Book Reviews

Presidential Transitions. Laurin L. Henry. Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1960. 738 pp. $7.50.

To understand the burden of this book the prospective reader has only to use (very slightly) his imagination concerning a time and events which he will realize are already familiar to him in a general way. During the months of 1960 prior to November, anyone who wanted to frighten a company of friends out of their wits might well have done it very simply. He could merely have recited to them, as true, a set of political circumstances and a sequence of happenings—the circumstances factual, the happenings entirely possible. The exposition might have run something like this:

The incumbent President of the United States could not succeed himself because, for the first time, the 22nd amendment prevented it. He was, anyway, an aging man, certain to be displaced by one belonging to a new generation. Even if the new President belonged to the same party, there would be changes in policy and an overhaul of top-level personnel. If he belonged to the other party, these changes would be drastic; and the personnel would be almost entirely replaced.

In anticipation of such a governmental revolution, the more than 1200 policymakers and administrators really responsible for making decisions and running the government were leaving as rapidly as they could find positions elsewhere. By election time the government would be manned by those who had not been able to find other jobs; the least effective, political jobholders would be left in charge. It would be months before the incoming appointees would take their places, and then further time would be required for these inexperienced replacements to learn their duties.

The general result would be that both before and after election, and even after inauguration of the new administration, the federal establishment would be seriously enfeebled and would be utterly incapable of meeting any demands of an unusual sort made upon it. And a crisis of major proportions would either paralyze it or cause convulsive decisions to be made which might be disastrous.

Only one sector of the government would have conserved its capability: the military. The generals and admirals would be especially vigilant because of the known incapacity of the civil branches.

The legislative branch would have been undergoing a shake-up even more severe than that of the executive. All of the representatives and one-third of the senators would have been affected by the election. Many would be new even if there was no party overturn. They would meet in January and would need some time to organize and to establish working relations with the new executive. If the Congress should have a majority belonging to another party than the President, these problems would be magnified. Whatever the results of the election, it would be weeks, or even months, before effective legislative work could be done.

To go on, it would take no imagination at all to consider that through several years there had been growing a quarrel with another great power whose strength was increasing and whose belligerence grew with its strength. This quarrel had reached crisis proportions several times. There was, in consequence, an armament race, and the armaments were of novel and horrendous sorts. It was realized that both sides of the conflict would lose by an outbreak of actual hostilities; hence, hostilities must be avoided by diplomacy, by compromise, by reaching an eventual accommodation. The existence of the nation into the future was involved in this process. No more delicate, difficult, or momentous task had ever fallen to a set of officials in Washington.

But at the moment of most complete disorganization, with one administration practically dismantled, the President without prestige, and the succeeding administration not yet installed, the rival great power, sensing its opportunity, would deliberately precipitate a new crisis, perhaps involving one of the trouble spots already the subject of controversy. The rival would have no difficulty working this crisis up to dangerous proportions, so that, just before or just after the election, the rival would come into a position to demand that we surrender to its views and claims on penalty of resort to force.

The choice of policies open to the United States would be these: The American position could be abandoned; negotiation, with a view to compromise, could be sought; or the enemy could be defied. But, in fact, the executive would be quite incapable of negotiating. The other nation would not believe it capable of reaching a decision that would be respected by the successor administration which might even be installed by another party. But the other alternatives would be almost as difficult. If there should be a surrender, the nation would be irreparably injured. If the blackmail should be defied, the nation would be incapable of putting in train the immense crash program required to meet the threat of war.

It could be guessed that the paralysis would most likely end in surrender, simply from incapacity to reach any other solution. But the generals and admirals, seeing this decision in the making, might ask themselves whether their duty to the nation was not greater than their duty to the institutions of democracy and to the Constitution in which these institutions were embodied. They might very well feel compelled to fill the power vacuum by taking measures of their own. After all, the means within their control would be sufficient to enforce any decision they might jointly reach. So the Republic, for the first time in its history, might find itself a military dictatorship.

There were plenty of those in a position to assess the situation to whom this imagined account would seem not too unlikely. If it did not actually happen, the nation would be fortunate to have come through a period of grave peril without disaster. But they would feel that the nation ought to have learned something from its narrow escape. In looking around for revisions of our national institutions which would make it unnecessary ever again to un-

dergo a similar ordeal, they would inquire whether the peril of 1960 was unique and, therefore, perhaps unlikely to happen again.

The answer to this would require two sorts of exploration. The first might be to ask whether transition periods in the past have produced perils of a similar sort; the second would be to ask whether events have occurred—inventions made, processes perfected, alignments arranged—which make present and future interludes peculiarly dangerous.

Looking to modern developments, the inquirers would have to seek no further than their newspapers; they would, in fact, have been looking with increasing anxiety at reports of such developments published in them during the last decade.

It is the purpose of Laurin Henry's book to trace the events of the past few transition periods. Of these he recounts in detail those which have occurred since Wilson took over from Taft in 1913. Each transition has seen the government enfeebled; but the more recent have been more serious because the dangers of enfeeblement have grown. Not only domestic problems require clear policy determinations; foreign affairs demand unremitting attention. The instance of Cuba's escape from the American family and its entrance into agreements with hostile powers is an illustration of what can happen just from inattention at the end of an 8-year administration. Such lapses possess more dangers at present than they have in the past; but we tend to forget that the problem is no different in kind—only in intensity—from those of other transition periods. For this forgetfulness Henry's book is a good corrective.

When Wilson took over from Taft, Henry reminds us, recognition of the new Chinese Republic was pending; settlement of the long dispute with Colombia over the acquisition of the Canal Zone waited; a treaty of friendship with Russia was expiring; and there was an acute dispute with Great Britain over canal tolls when the new waterway should open. This was not all. Domestically, the new parcel-post system had to be organized; railroad mergers were being fought; and a reorganization of the army was in process. These and other matters simply had to be suspended indefinitely as the old term ran out and the new one waited to begin.

When Wilson gave way to Harding in 1921, the situation was even worse. Postwar adjustments had yet to be made. Before the war ended, the Republicans had come into control in Congress, and peace had not even been declared. The dismantling of the war organization had been precipitate, and the chaos in every part of the government was paralyzing. The new President was peculiarly a creature of the politicians in his party, and this ensured the complete replacement of experienced civil servants with amateurs whose qualifications were purely political. It was a long time before a measure of competence was regained—except, perhaps, in the Department of State, where the effective Charles Evans Hughes was in charge.

When next the Republicans gave way to the Democrats, the frightening events of 1933 were in progress. The depression of the past few years had turned ugly indeed and by then had reached the upper levels of finance and business. When the new President took office, the banks were closed, unemployment had reached an incredible proportion of the working force, conservative farmers in the West were staging revolutionary riots, foreign nations were refusing to meet their debt payments, a world economic conference was about to meet, and disarmament negotiations at Geneva waited for new impetus. The outgoing President contended then, and has contended since, that it was the uncertainties of transition which made it impossible to control the degeneration that affected all these public events. He too had a hostile Congress to contend with; and no policy determinations could be made.

To go on, the takeover of the Eisenhower administration after 20 Democratic years had to be carried out in equally difficult circumstances. There was, among other things, an unfinished war in Korea. But there were many other policies on which it was assumed that reversal or severe modification could be expected. And there were now a much larger number of policy positions where replacements could be expected. The responsibilities of government both at home and abroad had immensely increased, and it was correspondingly more serious that the old controls should slip before the new ones could become effective. But there was no remission of the rule of displacement.

It was during this last transition that competent observers were confirmed in an already strong opinion that some way would have to be found to modify the disruptions of change. The nation could no longer tolerate a period of a year or more during which policy decisions were in abeyance and, no matter how serious the crisis, there was no competent authority to meet it. Why this feeling spread is adequately explained in this book. The nation had come into increased responsibilities; and it existed in a world whose dangers were infinitely greater than they had ever been before.

At the end of Henry's book there is a section concerning the future. In this he summarizes the suggestions offered by students for modifying the dangers of the interregnum. There are, of course, some difficulties that cannot be overcome without infringing democratic principles. The election that has taken place had as its purpose the choosing of a President and a Congress. The candidates sought office on party platforms offering the electorate certain policy alternatives. If a new President has been chosen, and especially if he belongs to what has heretofore been the opposition, it is inevitable that there will be new policies and new people to implement them. All or most of the top administrative positions will be vacated and refilled. This is right and necessary. But there are ways of making the transition at once speedier and more effective. And up to now there has been very little recognition of the need to do so. The Truman-Eisenhower change-over was one of the most disruptive in our history; and during the Eisenhower years no official attention has been given to the problem certain to arise in the present circumstances, which are even more perilous.

We have been living, the last months, in a situation quite as full of dangers as were imagined at the beginning of this review. It is to be hoped that when we have passed through them and are again embarked on a new administration of our affairs, the new President—or the Congress—will arrange for adequate consideration of the problem with a view to minimizing the danger to the nation in future interregnums. When this effort is undertaken Henry will be thanked for his preliminary survey of past problems and his hints for future reforms.

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