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Before the Oath: How George W. Bush and Barack Obama Managed a Transfer of Power

Martha Joynt Kumar

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It’s one of the hallmarks of American democracy: on inauguration day, the departing president heeds the will of the people and hands the keys to power to a successor. The transition from one administration to the next sounds simple, even ceremonial. But in 2009, as President George W. Bush briefed President-elect Barack Obama about the ongoing wars and plummeting economy he’d soon inherit, the Bush team revealed that they were grappling with a late-breaking threat to the presidency: U.S. intelligence sources believed that a terror group with links to Al Qaeda planned to attack the National Mall during the inaugural festivities. Although this violence never materialized, its possibility made it clear that well-laid contingency plans were essential.

Political scientist Martha Joynt Kumar uncovered this secret peril while interviewing senior Bush and Obama advisers for her latest book. In *Before the Oath*, Kumar documents how two presidential teams?one outgoing, the other incoming?must forge trusting alliances in order to help the new president succeed in his or her first term.

Kumar enjoyed unprecedented access to several incumbent and candidate transition team members, and she combines in-depth scholarship with one-on-one interviews to put readers squarely behind the scenes. Using the Bush-Obama handoff as a lens through which to examine the presidential transition process, Kumar interweaves examples from previous administrations as far back as Truman-Eisenhower. Her subjects describe in vivid detail the challenges of sowing campaign ideals across a sprawling executive branch as Congress, the media, and external events press in. Kumar’s lively account of lessons learned and pitfalls encountered during past presidential transitions provides an essential road map for presidential aspirants and their advisers, as well as campaign workers, federal employees, and political appointees.

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