



Mission is Possible Presidential Transition Mini-Series

Episode 1: John Pistole: Change is the Constant in Life

SASHA: Welcome back to Mission is Possible. I am Sasha O'Connell and I am thrilled to be introducing this miniseries of the Mission is Possible podcast, a joint project between Guidehouse and American University. This spin off series dives into the world of Presidential transitions and explores what can be expected inside the agencies during this timeframe and how best to prepare for success by talking with the folks who have been there. Thank you for tuning in, and please enjoy.

On this episode, we are pleased to welcome Patricia Cogswell as a host. Patty is a Strategic Advisor for Guidehouse's National Security Segment, having recently retired as Deputy Administrator to the TSA. Today, Patty is joined by former Administrator of the TSA and Deputy Director of the FBI, John Pistole. They discuss their shared experience at TSA and John's perspective on experiencing a Presidential transition from the career and political appointee side.

PATTY: John, thank you for joining us for today's special episode. If I could ask you to start with a short summary of your career in the federal government, highlighting where you were during presidential transitions.

JOHN: Sure. I'll just start it off, yeah, I'm John Pistole and I'm currently the President of Anderson University in Anderson, Indiana, my alma mater. And prior to that, I served as Administrator of TSA for about four and a half years from the summer of 2010 until the end of 2014 and thoroughly enjoyed the challenges and opportunities there.

And then before that I served for almost 27 years as an FBI agent and finished up as the Deputy Director of the FBI, which is the senior career position in the FBI. The FBI just has one presidential appointee, and so I served for almost six years still a new indoor record for longest serving Deputy Director, by that title anyway. But, served in Minneapolis as a street agent, and New York City in the '80s investigating the Mob, the Cosa Nostra as they say, and then went to FBI Headquarters and spent about three years there. And then Indianapolis as a white-collar civil rights and cyber-crime supervisor, and to Boston as what's known as an Assistant Special Agent in Charge, ASAC for about two and a half years overseeing New England cyber-crimes, white collar crimes, things like that.

And then to FBI Headquarters in 2000, and then became a part of inspection staff and things. And then 9/11 happened and of course, changed everything. And then was invited a few months later into the newly expanded Counterterrorism Division. And I said no three times and then director Bob Mueller contacted me and said, "I'd like you to serve." I said, "Happily, sir," and so I did that, and then stayed there from then until, I went to TSA in 2010.



So, in presidential transitions and going back as far as 2004, actually was the FBI briefer for the potential candidates, so President Bush in '04 and Senator John Kerry and his running mate. We briefed both of them and, there's a CIA and then myself are briefers.

And it's something similar in 2008 for candidate Senator Obama. And then also, after the night of the inauguration for now President Obama, but before his inaugural address, briefed him and his Chief of Staff at the time Rahm Emanuel, in terms of some of the security protocols that would be followed the next day as he was giving his speech on the Mall. And it's kind of interesting because the first time I'd seen him in quite a while from that initial intel briefing and I don't think he really remembered me but, so we're just talking briefly with Mark Sullivan, the Director of Secret Service and Rahm Emanuel. And then the President turns to me and says, "So what do you think I should say tomorrow?" My initial response was, "Well, uh, I think everybody appreciates brevity, so I'd say be brief." He smiled and laughed a hearty laugh, so I thought, okay, well there you go.

I wasn't actually involved much in transitions until when I was TSA Administrator in 2012, but it was obviously a re-election and so there was very little actual transition involved in that. Obviously, the normal course of people from the first term to the second term, things like that.

PATTY: You are one of a relatively small number of officials who both had a long tenure as a career senior executive and then went through the confirmation process for a political appointment. Can you talk with us a little bit about your experience? What factors weighed into your decision to accept, and what was the confirmation process like?

JOHN: I'd say it's unique for each person, both in terms of their openness to and saying yes to that opportunity, that possibility, that honor, in my mind. When I was asked whether I would be willing to serve as TSA Administrator, given I was the Deputy Director of the FBI and thoroughly enjoying that job and just that's back when the FBI had a great reputation.

When I was asked, literally my first thought was, "Now, there's a thankless job. What moron would want to do that?" And so, I was that moron, I guess. Then I learned that there'd been actually two prior nominees for the job who had not made it through the Senate confirmation process and that TSA was ranked about number 230 out of 234 best places to work in US government. And so, I'm thinking, "Hm, okay, so not only is it a place that nobody wants to work, but I'm the third candidate for the job, so what does that say about my- both intellect and my emotional intelligence," and all those things that come into mind when I've got a perfectly enjoyable, satisfying job and all that.

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But I also have a strong sense of God's guidance and leading in my life, at least for the recent past, and I just thought, "Well, if it's God thinks I should be open to it." And so, thought about it, prayed about it, talked to my wife about it, and decided to say yes to the process as long as it could be kept as confidential as possible because everybody who works in the government, you know that once word is out that you are even considering leaving, you become somewhat of a lame duck, so I didn't want that to happen, recognizing that I might be number three for three of nominees that didn't get confirmed.

The confirmation process was fascinating. I had briefed other nominees, obviously, for appointed positions, but never been that candidate. So that was a fascinating process, and really helpful for me in terms of- once I was actually confirmed to know people from TSA and DHS who I thought did a really good job on the briefing and those who perhaps could have done a better job. And their level of preparation and just how the addressed the myriad issues that TSA and DHS were dealing with back in 2010.

PATTY: Well, we'll say for all of us, thank you for your willingness to continue to serve and take on difficult, but frankly more rewarding jobs.

In thinking of our presidential transitions more generally, and just continuing along the comment you just made, what have you seen that you thought or found made a transition more successful, and how can federal officials in national security agencies prepare for the transition, whether it's a change of administration or a second term?

JOHN: Yeah, so I think part of it is just understanding for those nominees to really have as deep as understanding as possible of the agency or department that they are going in to lead. Oftentimes, coming from outside government, you have impressions, is what I've learned, and perhaps some stereotypes, just as I did going from the FBI to DHS/TSA. And I think more due diligence, I'll say, that the nominee, and people in transition in whatever capacity, can do to find out what are the opportunities to make improvements, and what are the challenges to making those changes. And not just practical or pragmatic, but political, because that's part of the process, obviously.

I think that's all part of it. Just both sides, both the agencies, departments, and the nominees preparing as best as possible and unfortunately sometimes, that doesn't happen for whatever reason. And I think we see the results of that where a new secretary might come in, or a new



agency head, either one, doesn't know what they're doing because they're not subject matter experts. Not that you have to know everything, but you should know- if you're working for a security agency, you should know something about security. If you're working for a regulatory agency, you should know something about regulatory matters. And then, every person needs to know about budgetary matters for the US government, which are much different from the private sector, and sometimes things don't translate well. So I think just that openness and willingness to roll up your sleeves and learn about each other, so the nominee about the agency, and the leadership of the agency and then also those people on the Hill, if it's a Senate confirmed position, you'd better get to know those people who are going to be voting for your confirmation. And what are their interests and their pet projects, let's say, and how can you best address that, so it's a whole package of things.

PATTY: I couldn't agree with you more, especially on the budget side of things. I have found quite a few who have stumbled through the process not understanding how budgets can make or break your tenure because they just don't get the right support in place.

JOHN: Yeah, no, that's a good point, Patty, and I think that was one of the advantages of coming from within the government, where I was basically the COO of the FBI as the Deputy Director with great budgetary help from all the people who actually did the number crunching and all that, and then that would be presented. But yeah, without that background, that I think anybody coming from completely outside the government, never worked in government before, that part, they need to pay really close attention that part of the briefings.

PATTY: Continuing on the conversation of briefings, and you've highlighted on some of this already, you've been responsible both for preparing briefing materials for incoming political appointees and received a lot of briefings as you began your tenure as TSA Administrator. Do you have recommendations for best practices or pitfalls to avoid in the briefings themselves?

JOHN: Yes, I have a couple. One is, just as the name implies, the debrief. Subject matter experts sometimes tend to go into a lot of detail because they are subject matter experts and that may be appropriate at that time, but probably not. It's probably the 20,000 to 25,000-foot level initially to have supporting background material, whether it's in an appendix or annex, but have that available in case the nominee asks follow-up questions. Say, "Well, if you turn to Appendix A, there's that detail." But to keep it at the high level and succinct, but thorough.

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So that's a challenge sometimes for briefers and just because you are a good briefer, doesn't mean you're a good subject matter expert and vice versa. So, it's a combination of those talents, skills, and abilities that I think really can be effective if you have somebody who can be thorough, yet succinct and then have supporting documentation. It's just like briefing a president. All the dozens and dozens of times I briefed either in the Oval or the State Room, the whole point is to keep it at the high level and then to be responsive to whatever the President or other principals are going to want to follow up on. And hopefully you have that detail that you can go into, and if you don't have the specific answer, just say, "Here's what I know, I don't know that specific point, and so I'll get that and get back with you."

That's the whole idea, to be responsive and to really try to be sensitive to what the nominees' interests and, frankly, attention span. I would mention one, I won't actually say who it was, but one person I was briefing. He could not keep his eyes open. I don't know if he'd had a tough night, but he just kept, until I would pause and after a few seconds then, and then I would continue on. And I thought, "I think he knows he's dozing off," but so be attuned to the interest level and the ability to absorb new information in that setting.

PATTY: Continuing on this topic you obviously briefed candidates, presidents-elect, presidents. Can you talk a little about your experience conducting those briefings? Did you find significant differences pre- and post-election in how those briefings went?

JOHN: Yes, and I think pre-election and pre being sworn into the job, there's obviously just generalizing, but there's a general sense of what can I absorb right now without all the other detailed information from all the handlers, the assistants and all the deputies and everyone who actually will be the means by which the secretary or the director or the administrator will be receiving information once they're sworn in. I'd say, not naivete in a bad way, but just the openness to receiving anything and asking any question, that is usually temporary; again, not necessarily in a bad way, perhaps more channeled way to say, after they've been in office for a while, to say okay, what can we and what should we be doing about this situation?

And then they have the context of knowing what the scope of responsibilities and authorities are, that the Department of Transportation can't actually regulate airlines on security issues. They can do that for safety issues. And some of those subtleties and nuances that most people outside of government would say, "Well, safety, security, I don't know, it's all the same thing, right?" So things like that and being attuned to how that candidate's perspective and paradigm will shift as she goes from the nominee to becoming the actual cabinet official or, again, director or administrator.



PATTY: If I could summarize on sort of my experience. There's one kind of level of information you want to have, even if you are a national security perspective, when you know the primary reason you're receiving the brief is so you can say something in public. It's another level of conversation you want to have if you're leading a policy discussion or debate because you don't want to say in public some of the things you absolutely need to have conversations about when you're having a policy discussion. And people need to remember, when you're briefing a candidate for, or briefing appointee before confirmation, they're focused on what they can say, not about the merits of the policy discussion (laughs).

JOHN: No, that's a great distinction, Patty, and I'm glad you mentioned that because that's absolutely true and most of those nominees are effective communicators in public, and that's one of the reasons they're being invited in addition to their expertise and political allegiance and all that. That's a good point.

PATTY: Continuing on this trend, how did you adjust your briefings for the different personalities of incoming leaders or based on what their national security goals were?

JOHN: Yes, I think that's one of the key objectives for any briefing team and transition team is to know thy audience going back to kind of a take on Socrates, I take it. But just the idea of how does your person like to acquire information? There's been lots written about the distinctions between the last three presidents, our current President and our prior two Presidents in terms of how they would receive briefings, and do they like a written narrative, a one-pager that they can read ahead of time before the briefer comes in, or do they want to see charts and graphs and maps and things like that, are they more visual in that regard, or do they just want to talk about something without reference to any documents or anything?

Honestly, that's one of the keys, is how does the nominee best receive information, how do they want to receive information and then when you have to provide and in a different form, to explain why you're doing that, so it can be seen as, this is an exception but it's important because, so that relevancy issues, so we're doing this this way because it's relevant. We don't say to the person, but that's what we've assessed has been your learning style, the way you acquire information. And so just that whole paradigm of how does your nominee best acquire information and what's their preferred model of delivery for that? So that's one of the keys.





And then finding out as quickly as you can what is the content they're interested in? And you take any presidential administration and look at the cabinet, and everybody's got their own interest and expertise and agendas, and so the better you can understand those three things, the better your briefings can be in terms of addressing those, because if you keep getting asked a question about this one area, but you're over here talking about policy or other things, that's not going to be meeting the needs for that department or agency or, clearly, the principal who's running that. So I think that's part of the key is just understanding both the processes and how things work and then what is the content, the subject matter that they're really interested in and have an ability to go into greater detail because of their background and experience.

PATTY: I very much echo your point on how different briefing styles or briefing needs can be. I remember I had one boss who was a former prosecutor, we didn't really brief her, we were more deposed by her.

JOHN: Yeah.

PATTY: Compared and contrasted to some of the other officials I have worked for over the years where they wanted to engage with you and learn the material and understand your perspective, and they'd let you do kind of an overview, but they'd want to engage, right? So, you can have widely variant in how their approach is.

JOHN: So, what I like to tell people is you need to be flexible, you know, to be able to just demonstrate flexibility-

PATTY: Yeah.

JOHN: ... and your style and content may need to change during the course of a ten-minute briefing, and you have to be flexible to address the needs of the person at that time.

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PATTY: One more question on briefings. Do you have advice for national security officials who will be providing short briefings, especially those involving investigative or law enforcement information that's factual, but adapts to that incoming official's background or briefing style? I would say in particular; you've had the experience of trying to explain law enforcement investigative techniques and national security to people who do not have background in those topics.

JOHN: Right, and I think that's part of it. Going back to know thy audience is, what is that person's background, and what is their level of comfort. There's this thing called the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure, or grand juries in this thing called Rule 16, that limits the disclosure of grand jury material, and so things like that you may be speaking a foreign language to somebody. If it's important for them to understand, or at least be exposed to that and it's relevant to whatever their position is, then you just have to put it out there and usually what I've found is to have a written memo where it- you highlight all those things, that's a leave behind that they can refer to later and then ask their assistants or aides to follow up on things like that.

When you get into the law enforcement sensitive information, there's always a hesitancy to share anything in- obviously of a pending nature because of- this person's not in position yet, if it's a pre-confirmation briefing, and so there's always some limit on what that information is. And if they ask specific questions about specific investigations, that's something you really need to get the general counsel's perspective on what can and should be briefed because, as my example of the first two nominees getting confirmed by the Senate that's something that does happen. It's not a rubber stamp and so you need to be careful about and sensitive to what that information may be.

National security's a whole different animal in terms of resources and methods and things that will not typically be briefed in a setting that, I'm talking about a setting for most of the cabinet and department heads that the need-to-know basis rule would kick in, unless it was a need-specific need-to-know, and then I'd just again, recommend that the briefer has clear guidance from general counsel's office as to what should and should not be briefed and then that can be relayed to a candidate or the nominee's handlers. And so, it's not too awkward for the briefer to say, "Well, that's classified and I can't tell you that,"

PATTY: And that always goes over so well? (laughs) What advice would you give to career officials who are undergoing their first presidential transition?

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JOHN: Learn about the department niche, as I mentioned before. The importance of knowing, not only the broad brush issues, so what is this department or agency responsible for, but what are the subtleties and nuances that have been the challenges in the past year, three years, in prior administration, whatever it may be. I was surprised at how little I knew about TSA when I started going through the briefing and the Senate confirmation process. I was so focused on FBI things, Department of Justice, and then working with DHS at the department level, I just wasn't focused on TSA issues. And of course, being armed, I didn't go through TSA security when I traveled. There's protocol for law enforcement officers.

So really was shocked to realize how little I knew that I just assumed, well that's part of DHS and it was created after 9/11, it's those people either in the white or blue uniforms at the airport that I don't deal with. And so that was a wake-up call for me and I would strongly encourage anybody who's in that process to do your homework. It's the greatest challenge and opportunity that you're going to have at this time, to say, "Yes. I'm going to do the best possible job I can and the best way I can prepare for that is learning everything I can and these briefings are one of those steps. But most of the learning will need to come from my own reading, research, asking questions, things outside of briefings." And the briefings should be where you can really focus on those things that the subject matter experts will know or will get the answers to.

I think just really doing your homework, whatever helped you be successful in life up to this point, do that, but with the focus being on the department or agency you've been asked to go in and lead.

PATTY: I think that's fantastic advice, not only for approaching confirmation, but also for becoming a well-acquainted and sufficiently prepared to lead the federal organization as well. Would you say that you looked at those as two stages? Or did you try to do them concurrently when you were making that transition?

JOHN: I think I blended the two, trying to make sure I understood everything I could about TSA, for example and DHS, but also what I believe my own strengths were in terms of leadership and ability to acquire information and then process that information in a way that made sense, that if I was to be confirmed, how I would use that. But the whole Senate confirmation briefing process is, frankly, it's a grind to go through so many different briefings. And of course, as you know better than virtually all, TSA being a large agency, there's a lot of moving parts, as in every agency, the challenge is how do you both understand that agency from the policy standpoint, but also from the personnel.



The TSA when I got there was about 60,000 employees and what does that mean for the average Transportation Security Officer (TSO)? What can I do to identify issues and support those people who are performing a critical national security function in keeping terrorists off planes, and do it in a way that best affirms their position and their work in addition to just work-life issues? I think all those things come into play and how that nominee can best prepare, hopefully they know somebody in the department or agency that they can talk to, quote, off the record. And just say, "So, tell me what that looks like and what are the issues that I should be attuned to?" It's both the formal and the informal processes, I would say, of learning about and then just diving in. Just jump in and move forward.

PATTY: What advice do you have for individuals who are in more senior career positions and who may be, therefore, acting between such time as an outgoing political appointee leaves and then the new political appointee is appointed or goes through confirmation? And then once the new person is on board, how can they transition so that they can support the new appointee?

JOHN: That's a great question, Patty, because I think so much of that comes down to the acting person's, expertise, background, interest in continuing to serve, or are they simply a placeholder that says as soon as the nominee gets confirmed, I'm out of here because that's not the person I wanted or perhaps I wanted the job and I was hoping to be nominated and that didn't happen. I mean, that happens from time to time and oftentimes the deputy secretary or the deputy director or administrator might be the best qualified in terms of knowing the organization, how it works, how to deal with the Hill and OMB and all those things, but doesn't have the political connections.

So, I think both identifying that acting person's motives and interest and expertise and for that person to say you are the acting head of the- the department or the agency, do that. Don't let people tell you no if you're not, but you have the authority and responsibility to lead during this time of transition, and so it might be for a week, it might be for a month, it might be close to 18 months as it was with Gale Rossides, who was the acting administrator before I got there because again, those two prior nominees didn't make it through the process. She was not only de facto running TSA, she was TSA in terms of the leadership, although, obviously Congress looks at people differently if they've been confirmed by the Senate. And so I think it's really to embrace that role as an acting person with the understanding that you will not be in that position forever and you will need to adjust to who the personality of the new head of department or agency and be open to what that person's preferences are. A new administrator or director or secretary may come in and depending on how many appointees are in that agency or department, may say, "Hey, I'm going to bring my own person in." So if you're the acting you



might be able to go back to your prior position, but it might be time to either retire or move on, look for other things because it's just not what you wanted to be as it was in the old days.

So that gets back to flexibility. Boy, if you can't be flexible in terms of transition, by its very definition, transition, right? Then you're changing and that's the one constant in life is change and so how can you adapt and best position yourself and the agency in particular, or department, for success during that transition and that acting time. So, embrace the role, use the full authorities of that position, and then be flexible. That's how I'd summarize that.

PATTY: I remember the first time I briefed you after you became TSA Administrator. We were preparing you for a National Security Council deputies committee briefing, where the DHS position was in opposition to FBI's position. I don't know that you'd been on more than a month and a half.

Can you talk a little bit about how I think the phrase you used at the time was where you stand is where you sit. Maybe talk a little bit about how you prepare for taking on the new positions and the responsibilities of your organization and how do you both stay true to your core beliefs around policy but recognize the kind of wider US government perspective.

JOHN: Right, and I think that last point is particularly important, Patty, because each agency has their own respective rules and responsibilities and fiefdoms, I'll say, but you have to look at it from the whole of government perspective. And when I say whole of government, I mean so what's best for the American people and how do you help make decisions that will help, for example, in this case, the traveling public. You know, if you're at TSA, particularly those people who fly, so what decisions will you make and how does that impact them in addition to other agencies that may have equities because they believe because of past practices, that this is the way it should be.

And without going into detail about that particular situation, that's one of the things I've learned that, I had certain beliefs and perhaps some stereotypes about what agencies could and should do, but it's all based on FBI information. And so when I was in the new seat as the head of another agency, I had different perspective on that, and so I needed to be able to articulate that, but do it in a constructive way that would hopefully be a win-win for both agencies because it's a win for the American people and for the government trying to implement changes and that's usually where it comes into play.

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PATTY: You highlighted that you were actually the TSA Administrator, I think, for four and a half years. That is actually a quite long tenure for a political appointee. A lot of them really are at the two years, you know to 36 months range.

JOHN: Yeah.

PATTY: How do you find expectations for length of tenure effects the individual appointee's willingness to take on certain kinds of issues? Obviously many come into new jobs wanting to immediately make a mark, as well they should, some of those things, though, aren't aimed at, and in three years I want to be here, because they may or may not be expecting to be there then.

JOHN: There's a lot to unpack in that and so I think trying to be brief I would say that it's important to understand if you are a senior person in that agency or department, a non-political appointee, try to get a sense of that early on. Is this person dragging a toenail across a base, as one of my FBI contacts talked about his promotion, I said yeah, man, I'm not trying to stay here, just touch that base and launch on. And some are open to that, you know I'm coming in to serve two years. Most are not because again, they want to be effective and think, "Well, I'll be there four years, be there the whole term and maybe two terms or something," but as you mentioned it is rare.

So, I think just trying to discern that. But then just being all in for as long as that person is there and if you are the nominee and you are the one who are serving, I would definitely not broadcast ahead of time that you plan on doing 18 to 24 months or 36 months or something because one thing, you don't know. That may be your plan, but if you're a presidential appointee as we've seen, particularly in this last administration, even if you have a set term, as certain people had, those terms are not always served. Because you do serve at the will of the president.

And so that's one of the questions is how you best do that, while serving the needs of the men and women of that agency and then again, the American people. That's why we have a government, right? Just to serve the needs of the American people and more globally, people around the world who depend on us for whatever that may be. So yeah, there's so much to unpack in that, I think I would leave it at that high level and then what I'd recommend is that you do a follow-up interview of yourself on this, or Sasha, or you two into detail from your perspective on that. You have a lot of good background experience in that.

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PATTY: I think probably the hardest thing for many careerists to understand is, you know, they've looked at problems, especially if they've been in the agency a long time, and they want to dive in on the really hard stuff. And the answer is most politicals go, "I know I'm not going to be here to see this through, so I'm not sure I want to start." Right? So, you have to gauge that with your principal. But knowing you're going to have somebody in for a longer period of time gives you opportunity to take on some of those larger systemic cultural level of certainty in an organization.

JOHN: Right, that's a good point. And having the best sense of that going in is most effective, I believe, for the agency and again, for the American people, but unfortunately you don't know how-

PATTY: You don't always have that, right?

JOHN: ... that luxury, so again, you just, you jump in and say this is the way it is now, we have an opportunity today. I mean, it goes back to the scriptures and the Psalms, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." It's not, we don't have tomorrow, we don't have yesterday. We've got today and so let's do what we can with that and make the most of it and give thanks for the opportunity to be serving, to be in public service, making a difference for others. Hopefully a difference for good.

PATTY: Is there anything we didn't cover that you would want to provide in terms of advice or things that you wish somebody had told you maybe earlier on in your career?

JOHN: Well, you've covered quite a bit, Patty, and we could talk a long time about these things, but no, I think you've covered the high points and each situation is unique, each person, just as each person is unique. And the sooner the nominee and the briefing team and then those from the agency or department that will be allowed to interact with that person during that confirmation process, the more transparent and focused that everybody can be in terms of how do we best do this to serve the American people moving forward? Assuming that I'll be confirmed, let's say, and that I will become the next fill in the blank, and that's what we're all here for, so we're looking toward a common goal and let's give thanks for that privilege and that opportunity. You know, that's part of our system of government, so. And I would just say, best wishes and Godspeed to everybody involved in this process, who's listening to this.

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PATTY: John, thank you so much for joining us on today's episode. It was a pleasure talking with you about your experiences.

SASHA: Thank you so much for tuning in to this episode of the Mission is Possible Presidential Transition miniseries. If you are interested in hearing more, look out for new episodes in this special series, and check out our other episodes on Apple Podcasts, TuneIn, Stitcher, or on the Guidehouse website.