefit in return for filling the Senate vacancy"—might there have been a political one? (Lavin, 2008). And why did the memo keep saying "the President" rather than "the President-elect"? Given these weak responses, offering innuendo rather than any evidence of connections, Obama remained free of the trap at Christmastime.

The third phase of the scandal opened a week later, when Blagojevich appointed former Illinois attorney general Roland Burris to fill the vacant Senate seat. Even as everyone from the sitting Illinois attorney general, Lisa Madigan, to the U.S. Senate Democrats were averring that the appointment could not stand, the president-elect weighed in:

Roland Burris is a good man and a fine public servant, but the Senate Democrats made it clear weeks ago that they cannot accept an appointment made by a governor who is accused of selling this very Senate seat. I agree with their decision.

But ultimately, of course, after Illinois secretary of state Jesse White on January 10 signed a certification form separate from the one that Governor Blagojevich signed, the U.S. Senate seated Burris on January 12. According to anonymous sources,

Obama already had told Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) that if Burriss had legal standing out of Illinois to seat him “sooner rather than later” (Associated Press, 2009).

And so, despite the usual range of lingering doubts and shadowy allegations, the national press left the scandal behind. Blagojevich was impeached and removed from office, a criminal trial awaiting after that action; Axelrod and Emanuel seemed none the worse for wear; and President-Elect Obama came out of the events with a new senator he had supported for governor of Illinois in 2002. Obama had managed to recognize Illinois’s jurisdiction, uphold the Senate’s rules for admitting new members, and honor a legislative successor. He passed the three-part test.

### *Campaign Promises*

Another significant test for Obama was his ability to successfully translate his campaign *for* the people into a government *by* the people. Other presidents-elect faced such a challenge. Woodrow Wilson’s 1916 victory over Supreme Court justice Charles Evans Hughes comes to mind. Wilson’s slight margin of victory during that electoral season was attributed to a people’s platform, including support for women’s suffrage and the voice of ethnic Americans, whom Roosevelt had alienated in the previous administration. In Obama’s case, the promise of governance by the people meant more than an agenda that reflected popular sentiment. His campaign rhetoric was replete with guarantees of greater government transparency and accountability, and to achieve this goal, Obama the candidate promised to use the Internet not only to listen to the voice of America but to also give citizens access to information about government agencies, policies, and decision making. The Obama campaign’s noteworthy use of the web, and especially social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, and the popular video site YouTube, perpetuated expectations that the president-elect would “revolutionize” government in cyberspace (Gronbeck, 2009).

For the president-elect, digital technology would serve as an emblem of strength and character, a symbol of government reform, and evidence of his success at governing. This is why Obama’s fight to keep his Blackberry took on the marks of a David and Goliath story. Obama’s lawyers and the Secret Service argued that security risks called for the president-elect to give up his online link to the outside world, especially when in office (Stone, 2009). Obama argued that being a people’s advocate required being connected to the electorate and suggested that the trust voters had in him on Election Day should extend to his ability to think carefully before sending private messages that could hurt the administration.<sup>5</sup> The back-and-forth continued throughout the transition, with Obama proclaiming, “I’m still clinging to my Blackberry. . . . They’re going to pry it out of my hands” (quoted in Zeleny, 2009, p. A22). On Inauguration Day, John Podesta (2009) made clear in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial the connection between Obama’s battle for his Blackberry and the president-elect’s strength, conviction, and commitment to the American people:

An off-line Barack Obama isn't just bad for Barack. It's bad for all of us. The president's [*sic*] ability to reach outside his inner circle gives him access to fresh ideas and constructive critics; it underscores the difference between political "victories" and actual solutions; and it brings the American people into a battle we can only win by working together.

Thus, a handheld electronic device allowed the president-elect to provide substantial evidence that he indeed would carry out his promise to the people, even in the face of opposition. The Blackberry also proved to symbolize the "change" Obama spoke of on the campaign trail. And it, along with transformations taking place inside the Beltway and at Obama's transition headquarters in Chicago, marked a notable departure from the ways that previous administrations used the Internet.

Immediately following Election Day, the president-elect acted on the symbolic capital of cyberspace. The Obama-Biden team announced that the president would be the first in office to name a chief technology officer to oversee the use of information technologies in the administration. The transition website, Change.gov (2008), posted the Obama-Biden ethics policy, which explained how the president-elect intended to use the web to facilitate government reform and "shine the light on Washington lobbying." Efforts to improve accountability included an "internet database of lobbying reports, ethics records, and campaign finance filings in a searchable, sortable and downloadable format"; a commitment that corporate tax breaks and earmarks would be made public via the web; a promise that as president, Obama would not sign any nonemergency bill without giving the public a chance to review the bill and comment on the White House website; and a requirement that rule-making agencies conduct their business online so that citizens could follow along in cyberspace (Change.gov, 2008). The president-elect illustrated the value of web transparency himself when shortly after the election he chose to be the first to record the weekly Democratic address for the video website YouTube. Following through on his campaign promise to host "online fireside chats," the president-elect sought to replicate FDR's intimate and direct connection to the American public.

The Change.gov website purported a similar opportunity to bring the president-elect closer to the people by asking visitors to submit questions for the administration and then to vote for the most important questions on the site. By January 8, 2009, more than 70,000 queries had been submitted. The top ranked question was whether Obama would "appoint a special prosecutor to investigate allegations of torture and surveillance by the U.S. government" during the Bush administration (Melber, 2009). Biden offered the official response, that a decision was the province of the Department of Justice, not the incoming administration. The exchange resonated with the precarious balance Obama would need to keep in dealing with George W. Bush to show evidence of governing with respect for the sitting president.

Obama's emphasis on what has been called "Google-enabled government" helped make the balancing act possible. Because the Internet represented Obama *doing* work,

what took place online was not set up merely for the president-elect to be prepared when in office; it was Obama acting with almost presidential authority without yet taking the oath of office. In the period following Obama's election, for instance, federal agencies started the transition to broader e-government by preparing for the "YouTube administration." Throughout Washington, federal staff was granted access to the site and encouraged to begin interagency collaboration through the web (Mosquera, 2008). The Presidential Inaugural Committee (PIC) also followed Obama's lead by offering unprecedented transparency about inaugural donors. The "searchable, sortable, virtually real-time database of donors available on the PIC website" meant any citizen could "search for and sort donors who give more than \$200 by name, employer, or hometown" (PIC, 2008).

On Inauguration Day, shortly before the president-elect became the president officially, the "official" White House website ([Whitehouse.gov](http://Whitehouse.gov)) relaunched. Opening with a statement from Macon Phillips, Obama's director for new media, the new White House promised communication and transparency. Licensing the site to the "public at large" was evidence of the open-source politics that would guide the Obama administration. Obama's web team would consist of "tech savvy individuals" who proved not only his commitment to the belief that open access benefits citizens but his intelligence on the issues related to technology (Merritt, 2009).

Therefore, throughout the period between his election and inauguration, Obama invoked the power of the Net to serve as proof of his fitness for office and as evidence that he was already listening to his people. Although some expressed concern about Obama's use of a for-profit site (Google) to do government business, the criticism was drowned out by evidence that the Internet spirit was catching on. The sense that Obama might overstep his place as president-elect was also quelled, as unease often is, by the sense that what was taking place online was driven by citizens, not the incoming administration.

And whereas Obama could not yet govern *per se*, he could, by appealing to "America" and public opinion, influence the legislative branch during the transitional period. This is the power of what Jeffrey Tulis (1988) has called the "rhetorical presidency." The dialectic between the president-elect and the people, made manifest in the Internet, amplified Obama's rhetorical power when confronting Congress. Throughout the transitional period, Obama made clear that he, and the American people, would expect congressional action on an economic stimulus package as soon as he took office. In fact, some historians expressed fears that Obama would "bludgeon congress" by trying to do too much to shore up public support in cyberspace (Lambrecht, 2009). Here the tension of action without authority was remade as credibility, for the rhetorical president is only as powerful as the discourse that surrounds him has public uptake. Critics' concerns that Obama was too responsive to the public during the transition offered visible evidence of the symbolic value of the Internet for the president-elect.



## The Reading of the Auspices

The *Collegium Augurum* was the second-ranking *collegium*, or sacred community, of Rome, comprising (at various times) 2 to 15 augurs whose job it was to read the signs—usually from the behavior of birds—of good or bad fortune before major decisions or actions were taken by Roman officials. Augurs would be consulted before battles, major domestic initiatives, and changes of leadership and at all other times of consequential action.

In our time, the augurs are the commentators, pundits, and anyone else with access to the public sphere. They not only describe and evaluate political behavior, action, or proposals but, like the augurs of old, predict dire or rosy futures on the basis of what they see. Political-cultural divination is a fact of life in an era of 24-7 news—filled with the voices of those who once commanded troops, held administrative or legislative office or appointment, or practiced legitimate journalism—and an Internet full of wannabes. We may no longer focus on the flight of birds or the entrails of night animals, but we read the auspices as closely as our Roman forebears. So now that we have reviewed some of the principal tests to which the president-elect was put, what prognostications of good or bad fortune filled the pages of print and sound bites of electronic public messaging?

On the whole, as the transition period moved from that 1st week to his preinauguration train ride into Washington, D.C., Barack Obama's fortune was being read, amazingly so, as almost uniformly positive around the world.

He could not have gotten off to a better start than he did during his 1st week. On CNN megastar Anderson Cooper's 360 blog, those responding to the Election Night photos, Obama's speech, and then his Friday press conference were ecstatic. In their own vernaculars, cn wrote, "I was impressed with Obamas victory speech. It is refreshing to hear any political figure recognize all different type of people and races. . . . Hope this is a sign for positive change for EVERYONE." Marti Middleton chimed in: "What a wonderful night Tuesday was for this country, what a wonderful Friday as well! At last we have a President and Vice President that have passion for all of the people in the United States of America." And JackieJNY almost exploded as she dropped back to the past, embraced the present, and prognosticated a buoyant future: "AS OPRAH'S SHIRT SAID HOPE WON !!!! YES WE CAN, WE DID AND WE WILL!!!!" (ac360.blogs.cnn.com, 2008). Or as a young African American who drove Election Day from Detroit to Chicago to be a part of the big night said,

On a night when change came to America, we had a front row seat for history. I'm not a man who cries in public, but being three generations removed from slavery, I shed tears of joy for not just that moment, but for history as well. (Smith, 2008)

Then, as the president-elect went to work during the next week on his appointments and nominations for executive office, various communities affected by executive

officials joined the celebration of positive times ahead. Tom Henry (2008) of the *Toledo Blade* expressed feelings that ran through much of the press:

I don't like getting hung up on political appointments. But whether you're running a business, a baseball team, or the federal government, the tone starts at the top.

And people from many walks of life are on board with President-elect Obama's picks of Nobel laureate Steven Chu as secretary of energy; former New Jersey environment chief Lisa P. Jackson as U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] administrator; U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar as secretary of Interior; former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack as secretary of Agriculture; Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley as chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and former EPA Administrator Carol Browner in a new White House position overseeing climate and energy policy. . . . So if I'm reading this right, a young senator from Illinois who is largely an unknown and ripped for his inexperience throughout the campaign is pushing the right buttons. He's showing signs of being tough on the environment, yet pragmatic. (Henry, 2008)

Tom Henry was not alone. Constitutional lawyer Glenn Greenwald (2009) praised to the point of hyperbole Obama's selection of Dawn Johnsen for the Office of Legal Counsel inside the Department of Justice, seeing a 180-degree turnaround vis-à-vis the previous administration and prophesizing that the Obama administration would "reverse the lawlessness and legal radicalism of the Bush years." And until his tax problems brought him down, Tom Daschle presaged a glorious future for health care reform, prompting Thinkprogress.com to predict that his Federal Health Board proposal of early 2008 "would ensure harmonization across public programs of 'health-care protocols, benefits, and transparency' and would set 'evidence-based standards for benefits and quality for federal programs' in the hopes of lowering the complexity of different insurance regulations and ultimately lowering costs" (Thinkprogress.com, 2008). Obama's "team of rivals" dominated the airwaves through the transition. Even *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, in its typically backhanded (ironic) way, on November 19, 2008, celebrated the idea with a "report" by Aasif Mandvi (2008) purporting to show a photo of Obama's cabinet including, yes, Hillary Clinton but also John McCain, Sarah Palin, George W. Bush, Lex Luthor of *Superman* fame, and of course Osama bin Laden as secretary of defense. Although some of Obama's appointments would run into trouble at confirmation time (including Daschle's), the collective sense in the country was one of unbridled optimism in a healthy future for individuals and the country as a whole.

The projection of appointees' administrative signs of good fortune went hand in hand with the reading of policy auspices, although not on talk radio. Attacks portending a dark and dire future for America under the new president flowed from most of the some 2,064 radio stations offering (usually conservative) news talk (Stelter, 2008). Talk show host Michael Savage, for example, on November 18, 2008, interviewed

Himlar von Campe, who compared the rise and election of Obama to that of Adolph Hitler (Corn, 2008). Hillary Clinton was a continuing target for the infamous Rush Limbaugh (and he was widely quoted as saying, "I hope that Obama fails"), and the broader, policy-related reading of the future was that if Obama tried to bring back the fairness doctrine in hopes of forcing right-wing talk jocks to give equal time to the left, he would face a firefight ferocious enough to bring him down (Gore, 2008).

In general, however, his policy moves—for example, his run-up efforts to gain control of the domestic monetary system after his inauguration (Aden & Aden, 2008), his vision for stabilizing African American families (Prichard, 2008), his foreign policy talk about the Middle East except for the Gaza crisis of early 2009 (Mahnaimi & Baxter 2008; Tisdall, 2009), his promise for new approaches to Pakistan and Afghanistan (Barker, 2008), his zeal for a transnational carbon trading plan including India (Roychowdhury, 2008), and his appointment of Susan Rice as ambassador to the United Nations (Stein, 2008)—were read as signs of new American cooperative initiatives designed to restore U.S. influence and reputation at home and abroad.

As January moved steadily toward the 20th and the changing of the executive guard, the auspices were read with greater and greater positivity. The Gallup Poll started the month indicating that 72% of the citizenry expressed confidence in Obama's ability to make a good president—with that figure climbing to 93% for liberals and gains even to 29% among conservative Republicans (Jones, 2009). In the CNN–Opinion Research Corporation poll just before the inauguration, Obama hit an 84% approval rate (Steinhauser, 2009). By mid-January, the 13 million supporters who composed Obama for America's powerhouse listserv were reconstituted as a public lobbying group with the same OFA acronym, Organizing for America, thus creating a sense of citizen empowerment, access to the president's agenda, and future change (Rutenberg & Nagourney, 2009). By Inauguration Day, the Aden sisters were reading the auspices in sync with the citizenry when they said,

Aside from seeing history in the making, Inauguration Day went beyond most expectations. There was a show of unity, emotion and hope not seen in many years. And by a margin of 3-1, people are feeling more optimistic about the future now that Obama is president. (Aden & Aden, 2009)

American optimism inevitably rises around the time of a presidential election. Since de Tocqueville, we have seen ourselves as a generally optimistic society—a notion that becomes scientifically measured and validated by pollsters during the quadrennial rite of political contestation for leadership of the country (Zullo, 1994). In the period between election and inauguration—that is, between campaigning and actually governing the country through executive edict and legislative initiative—the country's expectations for prosperity, virtue, and collective effectivity soar. That optimism not only produces the predominately positive reading of the auspices that we have sampled in this article but also helps launch a new presidency with the rhetorical support that new presidents need to get started. Whether they can sustain that sense of

good fortune and bright future is the subject of another article, although we know, of course, that generally the answer is no. The aura of “unity, emotion, and hope” that the Aden sisters saw on Inauguration Day of course evaporates with the first actions that the president takes on January 21, as political hope becomes political reality.

No matter. The mere politician became the president of the United States, with at least a chance to execute political power that promotes what the American Declaration of Independence called “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The politician—President Obama—could not have been expected to do that without having been transformed from an inexperienced Illinois senator to president in a rite of passage.

The finish of that rite the *New Yorker* cover of January 19 depicted as a small, solitary figure without the company of either Lincoln or Roosevelt, walking slowly across a vast expanse of snow toward the distant White House. Gone were the tens of thousands of campaign supporters from the rallies in Des Moines, St. Louis, Portland, Columbia, and Chicago; the hundreds of thousands who buoyed up the candidate in the Tiergarten in Berlin; the millions who squeezed into the National Mall for the inauguration. At the end of the rite, legitimated but alone, Obama now had to govern.

### **The Transition Period as a Legitimation Ritual**

Often when scholars speak of presidential “transition,” they are referring to the early days of a new presidency (e.g., Eksterowicz & Hastedt, 2005). Presidential appointments are considered, but so too are a president’s first decisions while in office, operating with presidential authority. This is indeed a transitional period for political parties, administrations, the new president, and the nation. But as we have argued here, there is also a specific transition that takes place in the short window between Election and Inauguration Days. This is a time of transformation for the individual who moves from candidate to governor, from president-elect to head of state. As Barack Obama was tested, his own value, the office of the presidency, and more generally, the political praxis that governs America from the executive branch were legitimated.

This happened in part because Obama’s transition replicated the rituals Americans have come to expect from the president-elect. Specifically, the cycle of Obama’s public statement and action followed by citizen interpretation and reflection worked to reestablish the political and cultural force of the presidency. This process of legitimation is a way of passing down information about the engines of the office, between administrations and across generations of Americans (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; see especially p. 70), and then of reasserting their power in public life. The ritual nature of this rebirth of political efficacy in a new leader is clearly evident in the execution of Obama’s 1st week as president-elect: victory speech followed by assessment of its portends, statements by the president-in-waiting followed by evaluation, a press conference to test his knowledge and judgment, and so on. Such routine events would have little meaning for a man with no “official capacity,” but their ritual and symbolic significance in the postelection period “justifies the institutional order by giving a

normative dignity to its practical imperatives” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 93). Simultaneously, the discourse surrounding the president-elect’s in-between period concretizes the language and symbolic frames through which his actions are read. The existence of such language, to review the president-elect as, for instance, respectful (in his treatment of President Bush), decisive (in his selection of appointees), or strong enough (to retain his Blackberry), is itself part of the process of legitimating both the man and the office. During the period under review, Obama effectively and successfully performed his role as president-elect. And his transition team, appointees, the press, and the public enacted and endorsed more generally the presidency of which he was a part. The ritual is a dialectic between the institutional representatives and agents of legitimation, rehearsed within a historical (traditional) set of sociocultural guidelines.

Thus, Obama’s references to history and past presidents do not merely serve to invoke forgotten, empty values. Harkening back to Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt or even Martin Luther King Jr. validates a presidential style that in turn evokes the norms by which a president-elect should be assessed. The same is true when the auspices reflect on the quality of Obama’s rite of passage by comparison to previous presidents-elect: Better organized than Clinton? More consultative than George W. Bush? Less acrimonious than Roosevelt? Yet as purposive as Roosevelt? The media’s response to Obama serves almost as a mnemonic device, reminding us that there are expected (and predictive) sequences to the ritual of presidential transition, historically grounded understandings of the consequences of various styles of behavior, and normative guides for evaluating how the ritual is performed.

This legitimation is not simply a habit but a formula that, when carried out, reweaves the social fabric of a nation in transition. The ritual elements of the in-between period for the president-elect reflect the challenges of governing prior to acquiring authority and of finding and adopting a presidential style prior to assuming the office. The president-elect must take immediate action following Election Day, which makes the 1st week of each transition crucial in identifying his style and historicizing it. Yet not all is merely personal; such action also must legitimate the office by paying due respect to previous administrations and by demonstrating that it will play a significant role in solving crises and reinvigorating the American spirit. The president-elect in addition must make moves to establish a cabinet and team of bureaucratic operatives while attending to the scandals that inevitably surround the gifting of political power and influence (as in the Blagojevich crisis).

The president-elect must do all of this while also following through on campaign promises that disclose the specific inventories of actions by which he has asked to be judged. So, in 2008-2009, the symbolic power of the transition is concretized when Obama’s acts are read by those who have been vested with or assumed unto themselves authority to speculate on the president-elect’s motives and mentality, impact and significance, and potential success or failure as president. The augurs, in this case, simultaneously act as spectators, speculators, and interactive performers in a social drama that initiates the president-elect into the process of governing.

The transitional process is complete in the ceremonial, ritual act of Inauguration Day. The Constitution does not use the word *inauguration* but requires only the oath of office. The 20th Amendment merely specifies the day and time of day on which the transfer of executive power is effected; constitutionally, the movement from one president to another is but a banal act of substitution. A ceremony reflecting some of the pomp and circumstance of a European coronation was added by George Washington and has been a part of American tradition ever since. The glow of a public spectacle by which the “office” is put on as an act of investiture endures in the United States (Gronbeck, 1986). The inaugural ceremony marks the successful rite of passage, with the legitimated president performing for the first time, in all of the ceremonial light that can be shined on him when he speaks and is seen by a citizenry, now “charismatic” in the sense that Clifford Geertz (1977) identifies public specularity as a source of power.

The institutional, ritual power of the presidency can appear overwhelming, so strong in fact that it is witnessed (indeed experienced) as part of an objective reality that exists outside of the control of citizens, politicians, and the press. Yet Obama’s transition highlights how the liminality of in-betweens offered opportunity to reshape cultural symbols associated with the president-elect and the presidency and reworked the candidate from electee to governor. In his early work, Victor Turner (1975) wrote of the betwixt and between moments of culture. Following Van Gennep, Turner referred to this time as a period of liminality, when “the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one’s own social position, but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements” (Turner, 1975, pp. 13-14).<sup>6</sup> As Turner explains, cultural transitions are where the social drama arises, and it is within the sociopolitical drama that subjects—here, both the leader and the led—have opportunities for change and the culture (in the case, the public) is willing to accept those changes.

Obama, situated as neither candidate nor president, performing in liminality, was ripe for transformation. To go from being rhetorician to actor; from candidate to governor; from one who might be the dream to the one who is the dream of Blacks being able to be president, of a government by the people, of transparency, yet of legitimacy—these matters were the accomplishments of transition. As we have been suggesting, there is no single political-governmental styling by which a politician becomes a president; it is all a matter of role-playing, of historical antecedents of stylings available in that role playing, of adapting both the person to the office and the office to the person within a matrix of place and time, all with the endorsement (or not) of interactive journalists, commentators, institutionalized experts, and—in our time—Internet-based assessors of political performance.

Given the fluidity of such role performances, it is during the liminal period that opportunities arise, then, to reshape and/or rework the interpretation and meanings of the political cultures and public expectations for action with it. As is clear from the review of Obama’s thinking and actions detailed in this article, although the public and

the press insistently tried to retrofit his president-elect style to that of his predecessors—Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt most predominantly—he also reshaped the expectations of how the presidency should work and relate to the citizenry. The Lincolns, Roosevelts, and others in the presidential lineage had no Internet and list-servs, never heard about globalization or global warming, did not have to deal with a transnational meltdown of economies and economic relationships between sovereign states, were not people of color. And so, Obama's relationship to his supporters in particular and the citizenry more generally, the kinds of issues that pressed on him even before he was in office, and the web of relations among the nations of the world forced him into actions and rhetorical stylings that would never have been asked of other presidents-elect. The legitimation ritual makes demands on both the electee and the political culture within which the ritual is taking place.

In the end, Obama worked through the rite of passage from electioneer to head of state both by conforming to cultural expectations and by remanufacturing those expectations to fit the pressing circumstances of the country's life-world. Ultimately, political legitimation conforms both the person to social-political understandings and those understandings to the force of circumstance. Barack Obama conformed both himself to those understandings and the office to the issues swirling in the public eye in late 2008 and early 2009. And so, on January 20, 2009, the auspices portended good fortune for all. It remains to be seen if the augurs got it right.

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### **Notes**

1. The argument for the necessity of transforming the campaigning politician into a governing president got strong development in Neustadt's (1960) original edition, thought by many to be a bible for the new Kennedy administration. In particular, Neustadt's discussion of Eisenhower's relationship with Truman—avoiding meetings with him during the campaign so as not be compromised in what he could say on security issues, managing his transition carefully through limited consultation—sets up what today is the conventional wisdom. And of course it was Neustadt who argued that presidential policy rose or fell on the bases of presidents' abilities to persuade their multiple constituencies. What Woodward (2006) added to this analysis was the strong emphasis on presidential performance: the staging, timing, and supporting cast used by presidents to clothe their office and actions in powerful and appealing specular accoutrements.
2. Bush's comments are drawn from a Yahoo news report, reprinted by Nate (2008).

3. Shortly after the inauguration, Geithner's appointment would face criticism in the confirmation process when it was revealed that he owed more than \$40,000 in back taxes. Obama's selection for the Department of Health and Human Services, Tom Daschle, withdrew his name for the post after reviews showed he too had failed to pay taxes totaling more than \$125,000 (Shear & Kornblut, 2009).
4. Bill Richardson's decision to decline the position of secretary of commerce would come as a disappointment to the Hispanic community.
5. In an exclusive CNBC interview, Obama described his belief that access to technology was central to his policy of constant communication about policies (Obama, 2009).
6. As scholars such as St. John (2008) have thoughtfully explored, Turner grappled with what liminality would mean in a postindustrial society. Turner's understanding of liminality had emerged from his experience with primarily small, agrarian communities. Turner offered the "liminoid" as a possibility in postindustrial societies—"forms of symbolic action, those genres of free-time activity, in which all previous standards and models are subjected to criticism, and fresh new ways of describing and interpreting sociocultural experience are formulated" (Turner, 1975, p. 15). For Turner, it would seem, liminality is uncuffed only when it emerges outside of institutional orders. Yet as Grimes (1990) explains, "the liminoid is sacred to members of a secular society" (p. 145). So too is the U.S. presidency. In this way, the legitimation of a U.S. president is akin to the sacred rites of passage that Turner vests with the potential of liminality.

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## Bios

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