

Biden and Trump vie to project authority, making for a tense transition

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By Matt Viser and Ashley Parker

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When President-elect Joe Biden put his weight behind a coronavirus aid package recently, it energized an effort that had seemed dead and nudged political adversaries to the bargaining table, with success now looking far more likely.

President Trump, meanwhile, spent last week demanding that a major defense bill nod to his cultural and political agenda, threatening a veto if it wasn't changed. But even some faithful Republican supporters shrugged him off, embracing a final draft that not only ignores Trump's demands but rebukes some of his moves as commander in chief.

That split screen of contrasting presidential trajectories is growing ever more vivid. One leader is steadily gathering power, building an administration and making policy proclamations; the other is seeing his power ebb even as he angrily insists he won an election that, a growing number of allies admit, he clearly lost.

It has made for a transition like no other, as two leaders simultaneously try to project the aura of the presidency.

"You have one who is refusing to not just concede defeat, but admit reality," longtime Republican strategist Doug Heye said. If a presidential transition is a delicate dance, he added, in this case Biden does not have a partner, because "the other person is not even admitting any music is playing."

Even under the best circumstances, the transfer of power, especially between parties, has tensions. "The country looks to the new, but the old is still in office until January 20th," said David Marchick, director of the nonpartisan Center for Presidential Transition. "The eyes of the world look to the new president, but there's only one president at a time."

In this case, Biden — eager to signal that he's poised to take charge of the country's health crisis — is issuing a drumbeat of official statements, exhorting Americans to wear masks and announcing Cabinet appointments. Trump, refusing to cede authority, is firing government officials, withdrawing U.S. troops stationed overseas and issuing veto threats, giving few signs of an imminent departure.

Partly to assert his authority, Biden has accelerated the pace of his appointments in recent weeks. Announcements initially planned for after Thanksgiving were moved earlier, and that stepped-up pace means Biden has now named more nominees than many of his predecessors at this point.

Underneath the public posturing, power is unmistakably shifting.

While Biden's aides scramble to keep up with the résumés flooding their inboxes, the White House has become eerily quiet as Trump staffers grimly look for new employment. Biden's team is busy planning an inauguration that Trump is unlikely to attend.

And Biden, not Trump, is often the one taking the more traditionally presidential role. On Wednesday, surrounded by American flags at a theater in Wilmington, Del., he spoke virtually to four workers about their experiences during the pandemic. Help is on the way, he said.

At the same time, Trump released a meandering 46-minute video filled with falsehoods attacking the integrity of the election, prompting Republican Rep. Adam Kinzinger (Ill.) to , "Time to delete your account." Many other Republicans are reluctant to say publicly that Biden has won, even while they privately accept the inevitable.

Biden on Wednesday also received the Presidential Daily Brief, a compilation of the nation's most sensitive intelligence, though he cannot use it to execute any decisions yet.

Trump — who routinely skips reading the briefing and has at times disregarded the oral summary — did not have such a briefing on his public schedule that day, and White House aides would not say if he got it. "President Trump is regularly briefed on intelligence," White House spokesman Judd Deere said.

Biden has begun talking privately to Republican senators, aiming to lay the groundwork for an ambitious start to his administration, filled with early executive orders and bills. He has asked Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, to stay on and help lead the fight against the coronavirus, serving for what will be Fauci's seventh president.

Biden's strategy is to project calm in a way that forecasts competence. Most of his days are spent on Zoom talking to staffers and interviewing potential nominees. He makes occasional forays to the Queen theater, which has become his de facto briefing center, with cameras set up for virtual roundtables and a backdrop erected to project a sense of formality for news conferences.

Biden has held meetings with governors, mayors, labor leaders and, on Friday, a group of county executives. He has drawn criticism for not meeting earlier with prominent Black leaders, which he plans to do Tuesday, and he has an open request from Latino and Asian American leaders eager for more diversity among the top Cabinet picks.

The president-elect has begun speaking regularly with congressional leaders behind the scenes, formulating an early legislative push. He told CNN's Jake Tapper he plans to encourage all Americans to wear masks for his first 100 days in office and said he will take a vaccine in public to show Americans it is safe.

And he's pressing ahead with appointments, outpacing his recent predecessors. Five weeks after Election Day, Biden has announced eight nominees requiring Senate approval; Obama had announced seven by this point and Trump five, according to the Center for Presidential Transition.

At this stage in 2000, George W. Bush had not even been declared the winner yet, and Bill Clinton — notoriously slow on such matters — did not make his first Cabinet nominations until Dec. 12, 1992, six weeks after the election.

The most successful transition in recent memory, Marchick said, was Bush's handoff to Obama, as the two leaders coordinated messaging, policy and execution during the 2008 financial crisis. Outgoing Bush officials checked with Obama's team before implementing new policies, and Obama was careful to avoid undercutting Bush on foreign diplomacy.

That contrasts sharply with the disconnect that marks the current transition, though career officials in various agencies have started meeting with Biden transition staffers.

While Trump still has a grip on his party, cracks are beginning to show.

The president is feuding with fellow Republicans in Georgia, making baseless attacks on their oversight of the election as they prepare to conduct two runoff elections next month that will decide the balance of power in the U.S. Senate.

Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, recently pressed Trump to prioritize getting "some last-minute wins," one official said. But Trump mostly reacted by threatening to veto the defense bill unless Congress repeals a federal provision known as Section 230, which gives websites legal protection when damaging material is posted by others.

That, too, is related to the election results, since Trump believes Twitter and other Big Tech companies were unfair to him during the campaign. Repealing the law would open to the door for social media companies to be held legally liable for the way they police their platforms.

The president has also attacked a provision in the bill instructing the Pentagon to change, within three years, the names of military bases that were named after Confederate leaders.

Republican leaders have largely brushed aside Trump's concerns, saying that the bill cannot pass if his demands are met and that it is crucial so the troops can be paid.

If Trump follows through on his veto threat and Congress overrides him, it will be the first time that has happened during his presidency — a striking sign of his struggle to maintain his clout.

Beyond that, Trump has little in the way of a plan, according to several senior administration officials, and is focused rather on cataloguing the ways he insists he was robbed of victory.

“The large majority of his time has been unstructured, in the Oval [Office], just going nuts about voter fraud,” said a senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the president’s private actions. “I don’t know how else to put it. That occupies seemingly every waking moment of his day.”

Trump’s anger over Biden’s win in Georgia, long a Republican-dominated state, has deepened in recent days, and he has become fixated on a new video — cited by Fox News’s Sean Hannity on Thursday — that purports to show suspicious suitcases at a Georgia canvassing center. Georgia officials have said the video shows entirely normal ballot processing.

Pardons are likely to become a major push in Trump’s final weeks in office, and the White House has also been working on last-minute executive orders to cement some conservative priorities, although they have not yet reached Trump’s desk. Advisers have also urged Trump to help Republicans hold onto the Senate seats in Georgia as a way to protect his legacy.

But inside the White House, the mood has darkened and a sense of fatalism has engulfed much of the staff. White House communications director Alyssa Farah resigned Thursday, a tacit admission that Trump had lost the election.

Even senior staffers are starting to move on, sending a steady stream of résumés to Republican firms. But Trump officials who were especially combative on Twitter are viewed as “pretty toxic,” said one Republican operative, and are being advised to seek work in less political venues first, providing a sort of cooling-off period.

That deflated atmosphere, along with the large number of staffers working from home, has created a silent mood at a traditionally frenzied White House.

“It’s the quietest it’s ever been,” one senior administration official said. “The biggest thing is there’s way less foot traffic to the Oval.”