A TRANSFORMATION IN AMERICAN NATIONAL POLITICS

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2012

EDITED BY
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In memory of Byron “Bill” Daynes.
Thank you for your contributions to the study of the presidency, and for being a true gentleman.
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Acknowledgments

This book is the product of a conference, “The Presidential Election of 2012,” held at Hiram College on November 16 and 17, 2012, as the dust was just starting to clear from Election Day (Tuesday, November 6). One hundred and thirty-two years earlier, in November 1880, Hiram College had seen one of its very own elevated to the presidency. James A. Garfield—who in 1851 commenced two years as a student at what was then the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, returned to the school in 1856 as an instructor and soon thereafter became its principal, and left the school in 1861 to embark upon a career in the Union Army and in government—became the 20th president of the United States. Appropriately, the conference participants enjoyed a private tour of the James A. Garfield National Historic Site in nearby Mentor, Ohio—an experience that fueled dinner conversation as nearly 40 scholars from the United States and Canada enjoyed the music of a string quartet.

The high quality of the scholarly chapters contained in this volume speaks for itself. The editors are enduringly grateful for the creativity, diligence, and patience that each author brought to his or her contribution. Graduate assistant Charlie Carlee provided valuable editorial assistance in assembling the manuscript. The University of Akron Press has been a steady partner on this project, and we have benefited mightily from the wise counsel and good work of Amy Freels, editorial and design coordinator; Carol Slatter, coordinator of print manufacturing and
digital production; and director Thomas Bacher. However, neither the conference nor the resulting book would have been possible without the superb efforts of several other estimable people. Brittany Jackson was indefatigable in handling a wide range of planning and logistical challenges associated with the conference. Anita Stocz and Mary Landries ensured that there would be suitable lodging for the participants, that the venues for the panel discussions and meals would be appropriate, and that transportation to and from airports and the historic site would be seamless. Todd Arrington, Chief of Interpretation and Education at the James A. Garfield National Historic Site, and his National Park Service colleagues, epitomized professionalism and enthusiasm as they shared their knowledge of the Garfield family and the site with the conference attendees. Keynote speakers Shirley Ann Warshaw, Professor of Political Science at Gettysburg College, and Stephen Koff, Washington Bureau Chief of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, offered up insightful analysis of the Obama presidency and Ohio’s role in presidential elections, respectively. And the Garfield Institute for Public Leadership provided generous support for the conference, underwriting nearly one-fifth of the conclave’s budget.

The conference was a true team effort, so rewarding and productive that we surely will convene another such gathering in the future. Hiram College’s new James A. Garfield Center for the Study of the American Presidency, whose mission is to cultivate in students a deep understanding of the institution of the presidency and the individuals who have held the office, surely will be the locus of that effort. We hope President Garfield would be proud.
Introduction
Chapter 1

Introduction

Douglas M. Brattebo, Hiram College, and
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There is no ceremony more splendid than the inauguration of an American President. Yet Inauguration is a ceremony of state, of the visible majesty of power. And though the powers of the office are unique, even more spectacular and novel in the sight of history is the method of transfer of those powers—the free choice by a free people, one by one, in secrecy, of a single national leader.

Whether Americans have chosen this leader well or badly is of the most immense importance not only to them but to the destiny of the human race. Yet, well or badly done, no bells ring at any given hour across the nation when the voting is over, nor do any purple-robed priests wait that night to anoint the man who will soon be the most powerful individual in the free world. The power passes invisibly in the night as election day ends; the national vigil includes all citizens; and when consensus is reached, the successful candidate must accept the decision in the same rough, ragged, and turbulent fashion in which he has conducted the campaign that has brought him to power.

—Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1960

“I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,” wrote Walt Whitman in his poem of the same name as its opening phrase, published in Leaves of Grass in 1867, “…each singing what belongs to him or her, and to none else” (Whitman [1867] 1965, 308). The 2012 presidential elec-
Introduction confirmed what many observers of American national politics had noted for several years, since before Barack Hussein Obama was first elected to the presidency in 2008. Namely, the choir of citizens whose voices make up the anthem of American life has come to look and sound different from what most of our grandparents, and even many of our parents, could ever have anticipated. The United States is being transformed. Yet the driving factors and complexity of this sweeping change are only now beginning to draw adequate attention, and the implications—for who Americans are, how they think of themselves, how their country divides or coheres along geographical and demographic boundaries, the manner in which presidential candidates communicate with them, the ways Americans decide how to cast their votes, and the ramifications for the making of national policy—could not be more important. The purpose of this book is to provide a series of insightful essays that will help readers understand the 2012 presidential election in all its intricacy. The volume is both retrospect and prospect, a snapshot in time and a projection into the future, seeking to chronicle America as a work in progress.

The inquiry unfolds in three parts.

Part One is made up of five chapters about campaigning and geography. Shirley Anne Warshaw looks at the exodus of senior Obama administration staff members in late 2010 and throughout 2011, a contrast with previous administrations, which had maintained a significant reelection operation in the White House, centered in the Office of Political Affairs (OPA). Warshaw concludes that the Obama administration’s decision to close the OPA and transfer all reelection personnel to the Chicago campaign headquarters ensured that partisan decisions would not be intertwined with political decisions, but the departure of numerous senior staff members also meant a loss of policy continuity and institutional memory. Jewerl Maxwell and Andrew Travis explore the impact of vice presidential candidates Paul Ryan and Joe Biden during the 2012 general election campaign to assess whether each running mate enhanced or compromised his side’s strategy. After examining the acceptance speeches of the two vice presidential candidates, the aftereffects of the vice presidential debate, and the use of the two running mates to target constituency groups and battleground states, Maxwell and Travis con-
clude that Paul Ryan did nothing to enhance Mitt Romney’s chances of winning the White House. Chad Kinsella uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to analyze 2012 election results of all 50 states and their counties. Kinsella notes differences in voting patterns between 2008 and 2012 to pinpoint trends in geographic concentrations of partisans and finds that the electorate is increasingly polarized not only by ideology but also along geographical lines. Neal Allen observes that despite failing to win the White House, the Republican Party in 2012 solidified its hold on elected office in the South, thereby ensuring its majority in the House of Representatives. President Obama’s relatively weak showing in the South, a continuation of the Democratic Party’s decades-long decline with white Southern voters as its center of gravity moves north and west, underscores the party’s likely long-term weakness in the region. Capping off the first section, Susan A. MacManus and David J. Bonanza examine the micro-targeting of voters by race/ethnicity, age, gender, religion, and geography in Florida, one of the nation’s premier battleground states and one of the most complex in which to campaign due to its constantly changing demographics. MacManus and Bonanza find that the Obama campaign was more successful in its demographic-based micro-targeting, and that the 2012 presidential race in Florida was very likely a precursor of the 2016 presidential race there, with a deepening divide between the young (Democratic) and the old (Republican).

Part Two consists of four chapters on domestic and economic policy. Through a close analysis of the 2012 primaries, national party conventions, and presidential debates, Steve A. Stuglin demonstrates that the Obama campaign was able to control the narrative about the 2008–2009 government intervention in the auto industry that bailed out General Motors and Chrysler. Stuglin concludes that by appropriating the history of events, shaping those events into a success story, and using that account as a line of attack against Romney, the Obama campaign was able to win the crucial battleground state of Ohio, an important reminder of the power of controlling economic narratives in presidential elections. Michael K. Gusmano notes that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010, the signature domestic policy achievement of President Obama’s first term, was based on the 2006 Massachusetts health care reform law signed into law by then governor Mitt Romney.
Nonetheless, the 2012 presidential election did not lead to strong public consensus about the ACA or its future, but rather was merely a skirmish in the long and continuing battle over national health insurance in the United States. Richard S. Conley points out that regulatory issues became subsumed in the larger, partisan divide about the state of the economy and perceptions of the incumbent president’s economic management. Conley finds that partisan voters on both sides fell back on their general predispositions regarding government regulation, with independents remaining divided on the president’s regulatory strategy. Byron W. Daynes examines the curious situation by which climate change, despite its intensification as a major global threat, never became a big issue in the 2012 presidential contest. Daynes explains that neither Obama nor Romney was eager for climate change to become a central issue in the race because they were uncertain which way it would cut, but Obama nonetheless went on to highlight the gravity of climate change in his Second Inaugural Address and promise action to combat it.

Part Three encompasses four chapters on foreign policy. Stephen D. Wrage explores the concept of American exceptionalism by employing a “symbol, ritual, and myth” approach, derived in part from the work of anthropologists, and argues that an understanding of exceptionalism is expected by voters and should be part of any presidential campaign. Wrage discusses the ways that appeals of the concept of exceptionalism have figured in recent elections by candidates as different as Carter, Reagan, Obama, and Romney, but he finds that exceptionalism was given short shrift in 2012. Leonard Cutler observes that Romney found it extremely challenging to draw a sharp contrast with President Obama’s national security strategy of flexible pragmatism, the light-footprint approach by which the United States strikes from a distance with drone technology, obviating the need for years-long military occupations. However, with an eye on his own ultimate legacy, Obama’s challenge after reelection would be to bring legal checks and balances to bear upon the process of targeted killing, even as he continued to engage in it, so that it might become more consonant with America’s professed values and more likely to augment rather than undermine the country’s long-term national interests. Tom Lansford, Jack Covarrubias, and Robert J. Pauly, Jr., investigate the reasons that Homeland Security issues did not play a
major role in the 2012 general election campaign. The authors find that the Obama administration already had moved toward the moderate Republican position on Homeland Security during the first term, and Romney, having won an intense skirmish over Homeland Security policy with the Libertarian wing of the Republican Party during the primaries, was left with little room to take a position that would strike a dramatic contrast with the president. Chris J. Dolan notes that, although domestic issues were most important in the minds of many voters in 2012, the Obama administration’s approach to global issues figured prominently in news coverage during election season—in large part because the global system itself is experiencing considerable change. In the last presidential debate, Obama maintained that after more than a decade of war he was placing the United States in a more stable global position, but the president also had to parry claims by Romney that his diplomatic approach was too apologetic and entailed leading from behind.

Time will illuminate whether the changes portended by the 2012 presidential election come into being rapidly, slowly, or at all. Even the most profound tectonic shifts of the American polity can seem uncertain until accreting years confirm their magnitude. Yet, as we approach the 2016 election, for some the message appears to be “business as usual.” Retiring Daily Show host Jon Stewart explained, “I’d covered an election four times, and it didn’t appear that there was going to be anything wildly different about this one” (Gajewski 2015). The Clinton/Bush stronghold on American politics appears to be firmly entrenched as a new generation of Democrats and Republicans struggle to define themselves against the backdrop of Hillary Clinton, and to a lesser extent, the continued wash of the Bush years in the American presidency. Yet, the 2012 election was significant in serving as a reminder that structural issues continue to play an important and underappreciated role in election wins, despite the rhetoric of change and hope that political parties rest their campaigns on and a changing political landscape of issues and challenges for the American experience.

As we seek to understand the 2012 watershed event and project into the future, it is appropriate to bear in mind another astute observation of Theodore H. White concerning presidential elections: “Heroes and philosophers, brave men and vile, have since Rome and Athens tried to
make this particular manner of transfer work effectively; no people has succeeded at it better, or over a longer period of time, than the Americans” (White 1967, 13). There is solace in White’s reminder, but also a reminder that no practice or trend lasts forever. America remains all at once an aspiration, an experiment, a colossus, and the sum total of all the demons and angels its citizenry is able to muster. The possible outcomes of this enterprise span the gamut, summon our hopes and fears, and demand our curiosity. May it ever be so.

REFERENCES


I. Campaigning and Geography
Chapter 2

The Obama White House’s Transition from Governing to Campaigning

Shirley Anne Warshaw, Gettysburg College

OVERVIEW

The announcement in September 2010 by David Axelrod, the political strategist in the White House, that he would be leaving his position in a few months set the stage for an exodus of other senior staff members to return to Chicago to work on the reelection campaign (Axelrod 2010). Axelrod’s departure was followed by that of Press Secretary Robert Gibbs and, several months later, by Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina, Social Secretary Juliana Smoot, and Deputy Senior Advisor Stephanie Cutter. Dozens of others from the White House followed. The most senior members of the 2008 campaign, all of whom had taken senior White House positions, were now leaving the administration to focus on the 2012 campaign.

The administration intended the exodus of campaign staffers, along with other actions, to present an aura of transparency. Political decisions would not be made by White House staff, with the clear message transmitted to the electorate that partisan decisions would not be intertwined
with policy decisions. Transparency had been a hallmark of the Obama administration, as it sought to distance itself from the Bush administration’s pattern of secrecy in decision making. During the 2008 campaign, Obama often discussed the necessity for greater transparency in government, and, once in office, pledged on the White House website that “My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government” (White House).

Issues of transparency became equally prevalent during the 2012 reelection campaign, as the Obama administration sought to ensure that political decisions remained independent of policy decisions, a process that necessitated separating the political and policy decision makers. The separation process took two paths. Not only were senior staff members moved out of the White House into the campaign offices in Chicago, but the White House Office of Political Affairs was shuttered and its senior staff moved out of the White House (Zelany 2011). Patrick Gaspard, director of the Office of Political Affairs, moved to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) as executive director to guide the intersection of the national party and the reelection campaign. Officially, the White House did not have a liaison to either the campaign or to the DNC with Gaspard’s departure and the closure of the Office of Political Affairs. Unofficially, newly hired senior advisor David Plouffe, the 2008 campaign strategist, would serve as the liaison to the campaign and the DNC.

Although Obama’s commitment to transparency across government was often discussed in the 2008 campaign and reinforced after the election, the decision to remove so many staff from the White House payroll and formally move them to the campaign was driven primarily by Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) and by decisions rendered by the Office of Special Counsel (OSC). Similarly, the decision to close the White House Office of Political Affairs, which had operated continuously since 1981, was driven by Waxman and OSC. While transparency was the public cover for the Obama administration’s decision, fear of negative publicity from Waxman and OSC were paramount in the decision.

To replace these four and others from the White House who had moved to the Chicago headquarters from the White House, President Obama chose more junior members of the White House staff rather than
moving staff members from the departments into the White House or bringing in outside experts. By 2011, the White House was divided among current White House staff members who had held mid-level positions in the 2008 election and new staff members moved in from the departments. However, with the House of Representatives under Republican control, the potential for new legislation to support the administration’s agenda was negligible, thus lessening the necessity of a proactive White House staff. By promoting lower-level staffers into more senior positions, the president sought to maximize continuity of policy within his senior staff and, at the same time, ensure cohesiveness within the depleted ranks of the White House.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section examines how past administrations dealt with the reelection campaign within the White House. The primary question addressed is whether White House staff members became integrally involved in the campaign. Six recent administrations that dealt with a reelection campaign are examined: Nixon, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush. Each provides a similar archetype of how the White House staff prior to the Obama administration became embroiled in the reelection process. The second section examines the Obama administration, which operated rather differently from its predecessors. The final section compares the Obama and past administrations and offers thoughts on how White House staff will be used in future reelection campaigns.

EXAMINING PAST ADMINISTRATIONS: IS THERE A STANDARD OPERATING MODEL?

Examining how past administrations staffed their reelection offices provides an opportunity to gauge whether the Obama administration moved away from a standard operating mode or, indeed, whether any standard operating mode exists.

Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford

Richard Nixon had few qualms about engaging White House staff in his reelection efforts, nor apparently did the public. Unlike Obama who dismantled the internal political operations within the White House,
Contributors


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Steve A. Stuglin (PhD, Georgia State University) is an award-winning teacher and currently an instructor of communications at Georgia Highlands College. His research interests include political rhetoric, public policy, and corporate management, with a focus on the relationships between storied institutions. He has written extensively on the relationship between the domestic auto industry and the presidency and presented these findings in numerous conference presentations, including at meetings of the National Communication Association, the Southern States Communication Association, and the Rhetoric Society of America. His recent chapter on the 2008–2009 government intervention in the auto industry appeared in *The Obama Presidency: A Preliminary Assessment* (SUNY).

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Stephen D. Wrage is a professor of Political Science at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. He specializes in ethics and American foreign policy and is the author of a number of widely used case studies of actual ethical quandaries experienced by officers in the American military. In 1991 he held a Pew Faculty Fellowship in International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government. In 1995 he spent a Fulbright year teaching at the National University of Singapore and has written about that severely controlled society for the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the Asian Wall Street Journal, and the Atlantic Monthly. In 2004 he published Immaculate Warfare, a study of the ethical, practical, and command issues raised by precision-guided munitions. His latest book is Spirits Talking: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Abigail Adams Argue Right and Wrong in the Affairs of States. It is a set of dialogues laying out three theoretical perspectives on issues in ethics and international affairs.