Striking While the Iron Is Hot — State and Local Transitions and the First 100 Days

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There is no time like the beginning. There is excitement and high expectation; and, hopefully, there are few angry flared-up, controversies to contend with. This is the best of times for new leaders in government. It is the period in which the incumbent Bush administration won enactment of the No Child Left Behind education-reform law and tax cuts. It is not a time to waste for political leaders at all levels.

I had a dream recently about this, and have had some experiences of my own in the policy-political cauldron. My dream was that my friend and a brilliant political scientist (who retired quite awhile ago), Herb Kaufman (some of you may know him, or of him), was just elected governor of New York. He asked me, "Dick, where's the list?" meaning the list of people to appoint to major posts. I replied, "Herb, it's too early for that." Then, I woke with a start — actually woke up alarmed and thinking to myself, "Dick, that's the dumbest thing you ever said."

There are two things that count the most in the early days of a new administration — people and ideas. The sooner a leader has a good handle on them, the better, including decisions made in and before a victorious campaign began.

Transitions as Policy Festivals

Transitions, which Tony Shorris used as the catchword title for this conference, consist of the short period of time (usually about two months) from an election to the inauguration. It is in this period that respected high-level people in the permanent government provide the incoming team

with large notebooks (now PDF files) on the issue landscape — underlying conditions, major threats, opportunities, key facts, factors and factoids — to be used by the victorious candidate and his or her advisors when there is a change in administration, particularly if it is from one party to another, but true nevertheless for handing off the baton from one person (be it a Democrat or Republican) to another of the same party. In this transition period, taking into account different styles and structures, the winning side usually organizes a series of task forces and committees of experts, stakeholders, and insiders to work on policy development for the new administration.

There is often what can be called an "attention-tension" in this period. The candidate and his or her close advisors are exhausted, often ebullient, and emotionally spent. More than anything else, they want, and feel they are entitled to, some "R and R." A little time in the sun is in order, for Northeasterners especially.

While it isn't easy to do, candidates would be well advised, particularly if they think they are doing well during a major campaign, to designate a trusted senior advisor to begin planning for the transition process before Election Day. This is the person who would be named soon after the returns are in as the point person to plan the transition for the new administration. This is not simple to do, because a lot is riding on early decisions. The designated transition-driver has to have good chemistry with the candidate, should be somewhat above the fray, wise, experienced, even avuncular, known to be substantive, and yet politically savvy — indeed, a hard combination of qualities to find in a single person.

In this hectic milling-around transition moment, a major sub-theme is the other big item besides new policy ideas for those mythical 100 days that are soon to begin — people. Those who are definitely going to be on the new team, people being looked over for positions, and aspiring appointees — all are part of these advisory transitory festivals. Other key actors, often with sharp elbows wanting access to the process, are the leaders of stakeholder groups, who are anxious to get their oar in early on policy ideas they love and hate.

It is about this transition period that I will tell my one (I promise only one) war story, even though it is about a national, rather than a state or local transition. In 1968-69, I was chair of the welfare transition task force for the incoming (few will remember — progressively activist) Nixon first term. I was told to pick whomever I wanted, disregarding their political affiliations, as long as they were the best experts. So I did. I included several liberal, clearly Democratic, advisors on Nixon's 1968 welfare transition task force. The report we wrote, which turned out to be too mild for the new team (particularly Pat Moynihan and Bob Finch), was roundly castigated by Nixon's insiders. Arthur Burns told the newly elected president that all the work of the transition-planning groups was good, except for ours, and that our work should be thrown out. I wanted to go into the government (I was one of the transition-milling aspirants), and I figured my goose was cooked. But it wasn't. In fact, Nixon took a more liberal tack than our group, which in retrospect, I think was an overly ambitious approach.

Arthur Burns, assisted by Alan Greenspan, later recruited me (by then I was a budget official; I did get the job I wanted) to help him head off the radical Moynihan-Finch plan by revising — and actually enriching — our initial welfare task force proposals. Such is life in the policy-politics hot house.

People

American government is distinctive for its large number of appointed officials in high-level posts. Most of my friends in the field of public administration don't like this arrangement, wanting to cut back on appointed jobs and increase the role and power of officials of the permanent government. I don't happen to agree with this view, but no matter. Whether one likes it or not, this is the American way of governing nationally, and also for large states and local governments.

The task of selecting, recruiting, relating to, and sometimes firing top officials is arguably the most important task of elected chief executives. I am a book junkie; this year, I enthusiastically recommend *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. One of Lincoln's three rivals for the Republican presidential nomination in1860, who became a member of his cabinet, Attorney General Edward Bates of Missouri, at first resisted. Said Bates: "My pecuniary circumstances (barely competent) and my settled domestic habits make it very undesirable for me to be in high office with low pay — it subjects a man to great temptations to live above his income, and thus become dishonest; and if he have the courage to live economically, it subjects his family to ridicule."[1]

For these reasons and others, a major challenge of American domestic governance is the supply side of appointed officialdom — getting enough good candidates for top-level influential "mover/shaker" jobs in the public service, which for the most part for domestic affairs is state and local, and now includes myriad nonprofit organizations that deliver, it is fair to say, most domestic public services.

Thirteen percent of the civilian labor force in the U.S. is employed by state and local governments. This does not include employees of nonprofit organizations, who now actually deliver most social services — for example, for child care, public health, drug and alcohol treatment, nursing homes, job training, youth programs, and preschool and after-school programs.[2] We should have a better way to measure this army of workers who also fulfill public purposes. Census Bureau data on service industries provide clues, but not enough to go on. Rather than the privatization of pubic services, an idea and slogan that was especially in vogue in the 1980s, what has happened is ***"nonprofitization."*** [3]

For graduate students interested in the public service, the available set of career-paths suggests the need, pretty early on, for one's own transition planning (that is from school to work). It is time for strategy, for decision-making about goals — whether to aim for a political post (elected and/or appointed), a senior leadership position in the permanent government, or major role in a nonprofit organization whose purposes one shares. In reality, this is not a set-in-stone or once-in-a-lifetime decision. Still, decisions made and paths tested in the early phase of a career (one's twenties and thirties) can have lasting influence. Time does fly!

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1 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 286.

2 National Commission on The State and Local Public Service, *Hard Truths/Tough Choices: An Agenda for State and Local Reform* (Albany, NY: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1993).

3 Richard P. Nathan, "The 'Nonprofitization Movement' as a Form of Devolution," in *Capacity for Change? The Nonprofit World in the Age of Devolution*, Dwight F. Burlingame, William A. Diaz, Warren F. Ilchman and Associates, Editors (Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 1996).

I took it on myself as a Woodrow Wilson School faculty member for ten years (a job I loved) to encourage the students I had in the domestic track to learn about and think about such career choices, and particularly to consider how one can have a gratifying and influential career as an "inner and outer" in the public service — a career that includes time spent both as an appointive official in government and in the private sector. This has to be done skillfully, always with an eye on a professional or business base to fall back on when it is necessary to do so. Public service (both elected and appointive) is risk prone, which indeed is true of leadership roles in any large organization. Teaching about management, it often struck me that the most important thing one manages in one's life time is one's own career.

Eventually, I put some of these ideas to paper and on screen, in the form of a small book and an e-book (properly booklets) with encouragement and advice to people who are considering appointive positions in domestic public service.[4] Among the subjects the books dealt with are how to get chosen, how to deal with and think about ethics in government and avoid conflicts of interest, team building, implementation (turning good intentions into good results), dealing with the press, and the special characteristics of American federalism. I will deal with these topics below, but first a closer look at transition periods as such.

Transitions — A Closer Look

Transitions can have many purposes. Some of them can conflict. One purpose, that has already been mentioned, is being a policy festival, involving a multitude of people who want and need to vent in order to say they were consulted, and hopefully in the process to win the confidence and good will of key officials of the incoming administration. The potential conflict here for the new team is that this can include so many people in the act, with phones ringing all the time, and e-mails piling up in computers, that this detracts from the critical task of getting a firm and fuller handle on the new administration's most important goals and challenges.

George Pataki's 1994 transition consisted of layers of groups, ultimately involving hundreds of people in all major policy areas.[5] A variant, the Corzine approach, limited this process to selected issues. There were 19 Transition Task Forces. Most were small with 15 or fewer members but four had as many as 30-35 members (Education, Human Services, Economic Growth, Health and Senior Services).[6]

As a general rule, I think the more focused approach is better. My former Princeton colleague and friend, Richard Roper, a graduate of the Wilson School, who has participated in three New Jersey gubernatorial transitions, gives the Corzine transition the highest marks as smart, capably led, and balanced, with new appointees skillfully integrated into the process.

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4 Richard P. Nathan, *So You Want to Be in Government? A Handbook for Appointed Officials in America's Governments* — (Albany, NY: The Rockefeller Institute Press, 2000). See also Richard P. Nathan, *Handbook for Appointed Officials in America's Governments:* http://www.rockinst.org/publications/general_institute/gov_handbook/handbook.htm.

5 Jeff Jones, "The Governors Gets to Work," *Empire State Report*, January 1995.

6 Phone interview with Richard Roper, December 6, 2005.

There are a number of good arguments for having a focused transition. Chief among them involves the availability and wise use of sheer physical energy. After all, campaigning is a frenetic, hectic, many-headed monster. Continuing this mode in the immediate aftermath is not likely to be all that crucial, and is in addition hard to focus and manage. This is not to say that transitions should be low key, only that they should err more towards the serious and functional side.

The literature on state and local transitions is not much help for purposes of strategizing and organizing this election-to-inauguration interlude. Compared to the national level, the literature on gubernatorial transitions is old, thin, pretty prosaic and mechanical, and mostly about relatively small states (few of which are in the Northeast).

In particular and worthy of special mention, the transition period is when the budget, especially the out-year budget picture, is bound to be a central topic, indeed "*the*" central topic. In the 1994 Pataki transition, it was dealt with off to the side and much more seriously and intensely than other transition topics.[7] It is in this window that a first-cut insider's and in-depth fiscal picture is brought to bear, taking into account current fiscal conditions and demands, and going into details on threats and opportunities more systematically than is possible on the stump.

Budgets are the spinal column of modern government, with lots of potentially painful nerve endings. Having the likely chief fiscal officials and central staff appointees of a new administration closeted with the incumbent budget experts will not be (indeed, should not be) the most visible work of the transition period, but is likely to be the most important work that is done. From what I have learned, this tends to involve the permanent staff of the budget office, with noses sometimes out of joint on the part of the top incumbent appointed budget officials, who are often politically savvy and fiscal experts, entitled to think that their perspective and advice are especially worthy. But that can be complicated politically; as a general rule leaving them out of the transition process is the right thing to do. They are likely to have too much baggage and too many close personal contacts and vested political interests that, no matter how well intended, can get in the way of planning for new starts.

Revising the budget and/or writing the new administration's first budget often is — and indeed should be — a compelling preoccupation of transition and the first 100 days. The new budget should take advantage of "Big Mo." That is, the momentum of the new start. The public will expect changes. Revision of an existing budget already transmitted to the legislature, or the preparation of a new budget (depending on how the budget process works), is a special opportunity, an opportunity to mix and match. That is, to mix and match the new team's initiatives with some of the not-so-tasty medicine involved in lowering other priorities and taking on "old chestnuts," defined as long-standing, but failed, fiscal "reforms" that can only be carried out (if at all) in the early days of a new administration. Often these "reforms" involve cutting — yes, cutting funding in areas in which existing programs are regarded as stale, tired, or out of date.[8] Indeed, it is an axiom of government that the long-standing expenditures that have the weakest rationales also have some of the strongest constituencies. Otherwise they would have been axed long ago.

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7 Phone interview with Brian Stenson, December 29, 2005

8 Dall W. Forsythe, *Memos to the Governor: An Introduction to State Budgeting* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997).

It is not unusual in transition periods for the budget process to be walled off from the higher visibility airing of policy ideas in open, or pretty much open, meetings about what should be done in major functional areas, like education, the environment, and economic development. I should make this point even more strongly: It is *desirable* to have the transition-period budget review take place off to the side, with an effort to give it a low profile. This is likely to be the most critical and serious part of transitioning, not to detract from the importance of airing and showcasing major functional-area policy goals, problems or issues. In this budget-review process, permanent staff of the budget agency have an important role to play in helping the incoming administration understand the out-year fiscal picture, identify landmines, and start to work on the mechanics of budget making.

Overall, the transition can and should be a way for both showcasing and refining what the candidate said he wanted to do in the campaign. Campaign rhetoric is necessarily cryptic. Slogans abound. Whether it is school reform, fighting crime, attracting jobs, upgrading the labor force, or as Senator Dole liked to say, "whatever," transition task forces can have the important and useful role of digging more deeply into the policy terrain by bringing in advocates and experts to test new program ideas, themes and program approaches. In this respect, the transition process, as already stated, should be selective about what is covered, or at least what the new team emphasizes and signals it really cares about. It may be necessary to include other topics, to show that they, too, are cared about, but which are not the policy areas that are amenable to, or expected to be the subject of, major early action. In the best of all possible worlds, transition agenda setting should be done with a skillful, shrewd sense of which parts of the transition menu are for the main course, and which are side dishes. Doing this well is likely to have pay-offs later on for the work involved in preparing "State of the State" and "State of the City" addresses that bridge campaign promises and the ongoing budget process. Case studies of state and local transition processes tend to make this same point about being selective, picking three or four top issues to highlight in the transition period and the early days.[9]

Organizing a New Government

There are no silver bullets for governing. But there are pitfalls to watch out for. Missteps made in the crucial early days, like picking the wrong people or issues and not having a workable system for decision-making, can be uncorrectable in the long haul.

Don't be impulsive. Be careful. "Hail Mary" initiatives should be avoided. And most of all make wise personnel choices. Such admonitions are easy to write down, and at the same time extremely hard to execute. Governors, mayors, and county executives bring their own style and history to bear. This is not *tabula rasa*. Relatively few new chief executives have headed very large enterprises, or in some cases if they have, they may have not experienced the intensely political milieu of constant scrutiny of the highest public offices.

Styles and situations are different. Some leaders are too hands on; some too hands off. Some highlight the budget process; some rely heavily (sometimes too heavily) on a chief of staff and inside group of advisors. Some are too cavalier in allowing agency heads their own head. Some are the other way around, too controlling, or at least they attempt to be.

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9 Thad S. Beyle, Editor, *Gubernatorial Transitions: The 1983 and 1984 Elections* (Duke University Press, 1989).

My predilection is to avoid over-centralization in the governor's or mayor's office. The term for this group in Albany is "the second floor," referring to the offices of the governor and key staff members. Walling off the "second floor" staff as if fortified and surrounded by hostile tribes is a condition to be avoided early on in government, and even more so in later periods. (This problem can be very serious at the national level as manifest in a "White House-surrounded" or "group think" condition and mindset to which the Executive Establishment is especially prone in times of high tension.) The people in the leader's close circle at every level can get too heady, isolated, and full of themselves, in a word, too ingrown. Again, this is easy advice to offer and very hard advice to take.

There is another reason to avoid isolation at the top. The people recruited for the highest visibility, highest prestige, typically cabinet-level positions are likely to be the best people a new leader recruits. It is a shame to alienate them, although the truth is that there are bound to be tensions where the leaders will want to pull one way and their own troops will want to pull them in a decidedly different direction. The wise leader is well served by working closely and well with cabinet agency heads — or getting rid of them.

There is in this crucial business of personal management the high-octane question of who picks the people for sub-cabinet and supportive appointed posts in government agencies, who do the heavy lifting at the state and local levels. If the leader makes these next-level appointments by selecting people with special ties to the leader, there is the potential of not being able to work well with their own cabinet-level agency heads. The other way around, delegating too many such appointments, can isolate the leader. People need to know where their bread is buttered. This requires a delicate balancing act, involving history, understandings, consultation, and selectivity in the way the leader (governor, mayor, county exec) deals with the most important sub-cabinet level appointees.

Implementation, Implementation, Implementation

It isn't enough to have good ideas and get them adopted. They have to hit the ground. Implementation is the short suit of American government. Players in our pluralistic and characteristically unending policy bargaining processes are so busy making policies that they have little time — or heart and interest — in carrying them out. This doesn't have to be. Making sure cabinet and sub-cabinet officials have good people at the next levels who work with, and in, the bureaucracy to convert good intentions into good policies and programs is a management principle well worth nailing to the wall in every major state and local government, and it is especially important to keep in mind in the crucial early days.

Once underway, a good and actually relatively simple technique for making sure management matters is to make sure that top officials "get out and about." Governments, indeed all big organizations, live by signals. For the leader and particularly for agency heads to show the flag in the field has multiple payoffs. One is that it signals to agency workers that their work is appreciated, that someone is watching and caring about what they are doing, who has clearly enunciated policy purposes and values that agency personnel would do well to care about. Another reason for top officials getting "out and about" is that it teaches. Such immersion provides reality checks for the policy process. Too often, policymakers live in isolated, removed, and abstract worlds of self-assured high-level planning without the needed leavening that comes from having sensitivity about what's really out there.

Also on the subject of implementation and getting on the right road in the early days, I would like to enter a big fat caveat. Beware of management experts bearing gifts. In particular, beware of experts who sit in their cubicles and design performance management systems from Mount Olympus. The worst such practices come from Washington, but they can come from the governor's or mayor's office too. The goals of performance management have to be real, feasible, well understood and managed, and monitored at the *operating levels* of public programs. I am an admirer of what Mayor Bloomberg is doing in New York City to establish and operate performance management systems at the agency level. "CompStat," the performance management system for the New York City Police, which originated in the Giuliani years, is often cited as a good example, and it is. It focuses on crime reduction and it operates at the precinct level. Other such agency-level performance management systems exist in New York City. New York State is working wisely as well in this critical area.[10] Nationally, other cities and states reflect the same deeply practical federalism perspective about how goals are set and performance is measured and managed. The worst practices involve budget-driven performance management systems, which cause (yes, cause) all sorts of gaming, manipulation, and counterproductive responses. I worry about the 2002 law, No Child Left Behind, in these terms and even more about the Bush administration's so-called PART performance management system, which in my view is deeply flawed.[11]

The High Road

Far be it for me to suggest taking the low road. But politics, as Mr. Dooley said, "ain't beanbag."[12] Deals will be made. Just be sure you (wherever you are in the governmental process) don't benefit personally.

Still, there are high roads. I have met and worked with more than a few leaders in high positions in government whose main purpose in political life is to advance principles, goals, and groups that mean a great deal to them. Call it moralistic, patriotic, whatever. But don't sell it short.

I have another purpose for this section. It may be just my musing, but I have the sense that our politics are getting increasingly intense, narrow and parochially self-serving. The idea of having high purposes is coming to have a bad name, or at least to be regarded with great skepticism. Everything is bargaining. Not that this is bad or wrong to do so, but it does tend to leave out general and weaker interests in the great game of self-government.

Economist Mancur Olsen observes that as democratic political systems get older (and ours is a great and old one), the leaders of the strongest interests become more and more adept at turf preservation. Herein lies a special challenge for state and city chief executives. Goring oxen isn't fun. Yet, there are hard choices that must be made, especially as economic and social conditions change.

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10 *Performance Management in State and Local Government*, The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, February 8 2005. http://rockinst.org/weinberg/pdf/PerformanceManagementReport.pdf.

11 Richard P. Nathan, *The Proper Roles of Performance Management Systems in American Federalism,* The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, Occasional Paper, November 3, 2005.

12 Finley Peter Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War* (University of Illinois Press, 2001).

Awhile back, I wrote an article on mediating institutions to take some hard collective zero-sum choices out of the hottest places in the political process — partially to insulate them from this heat. Federal base-closing processes are often cited as an example of this. Actually, there are many ways in which creative balances between accountability and expertise are struck. Redistricting in New Jersey is done on an intriguing basis that has the political parties select equal numbers of decision makers, with the chair for the decision process appointed by the State's chief justice. New York State is currently involved in a somewhat similar process for health-facilities planning to "right size" (that is, right *bed*-size) hospitals and nursing homes. Such techniques are often used in regulatory processes and for governmental reorganization to thin out and/or reorganize agency structures. I think of this as the "designated driver" approach. It still entails political choices (i.e., when to bring such techniques into play and when) and some degree of political oversight. But it gives the keys to others. "Here, you drive my car for awhile." We need to be selective and creative in American government in ways that, when all is said and done, involve taking the high road on certain very tough and intense political issues.

Good Government — What's That?

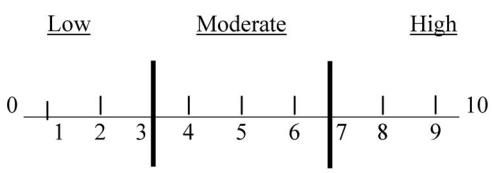
I have to confess to always having been a little skeptical of "goo's-goo's," that is, people with high-minded, grand ideas for good government reforms. I am reminded of the O'Henry short story. The narrator wanted to know, what's a man about town? So, he went about asking all the people he knew. On one such venture, he was struck by a bus and killed. His obituary stated his name and birth date, and then — "He was a man about town." I think I may be like that.

Not a long ago I tried with field research experts in 17 states to rate a representative panel of states according to the strength of what we defined as their "good government culture." [13]

"Good Government" Culture

States rank high for a "good-government" culture if they have leaders, leadership practices, traditions and management capacity that: (1) are seen as transcending partisanship and calculations of personal political advantage in important situations such that substantive considerations are highlighted in the governmental process in a way that is widely recognized and accepted by leading members of the legislature and leaders in the executive branch, and (2) that this "good-government" culture is reflected both in the way state government operates and is viewed by the public and in the way it is viewed and treated by the media.

Rating Scale



13 Richard P. Nathan and Heather E. Trela, "Research Note, Governmental Cultures of the American States," unpublished paper, Rockefeller Institute of Government, July 2005.

The results, qualified and tentative (a subject, however, that warrants more and close study) were as follows.

Sample States by "Good Government" Culture Rating

Low (0-3)	*Moderate (3-7)*	*High (7-10)*
Alabama — 1	**Arizona — 4**	**Michigan — 7.5**
Illinois — 3	**New Jersey — 4**	**South Dakota — 7.5**
Utah — 3	**New York — 4**	**Maine — 8**
	Kansas — 5	**Virginia — 8**
	Tennessee — 5	**Washington — 8.5**
	North Dakota — 5	
	South Carolina — 6	
	West Virginia — 6	
	Wisconsin — 6	

The best-known comparative study of American state government is by Daniel J. Elazar, conducted in the 1960s.[14] Elazar's study focused on political culture for three groups of states designated as moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic. We focused instead on process — on the tone and character of governance, political structures and management, and implementation capacity. Relying on indigenous field researchers in the information age allowed us to establish an electronic network to engage the group on an interactive basis. Elazar had to rely on shoe leather.

We did this scan because we were interested in discovering patterns to explain the existence (or lack of existence) of a state good government culture. Initially, we thought smaller states, progressive and populist north central and western states, politically liberal states, newer states, relatively wealthier states, states with homogeneous populations, and states with relatively small racial differences and high levels of education would stand out. Yet a review of the reports from the field does not point to one or even two or three such explanations. All of the variables cited were mentioned in some of the reports and in discussions with the field analysts.

Our results generate hypotheses. Many factors are suggested as independent variables, i.e., as structural and policy "handles" if you will for elevating the tone and character of the governmental process. They include the organization and procedures of the legislature, legislative staffing, legislative districting and electoral procedures, the role of term limits, long ballots, campaign finance rules, ethics laws, the role and organization of the executive branch, the selection of qualification of agency heads, budget procedures, civil service systems, agency structures (for example, commission and special district forms versus other forms), and the selection of judges and the operation of the judicial branch.

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14 Daniel J. Elazar *American Federalism: A View from the States* (New York, Harper and Row, 1984). See also: *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* Volume 21, Number 2, Spring 1991, which contains a number of articles on, and related to, Elazar's research.

These are hard, complicated, often seemingly mundane subjects to work on; some of them are not amenable to strong gubernatorial and mayoral action. Among other findings, we came away from our scan of the states with the view that term limits are not a good idea for either the chief executive or the legislature, and that campaign-finance and lobbying practices are a principal snare to good government. Changes in such areas of governmental structure and process can be viewed as *instrumental*. There are difficult choices in this territory as to how visibly and emphatically such subjects should be treated and how much political capital and clout should be devoted to them. Reformers should always proceed with caution — indeed trepidation. Again, as Mr. Dooley said, "A man that'd expect to train lobsters to fly in a year is called a lunatic; but a man that thinks men can be turned into angels by an election is called a reformer and remains at large." Still, the idea of our preliminary study that we could map some of the territory for political reform agendas is an appealing one. I would go a step further. In this moment of high-visibility for blatant campaign-finance and lobbying excesses, well-crafted reforms advanced from inside government are not just much needed. They are also so politically salient that pursuing them is smart politics as well.

Changing the tried and try folkways of the political process is hard work for obvious reasons. Politics is a business, and I would add that it often is, and surely should be, an honorable one. The people in the business are used to doing things in their customary ways. In New York State, lots of our major politicians favor political reforms of one sort of another. Most of the time, the very top leaders ("The Big Three" in New York) have a pending proposal and a handy speech about what they are advocating. But since there are differences between what the Governor wants, what the Speaker of the Assembly wants, and what the Majority Leader of the State Senate wants, it just so happens that they never quite get together on legislation. They tried, of course! Bottom line — for political leaders who want to change the rules of the game, the best time to try to do so is *early* (again, striking while the iron is hot), because such measure requires heavy use of the "Bully Pulpit" when it is likely to be strongest and a high level of "stick-to-it-ness."[15]

The Almighty Press

In the booklets I wrote for Woodrow Wilson students about appointive posts in government, I stressed that once in office, in the belly of the beast that is, you neglect the press at your peril. This advice is not limited to transitions and the first 100 days, but it is especially critical in these periods. The candidate of course will have ground rules for dealing with the press. New appointees need to think hard about the bright klieg lights now upon you. One of your biggest problems as an appointed official in government will be that you will get publicity when you don't want it and can't get it when you do. Reporters seek controversy — better yet, a good fight. You get noticed if you mess up or if you take somebody on or vice versa. Most of the time, it is not worth the trouble to try to find journalists who write good news about success stories and the serious work of governing. Look at it from their side. Media competition for audiences is intense. It is hard for journalists to get noticed in a widening world of ever-growing information sources — television, newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and web sites. Given this reality, here are ideas for dealing with the press:

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15 For information on state government in New York, see Robert B. Ward, *New York State Government: What It Does, How It Works* (Albany, NY: Rockefeller Institute Press, 2002). A new edition is in progress.

- *Maintaining your image and making it as good as you can is one of the hardest and subtlest challenges you will face as an appointed official in government*. Some reporters are not going to like what you are doing, seeing it as too conservative, too liberal, or just not what they think you should be doing. While they may profess and believe that they adhere to high standards of journalistic objectivity, after awhile bad relationships develop if the chemistry is just wrong. The higher up you go in government and the more visible you become, the more likely it is that such animosities will emerge. Where there are weaknesses in your record and vulnerabilities in your performance (and there are bound to be some), a reporter who has it in for you will find them. Therefore, you need to be scrupulous in protecting your integrity. The bolder you are in trying to change policies or win the adoption of new policies, the more likely your success as a government official will hinge on this advice.
- *Calls from reporters should get your quick personal attention*. The higher you go in government, the more likely it is that you will have a press assistant. Still, there is no substitute for taking press calls yourself when a subject you are working on is timely and hot. News is perishable and reporters care about hearing you talk in your own voice and asking you questions.
- *There is a corollary: You don't need to be accessible all the time*. If you don't want to answer certain questions, don't take calls from reporters who are likely to ask them. "No comment" is a bad answer.
- *Be sparing about going "off the record."* In effect, you are saying I will give you a tip, or a story, or help you on a story, but you can't use my name. You aren't identified because someone would not like what you are saying. The main reason you do this (and you should do it selectively) is that it creates chits. The next time you are in a hot spot, the reporter owes you one.
- *Some adversaries you acquire along the way in government should be treated deferentially in the press, some not so deferentially*. These are basically two different groups. Some adversaries will never be anything else. Having them on the other side can even be helpful to you. Other adversaries will be adversaries one day and friends the next. You should reserve the attack mode for the first group
- *Care about your style*. If you are shrill and always hurling lightning bolts, you may get ink, but you won't get respect. The saying, "I don't care what they say about me as long as they spell my name right," is not good guidance.

Reporters are powerful. They don't always make the world a better place, but on the whole our political system is well served by their constant scrutiny. It helps to create what political scientist Wallace Sayre called the "self-cleaning" character of American politics.[16]

This said, I think it needs to be noted on the other side of the coin that reporters often have an incredibly self-centered view of how easy it would be for them to do anything that becomes compli-

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16 Material in this section is from Richard P. Nathan, *Handbook for Appointed Officials in America's Governments,* http://www.rockinst.org/publications/general_institute/gov_handbook/handbook.htm

cated or malfunctions in the governmental process. It goes back to Wallace Sayre's comment above. Sayre's point about self-cleaning applies equally well to public administration.

The Genius of American Federalism

Being that this is my moment for, as Tony Shorris urged, laying out some points to "seed" the discussion at this conference, I have to put my special brand on this short paper.

Federalism is a dull subject to almost everyone. I remember my teenage children (and the neighbor's kids) years ago teasing me about how if you want to be really bored ask "senior" (short for Brookings Senior Fellow) about federalism. Nonetheless, I believe in our system of layered governments with lots of players having access to political processes. This is all the more crucial in the globalized information age in which citizens are otherwise and often decidedly disconnected. Robert Putnam writes about the importance of creating community social capital in a world in which increasingly people are bowling alone.[17] I didn't find his book with that title altogether convincing and useful for my purposes, but the point is well taken. Tip O'Neill was right. Even though federalism is decidedly untidy, we need it! Most of all, we need it at the local and state levels, whose roles in the governmental process we have under the microscope at this conference. Despite its great potential for clash and clang, American federalism ultimately locates pluralism, individual rights of citizenship, and political access at the local level. It is a great gift we have been given. State governments are vital in the way we use this gift because states make and oversee the home rules for political accountability at ground level.

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17 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000).