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Transition of Power: The Presidency

By Unknown

CHRIS WALLACE:

a tradition in this country--
in fact, one of the prides
of this country
is the peaceful transition
of power.

Do you make the same commitment
that you will absolutely accept
the result of this election?
I will tell you at the time.
I'll keep you in suspense.

NARRATOR:

in modern presidential history,
a candidate
in a national debate
challenges the peaceful
transfer of power,
a pillar of democracy
that's sustained
for more than 200 years.
So help me God.

-NARRATOR:

-(gunshot)

MAN (over radio):

The president is dead.
...scandal...

What's the matter
with these clowns?

...peace, and war,
what does it take to hand off
the most powerful office
in the world?

This is the secret history
of the transition of power.

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT:

I do solemnly swear...

JOHN F. KENNEDY:

faithfully execute the office
of President
of the United States...

RONALD REAGAN:

protect, and defend...

BILL CLINTON:

So help me God.

(cheers and applause)

The United States created

the very notion

of the peaceful

transition of power.

This is a concept

that was nonexistent

on the planet Earth

before Washington

transferred power to John Adams

in the latter part

of the 18th century.

Before that, the world was

made up, principally,

of monarchies,

where kings and queens

only relinquished power

through death

or more sinister forces.

The idea that someone would

voluntarily relinquish power

and hand it off

to another person was

actually a really radical

experiment in governance.

But here we are

doing it systemically.

There are no daggers

to the hearts,

no tanks in the streets.

It's an incredible thing

even today we take for granted.

(trumpet fanfare)

ANNOUNCER:

of the United States.

NARRATOR:

presidency begins with an oath
to preserve, protect,
and defend the Constitution.
-I, Franklin Delano Roosevelt...
-...do solemnly swear...

NARRATOR:

35 words that make you
the most powerful executive
in the world.
...that I will faithfully
execute...
...the office of
President of the United States.
No other job has the danger,
the influence,
the power, the potential
for a terrible tragedy
that the presidency has,
which makes the transition
of power
such a critical process.

NARRATOR:

the transition gets underway
long before America chooses
its next leader.
(bell tolling)
(triumphant music playing,
cheers and applause)
I accept your nomination.
...for the presidency
of the United States.

NARRATOR:

The political conventions
signal the opening
of the general election season.
The presidential transition
begins
just as the real battle
for the White House kicks off.
You're not up to doing the job.
She should not

be allowed to run.

NARRATOR:

rhetoric intensifies...
He'd rather have a puppet as
president of the United States.
No puppet.
No puppet.

NARRATOR:

must each prepare
for what will happen
if they win.

KEITH HUGHES:

One might think that
the presidential transition
teams
and the actual transfer of power
is kind of
being put together
after the election.
It actually occurs as soon as
the nomination conventions
are over.

H.W. BRANDS:

When Lincoln became president,
it was Lincoln
and a couple of secretaries,
and that was it.
Nowadays, transitions involve
thousands of people.
And so it's almost like
the creation
of a government anew.
And it's a huge job.

ALLAN LICHTMAN:

of the United States is
a \$4 trillion business.
No private business even
remotely approaches it.
So imagine having

to take over
a \$4 trillion business
in just a few months.

NARRATOR:

assembles a transition team
to lay out the plans for their
future administration.
Congress appropriates
a total of \$13.3 million
to support this process.

LICHTMAN:

in the middle of the campaign,
are involved in planning
this transition.
In effect, each campaign
is assembling
a shadow government.

MAX STIER:

till after the election,
there's no way in the world
that you're going to be ready
to actually run the government
on day one.
What a great job.
(siren blares, stops)

NARRATOR:

the candidates are chosen,
there is a crucial moment
in the transition--
the first top secret
national security briefing.
MICHAEL CHERTOFF: The nominees
get a certain level
of security briefing.
It's not the crown jewels,
but it's at least
some kind of general overview
of what's going on
in the world.

NARRATOR:

ensure continuity
in matters of national security
but are not mandated by law.
They're a tradition
linked to a pivotal
wartime transition
and an incoming president
caught completely unprepared.

LICHTMAN:

of course, became president
instantly upon the death
of Franklin Roosevelt,
a couple of months into
Franklin Roosevelt's
fourth term.
He hadn't been vice president
during any
of FDR's other three terms,
so he was a brand-new
vice president
who had gotten
no intelligence briefings
in the middle of World War II.

GAGE:

that he did not know
in that moment
really are quite astonishing.
He hadn't been privy to most
of the diplomatic negotiations
that were going on,
or even the kind
of war planning
that had been happening
inside the White House.
He had no idea
that the United States
had been developing
an atomic bomb.

LICHTMAN:

Which left Truman

with maybe one of the most
monumental decisions
a president ever had to make--
was he going to use the bomb
to try to force
the Japanese to surrender?

NARRATOR:

to drop the atomic bomb
comes just four months
into his presidency.
In two strategic attacks,
the most destructive weapon
ever unleashed annihilates
two cities
and kills more than
200,000 people.

DOYLE:

Because Franklin Roosevelt
had neglected to brief him
on the most important issue
facing the presidency
at that time,
Truman had to learn
on the job,
and Truman knew
how dangerous that was,
so going forward he said,
"I'm gonna make darn sure
that all my successors have
"knowledge of what's going on
before they're elected
president."

NARRATOR:

Truman takes action
to ensure that
future presidents
are more prepared
to take office.

DOYLE:

Truman had the idea:

let's have
the Democratic candidate,
Adlai Stevenson,
and the Republican candidate,
Dwight Eisenhower,
receive intelligence briefings
many weeks ahead
of the election.
Intelligence briefings
are now tradition,
and it's a very good one.

NARRATOR:

Candidates who receive
these classified
intelligence briefings
are required
to keep them private
as a matter
of national security.
But what if a candidate
exploits the nation's secrets
for political gain?

DOYLE:

minute of the 1968 campaign,
something happened
that was so bizarre
and so shocking that the
details of it remained secret
for the next 50 years.

NARRATOR:

In the late 1960s,
America is once again at war.
The conflict in Vietnam
is tearing the country apart
and is the leading issue
in the 1968 election.
We shall begin with Vietnam.
Never has so much military power
been used so ineffectively.

UPDEGROVE:

Lyndon Johnson
opted to brief all of the viable
presidential candidates:
Hubert Humphrey,
his vice president--
the Democratic candidate--
Richard Nixon,
the Republican candidate,
and George Wallace,
the Independent candidate.
And he briefed them
on what was happening
in the war in Vietnam.

NARRATOR:

President Johnson reveals
a bombshell.
His administration is
in secret talks to end the war.
After years
of careful persuasion,
top diplomats are
nearing an agreement
to bring both North
and South Vietnam
to the negotiating table.
If Johnson successfully
negotiates peace,
it could help secure
the election
for his vice president,
Hubert Humphrey.

DOYLE:

Richard Nixon was desperate.
He saw a very,
very close election.
Hubert Humphrey
and he were polling
just about even
in all the polls.
This time we're gonna win!
(cheers and applause)

DOYLE:

what the Nixon campaign did
in secret
was an act
of political sabotage.

LICHTMAN:

Candidate Nixon acted
to try to scuttle
the peace talks.
He sent his representative
to the South Vietnamese
to say, "Don't cooperate.
Wait till I'm elected
and you will get a better deal."

NARRATOR:

declassified in 2008,
reveal that just days
before the election,
President Johnson learns
about Nixon's scheme
to derail the peace process.

DOYLE:

to get the Nixon campaign
to stop these secret
backdoor negotiations
with South Vietnam,
President Johnson calls up
Republican leader
Everett Dirksen,
and accuses Republican
Richard Nixon
of the ultimate crime.

DIRKSEN:

Yeah.
Yeah.
That's a mistake.
Oh, it is.
Yeah.

JOHNSON:

(phone hangs up)
(telephone ringing)

NARRATOR:

Less than 24 hours later,
a call is patched through
to President Johnson.

JOHNSON:

NARRATOR:

The peaceful transfer of power
from one president to the next
is a complex process
that begins
long before America chooses
its next leader.
To prepare the candidates
to govern
on day one, they receive
intelligence briefings
that are supposed
to remain top secret.
But in 1968,
at the height
of the Vietnam War,
candidate Richard Nixon
secretly uses
intelligence
from those briefings
to interfere with
President Johnson's efforts
to set up peace talks.

DOYLE:

Nixon campaign operatives
told the South Vietnamese
government
to pull out of the negotiations.
Don't negotiate now,
through the Johnson-Humphrey
administration, hang on,
you'll get
a better deal with us.

NARRATOR:

declassified recordings,
an adamant Nixon can be heard
assuring
President Lyndon Johnson
that he has made
no attempts to interfere
with the peace process.

JOHNSON:

Yes, Dick.
Dick...
Well, that's good, Dick, I...
And if we can get it
done now, fine.

NARRATOR:

and President Johnson knows it.
But there is nothing
he can do about it,
because his proof that
the Nixon campaign is tampering
with the peace process comes
from a secret
government wiretap
of the South Vietnamese embassy
in Washington, D.C.
In the political game of chess,
it's a stalemate
of king versus king.

LICHTMAN:

And as a result,
the South Vietnamese
did not cooperate
in the peace talks, a ceasefire
was not brokered,
Richard Nixon was elected,
and the war dragged on
and on for many years.
(chanting indistinctly)
You would think that the
transition from Johnson to Nixon

would be a bitter
and chaotic one.
Ironically, it turns out
to be one of the smoothest
in history.
I don't think Johnson wanted
to see the transition
become a point of contention.
And you're dealing with two
incredibly astute politicians.
You know, probably
the most astute politicians
of the last hundred years,
one could argue.

NARRATOR:

Before you can transfer power
to a new president,
the country first has
to choose one.
(bell tolling)
The 2016 election
between Hillary Clinton
and Donald Trump
marks only the fifth time
that the winner
of the popular vote
loses the presidency,
a result
that has renewed debate
about the Electoral College.
The peaceful transition
of power depends on a free
and fair electoral system,
a process that can be thrown
into a tailspin
when the margin is too slim.
In 1800,
the election
is as close as it gets.
Four men, including the sitting
president, John Adams,
are battling
to claim a majority

of the electoral votes.

LICHTMAN:

Two candidates tied.
Thomas Jefferson
and Aaron Burr.
And so the House
had to pick the president.

NARRATOR:

The Constitution mandates
that in the event of a tie
in the Electoral College,
the House of Representatives
must break the tie by a vote.
The House is deadlocked
for a week.
Finally, on the 36th round
of voting,
Vice President Thomas Jefferson
is elected
the third president
of the United States
just 15 days
before the inauguration.

BRANDS:

That transition
could have gone badly.
If there had been resistance,
then the American experiment
itself
would have taken
a different route.
When that one went peacefully,
it set the model for everything
that followed.

NARRATOR:

another divided election result
and a closely contested race
ends with the most
controversial transfer of power
in recent history.

ANCHOR:

It's been a nerve-racking night
for both candidates.

NARRATOR:

November 7, 2000.

As the returns
begin to roll in,
America learns a new
Election Night catch phrase:

"Too close to call."

Vice President Al Gore
is narrowly ahead
of George W. Bush
in the popular vote,
but the two are tied
in the Electoral College.
It all comes down
to Florida, where 25 electoral
votes will decide the election.

-ANCHOR:

projecting... -After 2:00 a.m.,
network projections
call Florida
a win for George W. Bush.

SECRETARY ANDREW CARD:

Bush won Florida,
and then Al Gore conceded,
and then Al Gore didn't concede
because maybe Bush
didn't win Florida.

NARRATOR:

is just 1,784 votes,
less than 1/2 of one percent,
which, under Florida law,
triggers an automatic recount.
After 24 hours
of recounting ballots,
Bush's lead drops
to only 362 votes.
The Gore campaign petitions

for a manual recount
in four Florida counties.
It is even more important
that every vote is counted.

NARRATOR:

But the process takes time,
putting the transition of power
into a state of limbo.
We're tracking,
looking at the ballots,
noting where
the hanging chads are.

NARRATOR:

In late November,
nearly three weeks
after Election Day,
George W. Bush is ahead
by 537 votes
and is officially certified
as the winner in Florida.
Gore still refuses to concede
and continues his fight
for a recount in the courts.

ANITA McBRIDE:

who was going to be president
of the United States was made
over five weeks after Election
Day and had to be decided
by the Supreme Court
in December.

NARRATOR:

On December 12,
just 39 days
before the inauguration,
the Supreme Court makes
its ruling against Al Gore.
Florida's decision stands.
While I strongly disagree
with the court's decision,
I accept it.

And tonight, for the sake
of our unity as a people
and the strength
of our democracy,
I offer my concession.

NARRATOR:

the election, but at a price.
His transition time
is cut in half.

McBRIDE:

We lost a lot of time in 2000
because it was unclear who
the president was going to be.
So it was very difficult, made
it much harder to get started.

NARRATOR:

Even as he takes office,
President Bush
still has thousands
of appointed positions to fill.
Then, just eight months
into his first term,
the unthinkable happens.

-TEACHER:

-STUDENTS:

-TEACHER:

-STUDENTS:

-TEACHER:

-STUDENTS:

NARRATOR:

of September 11, 2001,
the president is at
a Florida elementary school
promoting his education

initiative.

CARD:

of these second graders.
I walked up to the president
and I leaned over and whispered
into his right ear,
"America is under attack."

NARRATOR:

During the modern transition
of presidential power,
a new administration must fill
4,000 jobs
to run the government,
a process that usually takes
several months.
But in the close election
of 2000,
one president's transition time
is cut in half,
leaving many security positions
unfilled.

CARD:

President George W. Bush
did not have
a very long transition,
because his transition
really didn't start
until after the Supreme Court
had decided
a very contentious election.

NARRATOR:

After eight months on the job,
Bush's administration
is just getting up to speed,
when he's forced to confront
the deadliest terrorist attack
on U.S. soil.

CARD:

I walked up to the president

and I leaned over and whispered
into his right ear,
"A second plane
hit the second tower.
America is under attack."

MCBRIDE:

And George W. Bush,
now the 43rd president
of the United States,
became a wartime president
in a matter of seconds.

CARD:

Presidents have to be nimble
and deal with the world
as it is.

Not the world
that they want it to be.

And President Bush
clearly was given that
in spades
on September 11, 2001.

I can hear you,
and the people who knocked
these buildings down
-will hear all of us soon!
-(cheering)

CHERTOFF:

it occurred months
after the inauguration,
still occurred early
in an administration.
There were many positions
that were unfilled,
had not been confirmed.
The FBI director had been
on the job for ten days.

NARRATOR:

The crisis is a wake-up call
for a new administration.

CARD:

played a role
in President Bush wanting
to make sure that his successor
would have better tools
available to help him
do the job.

CROWD (chanting):

U.S.A.! U.S.A.!

ANNOUNCER:

Ladies and gentlemen,
the President
of the United States.

NARRATOR:

as Bush prepares
to hand over power
to Barack Obama,
he gives a mandate
to his entire staff.
This peaceful transfer of power
is one of the hallmarks
of a true democracy,
and ensuring that
this transition is as smooth
as possible is a priority
for the rest of my presidency.

NARRATOR:

For the first time ever,
national security staff
from two administrations
come together for a joint
crisis training drill.

CHERTOFF:

So we put together a scenario
designed to make sure
everybody understood
what would happen if there
was a terrorist attack.
Who would have
what responsibilities,

what kinds of tools
would be available?

SECRETARY JANET NAPOLITANO:

We're literally seated
next to the person
we were replacing.
The role I was taking on
was a very heavy role
with a heavy responsibility.

It was a humbling moment.
9/11 really changed things.
We're in much too serious
a state of affairs
in the world these days
to play games
with a transition.

(bell tolls)

I love this country.

-(crowd cheering)

-Thank you. Thank you very much.

NARRATOR:

Once the election is over,
the transition of power
gains momentum,
as political rivals
put country first.
Donald Trump is going to be
our president.
We owe him an open mind
and the chance to lead.

NARRATOR:

Within days,
the president-elect is invited
to the White House,
a symbol of a peaceful transfer
of power.
I very much look forward
to dealing with the president
in the future,
including counsel.

GAGE:

One of the questions that usually comes up in this critical period between November and January is: what is gonna be the relationship between the outgoing administration and the incoming administration?

NARRATOR:

may be eager to begin, but his authority is limited while the sitting president is still in charge.

Hello, everybody.

-Some of the harsh words...

-DOYLE:

he or she has great power. But an outgoing president has almost no political capital remaining;

he or she is a lame duck.

Michelle!

Lame duck.

That's really good.

This is one of the better ones.

HUGHES:

actually originates from London and the stock market.

In the 18th century, the term was meant to refer to an investor who had defaulted on their funds.

So, that term carried over, in the 19th century, when political reporters started referring to politicians who had lost an election

but were still holding power.

NARRATOR:

Today, the lame duck period lasts about ten weeks. But it used to be even longer. The Founding Fathers originally set the inauguration on March 4, a full four months after the election.

HUGHES:

You have to remember that when the Constitution was written, it took a long time for people to get from point "A" to point "B," so therefore, March 4 seemed like the perfect date.

NARRATOR:

is supposed to ensure a smooth and orderly transition. But it can also create a power vacuum, a period of uncertainty that, in one election year, threatens the very survival of the nation.

November 6, 1860.

Republican Abraham Lincoln wins a contentious election, promising to stop the spread of slavery. His victory creates a revolt in the Southern states. Six weeks later, South Carolina secedes from the Union and six other states follow. Outgoing president James Buchanan does nothing.

HUGHES:

He's a lame duck,
he's not accountable, he doesn't
really know what to do
when we're in this kind of
long waiting period,
waiting for Abraham Lincoln
to come into the White House
to do something.

NARRATOR:

On the brink of civil war,
the nation is unraveling,
as the clock ticks toward
the most dangerous
transition of power
in presidential history.

NARRATOR:

In America's 230-year history,
the presidency
has changed hands 43 times.
But never has the transition
period been as dangerous
as it was in 1861.
After Abraham Lincoln
wins the election,
outgoing president
James Buchanan is a lame duck.
He does nothing to stop
the wave of secession
that's tearing
the country apart.

LICHTMAN:

During that transition,
Buchanan had all the power,
Lincoln had none.
And one after another
after another
Southern state seceded
from the Union.

NARRATOR:

The damage is irreversible.

In the four months
between the election
and Lincoln's inauguration
on March 4,
seven states leave the Union.
The Civil War breaks out
just 39 days later
and the new president inherits
what will become
the bloodiest conflict
in U.S. history.

BRANDS:

in this transition stuff,
that smooth transitions
are most necessary
when they are least possible.

NARRATOR:

nation is tested once again,
as the presidency changes hands
during the Great Depression.
When the stock market crashes
on October 24, 1929,
President Herbert Hoover
has been in office
only seven months
and now finds himself presiding
over an economy in free-fall.
And therefore, I would say
to the American public,
be patient...

NARRATOR:

Three years later,
he loses his bid for reelection
to the Democrat,
Franklin Delano Roosevelt.
It looks, my friends,
like a real landslide this time.

LICHTMAN:

point of the Great Depression.
You're talking about up to 25%

of people unemployed
in America.

GAGE:

are closing.
People are losing their money.
Herbert Hoover kind of
wants to do something
as a lame duck president.
He reaches out
to Franklin Roosevelt and says,
"Can we figure out what to do
about all of this?"
And Roosevelt,
more or less, says,
"Thanks, I think I'll wait
until I'm president."

NARRATOR:

of the four-month period
between the election
and Inauguration Day,
the U.S. economy
grinds to a halt,
with 11,000 bank failures
and unemployment
approaching an all-time high.
The urgent crisis
sparks Congress
to make an historic change
to the U.S. Constitution
and the transfer
of presidential power.

LICHTMAN:

Prior to 1936,
the inauguration of a president
took place, actually,
on March 4.

HUGHES:

of a period
to have a lame duck presidency.
So, in 1933,

the 20th Amendment was ratified,
and that moved the date
from March 4
to the date we know now,
January 20,
shortening the period.

NARRATOR:

But what happens
if there's no time
for a transition
and the presidency
must change hands
in the middle
of a national crisis?

REPORTER:

lands at the Dallas airport,
Love Field.

NARRATOR:

November 22, 1963.
President John F. Kennedy
and his wife, Jackie,
are on an early campaign swing
through Texas.

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

car is now turning
onto Elm Street, and it will be
only a matter of minutes
before he arrives
at the Trade Mart.

NARRATOR:

On a downtown Dallas street,
the tradition of an orderly
transfer of power
is put to the ultimate test.
(gunshots)

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

It appears as though
something has happened

in the motorcade route!
Something, I repeat,
has happened
in the motorcade route.

NARRATOR:

President Kennedy
is hit by an assassin's bullet.

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

Several police officers
are rushing up the hill
at this time.
Stand by just a moment please.

NARRATOR:

of power begins in an instant,
as Secret Service agents
dive to protect the man
riding just two cars behind:
Vice President
Lyndon Baines Johnson.

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

There has been a shooting.
Parkland Hospital
has been advised to stand by
for a severe gunshot wound.

UPDEGROVE:

Johnson finds himself
at Parkland Hospital
awaiting the news
on Kennedy and he finds out
that he's dead.

DOYLE:

President John Kennedy's heart
stopped beating,
Lyndon Johnson became the
president of the United States.
That is what
the Constitution defines,
and that's before

any swearing in;
it happens in that second.

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

The president's wife,
Jackie Kennedy, was not hurt.
She walked into the hospital
at her husband's
stretcher's side.

NARRATOR:

Looming over it all is the fear
that Lyndon Johnson
could be the next target.

DOYLE:

killed in public,
a few hundred yards in front
of him, in the motorcade.
For all he knew, this could
have been a massive conspiracy.

NARRATOR:

At Dallas Love Field,
Air Force One
powers up its engines.
Recently discovered recordings
between Air Force One
and the White House
document the unfolding crisis
in real time.

UPDEGROVE:

For security reasons,
Johnson chooses to go
to Air Force One immediately,
uh, and is forced
below the window
in the limousine that speeds,
in less than ten minutes,
to Love Field.
And he decides that
that's when, uh,
Kennedy's assassination

should be announced.

NARRATOR:

At 1:

the historic news
goes out to the world.

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

Just a moment, just a moment,
we have a bulletin coming in.
We're now switching directly
to Parkland Hospital and KBOX
news director, Phil Hampton.

PHIL HAMPTON:

of the United States is dead.
There's only one word
to describe
the picture here, and that's
"grief," and much of it.
It's official
as of just a few moments ago.

NARRATOR:

An assassin's bullet
throws the entire
U.S. government
into uncertainty.
Holding the country together
now falls on Lyndon Johnson.
You, John Fitzgerald Kennedy,
do solemnly swear...

NARRATOR:

is sworn in,
the transition of one leader
to the next
is the culmination of months
of detailed preparation.
-So help you God?
-So help me God.
(cheering)

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

Something has happened
in the motorcade route.
Stand by, please.

NARRATOR:

But on November 22, 1963,
the transfer of presidential
power happens in an instant.

RADIO ANNOUNCER:

President Kennedy
has been assassinated.
It's official now.
The president is dead.

NARRATOR:

becomes president
in a moment of crisis.
No one knows for sure
if the country
and its new leader
are still under threat.

DOYLE:

You have to take
the reins of power,
you have to somehow manage
all these pieces of pure chaos,
for which there is no precedent.
This had not happened
in the modern era.

NARRATOR:

on taking the oath of office
before Air Force One
leaves Dallas.
The chief justice
of the Supreme Court
traditionally presides
over the oath of office
at an inauguration,
but under the law, any federal
judge can administer the oath.

Johnson calls
an old Dallas friend,
Federal Judge Sarah Hughes,
to swear him in.
Outside the plane,
the hearse carrying
Kennedy's body arrives.
Secret Service agents
have purchased a casket
from a local funeral home,
but it's too wide to fit
through the cabin door,
so ultimately, the ornate metal
handles are ripped off.
The slain president is brought
on board Air Force One,
accompanied by his widow,
Jackie.

Johnson asks that
Jacqueline Kennedy accompany him
while he's taking
the oath of office,
out of respect
for the now former first lady,
and to show the nation
and the world
that there is
this transition of power
from Kennedy to Johnson.
It's very symbolic.

NARRATOR:

photographer,
Cecil Stoughton,
chronicles the moment.
The photo reveals details
of a quickly improvised
inauguration ceremony.
There is no Bible on board,
but a Catholic prayer book is
found in the plane's bedroom.
A Dictaphone is grabbed
off Kennedy's desk
to record the historic moment.

Although he had color film,
the photographer captures
the moment in black and white.
It's faster to process,
and the new president wants to
share this image of stability
with the world
as quickly as possible.

2:

after the assassination,
Air Force One
takes off from Dallas.
At Andrews Air Force Base
in Washington, D.C.,
Johnson waits
until the casket is removed
before making his first speech
as the nation's leader.

JOHNSON:

for all people.
We have suffered a loss
that cannot be weighed.
For me, it is a deep,
personal tragedy.
I know that the world
shares the sorrow
that Mrs. Kennedy
and her family bears.
I will do my best.
That is all I can do.
I ask for your help and God's.

DOYLE:

Lyndon Johnson was trying
to show the public that, yes,
our president was just killed,
but there is
a transition of power.
I am now the president
and it will now be orderly.
He was able to switch
people's perceptions

from John F. Kennedy
to Lyndon Johnson,
even given
such horrific circumstances.
That's a presidential
transition
we've never seen the likes of
before or since.
(bell tolls)
We are going to appoint
"Mad Dog" Mattis
as our secretary of defense.

NARRATOR:

of power depends on more
than just the chief executive.
To be successful,
the president must build
an effective administration
of experts and leaders
who will direct
and implement his policies.

GAGE:

The new president begins
to pick those who are really
part of his or her inner circle.
So, you're looking
at the White House staff.
You're looking at the Cabinet,
the people that
the new president
is really going to rely on.

NARRATOR:

The first presidential Cabinet
under George Washington
had only four members.
Today, there are
15 Cabinet positions
who all serve at the pleasure
of the president.
Cabinet members are
part of the hierarchy

of presidential succession,
in the event of death,
resignation,
or impeachment.
The current line of succession
is 17 positions deep,
beginning
with the vice president,
followed by
the speaker of the House
and the president pro tem
of the Senate.
After that,
we hit the Cabinet list,
going in order of Cabinet
positions created.
So, that would start
with secretary of state,
and we'd go all the way
down the list
to director
of homeland security.

NARRATOR:

is clearly spelled out
by the Constitution
and Congress
to ensure continuity
in times of crisis.
But in the real world,
things don't always
go according to plan.
(gunshots)
(people screaming)
Ronald Reagan was shot
by John Hinckley
outside
of the Washington Hilton,
a mile or so
from the White House.

NARRATOR:

President Reagan's code name,
and in these rarely heard

Secret Service radio calls,
the chaos
of the assassination attempt
is captured in real time.
As the motorcade speeds
toward the White House,
Reagan appears to be fine,
until Secret Service Agent
Jerry Parr notices
blood coming
from the president's mouth.
He is rushed to George
Washington University Hospital.
He walks in the front door,
and he collapses,
and he goes
into emergency surgery.

NARRATOR:

members of Reagan's Cabinet
gather in the Situation Room.
The key people in the room are
National Security Advisor
Richard Allen,
Secretary of Treasury
Donald Regan,
Secretary of Defense
Caspar Weinberger,
Secretary of State
Alexander Haig,
James Baker, Chief of Staff,
Press Secretary Larry Speakes.
Conversations in the Situation
Room are usually not recorded,
but Richard Allen decides
to make an exception.
George Bush,
Reagan's vice president,
was in Fort Worth, Texas,
uh, when he finds out
that Reagan has been shot
and that he needs to return to
Washington as soon as possible.

NARRATOR:

on board Air Force Two,
now returning to the capital,
but the plane's communications
are outdated.

Without a direct secure line,
Bush cannot effectively
take control.

Neither the president
nor the vice president
are able to run the government.
The transition of power
is up in the air.

HUGHES:

went under the knife,
he was out,
and the way it should've worked
is George Bush should have
gotten power
because the president
was obviously incapacitated.
But of course,
George Bush was in an airplane,
so that didn't occur.
What did occur
was a very kind of weird scene
at the White House.

WEINBERGER:

Until the vice president
actually arrives here,
the command authority is what?

-HAIG:

-Hmm?
Well, I...

DOYLE:

is in the operating room.
Nobody knows if he's going
to live or die.
You have the senior officials
of the United States

arguing over who is in charge
of the American government
at this moment
and who has the ability
to command the military.
Secretary of State Alexander
Haig has one point of view;
he's in charge.
Secretary of Defense
Cap Weinberger says,
"No, that's not right,"
and they are in a state
of total confusion.

NARRATOR:

of the unfolding crisis,
the Pentagon reports
an increase in the number
of Soviet submarines
off America's East Coast.

DOYLE:

And at this point in time,
nobody knew if this
assassination attempt
was an attack by the Russians
on a new president.
It could have been the first
wave in a bigger attack.
So, if decisions need
to be made right now
about nuclear weapons
and about ordering
military forces on alert,
who's gonna make
these decisions?
Who's going to be the president?

NARRATOR:

and succession of power
is the hallmark
of American democracy...
Are you up for one more term?
...whether it happens

every four years,
eight years, or in an instant.
(gunshots)
(people screaming)
In the hours after
an attempted assassination,
President Ronald Reagan
is in emergency surgery
with a bullet lodged
just one inch from his heart.
Vice President George Bush
is flying back to Washington,
but has no secure
communication link,
and the Cabinet can't agree
on who's in charge.

WOMAN:

You guys, sit down here.
White House Spokesperson Larry
Speakes faces the press corps.
They want to know who is
in control at the White House.
If the president goes
into surgery
and goes under anesthesia...

-REPORTER:

management? -I-I cannot answer
that question, which is,
which is technical and legal.

BRANDS:

Reagan's secretary of state,
who's watching this
from the Situation Room,
thought that
the president's spokesman
was not doing a good job,
and so he literally ran
from the Situation Room
to the briefing room and grabbed
the microphone and said...
First, uh, as you know,

we are in close touch
with the vice president,
who is returning to Washington.

REPORTER:

the decisions for the government
right now?

Who's making the decisions?

Constitutionally, gentlemen,
you have the president,
the vice president
and the secretary of state
in that order.

And should the president decide
he wants to transfer the helm
to the vice president,
he will do so.

(reporters clamor)

As of now I am in control here
in the White House.

NARRATOR:

The trouble is,
Secretary Haig
has made a mistake.

BRANDS:

And his point was to reassure
the American people,
to reassure the world.

The effect, in fact,
was just the opposite.

Because here's this guy who's
flushed and out of breath,
and saying "I'm in charge,"
and in fact he's wrong.

It made very clear that,
well, nobody was in charge.

He misstated the line of
presidential succession.

You have the president,
the vice president,
and the secretary of state
in that order.

He was not next in line
after the vice president.
Ahead of him was
the speaker of the House
and the president pro tem
of the Senate.

NARRATOR:

At 6:

the vice president finally
arrives in Washington,
takes command
of the Situation Room,
and tries to restore order.
(indistinct talking,
camera shutters clicking)

NARRATOR:

President Reagan survives
the near fatal gunshot wound.

BUSH:

The president's emerged
with the most
optimistic prospects
for a complete recovery.
I can reassure this nation
and a watching world
that the American government
is functioning
fully and effectively.

NARRATOR:

70-year-old Ronald Reagan
is back at work,
signing a piece of legislation
in his hospital room.
Reagan was amazing in the way
he was able to rebound from,
you know, being nearly killed
when he was shot.

NARRATOR:

During the entire incident,
Reagan never officially
transfers power,
but the 25th Amendment
does provide a way
to temporarily hand off power
with a simple letter
to Congress.

HUGHES:

a president who's going to be
temporarily incapacitated,
the president would voluntarily
give up power,
and then once they're
in their right mind,
they're back on their feet,
they again give
written permission
to have that power back.

NARRATOR:

was most recently invoked
by George W. Bush.
I'm gonna be sedated
for a period of time
and will, uh, transfer power
to the vice president
during that time.

NARRATOR:

Twice while in office,
Bush signs over power
to his VP,
Dick Cheney.
Both times were because
of a colonoscopy.
As a result,
Cheney now holds the record
for what is, in effect,
the shortest presidency
in history,
a total of four hours.
He'll realize he's not gonna be

president that long.
(reporters laughing)
Anyway, I'm glad to be able
to share that with you.
-Thank you all very much.
-(laughter)
(bell tolls)

NARRATOR:

transition of power
now just two weeks away,
inside the White House,
plans are underway
to prepare the Oval Office.
Every president
can personalize the space
from the artwork
to the furniture.
It's also become a tradition
for presidents to design
their own Oval Office rug.
Each one features
the presidential coat of arms,
which includes the image
of an eagle
holding both the arrows of war
and the olive branch of peace.

GARY WALTERS:

that's important
to the president
is the selection of the desk
that he's going to use
and sit behind.
Some have used
the HMS Resolute desk,
the one that John John Kennedy
crawled through,
that many people have seen
that photograph.

NARRATOR:

The Resolute desk was a gift
to President

Rutherford B. Hayes
from England's Queen Victoria.
It's been used by seven
presidents in the Oval Office
since 1880.

WALTERS:

use other desks.
President Nixon used
a different desk
in the Oval Office.
(indistinct talking)
Lyndon Johnson brought his desk
from when he was down
on Capitol Hill.
It's the president's office,
and whatever he wants in there
is what should be there.

NARRATOR:

Presidents can also choose
how to document their time
in office.
Some have installed hidden
microphones in their desks
to secretly record
conversations.

DOYLE:

The first president
to bug the Oval Office
was Franklin Delano Roosevelt,
who had a big old-fashioned
sound-on-film recorder.
There was a microphone in
a lamp on the Oval Office desk,
the wire ran down
to the basement,
and he recorded random
press conferences
and Oval Office business.
John Kennedy
installed a James Bond
kind of system where there'd be

a pen and pencil set
on the Oval Office desk,
and he'd say, "Oh, hello,
how are you? Come on in."
And he would just push
the pencil forward.
That would...

(snaps)

kick on the tape recorders
underneath the, uh, Oval Office
and he would then be recording
everything you said to him
and you would not know it.
Johnson installed
his own system,
which was much more focused
on the telephone
'cause Johnson did all
his important business
on the telephone.

NARRATOR:

But for one president,
the decision to set up
a secret recording system
would be the fatal blow in
the strangest transfer of power
in American history.
(cheering)

REPORTER:

received an overwhelming mandate
from the American voters.

NARRATOR:

after a landslide victory
earns him a second term
in office,
Richard Nixon's presidency
is in virtual collapse.
His top aides are implicated
in the cover-up
of a burglary at the
Democratic Party headquarters

in the Watergate
office complex.
Nixon goes on live television
to assure the nation
he has no involvement
in the scandal.
Whatever improper activities
may yet be discovered
in connection with
this whole sordid affair,
justice will be pursued fairly,
fully and impartially,
no matter who is involved.

NARRATOR:

Although Nixon swears
he knew nothing about
the Watergate cover-up,
Senate hearings
probe for evidence
linking the president
to the conspiracy.
January 21, 1969...

NARRATOR:

aide Alexander Butterfield
shocks everyone
as he testifies under oath.
I don't have
the technical knowledge
but I will tell you
what I know about...

NARRATOR:

In the best-case scenario,
the transition
of presidential power
takes place
after a fair election
with a definitive result.
But the Constitution also
covers the unexpected.
In July of 1973,
after more than a year

of investigations and hearings
into the Watergate scandal,
Richard Nixon's administration
is in shambles.

But he still manages
to cling to power...
until the testimony
of a White House aide
seals the president's fate.

THOMPSON:

you aware of the installation
of any listening devices in the
Oval Office of the president?

I was aware
of listening devices.

Yes, sir.

NARRATOR:

The revelation that Nixon
has been secretly recording
his Oval Office conversations
ignites a political firestorm.
The Senate wants Nixon
to turn over his tapes.
He refuses,
claiming executive privilege.

BRANDS:

can basically stonewall
demands by Congress
to show them stuff.
Executive privilege
is very powerful.
And this is... this worked
for Richard Nixon.

CROWD (chanting):

We love Nixon! We love Nixon!

BRANDS:

think of themselves
explicitly as above the law,
but they often act
as though they are,

and, in practice,
they often are.

NARRATOR:

As Nixon stalls Congress,
another major scandal erupts
inside his administration.
This time, involving his
vice president, Spiro Agnew,
who pleads no contest
to federal tax evasion
and resigns from office.
Now, previously,
when there was a vacancy
in the vice presidency,
it stayed vacant.
When J.F. Kennedy was killed
and Johnson became president,
there was no vice president,
but under
the new 25th Amendment,
a president now appoints
a vice president
with the approval
of both houses of Congress.
And Richard Nixon
appoints Gerald Ford,
a member of the House.
He had been
House minority leader.
So, Gerald Ford becomes
the first appointed
vice president in U.S. history.

NARRATOR:

is yet another blow
to Nixon's
crumbling presidency.

DOYLE:

not a president anymore.
His support was collapsing
in Congress
and among the American people

so dramatically
that he was in effect
a lame duck president.

NARRATOR:

In July of 1974,
the Supreme Court orders
President Nixon
to release all the tapes
recorded in the Oval Office.

NIXON (on tape):

discuss this son-of-a-bitch...

NARRATOR:

3,000 hours of recordings
surrendered to Congress
are the direct product
of a seemingly small technical
decision Nixon made
three years earlier.

DOYLE:

bad judgment to install
a noise-activated system
that kicked on every time
somebody bumped into a table
or started talking.
So as a result, he forgot that
the tapes were even running.
What's the matter
with these clowns?
As soon as they were released
in detail,
the American people
were horrified.
You can hear the president
of the United States
ordering break-ins,
obstructing justice,
masterminding
a conspiracy of payoffs.
It was something completely new
to the American people,

the idea that the president
of the United States
would be masterminding
a criminal conspiracy from
behind the Oval Office desk.

NARRATOR:

begins impeachment proceedings,
and the transition of power
takes yet another
historic turn.

LICHTMAN:

On the one hand,
Nixon didn't want to be
impeached and convicted,
to become the first president
to be so disgraced.
On the other hand he didn't
really want to resign either,
but he had to.
Resignation was a less awful
alternative to being impeached
and thrown out of office.
I shall leave this office with
regret at not completing my term
but with gratitude
for the privilege of serving
as your president for the past
five and a half years.

UPDEGROVE:

August 9, 1974
is an incredibly dramatic day
in American history.
It's the first time
a president
of the United States
has resigned the office.
And Nixon, that day,
goes in the East Room
and says good-bye to his staff
in one of the most revealing
speeches Nixon ever makes

during the course
of his political life.
You are here
to say good-bye to us.
And we don't have a good...
word for it in English.
The best is au revoir.
We'll see you again.
(applause)

UPDEGROVE:

to the South Lawn,
boards Marine One,
incongruously flashes
the victory sign
and then is whirled away
to political obscurity.
Soon thereafter,
Gerald Ford goes
into that same room,
the East Room,
where the chairs
have been rearranged
to symbolize a new direction.
If you will raise your right
hand and repeat after me:
I, Gerald R. Ford,
-do solemnly swear... -I, Gerald
R. Ford, do solemnly swear...

UPDEGROVE:

becomes the first president
not elected
by a national electorate.
Ladies and gentlemen,
the President
of the United States.
(applause)
My fellow Americans,
our long national nightmare
is over.
Our Constitution works.
Our great republic
is a government of laws

and not of men.

UPDEGROVE:

moment, which shows
the presidency does not begin
and end with one man.

FORD:

Thank you.

NARRATOR:

It's less than a week
until the official transition
of power,
and for an outgoing president,
it's a time for reflection,
humility and sometimes
a little fun.

-Let's light this candle.

-I want to see eBay.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Just like that.

You're riding the wave
of the future, my man.

Now, what do you
feel like buying?

NARRATOR:

This White House gag reel
shows Bill Clinton at the end
of his eight-year term.

A man with nothing to do.

B-9.

-You sunk my battleship.

-Yes!

NARRATOR:

president's last days

-are so carefree.

-(phone rings)

Hello.

NARRATOR:

At the end of his term,

Jimmy Carter
still needs more time.
In 12 hours, he'll hand over
the keys to Ronald Reagan.
But he's in the middle
of an urgent negotiation
that he's determined to finish.

(shouting)

52 Americans
have been held hostage
by Iranian militants
for 444 days.

UPDEGROVE:

wants to resolve
the hostage issue in Iran
that has crippled his presidency
and has resulted in his being
overwhelmingly defeated
by Ronald Reagan,
and he wants to leave
the presidency
having put that issue to rest.
(phone rings)

NARRATOR:

of Carter's last day in office,
after working around
the clock for two days
to negotiate with the Iranians,
the deal is still not done.
Does the Bank of England know
the figure
we're supposed to reach?

NARRATOR:

of the hostages, Carter agrees
to pay a form of ransom,
the return of nearly \$8 billion
in Iranian cash and gold,
frozen in American banks
since the beginning
of the crisis.

CARTER:

him to certify something
\$12 million short.

NARRATOR:

the stakes couldn't be higher.
At noon, he loses his job
and all of his power.

Finally, at 6:

there's a breakthrough.
Hello.
Yeah...
Right on, man!
That's great, that's great.

NARRATOR:

is in place, and everything
seems to be going
according to plan.
The hostages board
a plane in Iran.
So that'll go to Algiers,
and Algiers,
when they notify Iran,
will notify us back, right?

NARRATOR:

there's a problem.
Nothing concerning the airport?

DOYLE:

Jimmy Carter is on the phone
trying to get confirmation
that the hostages have left
Iranian airspace.

NARRATOR:

the Iranians are holding
the 52 hostages on board
two jets.
They were suppose
to have taken off
once the money was transferred,

but at 7:

are still on the ground.
Carter's last chance
at redemption is slipping away,
and there's no telling
what will happen
when a new president
takes power.

NARRATOR:

On Inauguration Day,
the sitting president
holds power
until the exact moment
of transition, 12:00 noon.
On January 20, 1981,
as he prepares to leave office,
President Jimmy Carter
is fighting the clock.
Hello, I just wondered if you
had any report to give me.

NARRATOR:

for 48 straight hours
to secure the release
of 52 American citizens
being held hostage in Iran.
He's desperate to get it done
before he transfers power
to Ronald Reagan.

DOYLE:

All they want to hear is,
"The plane has left the runway.
The hostages are on their way
home," and the Iranians
will not give him
that satisfaction,
because to the militants
in Iran, Jimmy Carter
represented the devil,
America, for years.
Carter was seen

as the principal opponent
of the Iranian Islamic
revolution.

So he was a bad guy,
he was the original
great Satan of the West.

NARRATOR:

With just hours to go,
Carter dresses
for the inauguration.
His aides continue
to work the phones.
Mm-hmm. What about statements
by Tehran radio?

NARRATOR:

At 8:

Carter updates
President-elect Reagan.
Governor. Good morning,
how you doing?
Um, I placed a call
for you earlier.
I just want to let you know
that the planes
are at the end of the runway.

NARRATOR:

The soon-to-be ex-president
takes a brief time-out.
Two hours later,
as Carter welcomes
the incoming First Family,
there's still no word
on the hostages.

DOYLE:

has to get in a limousine
to get his successor sworn in.
He can't delay this, he can't
delay the transition of power.
The transition of power

happens on the clock.
When he goes to the inauguration
of Ronald Reagan,
relinquishing power,
he hasn't slept in 50 hours.

NARRATOR:

Carter continues to manage
the crisis from a phone inside
the presidential limousine,
as he travels the short
distance to the Capitol.

DOYLE:

The clock keeps ticking,
the Iranians don't release
the hostages.
They're being held
in airplanes
on the runway in Tehran.
Jimmy Carter walks down
to the podium
of the inauguration.
They have not been released.
The Iranians are teasing
and tormenting Jimmy Carter
and the American people
until the last second,
and they're holding it
into the new presidency
just to give one last poke
in the eye to Jimmy Carter.
I, Ronald Reagan,
do solemnly swear...

REAGAN:

do solemnly swear...
That I will faithfully
execute...

DOYLE:

Ronald Reagan is sworn in.
So help me God.
May I congratulate you, sir.

DOYLE:

from Tehran airport
with the hostages aboard.
The planes bearing our prisoners
left Iranian airspace
-and are now free of Iran.
-(applause)
What is one of
the first decisions
that Ronald Reagan makes?
He decides to send Jimmy Carter
to greet the freed hostages
in Germany,
as a symbol to the world
that he may no longer
be president,
but we're presenting
a united front.
This gesture by Ronald Reagan
really showed
the strength of our democracy.

NARRATOR:

morning, the outgoing president
prepares for a different
kind of transition.
In a matter of hours, the most
powerful person on Earth
will become an average citizen.

CARD:

I had the privilege of watching
George H.W. Bush's
last day in office.
And he didn't choose that
to be his last day in office.
He lost reelection,
and so it was
a bit melancholy.

NARRATOR:

into the Oval Office desk.
It's addressed to his rival

and successor, Bill Clinton.
A handwritten note of support
from one president to another.
Every outgoing president since
has done the same,
although most of the letters
remain private.

McBRIDE:

great traditions...
There are several great
traditions that happen
on the morning of January 20,
is, first of all, the farewell
to the executive residence
staff.
The staff gathers
for one last good-bye
to the First Family.
We, all of us,
get very close to the families.
But our Constitution says
the president changes at noon.
And that's when we have to
go to work for a new president.

NARRATOR:

than two hours to go
before the transfer of power...
...the outgoing
and incoming First Families
meet for morning coffee.

UPDEGROVE:

The incoming president arrives
at the White House,
is greeted by the president
and first lady.
It's civilized,
and it's a symbol
of the peaceful transition
of power
that we take for granted
very often in our country.

NARRATOR:

as George and Laura Bush
welcome Barack and Michelle
Obama to the White House,
a record of nearly
two million spectators
are gathering
in front of the Capitol
to witness history.
But few people are aware
that Homeland Security
is tracking a viable threat
at the National Mall.

CHERTOFF:

about a number
of potential terrorists
planning to carry out an attack
that would be occurring
actually on Inauguration Day.

NARRATOR:

Homeland Security Secretary
Michael Chertoff
relays the threat
to his successor,
Janet Napolitano.
There are threats that happen
a lot, unfortunately.
And the lingo used is "Are you
able to clear the threat?"
I was informed that there was
a credible threat
against the inauguration
that they had not
been able to clear.

NARRATOR:

intelligence reports,
Somali terrorists have
entered the country via Canada
and are allegedly planning
to detonate several bombs

in the crowd
during the ceremony.
The possibility
of a terror strike
at the exact moment
of presidential transition
poses a unique problem:
who's in charge
of managing the threat?

CHERTOFF:

as the outgoing secretary,
I would be resigning,
effective noon,
when the oath is taken.

NARRATOR:

from politics and protocol,
Chertoff and Napolitano
changed the rules
for Homeland Security.

CHERTOFF:

if you're interested,
I'm prepared to spend
the rest of the day in office,
instead of leaving noon,
so that if something occurred,
you're not pulled away
all of a sudden
and dropped into a, you know,
kind of boiling water.
This way we can have
some continuity,
then, at the end of the day,
midnight,
I will tender my resignation.

NAPOLITANO:

Michael and I just decided
that the logical thing to do
would be for him to be
in the command center,
and he would keep me posted.

(crowd cheering)

NARRATOR:

on the Capitol steps,
President-elect Obama has been
briefed about the threat.
He has two prepared speeches:
his inaugural address,
and a statement to be delivered
in case the Secret Service
needs to order
a mass evacuation
of the Mall.

I, Barack Hussein Obama...

-I, Barack...

-...do solemnly swear...

I, Barack Hussein Obama,
do solemnly swear...

Of course, I,
in the back of my head,
know Chertoff is working
a threat.

Very few people know
that there was actually
all this work being done
in the background.

-So help you God?

-So help me God.

-Congratulations, Mr. President.

-Thank you, sir.

(cheers and applause)

All the best wishes.

(fanfare playing)

CHERTOFF:

As I was at the command center,
I was informed that
they'd thoroughly investigated,
they'd tracked down
whatever the information was
that led people to worry
about a threat,
and it had washed out.
And, in fact,

the inauguration went off
without any particular problem.

NARRATOR:

saying that security
is paramount
at every inauguration.
But when the entire line
of succession is present,
there's a special
contingency plan.

CHERTOFF:

everybody from the government
collected in one venue,
ingoing and outgoing...
...you need to have
one Cabinet secretary
in the line of succession
that is not on premises,
so if, God forbid,
something happens
and everybody gets killed,
there is a continuity
of government.

NARRATOR:

is chosen by the president
as the designated survivor.
...of these United States...
During the inauguration,
and whenever the president
addresses
a joint session of Congress,
there is not just one,
but three designated survivors.

HUGHES:

of the Cabinet who sits out.
There's also someone
from Congress,
so we have a Congressional
designated survivor.
And there's even

a designated aide survivor.
So on Inauguration Day,
the three designated survivors
are flown out of town
to an undisclosed
government location.
They lock the door and they
guard 'em just in case
there's some type
of catastrophe,
the country can still
go forward.
My fellow citizens...

NARRATOR:

addresses the country
for the first time,
another profound
transfer of power takes place
just a few feet behind him.

LICHTMAN:

is entirely for show.
The real transition
is the handing over
of the nuclear football.
It is the mechanism by which
a president can launch
a nuclear attack.
All the power of the presidency
can be narrowed down
to that moment
and that object.

WARREN E. BURGE:

are you prepared to take
-...the constitutional oath?
-I am.

NARRATOR:

transition of power,
the mantle is officially passed

at exactly 12:

I, William Jefferson Clinton,
do solemnly swear...

NARRATOR:

just a few feet away,
there's a different kind
of transfer happening.
One that's not meant
to be seen by the public.
I, Barack Hussein Obama,
do solemnly swear...

LICHTMAN:

The real transition
is the handing over
of the power
to control America's
incredible nuclear arsenal.

NARRATOR:

That power is contained
in a 45-pound
aluminum briefcase
covered in black leather--
the president's
emergency satchel,
better known as
the "nuclear football."
Everything about it
is top secret.
The nuclear football
dates back to
the time
of President Eisenhower.
It is the mechanism by which
a president can launch
a nuclear attack.

NARRATOR:

Pete Metzger
is one of the few who knows
exactly what's in
the Zero Halliburton
briefcase.

He was the military aide
assigned to carry the football
for President Reagan.

METZGER:

So the nuclear football,
or the presidential
emergency satchel,
contains the information
and equipment
the president,
as commander in chief, needs
to give clear, direct orders
to the nation's
military forces--
in this case,
the nuclear forces.

NARRATOR:

no actual launch button
inside the briefcase,
but there is a secure
communication package,
so the president can reach
anyone he needs
from anywhere in the world.
Reportedly, there is also
a 75-page presidential
decision handbook
that details viable targets
and the casualty estimates
which could total
into the millions.

LICHTMAN:

The nuclear football alone
is not enough to launch
a nuclear strike.
You need something else,
and that's called the biscuit,
a little card
that has the president's
unique authentic code.
(cheering and applause)

NARRATOR:

The president is expected
to carry the biscuit
at all times,
no matter where he travels.
And the football
is always by his side.

METZGER:

about it and think, my gosh,
the idea that there would be
a nuclear strike,
it's so horrible it's-it's hard
to kind of imagine.

NARRATOR:

Five aides,
one from each branch of the
military, take shifts
carrying the satchel
24 hours a day.
Although the briefcase is not
handcuffed to the aide's wrist,
there is a leather leash
that allows the aide
to be physically attached
when transporting it.
But even the most fail-safe
system can be vulnerable.
(gunshots and screaming)
When President Reagan
is shot in 1981,
in all the chaos,
the biscuit goes missing.

LICHTMAN:

For a brief period of time,
the president was separated
from the essential
nuclear identification code.
It was actually tossed
in his, uh, discarded clothes
when he went to the hospital,

and later found in his shoe.

NARRATOR:

just one nuclear football.

ANNOUNCER:

the Vice President...

NARRATOR:

There is a second briefcase
assigned to the vice president
in the event the president
is incapacitated.

But neither man has the power
to act alone.

The president, and this
is not well known,
cannot launch a nuclear attack
on his own.

There's the two person rule:
it has to be approved by the
secretary of defense as well.
The secretary of defense can't
initiate a nuclear response
or a nuclear attack,
but the secretary has
to be the second person
to approve a presidential
nuclear launch.

NARRATOR:

of the nuclear football
on Inauguration Day
is a critical moment
that's carefully timed
and choreographed.

METZGER:

the swearing-in on the Capitol,
the duty military aide
is in the motorcade, as always,
with the president
of the United States.
The president-elect

of the United States
then takes a separate route
to the Capitol.
Until the moment
the president-elect
says the words...
-So help you God?
-So help me God.
-Congratulations, Mr. President.
-Thank you, sir.
...and becomes president,
the military aide's loyalty
is to the sitting president.
At that moment,
it changes and becomes
the relationship
with the newly elected
president.

LICHTMAN:

At the moment
the new president
becomes the president,
the old nuclear codes
become inactive,
and the new nuclear codes
become active.
And the president,
regardless of what's going on
in the ceremony, he or she
has their finger
on the nuclear button.
So that is the transition
of power
in the most literal way,
that briefcase
moving from person to person,
through history.
(applause)

OBAMA:

I stand here today
humbled by the task before us.

NARRATOR:

As the new president delivers
the inaugural address
at the Capitol,
just a mile away...
...it's moving day
at the White House.

WALTERS:

Nothing occurs
until after the president
and the president-elect
and their families
leave the White House
on their way to the Capitol.
We want to have them
moved in entirely
in a period of about five hours.
From noon...
until the inaugural parade
is completed,
which is usually around 5:00.
I've always referred to it
as organized chaos.

NARRATOR:

For security reasons,
no outside contractors
are brought in.
The massive moving job
is done entirely
by the nearly 100 members of
the existing White House staff.
The White House chief usher
oversees the entire operation.
There's so much going on
and so many moving parts.
It is quite like
a military maneuver.

NARRATOR:

Stephen Rochon should know.
He was a rear admiral
in the U.S. Coast Guard.

My concentration is to make sure
that everything is done
in a timely manner.

NARRATOR:

Walters, worked as chief usher
for 21 years,
serving four presidents.

WALTERS:

Our objective is to make sure
that when the family moves in,
they move into their home.

ROCHON:

is on the counter,
and their towels
that they selected
are on the racks,
and their bed is made.

NARRATOR:

And that's just the residence.
In the West Wing,
the working offices
also get a complete makeover
in a matter of hours.

McBRIDE:

Administration
is working on painting offices,
taking down walls,
putting up walls.
Reconfiguring it
to the way that the incoming
transition team has directed,
so that when people show up,
it's the new term.

NARRATOR:

By 5:

the oath of office
has been taken,

the parade is over,
and the White House is ready
for the new First Family
to move in.
The transfer of power
is complete,
but the transition to being
president is just beginning.
How will a new president
put his stamp
on the transition of power?
(crowd cheering)

NARRATOR:

and circumstance
of the inauguration,
America's new leader
has one more important
transition to make,
from citizen to president.

GEORGE W. BUSH:

in which you're sworn in
is an action-packed day.
And I remember,
finally came back up here
and decided to go
into the Oval as, uh, you know,
as president
of the United States.
And, uh, I went over there
and then called my dad
and asked him to come.
And it was, uh...
it was a very touching moment,
a very emotional moment for me.
And I think for him, too.

NARRATOR:

The president's new home
at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
features 132 rooms
with living quarters on
the second and third floor.

ROCHON:

the executive residence--
the mansion, as we call it,
or the president's house--
there are, approximately 95
full-time staff members.
The engineers, the carpenters,
the plumbers, the housekeepers.

WALTERS:

The curators that take care of
the White House
fine arts collection.
We have a florist shop
who takes care of all
the cut floral arrangements
in the, in the residence.
We made this very, uh, thin pod
out of dark chocolate.

WALTERS:

We also have a kitchen staff.

NARRATOR:

prepared for the First Family,
and there's basically
24-hour room service,
but with one caveat.

WALTERS:

One of the things
that most people don't
understand about the White House
is that the president
and the first lady
are responsible for all
their personal expenses.

McBRIDE:

your three square meals a day,
you're paying for that,
and you're paying
for things that you would

no matter where you lived.
Your dry cleaning,
items for your pets,
toiletries.

WALTERS:

The first time I presented
a bill to Mrs. Reagan,
she said,
"What's this?" And I said,
"Well, Mrs. Reagan,
you're responsible
for all of your
own incidentals."
And she said, "I'll have
to talk to Ronnie about this."
And certainly after that
it was never a problem,
she was just
somewhat taken aback by it.

NARRATOR:

At the time,
Ronald Reagan's salary as
president was \$200,000 a year.
Today, the job pays \$400,000.
And, of course,
transportation is included.
The president travels
in a fleet
that includes
two customized 747s...
-See the hot tub?
-(laughing)
...five identical
marine helicopters,
and the presidential state car,
also known as the Beast,
a 15,000-pound
rolling fortress.

METZGER:

two presidential limos
in the motorcade,

for obvious reasons.
Then there's the Secret Service
right behind that,
the very heavily armed agents.

NARRATOR:

the new president is isolated
in a bubble of protection.
The office of the presidency
is a lonely office.

MCBRIDE:

really fully prepared
until you are sitting
in the Oval Office.
You can't fully feel
that weight
of the responsibility
until you're sitting
in that chair.

NARRATOR:

look to make a statement
on day one
with bold policy moves
to quickly cement
the transfer of power.
On his first day,
Jimmy Carter pardons
all of the Vietnam
draft dodgers.
Ronald Reagan's first move
is to carry out his campaign
promise to cut spending
by putting a freeze
on all hiring
of civilian federal workers.

BRANDS:

In fact,
there is some incentive,
if you get elected
by running against
your predecessor,

then you probably want
to make a sharp break.
(cheering and applause)
It will serve Trump to show
that this is not
a continuation.
And we will make America
great again.
God bless you and good night.
I love you.

NARRATOR:

The future success or failure
of a presidency
is hard to predict.
But for over two centuries,
there's been one hallmark
in our national politics:
the understanding that power
is transferred peacefully
from president to president.
It has endured directly
from George Washington
to today.
That has never been
interrupted,
it has never been disputed.

UPDEGROVE:

of our nation
that 200 some odd years
after the Declaration
of Independence
and the Bill of Rights
and the Constitution
were put into place,
we've never had a problem.
That shows you
how absolutely strong
the underpinnings
of the United States truly are.