

President-Elect Obama Wants to Hear From You

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In his victory speech, President-elect Obama said that he wants to hear from the public. He wants to know our priorities, and our ideas. He has launched a new Web site, with information on the transition plans and progress. There is a place for you to send your comments and suggestions on public policy. Mr. Obama can't read all of the posts personally, but the staff will read them. This is your chance. Try it. www.change.gov.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." On election night, community organizers all over the United States said "YES WE DID!"

At noon on January 20, 2009, President-elect Barack Obama will take his oath of office and become the 44th president of the United States. There's a lot of work to do in the 68 days until then.

During the transition, the president-elect will choose his staff and cabinet, attend briefing sessions on national security and other issues, and begin plans to introduce his new policies to Congress – and get them passed.

No one can possibly know everything. That's why the president has such a large staff. The president leads the executive branch of our government. The executive branch manages the daily business of the nation, through the 15 cabinet departments. The secretaries and upper-level staff of each department should be experts in their respective fields. Right now, President-elect Obama is reviewing candidates for each position. He must find people who agree with his philosophy and priorities for the government, and are capable of doing those jobs.

The appointed staff members fall into two groups. The White House personnel – chief of staff, press secretary, political director, legislative director, and advisors on various topics are the president's personal staff and do not have to be confirmed by the Senate. The constitution does require the Senate to confirm cabinet secretaries and other high-ranking cabinet positions, judges, ambassadors, and other diplomatic posts. The confirmation hearings will begin after the inauguration. I'll write more about that process in January.

Until they resign their seats, Senators Obama, D-Illinois, and Biden, D-Delaware, are still members of the U.S. Senate. While Congress has adjourned for the year, the leaders can reopen their session if an emergency or unusual situation occurs. If that happens, Mr. Obama and Mr. Biden would still have all of the rights and responsibilities of senators. When they resign, the governors of Illinois and Delaware will appoint new senators to fill those seats. There will be elections for both seats in 2010.

Rep. Rahm Emanuel, D-Illinois, will be the new White House chief of staff. There will be a special election to fill Mr. Emanuel's House seat, probably within a few months. There may be other appointments or special elections, depending on whom Mr. Obama appoints to which positions.

Mr. Obama has stated that the economy will be “job one” for his new administration. His team is now preparing their legislative plans. Many news commentators speculate on what the new president will accomplish in his first 100 days in office. The “100 days” is not a legal target. It refers to the first 100 days of President Franklin Roosevelt’s first term in 1933, in which he faced enormous challenges during the Great Depression. President Roosevelt established his “New Deal” and accomplished a lot during that time. Since then, the media has watched the first 100 days of every new president’s term because it’s dramatic and feeds the public’s desire for quick results.

The Electoral College meets on December 15. While we don’t expect any surprises, Barack Obama will not officially be the president-elect until the Senate opens and reads the Electoral College results in January. I’ll write about that process next week.

For more information, go to www.usa.gov and www.change.gov.

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