

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO TRANSITION TO WASHINGTON, DC

CAPITOL
COMMENTS



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When a new presidential administration comes to Washington, D.C., the place becomes a flurry of activity, rumor, and anticipation. This is especially true when control of the White House shifts from one political party to the other. So what is it like to enter this politically charged atmosphere as an outsider? The transition of power is well defined, cooperative, and truly an incredible experience. It is, however, anything but easy. Although much attention is paid to the occupant of the White House, the day-to-day leadership of our government is placed in the hands of more than 4,000 political appointees, with almost 1,200 or more that face Senate confirmation.

Unlike cabinet secretaries, most of these appointees are and will remain unknown to the American public. However, they have significant power to change the culture and operation of the federal government. It is an exciting and intoxicating time for those that venture to D.C. and assume positions in department and agency leadership. Having gone through that experience, I wanted to take this opportunity to reflect on my personal thoughts about how the transition occurs.

Over the past few weeks I have talked to a number of individuals who, either on their own or at the urgings of others, have contemplated making a move from their current job to one in D.C. I remember receiving a call from the White House Office of Presidential Personnel in 2001 inviting me to come to D.C. to interview. I was

honored and excited to be considered. My advice to any who answer that call is to be honest in your interview answers and job expectations. I approached the interview with a clear set of goals that I had in mind and a number of controversial issues for which I had strong opinions. Each of us has beliefs and values that drive us professionally and personally. Some of these values are sacrosanct and not open to challenge. Leading a federal agency is hard work and if it does not conform to personal principles, it will not only be hard but unsatisfying. The reality is that you are expected to serve the secretary of Interior and the president first, not necessarily the nation.

During the transition period, potential nominees undergo extensive background checks by the FBI, finger printing, and signing a document that essentially eliminates any personal privacy that might be assured by the Constitution. It was not an exercise to be taken lightly. I spent days traipsing through Senate office buildings to meet with senators and their staff in order to introduce myself and opine on questions posed by those individuals. Senators sent questions to be answered on the record for future recall during confirmation hearings and congressional testimony. Fortunately, my confirmation hearing went well, but it was months before the Senate approved my nomination, leaving me in limbo between my job in Kansas and my new job in D.C.

Finding an affordable home in the D.C.-area was no easy task. We settled for a very small rental property in a

highly developed neighborhood just 20 minutes from downtown D.C., but over a thousand miles from my rural Kansas home. The good thing about our house was the entire house could be vacuumed without unplugging the cord—let's just say, it was small. Two people in the kitchen were manageable, three, impossible.

Meanwhile at work, the transition process involved endless briefings from staff about dozens of programs, budgets, personnel, regulations, and legal issues. Piled on top of one another, the briefing books were no less than a foot high. Career staff were excellent at sharing their knowledge and provided any and all information necessary to be successful. The pace of decision-making and issue resolution was unlike anything I had experienced previously. The distinction between serving as a state agency director and a federal agency director was sharp and complicated. As a state director, I knew the ins and outs of legislators, geography, issues, and constituents. My regulatory decisions had real-world impacts on individuals that I knew quite well and communities where I worked and recreated. As the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, I could never make those types of personal connections on a national scale. I never forgot those hunters, anglers, landowners, farmers, and ranchers that were instrumental for conservation; yet, regulatory decisions at the federal level have wide-ranging impact, many driven by court rulings that seemed to have no regard for common

sense or practical impact.

My experience serving as the director of the Fish and Wildlife Service was absolutely incredible. Traveling and meeting dedicated staff at installations that stretched from the Florida Keys to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Kaktovik, Alaska, was a privilege like no other. However, those experiences were sandwiched between days of endless meetings (8-10 per day) with constituents and lobbyists, trips to Capitol Hill, receptions, speeches, legal discussions, and bureaucracy like I had never experienced, all of which provided a daily grind that, at times, was suffocating.

Working in the federal government in our nation's capital was thrilling and satisfying. It also provided a roller coaster of emotions. Some people are born to live in that fast-paced, big-city, and bright-lights environment. Although I thoroughly enjoyed my time there, I realized I am not cut out for that life. Others thrive there, and they have my utmost respect. I wish all those who serve our nation in Washington, D.C., professional success and personal fulfillment. Today I sit in my office in rural Pennsylvania looking at forests and fields; for me; I found a better place to be. ■