

Trump's Haste in Naming Cabinet Could Be Inviting Post-Inaugural Peril

President-elect is outpacing his predecessors with speed of nomination process.



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Thirty-seven days after winning the presidency, Bill Clinton announced his intention to nominate Lloyd Bentsen as his Treasury secretary. It was his first Cabinet announcement. In 2008, President Obama worked quite a bit quicker, announcing eight of his 15 Cabinet nominations in the same time frame.

But even he couldn't match the speed at which Donald Trump has unveiled his nominees.

With the recent additions of Rick Perry and Ryan Zinke to his proposed Cabinet, Trump has already announced 13 nominations at the same point.

Such a pace is undoubtedly historic, and has quieted some of the transition's biggest critics. In doing so, Trump has again flipped political convention on its head, eschewing privacy and tireless vetting for what some have called an unregimented, undisciplined operation.

Many of Trump's tweets and announcements are unscripted and "totally in the moment," forcing transition staffers to scramble and accelerate certain processes, according to a key adviser to the transition team.

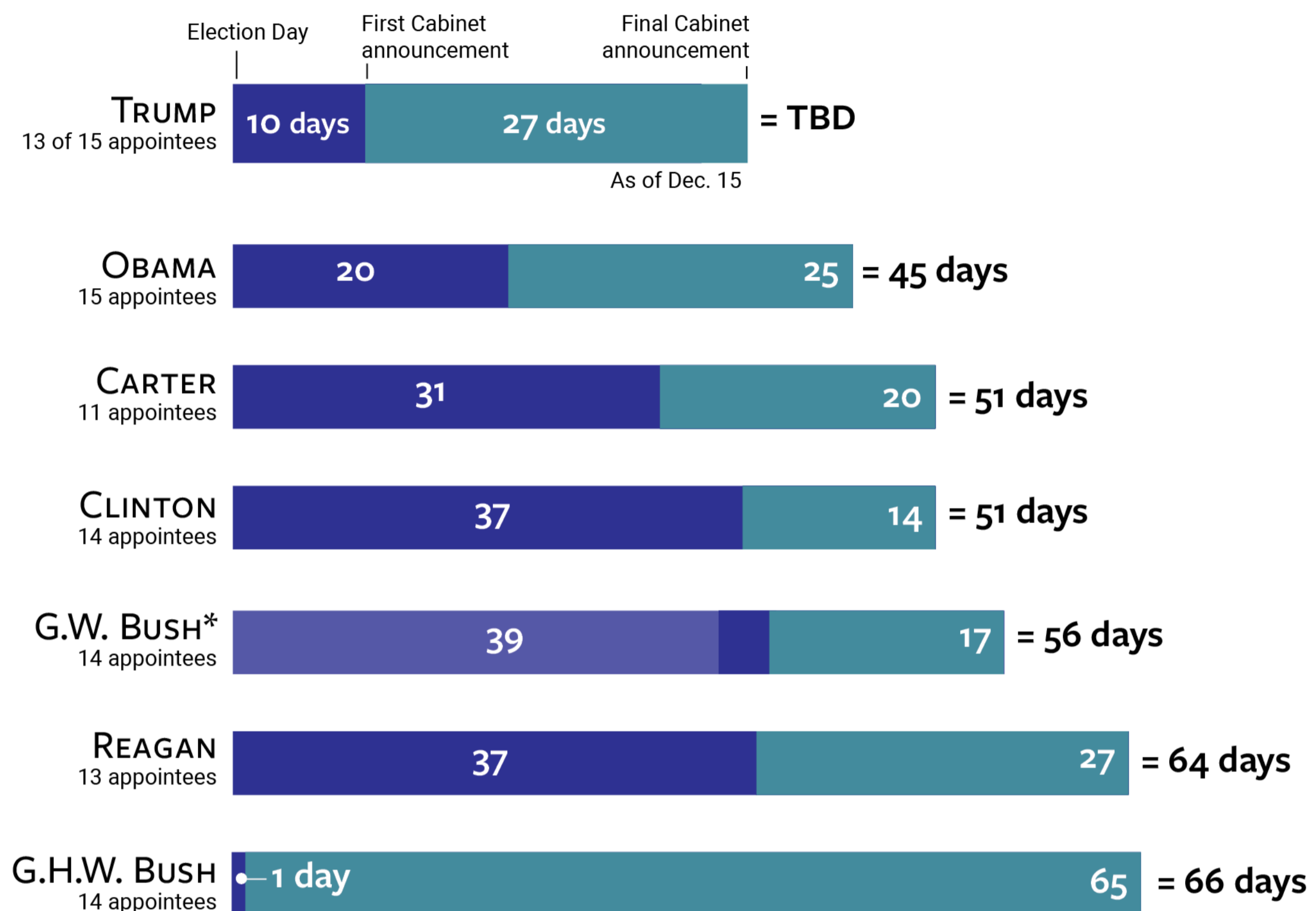
In late November, Donald Trump and his advisers settled on retired Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis as Defense secretary and, if Trump himself is to be believed, planned the announcement for Monday, Dec. 5. Only he couldn't wait that long, jumping the gun four days early.

"I don't want to tell you this because I want to save the suspense for next week," Trump said in a nationally televised rally in Cincinnati, Ohio, on Dec. 1, before announcing his plan to nominate Mattis. "Don't let it outside of this room. Do you promise?"

This lack of discipline is exacerbated by the inexperience of many of Trump's closest confidants, the transition adviser said, adding that Trump has surrounded himself with "a lot of New Yorkers that have never done politics and government before."

Donald Trump stocking his Cabinet at a historic pace

President-elect Donald Trump is on track to fill his Cabinet at the fastest clip in modern history, having announced nearly all of his choices in just over a month. Below, we compare the pace of Trump's nominations to that of previous incoming presidents.



*George W. Bush wasn't officially named president-elect until 35 days after the election.

The biggest concern with the transition's accelerated pace, however, is what it may mean for the Trump team's vetting process.

"I think there's a real question about how much vetting they're doing before they're making the announcements," said Max Stier, president and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service and veteran of four separate transition efforts.

According to *Politico*, Trump's vetting operation is being led by Don McGahn, partner at Jones Day and Trump's choice for White House counsel, and he is being aided by lawyers at O'Melveny & Myers. A transition source also tells *National Journal* that lawyers at McGahn's firm are involved.

The transition team's vetting stands in stark contrast to the efforts undertaken by Obama and his team in 2008, when the incoming administration required all prospective nominees to answer 63 questions and had teams of lawyers pore over hun-

dreds of pages of records for each official under consideration. Conversely, multiple individuals who interviewed with Trump told the Associated Press they were not asked for personal documents or vetting information.

The Trump transition team did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

So why haven't Trump's intended nominees been subjected to the same laborious process?

"It could be that they're not vetting carefully or that the kinds of things they're vetting for are not the things [administrations] usually vet for," said David Lewis, chair of the political science department at Vanderbilt University and author of *The Politics of Presidential Appointments: Political Control and Bureaucratic Performance*. Lewis specifically mentioned the importance of vetting for tax problems, which derailed Obama's nomination of Sen. Tom Daschle to be Health and Human Services secretary in early 2009, as well as two potential attorneys general for Clinton in 1993.

Among Obama's 63 questions, said Lewis, was whether the candidates had done anything in their lives "that would possibly embarrass the president. ... I don't think that's the kind of vetting that they're doing."

The confirmation process for Cabinet nominees is invasive, and in purging the transition effort of lobbyists and those with a deep knowledge of the government's workings, Trump and Vice President-elect Mike Pence have effectively chosen to wing it. While improvising served Trump well during his campaign, it may not be the smartest strategy for a transition.

"When you do this all out in the open with the vetting, you don't know what you're going to find," Stier said. "They're unlikely to understand just how challenging that is going to be."

Hasty announcements brought on by half-baked vetting can have a wide range of consequences, the most obvious of which is public embarrassment for both the president and nominees. If poor vetting failed to uncover "serious skeletons in [a nominee's] closet, it could make the president look incompetent," Lewis said.

Even beyond that, avoidable complications glossed over by lackluster pre-vetting can lead to prolonged confirmation battles, which stand to derail the momentum of an administration's first 100 days and leave the president rushing to recover.

"The risk of quick appointments is that if they haven't been thoroughly vetted, then that can cause problems," Lewis said. "If all of the congressional attention and media attention and public attention is on bruising confirmation battles, that can derail your agenda."

Trump's historic pace has mitigated his detractors' thirst for turmoil in the short run, but he may yet come to regret what he has given up.

“They’d better go in with eyes wide open,” Stier said.

Graphic by John Irons



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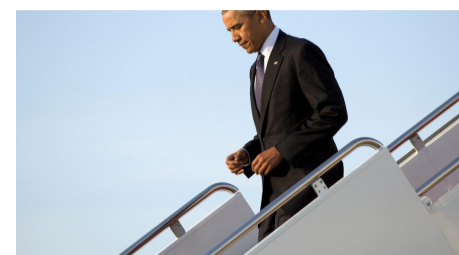


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