

**Amateur Government:
When Political Appointees Manage
the Federal Bureaucracy**

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About this Report

One of the major recommendations of the National Commission on the Public Service (the Volcker Commission) was to reduce the number of political appointees in the federal bureaucracy. The Volcker Commission focused on the problems wrought by the politicization of the federal service.

In this working paper, which CPM is pleased to publish and distribute, David M. Cohen, who spent 34 years in the federal service, including 25 years in managerial and executive positions and 15 years in the Senior Executive Service, offers a hard-hitting critique of the management competence of political appointees in federal agencies. Drawing on his own experiences and those of former colleagues, with reference to some of the academic literature, he argues that the price of "amateur government" is even far greater than the Volcker Commission detailed. He calls for far-reaching changes that would greatly reduce both the number and levels of political appointees.

With this paper, CPM is proud to resume a lost Brookings tradition of publishing thoughtful, provocative, and timely essays on public administration by actual practitioner-scholars.

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Management

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Introduction

No one would ever have brain surgery performed by a science policy expert without a medical degree who had never set foot inside an operating room. No one would ever have a high-rise office tower designed and built by a real estate industry lobbyist with no architectural training or any construction experience. And surely no multimillion dollar corporation would ever place at the head of a major operating division a young man a few years out of college who had never managed funds or supervised more than a handful of people--even if he were the son of the CEO's boyhood friend.

Yet the management qualifications of most political appointees in our federal government--and even the technical qualifications of many--are no more relevant to their positions than those of these three hypothetical candidates.

We entrust the administration of the largest "company" in the country, with the biggest budget and staff, the widest range of products and services, and the greatest impact on the life of every American, to a cast of well-meaning political loyalists with little or no management experience. They may be smart, committed, and frequently high-energy workaholics, but most have never *run* anything, except, perhaps, a political campaign.

We are a society obsessed with credentials. We demand board certifications for our professionals and licenses for just about everything, from plumbers to day care providers. In addition to formal training and degrees, we also expect demonstrated experience and the testimonials of satisfied clients and customers.

Yet, when it comes to selecting the top leadership of the executive departments and agencies in our national government--including not only cabinet secretaries and agency administrators, but also the many hundreds who head the next two or three organizational echelons--we abandon essentially all professional standards. We

accept the rather mindless notion that any bright and public-spirited citizen can run a government agency, bureau, or office.

Under the mistaken notion that few, if any, managers already in the federal government can be trusted but that all political appointees can, each Administration fills the preponderance of its appointments from *outside* of the government. Thus even those appointees who *do* possess the requisite combination of management and technical expertise are largely unfamiliar with the departments and agencies which they will head, and with the systems, procedures, and "culture" under which they will operate.

What other enterprise would do this, even in the pursuit of innovative thinking and policy correctness? Perhaps a major corporation or institution would fill its chief executive and/or one or two other senior positions from the outside, but would any fill *every* senior management position with individuals with little or no inside experience? Would any organization so managed have any reasonable expectation of success? Fortunately for the government, it has no competition, and thus has never had to pay the price of this bizarre method for selecting its top managers.

To the extent professional standards are employed in making political appointments, they are limited to *technical* or *program policy* expertise. That is, of course, *one* essential credential for the job. But no one involved in the selection process pays much attention to the appointees' management and administrative capacity and track record--not the President and his staff who identify and "vet" the appointees, not the Senators who must advise and consent on the nominees for the most senior positions, not the press and media pundits who report and comment on the selections. And the general public doesn't raise an eyebrow.

The most controversial and celebrated confirmation fights never revolve around a nominee's capacity to *execute* policy, to design and effectively carry out new programs, implement key legislation, or deliver services. A nominee's confirmation may well depend on whether his/her political philosophy is too far to the left or right of the "mainstream," where he/she stands on lightning rod issues, or whether he/she has a drinking problem or is a sexual abuser. But the fact that the candidate can't manage his or her way out of a paper bag has never disqualified anyone in memory from holding a senior position.

This is not a partisan issue, nor a problem unique to particular departments. It transcends Administration, political party, or agency, afflicting both Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. There are clearly notable exceptions. A few appointees are gifted and imaginative managers whose professionalism is of the highest caliber. But they are painfully rare. Most appointees are rank amateurs in administering large organizations and budgets, supervising people, and *executing* (as contrasted with developing or promoting) policy.

Government, as we are increasingly aware, is an enormous enterprise. It is as much a "business" and a "profession" as any other, and, in most respects, far more complex--answerable to many competing "bosses" and "customers." The bottom line is measurable not only in dollars and cents, but in the security and well-being of 260 million Americans and billions of others on foreign shores.

To manage government bureaucracies well takes a combination of many qualities, talents and skills: program or technical expertise; organizational know-how; years of on-the-job experience; management and people skills; the wisdom of maturity; a high comfort level with relative anonymity; a willingness to subordinate private ambitions to the greater good of one's public clients or programs; and, perhaps most significant, a long-term view with an abiding concern for the future of the organization one leads.

Most political appointees fall far short of possessing the requisite management skills. They have little interest in management and seldom even consider that as their proper role. They have a high turnover rate and few stick around long enough to acquire the requisite skills even when they are sufficiently talented and motivated to do so. They have no long-term commitment to the organizations they head.

The American public, in a sense, deserves what it gets. It treats public administration as a game anyone can play. It often complains about the quality of the services it receives, but never considers that the productivity, responsiveness, and performance of the bureaucracy it confronts is a function of the management performance of the political appointees at the top of the organizational hierarchy.

There is another myth that the government "runs itself," that it doesn't really matter if the top leadership just focuses on the big policy issues. Cabinet secretaries and their lieutenants are too important, it is

thought, to get bogged down in the minutiae of regulations and fiscal management. The career staff will tend to the grubby details; they know how to get it done. The career staff *do* know how to get it done, but they are only as good as their political leaders will allow them to be. No matter how well-trained, no army will win many battles and avoid excessive casualties without competent generals who develop the battle plans, marshal the resources, provide the requisite troop strength, and arrange for critical logistic support.

There is a general and growing consensus, both within and outside the federal government, that the government is not working very efficiently. Recent studies, from both the public and academic sectors, have zeroed in on management issues as a major source of the problem, but none has yet identified the management credentials of political appointees as a critical contributing factor.

Vice President Gore's task force on government "reinvention," the National Performance Review, has made a promising start toward a long overdue self-evaluation of the federal government. Most refreshing is the conclusion in the task force's report that the source of the problem is *not* the rank and file career employee, that civil servants are *not* inherently incompetent, unimaginative, or unmotivated.¹ To the contrary, the National Performance Review asserts, they are the best source of ideas and solutions, and will readily take corrective action and operate at high efficiency and responsiveness if only "empowered" to do so. How will this empowerment be accomplished? By freeing civil servants from cumbersome rules and procedures not of their own making and from excessive supervisory control. Decentralizing decision-making will unleash the federal careerist's entrepreneurial energies and untapped initiative.

While correctly concluding that there are too many supervisors and managers in the federal government, resulting in both a top-heavy and unnecessarily expensive work force, the National Performance Review makes three serious errors. First, it makes no distinction among the kinds of work federal employees do, assuming that whether they are performing assembly line repetitive functions or highly analytic and judgmental functions, they require the same level and ratio of supervision. Second, it makes no distinction between the *span of control*

¹ National Performance Review, "Reinventing Human Resource Management," September 1993.

of any manager and the number of *layers* of management, but falls back on recommending an arbitrary ratio of one manager for every 15 subordinates. Third, the National Performance Review never even addresses itself to the cadre of political appointees, their management credentials, or their contribution to government inefficiency. Rather, it appears to make the tacit assumption that only the number of *career* managers is excessive, and that it is only *career* managers who are preventing their employees from operating at the level of productivity of which they are capable.

Paul Light, in his highly informative and thoroughly researched book, Thickening Government, presents a far more compelling analysis of top-heavy management in the federal government, avoiding most of the deficiencies in the Gore reinvention task force report.² He correctly and exhaustively documents the increasing thickening of management layers in the federal government in the post-Second World War period, a trend that has exploded in the last 25 years. He carefully distinguishes between the span of control of individual managers and the number of layers of managers between the top and the bottom of management hierarchies.

In contrast to the Vice President, Light focuses most of his attention on the excessive layers of *political appointees* at the top of the federal hierarchy. While his analysis underscores the fact that management "thickening" is as prevalent among career managers and supervisors as it is among political appointees, he offers the highly useful insight that the burgeoning layers of political appointees in recent Administrations have only encouraged and abetted, rather than curtailed, the thickening of management in the career service.³

Even Light, however, does not address the management and technical qualifications of appointees. Top-heavy management and excessive layering are indeed critical problems. But simply reducing the number of managers and flattening the hierarchical structure will not suffice if those holding the senior-most positions still lack the management experience, skills, and mindset essential for effective organizational leadership. If the American public wants the quality of

² Paul C. Light, *Thickening Government: Federal Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Accountability* (The Brookings Institution and the Governance Institute, 1995).

³ Light, pp. 91-94.

government it is entitled to, it must abandon its tolerance for amateurism at the top.

Political Appointees and Career Civil Servants

Political appointees constitute only a tiny fraction of the federal work force, numbering slightly over 3,000 government-wide. By contrast, there are approximately 2.1 million civilian career employees in the Executive Branch departments and agencies (excluding the semi-autonomous United States Postal Service). Contrary to popular belief, this total of 2.1 million has remained essentially unchanged over the past 20 years despite expansion of federal government programs and explosive growth in the national budget. Total federal employment has actually begun to decline. Over the next five years, under recently approved deficit-reduction legislation, the federal work force will be cut by a minimum of 300,000 positions.

Career employees work under "merit system" rules, through which vacancies are filled by competitive procedures. Formal qualifications--including educational requirements and both general and specialized work experience--are established for every position and grade. Promotions beyond pre-determined "career ladders" are also subject to competition.

Atop the career civil service is the Senior Executive Service, or SES. There are over 8,200 authorized career SES positions, of which fewer than 7,500 are filled. Essentially all Senior Executives are managers of major Headquarters program and staff offices or the heads of major regional or field installations. Supplementing the SES are 700 Senior Legal or Senior Technical positions, about 550 of which are filled. These career executives may have some managerial responsibilities, but their unique, highly specialized technical skills are the critical characteristics of their positions.

The State Department's Foreign Service and certain law enforcement agencies have separate personnel systems for career employees. All, however, have comparable structures and merit procedures, and have some form of senior officer corps analogous to the SES.

By contrast, the 3,000 political appointees are selected noncompetitively. Their positions have either no qualifications standards or standards which are very loosely applied.

Some appointees, such as members of certain semi-independent commissions, have fixed terms, but most serve at the pleasure of the President or department/agency head. Theoretically, political appointees can be removed at any time, with little or no notice, but they rarely are, except when the Administration changes. Even then, if the same party remains in power, some may stay on. Most departures are purely voluntary, and while an Administration stays in office political appointees tend to have as much job security as career staff--not usually the same job, as will be discussed below, but a job.

Political positions fall into three categories, in descending order of authority: the Executive Schedule; non-career Senior Executive Service; and Schedule C.

Executive Schedule appointees are the secretaries of cabinet departments, the administrators/directors of major independent agencies, their deputies, and the heads of major departmental or agency bureaus or divisions, commonly called assistant secretaries, assistant administrators, or assistant directors. Executive Schedule appointees are nominated by the President, subject to confirmation by the Senate. There are about 570 appointees in the Executive Schedule, over 70 percent of whom serve indefinitely, with the balance serving fixed terms prescribed by law.

Noncareer Senior Executives constitute the next category of political appointees. They include senior staff in the immediate offices of cabinet secretaries, deputy secretaries, and agency heads, as well as the layer of deputy assistant secretaries who, more often than not, are the immediate supervisors of career Senior Executives. By law, no more than 10 percent government-wide of the SES may be political appointees. However, in an individual department or agency, the proportion may be as high as 25 percent. There are currently over 700 noncareer Senior Executives.

Schedule C employees comprise by far the largest category of political appointees. Numbering over 1,700 government-wide, most provide confidential support services to senior appointees in the Executive Schedule and to noncareer Senior Executives. A few may

hold management positions, heading up special staff offices or small field offices. Schedule C employees may include secretarial as well as professional staff. The bulk, however, are in professional positions and concentrated in the highest pay grades, with job titles such as "Executive Assistant" or "Special Assistant."

Political appointees form a mushrooming hierarchical pyramid. Each departmental secretary or agency administrator has a deputy and several assistant secretaries or assistant administrators. Each of these assistant secretaries usually has two or more deputy assistant secretaries. As with royalty, every cabinet king or queen, and every subcabinet prince, duke, earl, and baron, must have his or her retinue of courtiers and attendants. Every senior political position thus invariably generates a minimum of two or three Schedule C support positions. Cabinet secretaries and their deputies have an even larger number of Schedule C staff in their immediate offices.

The Myth of Political Accountability

Why do we have political appointees? The primary reason, theoretically, is to assure political accountability. A secondary reason is to reward supporters who helped elect the President.

Initially, the spoils system ("to the victor go the spoils") reached down to the lowest echelons of the bureaucracy, and nearly all federal jobs were dispensed on the basis of patronage. In the post-Civil War years a professionalized, merit-based civil service system was established and, as refined and enlarged over the succeeding generations, now covers all but the senior-most layer of the federal government. The principle remains entrenched, however, and seems hardly ever questioned, that all the key policy-making positions and their immediate support staff should be filled by political appointment.

At first blush, there is much to commend this approach. Isn't the President entitled to have leaders loyal to him calling the shots? Isn't it essential that the policies of the federal bureaucracy be consistent with the Administration's platform and priorities, and be developed and implemented by persons subject to Administration appointment and removal?

There are, however, several fallacies in this line of reasoning. The first is that career bureaucrats cannot be trusted to carry out an Administration's policies and that political appointees are essential to keep them in line. The second, corollary fallacy is that if one political appointee is good, two are even better, and the more an Administration appoints the greater the assurance of political accountability. The third fallacy is that all political appointees owe their primary loyalty to the President and his policies and therefore speak with one voice. The fourth fallacy is that to the extent the third fallacy is overcome and political appointees are primarily loyal to the White House, the command structure of each department and agency is improved.

Fallacy #1: Career Managers Cannot Be Trusted. This widely-held belief reflects a combination of mutually reinforcing but erroneous notions. One is that "bureaucrats" are inherently lazy and lacking in initiative, deadwood who can't be fired. Without political appointees riding herd over them, they would never do anything. It is ironic that this image of the bureaucrat as inefficient and incompetent persists along with the previously noted, and contradictory, belief that the government can run itself, and that it therefore doesn't matter if the appointees on top lack expertise.

The federal bureaucracy, like any other large work force, does have its share of weak employees, but most career civil servants are hard-working and dedicated to serving the public. Many are extraordinarily talented and creative, highly adaptable, and willing to take on new challenges, cheerfully adjusting to continually changing leadership and frequent shifts in policies and priorities. Most political appointees, upon first assuming their positions, share the popularly-held image of the lazy/recalcitrant/uncreative bureaucrat. Upon actual exposure to their subordinates, however, they invariably change their minds, and, by the time they leave, are singing the praises of the career staff, extolling their intelligence, loyalty, and dedication.

A parallel notion is that career bureaucrats are resistant to change and are so invested in the programs and policies they administer that political appointees must be superimposed on them to enforce responsiveness to the Administration, the Congress, and the public. Most civil servants *are* committed, and care deeply about what they are doing. But it is often forgotten that they do not create the laws and programs they administer.

Blaming the career civil servant is a classic case of shooting the messenger. Who, after all, writes, passes, and signs the laws that the bureaucracy implements if not the Congress, the President, and his cadre of political appointees? Who proposes and authorizes those despised programs, requirements, and taxes? Who approves the deficits and appropriates the budget-busting funds? Who authorizes the overlapping agencies and functions, the cumbersome personnel procedures, the time-consuming regulatory process, and mind-numbing contracting requirements?

The career bureaucrat is, in effect, caught in a Catch 22. He is attacked as recalcitrant if he does not enthusiastically implement the laws and programs enacted by the Congress and the President, and is attacked for being too "heavily invested" in them when a new Administration, pressing for alternative policies, comes into power. The truth is that most bureaucrats regroup and adjust about as quickly as humanly possible once new marching orders are clearly laid down.

This is not to argue that change is easy in any large organization. Whether public or private, all bureaucracies share a common tendency towards rigidity, form over substance, and alienation of workers from the "customers" they serve. But such institutional tendencies occur no matter who holds the top positions. Changing organizational cultures takes tremendous effort and persistence. Political appointees don't stick around long enough to complete organizational revolutions, and seldom are willing to make the human and material investment required to succeed.

Another misconception contributing to the belief that career bureaucrats cannot be trusted is that they have no experience working within a political environment, and are therefore unable to integrate the Administration's policy objectives with the demands of Congress, public interest groups, the private sector, and the general public. Political appointees, the common argument goes, have a greater sensitivity to these external forces, while professional career civil servants wear blinders that isolate them from political realities.

Again, the opposite is more often the case. Career managers and executives have unparalleled experience in operating in such an environment, while inexperienced political appointees often have far less sound *political* judgment. Their more seasoned career subordinates,

who have worked with these external forces for years, have a greater chance of long-term success.

Most career executives and managers are not only as responsive as political appointees to Administration policies and priorities, but are by experience, mindset, and training more adept at *implementing* them. They have years of experience, over several changes in Administration, and within any single Administration, in adapting to policy shifts. Career managers do have a propensity for facing pragmatic realities and for identifying the pitfalls and obstacles in implementing any major new policy. But as professional administrators, careerists must deal with process, and understand that the means is what gets you to the ends.

Contrary to popular perceptions, career managers get their kicks from the challenge of implementing new initiatives. Administering the same programs or functions year after year eventually wears thin, and the greatest professional growth and satisfaction usually come from successfully launching new projects or programs. Once the problems are on the table and addressed, the careerist is far more capable than the political appointee of designing a strategy for overcoming them, or of helping to modify the policy without undermining its original thrust.

Fallacy #2: The More Political Appointees the Greater Political Accountability. No one would argue with the notion that an Administration ought to be able to select the head and perhaps a few immediate subordinates of every department and agency. It is unrealistic to expect that even a President with highly defined policies and priorities can directly supervise the entire government from the White House. But once a field general is in place at the top of every department and agency and has established the new policy directions and strategies to be followed, why do we assume that he or she is incapable, without a small army of political colonels and lieutenants and a host of their adjutants, of leading the career executives and managers who carry out his orders?

Not only is that small army of political appointees not necessary, but it actually *weakens* the level of political accountability to the President. As Paul Light has shown, while political appointees account for only a tiny fraction of all federal employees, they account for a full

third of the layers of managers in the chain of command.⁴ Aside from all the debilitating effects of excess layering on a bureaucracy's productivity and effectiveness, these multiple layers of political appointees only increase the likelihood of mixed or contradictory messages and slow down the communication, and complicate the enforcement, of Administration policies. The 1989 Volcker Commission concluded that excess layers of political appointees "undermine effective presidential control of the executive branch. Presidents today are further away from the top career layers of government with 3,000 appointees . . . than was Franklin Roosevelt 50 years ago with barely 200."⁵

Fallacy #3: All Political Appointees Are Loyal to the President and His Policies. Neither political party is a monolith whose adherents share the same political philosophy or platform. Presidents are elected by coalitions made up of many different factions and interests. Many political debts must be paid and many separate power bases need to be accommodated and appeased. The President has to please a host of Senators, Congressmen, governors, mayors, and key interest groups. To strike the necessary compromises, he often ends up selecting or approving individuals who are *not* loyal to him, or who are more loyal to someone else, or who have policy agendas at odds with his own.

The so-called "Administration" thus does not always speak with one voice, even within any single department or agency. The cottage industry surrounding background quotes from "senior" or "highly-placed" government officials who question, qualify, or outright undermine Administration policy is testament to the fiction of accountability. Most career executives demonstrate far more discipline and restraint.

Fallacy #4: Having the White House Make All Political Appointments Leads to Effective Command Structures at the Departmental and Agency Level. Yet another Catch 22 in the political accountability myth is that sometimes it works: that is, all or the preponderance of the political appointees in a department or agency are not only officially selected by the President but are primarily loyal to him. But given the realities of human relationships in a bureaucracy, this

⁴ Light, pp. 89-90.

⁵ National Commission on the Public Service, *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service: The Report of the National Commission on the Public Service, 1989*, p. 26.

often produces perverse results, and implementation of the President's agenda may actually be impeded, rather than facilitated. To the extent loyalty to the President is paramount, internal departmental or agency loyalties may be weakened.

Any effective organization needs a clear and enforceable chain of command. When the head of the organization cannot count on the loyalty of his subordinate executives, and they, in turn, on theirs, the results are usually disastrous. If a deputy assistant secretary or assistant secretary owes his job and primary loyalty to the White House, rather than to his immediate boss or the departmental secretary, he is often unaccountable, and becomes a loose cannon pursuing his own agenda, or his own perception of the President's agenda. Even where there is full agreement on policy ends, disagreements on means or on style, may get in the way, and if a top appointee cannot depend on the support of his political subordinates for fear that they will call in their White House patron(s), the President's program is ultimately short-changed.

Rewarding Supporters Also Undermines Accountability

This tenuous level of accountability is further weakened by the second justification for political appointments--the need to reward campaign workers and key supporters or their proteges. Many political positions are created solely to give someone a job, not because they are needed to carry out the Administration's mission or keep those bureaucrats in check. Examples include most deputy assistant secretary slots, which simply constitute another, and often confusing, bureaucratic layer. Many Schedule C jobs are totally make-work, or provide support to an unnecessary higher-ranking political executive.

Cabinet departments and independent agencies therefore have to absorb dozens of unneeded appointees foisted on them by the White House. Ironically, senior political appointees often have less control over the selection of their subordinates than do career executives and managers. Spawning so many unneeded jobs and filling them with appointees not of their supervisors' choosing, further undermines political accountability, and ultimately comes back to bite the Administration these appointees are supposedly serving.

Criteria For Selecting Political Appointees

Who and what do you have to be to be selected as a political appointee? Almost invariably you have to be a member of the President's party. It also helps to have been an active supporter in his campaign (particularly before he was nominated), a major financial contributor, or an old family friend. These last qualifications are less important if you have a powerful patron who fits one of these categories or whom the President needs to please.

Obviously, the level and visibility of the position make a difference. Usually, the higher the level, the greater the candidate's qualifications or, at least, public reputation and standing, must be. Nominees for Executive Schedule positions, who must be confirmed by the Senate, are naturally subject to the closest scrutiny and are the only candidates who get any national press play.

Normally, policy or technical expertise is a major qualification for cabinet and subcabinet positions. But political clout or an impressive general resume is sufficient to win confirmation, even if the candidate's credentials are only marginally relevant to the department, agency, or bureau he or she will be heading. Attorneys from large firms or corporations and respected academics with major publications are assumed to have what it takes. If you're a current or former governor, Senator, Congressman, or big-city mayor, you don't have to be much of a policy expert. The cachet of your office is qualification enough.

Noncareer Senior Executive Service appointments, which are not subject to Senate confirmation, get almost no visibility, and therefore allow for riskier selections. This is the level where political ideologues most often appear. Some of these appointees are chosen from the ranks of practitioners or policy specialists in the field, and may have more subject matter expertise than their cabinet secretaries and assistant secretaries. Many others, however, such as senior regional or statewide campaign workers, have solely political credentials.

Policy or technical expertise is rarely a criterion for selection of Schedule C appointees. Here, past working relationships with, and loyalty to, the political executives they serve may be a critical factor. Cabinet and subcabinet officers often bring to Washington trusted subordinates from their prior offices. Many Schedule C staff, however, were previously unknown to their new bosses, and were recruited because of their connections to key interest groups, members of

Congress, or Congressional committees. Many others were not recruited at all but were "gifts" from the White House, outplaced from the long lists of junior staff workers in the Presidential campaign who need to be rewarded. For some of these young people, their Schedule C appointment may be their first real or full-time job.

Political appointees may thus run the gamut from high-profile, highly-respected politicians and mature, seasoned professionals to inexperienced young men and women just out of college. Many are policy and subject matter experts in the portfolio of the department or agency to which they are appointed. Some are not but know their way around the federal government, while others have really no specialized qualifications other than their energy, loyalty, and a liberal arts education.

But no matter how impressive their political, policy, or technical qualifications, their managerial experience or competence is not a consideration. Executive Schedule and Noncareer SES appointees literally run the government, administer a \$1.5 trillion budget and supervise 2 million employees, yet their managerial qualifications are essentially ignored. No nomination rises or falls on whether the candidate is a good manager. Some appointees *are* good managers, but that is not why they were chosen. Most, because of inexperience or a lack of natural talent or interest, are not. Lip service is, of course, paid to the need for strong managers, but managerial competence is almost never the basis for a selection.

This is really not surprising. Management issues are dry and boring, and are seldom understood or appreciated by the public or the movers and shakers in politics. They don't sell newspapers or make or break political careers. It also takes a manager to appreciate who is and who isn't one, but few players in the appointment process are themselves managers. Extraordinary attention is paid to the backgrounds of senior-level appointees by White House trouble-shooters, Senate committee staffers, the Senators themselves, public interest groups, lobbyists, the print media, and television commentators. But none of these actors in the drama cares much about management. They focus solely on the candidate's political philosophy or his/her public positions and writings. Alternatively, they are scrambling to find "dirt" or prevent scandal.

Everyone talks about government "waste" and "inefficiency," but everyone seems to think it is caused primarily by corruption, government

intrusion in areas where it doesn't belong, or the irredeemable nature of bureaucracies. No one ever considers that the bright, knowledgeable, and politically savvy fellow at the top of the organization is simply inexperienced and over his head. No one asks: "Has this nominee ever administered anything? Can he supervise people and manage a large organization?"

What Is a Good Manager?

What does it take to be a good manager? A brief exploration of this question is critical to a fuller understanding of why political appointees so often lack, or never develop, the requisite characteristics, attitudes, and skills. Good managers are not created overnight, and it takes far more than intelligence and drive to become one.

Management is an art, not a science. It does involve some basic underlying conceptual principles and does require the acquisition of a body of technical knowledge. Nevertheless, no amount of academic training alone can produce good managers. There is simply no substitute for on-the-job experience--experience gained *before*, not *after*, one is appointed to an executive position. It takes years of working within organizations--preferably large ones--at various functional and operational levels, and at increasing levels of responsibility. It takes extended observation of what works and doesn't work, of learning the lessons of failure and how to maximize success. It also takes maturity, sufficient time, and life experience to have acquired the requisite seasoning and perspective.

Planning. The first step in managing any organization is to establish clear, measurable, and realistic goals. What do you want to accomplish and when? Without those answers one cannot determine if success or failure has been achieved. It seems simple and obvious, but planning is actually one of the most difficult management tasks. It requires a comprehensive analysis of where things now stand, where you want to get to, what needs to be fixed or accomplished to get there, and what resources are needed to make it all happen. It requires identifying not only the final result desired, but the incremental steps and milestones along the way, and realistic deadlines for each.

Good planning often forces policy changes. Consideration of all factors may reveal that a goal cannot be achieved within the desired

time frame. If delay is unacceptable, innovative alternatives must be identified to shorten the developmental process, or the goal itself modified. If required resources are not available, additional resources must be found or, again, the goal modified to accommodate the limits of available resources. Planning is thus both a management strategy for achieving objectives and a reality check to test whether the objectives as defined are achievable.

Integrating Policy and Operations. Policy expertise and management effectiveness are not incompatible, but are mutually supportive. A good manager must have a comprehensive understanding of policy objectives, and, to the extent he lacks technical program expertise, must appreciate his limitations and recruit and defer to subordinate experts. Conversely, policy options and program designs are successful only when their management and operational implications and resource requirements are understood and addressed. Policy ends and management means must always be in a proper balance. Having a vision of the future is of little value if you don't know how to get there. Operational incompetence often leads to the mistaken conclusion that the goal itself was misguided or unachievable.

Establishing Accountability. Effective management requires clearly assigning responsibility, giving those responsible sufficient authority to accomplish the task, and enforcing accountability. Lines of authority and reporting relationships must be in place and understood by all participants; there can be no doubt as to who is in charge. Picking the right organization or person to perform a task is also critical, requiring careful weighing of the strengths and weaknesses of each possible choice. Once an assignment is made, it cannot be forgotten or ignored. The good manager must delegate sufficient independence and authority, but at the same time continue to track and monitor progress, to give and receive feedback, and to make periodic course adjustments.

Management of Resources. Good management requires an understanding of the total workload demands on one's staff, including not only Administration initiatives, but also ongoing, day-to-day operational activities mandated by law or agency procedures. This workload must be balanced against available staff resources and organizational capacities.

In a zero-sum game, the manager must establish clear priorities and organize work so as to maximize productivity. If everything is a priority, product or service quality and program or fiscal integrity are jeopardized. Productivity cannot expand simply by spouting platitudes about "doing more with less." The good manager must be willing to reduce or eliminate certain programs or activities to free up staff for higher-priority initiatives. The manager must also get his hands dirty and deal with a lot of grubby administrative details. For the organization's primary business to move forward expeditiously, constant attention must be paid to correspondence, reporting requirements, budgets, audits, and personnel actions. Travel, training, and contract resources must be carefully used to maximize staff effectiveness.

Intra-agency Coordination and External Relations. Good management involves ongoing negotiation, coalition-building, and a continuing search for consensus. No organization can accomplish its mission alone. The effective manager must coordinate with colleagues and counterpart organizations within his department or agency whose help, support, and concurrence are critical. He must appreciate their needs and priorities and be willing to compromise. Proper attention must also be paid to communications with a wide variety of external organizations and institutions: State and local officials, trade associations, public interest groups, client organizations, Congressional committees and offices, and other federal departments and agencies. This, too, involves a continuing process of consultation and negotiation.

Concern for People. Any organization is only as good as the skills, productivity, and morale of its work force. The federal government is no exception. Even "faceless bureaucrats" are human beings with needs and emotions, and the effective manager must be a motivator, a listener, a leader, a mentor. He must devote significant time and energy to staff recruitment and retention, training, career development, and work place conditions. Success will depend heavily on maintaining open and honest communications with employees at all levels. Active solicitation of, and responsiveness to, employee input will produce a better product and, in the long run, get the job done faster.

Management Systems and Procedures. The effective federal executive must learn the "language" of government--its laws, regulations, systems, and procedures. Whatever their shortcomings, these controls serve a good purpose--to assure consistency, order, openness and fairness, to protect the public's funds, and to prevent bias

or fraud. These systems and procedures themselves sometimes get out of control and become the enemy of progress, but a good manager needs to know the enemy to defeat him.

He must thus understand and learn how to use federal personnel policies and procedures, accounting, auditing, and reporting requirements, procurement rules, travel policies, ethics and equal employment opportunity regulations, and labor-management agreements. He must also, in this age of the computer, use modern information systems. Information is power, and integral to management success is the ability to track progress, to measure success or failure, to evaluate results, to correct deficiencies and build on strengths.

A Long-Term View; a Concern for the Future of the Organization. Government is a long-haul enterprise. It takes patience and endurance. Just as in the private sector it can take a decade or more of research and development to bring a new product to market, so it takes several years to design and launch a new government program. In government, as in industry, there are few overnight success stories. Good management requires the postponement of gratification for the long-term good of the organization. The government executive must be willing to invest heavily in the early years of a program, expecting little or no immediate gain, in order to reap "profits"--public benefits--in the future. He must either make a long-term *personal* commitment to stick with the project until its completion or proceed knowing that its benefits will not be realized until after his own tenure ends. He must forgo instant, flashy successes achieved at the price of weakening the organization, damaging critical relationships, or reducing productivity in later years.

Why Political Appointees Come Ill-equipped to Be Good Managers

Very few political appointees come to their positions with these critical management skills. Only a handful have worked in the executive branch before. Some do have significant relevant management experience outside the federal government. Most, however, are not only ill-prepared for the management demands of their new jobs, but come from backgrounds and professions whose ingrained skills and attitudes are actually counterproductive to good management.

Former state and local officials *do* come with relevant experience. Whether they are former governors and mayors or senior

appointed or career officials, they know something about administering large organizations and are familiar with public budgeting, fiscal, and personnel systems. They possess critical insight into how federal programs and regulations work--or don't work--on the receiving end, and have hands-on experience in translating policy into action and in managing people and resources. Unfortunately, former state and local administrators do not constitute a significant percentage of political appointees. Moreover, despite their many qualifications, few have actually previously worked in the federal government.

Former executives in private industry also have significant expertise in managing people and resources--in "meeting a payroll"--and in long-term strategic planning and execution. Like state and local officials they have a realistic perspective on the impact of federal policies and regulations. However, they come with a lot of corporate cultural baggage that gets in the way, are ill-prepared to deal with much stricter federal ethics standards and conflict-of-interest rules, and are unfamiliar with civil service procedures and requirements. They thus have to learn--or unlearn--a lot before their management skills and expertise can be fully exploited.

In any event, not many corporate executives move on to senior positions in the federal government. The more common career path is *from government to private industry*. Few captains of industry are attracted to public service; even the highest federal salaries are simply not competitive. It takes a unique level of commitment for a corporate executive to accept a cut in salary of \$100,000 or more, not to mention the loss of perks such as stock options, bonuses, company cars, frequent-flyer miles, and club memberships.

From what professions do most political appointees come, and why do these professions equip them so poorly to be good managers? Most political appointees appear to fall into seven occupational categories, some of which overlap: lawyers, legislators, academics, Congressional staffers, lobbyists, campaign workers, and trusted aides.

Lawyers. Lawyers are primarily individual entrepreneurs, not team players or organizational men or women. Most can have long and successful careers without acquiring essentially any managerial experience. Even in large firms most attorneys don't supervise more than a handful of associates and a secretary. Senior partners do have some

management responsibilities, but they are a sideline. Administrative oversight is often delegated to an office manager.

Lawyers work on individual cases, or serve individual clients. They do not manage continuing programs or administrative functions. Winning is all-important, and it is the immediate battle, not some ultimate larger war, by which victory is measured. For the litigator, convincing a single judge or jury is all that counts, and no long-term price is paid for the tactics employed or debris created along the way. For the attorney who operates largely outside the courtroom on regulatory, tax, commercial, or estate matters, the focus is on the trees, not the forest. Enormous attention is devoted to detail, to the exact meaning of words and phrases, to the correct interpretation of complex statutory and regulatory provisions.

The practice of law does not encourage or reward "big picture" thinking or strategizing. Lawyers are not very experienced in balancing multiple points of view or competing demands, skills which are essential for managing large, complex organizations. Despite their many political connections, they often have little feel for political process or how public policy is ultimately implemented. Attorneys are also not used to accountability. Much of their work is behind closed doors and, even in highly publicized court cases, they are not answerable to the public.

Perhaps the biggest barrier to lawyers becoming good managers is that they are trained *not* to take risks, to get things exactly right, no matter how much time it takes. The good attorney constantly strives for perfection. The good manager, by contrast, operates in an imperfect world. He never has the optimal resources to get the job done, and can never please all the competing forces impinging upon him, but must play a continuing balancing act. He must take risks and strike compromises to move his agenda forward.

Legislators. Whether they are city councilmen, county supervisors, state assemblymen, or members of Congress, legislators are also individual entrepreneurs, not organization people. Much of their energy is devoted to getting elected, polishing their public image, and staying in office. Success is measured largely by political survival. Attaining and maintaining political power is not, however, the only motivator. Most legislators are sincerely concerned with public policy, and are often hard-working advocates for their constituents. All work on one or more committees, and some rise to become committee chairpersons.

Legislators thus acquire some sense of team effort and develop coalition-building skills. They are also experienced in working with a variety of competing interest groups. Legislating is impossible without negotiation and compromise.

Nevertheless, legislators are not managers. While they oversee major public bureaucracies and programs, they don't manage them. Most legislators have never *run* any large public or private organization. Their own staffs are very small, and nearly all supervisory responsibilities are delegated to a senior subordinate. Often lawyers themselves, legislators focus on the technical language and provisions of the law. They are concerned with policy alternatives, but have little interest in, or responsibility for, policy execution. They stress results, but not the organizational or procedural means for achieving them. They thus often fail to provide the resources needed to implement legislation or to consider operational realities in shaping legislative requirements.

Legislators also lack the patience and discipline to track progress of programs once authorized and funded, and to systematically evaluate results. They may threaten accountability by legislatively mandating a variety of reports by administering agencies, but often don't enforce submission requirements or read and act upon reports received. Even repeatedly re-elected legislators lack the long-term view of the good manager. Their focus is still on the short-term--running for office, passing a particular bill or amendment, addressing a constituent's complaint--not on the effective administration of ongoing governmental functions and programs.

Academics. Academics have minimal interest or experience in management. Whether as teachers or researchers, they administer very little, and do not supervise people or programs. They may *write* The Organization Man, but they are not organization men themselves. They pursue primarily their own individual intellectual or scientific interests. Some become department chairpersons, thus acquiring limited management expertise, but only the tiny fraction of academics who ultimately serve as college and university presidents, or deans with large administrative portfolios, develop significant management skills and experience.

Academics do possess critical analytic and evaluation skills, which are essential qualifications for any good manager. But while their findings and conclusions may enrich man's spirit, or expand his

understanding of the world around him, they have little relevancy to managing large, complex bureaucracies. Like lawyers, they also possess certain characteristics that are counterproductive to effective management. They are notorious individualists, not team players. Competition for publication and for research breakthroughs is fierce and often vicious. Withholding of cooperation is seldom punished and frequently rewarded. Academics have little need to fashion compromises, communicate with disparate interest groups, or accommodate competing needs and demands. They have few true clients and are used to wielding fairly arbitrary power without accountability.

Congressional Staffers. These talented and highly motivated people bring broad political experience and unique, specialized technical expertise. They actually write the legislation and know the intricacies and background of particular programs. They are familiar with public policy issues and know their way around the Washington government scene. They also have excellent communications networks with public interest groups and private sector trade associations in their fields of expertise.

But Congressional staffers are essentially individual performers, not managers. They may be disciplined students of legislative detail or statutory requirements, but have no significant supervisory or organizational expertise, and few clues about how to implement or execute legislation. They are experienced primarily in promoting the career or political interests of a single United States Senator or Congressperson. They thus easily become loyal and responsive assistants to their new bosses--cabinet secretaries or assistant secretaries--but are ill-equipped to manage anything themselves. Their outlook is always up, not down. They know how to please the boss, but not how to lead or motivate subordinates. They have a keen understanding of political ramifications and public relations, but limited comprehension of how to organize work and manage resources.

Lobbyists. These professional staffers from a broad array of national professional organizations, trade associations, "think tanks," and nonprofit advocacy and consumer groups, share many of the same strengths and weaknesses as Congressional staffers. They, too, have considerable expertise in the legislative and political process, help write legislation and are masters of statutory detail and nuance. Lobbyists are policy experts and possess impressive technical knowledge--and

commitment--in their respective issue or subject areas, but they, too, generally lack management experience or interest. Most have no supervisory responsibilities. They come from relatively small organizations with usually a single-interest focus. Even the heads of most associations have few staff or organizational units to supervise. Lobbyists are concerned 100 percent with policy issues and member service. They do not operate programs. Their focus is on the here-and-now, not the long term.

Presidential Campaign Workers. These political appointees come from many different backgrounds and occupations. Some may be mature and accomplished professionals, and a few, before joining the campaign, managed businesses or organizations of substantial size. But most are inexperienced and very young. For some, this is their first real job. Others may already be launched on their professional careers, but haven't acquired much maturity. Many campaign workers who *are* experienced professionals are lawyers, academics, Congressional staffers, or lobbyists who, as described above, also lack the requisite managerial qualifications. Still others may already be members of the candidate's staff in his current capacity, but they function there as multi-purpose assistants, not managers.

Even well-managed campaigns bear little relationship to a well-managed government department, agency, or bureau. Political campaigns place primary value on objectives which are antithetical to long-term effectiveness in managing large government bureaucracies with ongoing multiple, complex functions and multi-billion dollar budgets. Winning the election is the sole measure of success. Promotion of the candidate, not programs or organizations, is the campaign worker's focus. Campaign workers are cheerleaders, not administrators, and frequently fail to understand that *governing* is a vastly different business from getting elected.

Trusted Aides. Most senior appointees get to bring along with them at least some trusted aides of their own choosing. Rarely are these aides themselves managers. Most commonly, they fit the same profile as Congressional staffers. They are committed and hard-working, politically savvy, and may even possess significant technical or policy expertise, but they are selected by their bosses primarily because of their familiarity, proven loyalty and devotion, and readiness to place the boss's agenda and career interests above their own. If, as is so

frequently the case, the boss lacks managerial credentials, the trusted aide appointee tends to reinforce his or her managerial shortcomings.

Why Political Appointees Don't Learn to Be Good Managers

While political appointees come poorly equipped to carry out their management responsibilities, they have the potential, given sufficient time and discipline, to acquire many of the requisite skills--to learn to be good managers. They are usually bright, public-spirited, and enthusiastic. Most truly want to "do good," to achieve a particular programmatic or legislative mission, or to address a critical national need or problem. Nevertheless, very few develop managerial competence while on the job. There are many contributing factors, including personal attitudes and characteristics, conflicting agendas and objectives, and a variety of structural impediments.

Overconfidence; Ignorance of One's Own Deficiencies.

Whatever their level of responsibility, political appointees have been successful in the past. They are articulate and aggressive achievers, and know how to market themselves. They are politically savvy and obviously well-connected.

For those at the cabinet officer level, who had already attained national prominence or high political office, this new appointment is but another jewel in their crown. They are accustomed to star status and have no reason to believe they won't continue to shine in their new position. And surely none of their subordinates will tell them otherwise. A few assistant secretaries, or even fewer deputy assistant secretaries, may also be political stars or have made substantial financial sacrifices to serve. Most appointees at this level, however, have never before had as much responsibility, or earned as much money--a measure of their inexperience, since their pay compares unfavorably with private salaries. They are very taken with the cachet, prestige, and trappings of office, and are wont to be very full of themselves. At the start of an Administration, political appointees have also just been part of a successful Presidential campaign. They are therefore flush with victory, have a triumphant sense of being part of a winning team, and are ready to take on the world.

A few appointees have the self-awareness to realize they have much to learn before they can perform effectively, but most feel they already have the answers. Heady with self-confidence, and generally lacking in prior experience in managing large organizations, the typical appointee is convinced he is pretty terrific, and already knows all he needs to know to run his shop. He forges directly ahead without taking the time or trouble to acquaint himself with the organization he heads, to explore how it works, to get to know the players and what they do, or to realize how much he can learn from them.

Insularity; Distrust of Career Staff. Political appointees spend most of their time talking to and working with each other. While they compete for attention, jockey for power, and are prone to destructive infighting, they still form a tight little club of departmental or agency insiders who reinforce rather than counter their common managerial weaknesses. They meet frequently to develop strategies, address crises, deliver progress reports, and swap war stories. Habituated to generating "spins" on controversial issues, they posture with each other as well, always emphasizing positive accomplishments, seldom shortfalls. Unaware of their respective limitations, and self-sequestered from the objective judgments of outsiders, they (at least when together) pat each other on the back, exaggerating successes and minimizing failures.

Since criticism is seldom provided by his peers, the appointee's primary source of alternative viewpoints and sound management advice is the career staff. He usually gets a lot, mostly unsolicited, but not as much as he really needs. The free flow of critical thinking between political appointee and career staff is at best problematic. Several forces are at work here. The first, common to any supervisory relationship, is the power imbalance which entitles the supervisor to demand respect and loyalty whether or not they are merited. Supervisors are more accustomed to giving orders than soliciting advice, and even the most enlightened prefers to hear how well, not how badly, he or she is doing. Subordinates are loathe to be completely candid, and tend to express dissatisfactions and criticisms in muted terms. Exacerbating this inherent tension, the appointee arrives on the scene with a ready-made staff in place. Even if his tenure is lengthy (a rarity; see below), he has the opportunity to make relatively few new hires. At most, he can reshuffle the hand he is dealt.

Secondly, reversing the usual pattern, the appointee's subordinates generally have more expertise than he in the programs and functions under his domain. Most appointees know this, despite their supreme self-confidence. Some take the time to learn, and others stay out of the way and delegate responsibility, but many simply respond by circling the wagons and remaining aloof--the "don't bother me with the facts" approach to management.

Thirdly, and most critical, political appointees bring with them a high level of distrust of the career civil service. They buy into the common stereotype of government "bureaucrats": uncreative paper-pushers and lazy freeloaders who hide behind "red tape" and who only obfuscate and delay. Appointees thus fear they will be "co-opted" by the career civil servants and become part of the problem rather than the solution. Many never learn the difference between resisting manipulative recalcitrance and modifying preconceived ideas based on exposure to informed and constructive input.

This prejudicial distrust of career staff is heightened by partisan misconceptions. No matter which party controls the Administration, its appointees assume that the career staff is dominated by members of the opposition. When the Presidency passes from one party to the other, the incoming appointees have the mistaken notion that the outgoing party somehow managed to purge all opposition party members from the career rolls and populate the civil service with only its own loyalists. No one really knows the party affiliation, if any, of career civil servants. They are probably fairly representative of the population as a whole, but whatever the reality, Republican and Democratic appointees upon their arrival are equally suspicious.

The tendencies of political appointees to stick together and to distrust the career staff combine to produce a group dynamic that both compensates for their sense of alienation from their subordinates and helps explain their own frequent failure to advance their policy and program agenda. The career staff becomes a convenient whipping boy. Dumping on the bureaucracy is more comforting than critical self-evaluation. Identifying a common enemy also helps to build a sense of in-group solidarity.

By the time they leave their posts, political appointees have invariably changed their minds about the career staff. They come to see them as individual human beings instead of cardboard stereotypes,

have learned to appreciate their strengths and talents and to understand that most want to do a good job and will be supportive if given the opportunity. Most appointees eventually realize that bureaucrats want their bosses to succeed and look good, because that is how they and the programs to which they are committed also look good. Unfortunately, it takes a year or two for political appointees to stop treating their career staff as the enemy and to begin viewing them as loyal supporters, professional colleagues, and comrades in a common cause. By then it is often too late.

They Don't Stay Long Enough. By the time most political appointees gain this wisdom and insight, and begin to acquire useful managerial skills, they often leave. Even if they stay in the federal government, they shift from job to job with startling frequency. Just when they've begun to master the requirements of a position they typically move on to the next. They never seem to hang around long enough to become truly productive.

There are no definitive statistics on the tenure of political appointees, but a 1994 General Accounting Office report of turnover in 567 Executive Schedule positions, over a 10-year period from 1981 to 1991, is instructive.⁶ The 409 positions with no fixed term of office turned over an average of 2.3 times. In other words, two to three different incumbents held the typical position during the 10 years. However, because many positions remained vacant for substantial periods before being refilled, the median length of service of incumbents in these positions was only 2.1 years. The turnover rate was even higher and the median tenure even lower in the 14 cabinet-level departments. Appointees in eight departments had median tenures of less than two years, ranging as low as 1.6 years.

Appointees' tenures were longer in the 158 Executive Schedule positions which had fixed terms of office. Because the length of fixed terms and other tenure-related factors varied widely from agency to agency, GAO declined to compute government-wide medians for length of service in these positions. Nevertheless, in the majority of the agencies surveyed, the median tenure for appointees was substantially shorter than the length of the position's fixed term.

⁶ United States General Accounting Office, Fact Sheet for the Chairman, Committee on Government Affairs, U.S. Senate, *Political Appointees: Turnover Rates in Executive Schedule Positions Requiring Senate Confirmation*, April 12, 1994.

Median tenure figures are not available for the much larger group of political appointees who hold noncareer Senior Executive Service or Schedule C positions. But from all indications, mobility for these appointees, who are not subject to Senate confirmation, is even greater. Median tenures for deputy assistant secretaries and lower-level appointees are probably more in the range of 18 months or less.

Mobility of political appointees is both intra- and inter-departmental/agency. Within a department appointees are upwardly mobile, often following a progression of steps in the continuum from special assistant to executive assistant to deputy assistant secretary to assistant secretary to deputy secretary to secretary. None, of course, starts at the bottom of this career ladder and gets all the way to the top, but an ascent of two or three rungs is not unusual. Appointees do acquire additional managerial experience as they rise in level of responsibility, but they are continually learning a new job and developing new relationships with yet another group of subordinates. They never have a chance to settle in and maximize effectiveness.

It takes the better part of a year for a political appointee to learn his/her job, but if he doesn't stay in that job more than another six to 12 months, it is no wonder he doesn't become a very good manager, even if he desires to learn. If he spends the latter part of his tenure seeking and firming up his next assignment, he is psychologically disengaging from his current assignment just at the point when he finally knows enough to really make a significant contribution.

The tenure of appointees, however, is only part of the problem. Political positions are seldom filled simultaneously, and at any time several positions may be vacant. The 1994 GAO study of turnover in Executive Schedule positions also looked at the length of time positions with indefinite terms remained vacant. In a representative sample of eight departments and agencies the average length of time such positions remained vacant ranged from six to 20 months. One position remained vacant for 33 months!

If there are always a number of key vacancies in an agency, management dislocation results, forcing temporary doubling up or reallocation of oversight responsibilities. Arrival of new appointees requires adjustments in functions and relationships among initial appointees. Just when the last appointments are made, some of the early arrivals may already be moving out or on to their next assignment.

The management team never really gets its wind. A musical chairs game is continuously in progress, and a shift in one position creates a ripple effect, setting off a cascade of other changes. This is not a conducive environment for developing managers.

Ambition/Outerdirectedness. The good manager perceives the organization he heads as his primary professional commitment. Its mission and well-being are the focus of his energies. The typical political appointee, by contrast, has grandiose plans and ambitions which direct his attention elsewhere. For some, politics and power are in their blood. They may aspire to elected office or to a higher appointed position. Getting the favorable attention of the White House or joining its inner circle may be the objective; for a few who dream big, the Presidency itself may be the goal. Political appointees thus often view their current appointment as only a stepping stone in a continuum of rising power and status.

The ultimate objective of many other political appointees is commercial success or professional pre-eminence. For them political office is simply a means to that end, affording an opportunity to build the necessary professional resume. A stint in the public sector adds luster, technical credibility, and a reputation for public-spiritedness, helping to grease the skids for a place at the top of the business or professional hierarchy. Getting to know the procedural mine fields, mastering the regulatory requirements, and acquiring personal contacts are far more valuable to potential private sector employers than managing their public portfolio well.

Whether the appointee's long-range ambitions are in the public or private sector, he or she is distracted by external concerns and stimuli. Much time and energy are spent on networking, on building, nurturing, and maintaining personal contacts. The appointee is preoccupied with marketing himself, with identifying, lining up support for, and securing the next political appointment or prestigious private sector position. Seduced by proximity to the centers of power, appointees fiercely compete to see who can find the most favor with the department secretary or who can develop the strongest ties to the White House. If offered the choice between spending the day with subordinate career managers thrashing out critical operational issues and, say, making a high-profile public appearance, addressing a press-covered national conference, or sitting in on a policy-planning session with top-ranking White House staff, guess where most appointees come out!

Misunderstanding Their Role. Political appointees don't comprehend the totality of their responsibilities, but see their role solely as policy-makers and ceremonial, titular heads of their organizations. These *are* critical elements, but appointees are also field generals who lead the troops who carry out the organization's mission.

Many appointees are captivated by the glamour of their positions and ignore the fundamentals. They lavish their attention on travel opportunities, public appearances and speeches, press interviews, top-level policy meetings, and White House contacts, but have little patience for the critical spade work that makes programs and organizations function effectively. They devote little or no time to working out key regulatory provisions, making budget allocations, building and nurturing the organization, determining critical personnel assignments, or translating policy concepts into operational reality. While the mechanics and details can be delegated to subordinate career staff, the political appointee at the top must set the wheels in motion, stay involved, resolve impasses, and provide continuing motivational leadership. Good field generals need to spend some time in the trenches, not just review troops on parade.

Political appointees often fail to understand that their staffs already have ongoing, operational workloads, mandated by law and administrative orders, and that a large part of the appointee's responsibilities is to facilitate and expedite the performance of that workload. Appointees with ambitious program agendas must recognize that if new initiatives are undertaken, something else has to go. Many appointees do not appreciate that their staffs have their own needs and concerns, and that unless the working environment is professionally satisfying and morale is good, implementation of the appointee's own agenda will suffer.

Instead, political appointees commonly see their staffs as playthings for their amusement, who serve their needs, who function as their servants rather than the public's. Often they view their subordinates as elastic, underutilized utility players just waiting around for a new assignment. As work is piled on, regardless of existing demands, stress and tension build, and morale declines. The quality of either the product or other critical operations suffers.

Lack of Accountability. Finally, political appointees have little incentive to mend their managerial ways. They are not answerable for their performance, or *non*performance. No one holds them accountable. Here the issue is not *political* accountability--being held responsible for supporting the Administration's political philosophy and priorities--but *managerial* accountability--being held responsible for effective administrative or operational performance.

Even when an appointee is held in low esteem by his or her colleagues or superiors, corrective action is seldom taken. At worst, the appointee may be isolated from the center of power, shut out of key meetings, or simply ignored. Some of his or her responsibilities may be reassigned elsewhere. Even if forceful action is unavoidable, the appointee is seldom removed, but "promoted upstairs" or shifted to a less critical job. Only in extraordinary circumstances--such as a major public political gaffe or conflict-of-interest scandal--is the appointee fired, or allowed to resign. Embarrassing the Administration is the ultimate transgression, but the Administration is rarely embarrassed--nor does the press take notice--simply because an appointee is a lousy manager.

Several factors contribute to this lack of managerial accountability:

Never Speak Ill of a Fellow Appointee. The clubby sense of brotherhood that prevails among political appointees requires that no appointee be publicly criticized or rebuked. On the record every appointee is an outstanding member of the team. Even if he resigns under fire, one always "regrets" or "deeply regrets" his departure, no matter how grievous his blunders or nonperformance.

Independent Power Bases. Many appointees have their own outside political sponsors or well-placed connections who were responsible for their appointments and can make a lot of heat if there is an attempt to remove them. They may not have been actively recruited, but hold their job because their department head had no choice. They are thus largely "untouchable," and everybody knows it.

Pure Cowardice. Politicians love to say "yes," to dispense goodies. They hate to say "no," to announce bad news. Agency superiors thus prefer to tolerate failed appointees and sweep their mistakes under the rug than tell them they're screwing up. Hoping the appointee finds

another job (which, as noted, often happens), they would rather bide their time than bite the bullet and get rid of him.

It Takes One to Know One. Since the appointee's supervisor is often himself a poor manager, he will not readily recognize management failure when it occurs. When the appointees in a department or agency share the same management deficiencies, they tend to ignore and reinforce their common weaknesses.

Even Political Appointees Can Be "Snowed." Any lower ranking political appointee worth his salt can tell his boss what he wants to hear. Big egos just take extra stroking. If sufficient attention is paid to making the boss look good, and to keeping him or her the center of public attention, little notice will be paid to whether the organization is actually accomplishing critical operational goals.

Blame the Other Guy. If all else fails, blame the career staff. Given incoming political appointees' initial distrust of civil servants, pointing the finger at the "bureaucrats" is always a plausible defense, and very hard to disprove. Alternatively, some external entity--Congress, the press, a special interest group--is a credible cause of the failure.

It's Usually Too Late. Since the tenure of the typical political appointee in any given job is very short, it is usually hard to pin anything on him. Initial failures can always be laid at the door of one's predecessor, particularly if part of the previous Administration. By the time the appointee can be arguably held accountable for performance under his own watch, he may have gone to his next assignment--or his boss has left.

The Price Paid When Nonmanagers "Manage"

Does all this really matter? Shouldn't an Administration be allowed to dispense *some* patronage to the folks who helped put them in office? These appointees comprise only 3,000 out of more than 2 million employees in the federal executive branch, and they bring fresh ideas and much-needed energy. Besides, how much damage can they do? The career staff does the real work anyway, and can be counted on to keep the wheels of government turning. So what's the harm of letting political appointees play the amateur government game? Isn't it a small price to pay?

It is not such a small price, and it does a lot of harm. The costs are enormous in confusion, inefficiency, lost time, wasted effort, low productivity, excess bureaucracy, and unnecessary personnel. Fresh ideas *are* essential, but most have been thought of before--by the bureaucrats no less! Some have been tried and failed. Others have proved successful but have been abandoned for want of political or financial support.

But what is the value of even promising new ideas when their proponents haven't the faintest notion of how to implement them? What is the value of new enthusiasm and energy when they are squandered or misdirected? Mismanagement of good public policy can be devastating. Critical resources are drained from other worthy operations, frustration and cynicism are bred, and the mistaken conclusion is drawn that the policies themselves were defective. Even more damaging, the myth is reinforced that government itself doesn't or can't work. It is therefore essential to explore the real financial, human, and operational costs of allowing amateurs to run the government.

In Thickening Government, Paul Light provides a compelling analysis of the debilitating multiple effects of excessive layers of political appointees: diffusion of accountability, information distortion, administrative inertia, disunity of command, the growing gap between authority and responsibility, and obstacles to innovation.⁷ While these effects hurt the entire federal bureaucracy, from top to bottom, Light's analysis focuses primarily on the impact on any President's capacity to field a management team and implement his legislative and programmatic agenda. Light briefly addresses how political layering also affects the rank and file career employee--for example, creating barriers to employee recruitment, retention, and involvement in decision-making--but he does not explore this area in depth.

The Gore National Performance Review has correctly emphasized the need to liberate front-line career civil servants from the strangle-hold of unnecessary procedures and managerial controls, but fails to identify the stultifying role played by incompetent and inexperienced political appointees in creating the problem. It would therefore be useful to describe the impact of political appointees on the daily working environment of the career bureaucrat.

⁷ Light, pp. 61-71.

The Impact on Personnel Costs and Productivity

It is easy to conclude that the actual costs of employing a mere 3,000 political appointees is negligible, considering that they constitute but a token percentage of the 2.1 million federal work force. Salaries and fringe benefits, alone, for these 3,000 political appointees are not trivial, amounting to over \$350 million annually.⁸ In addition to personnel costs, other direct costs of employing political appointees include space, equipment, furniture, and travel. Appointees' offices are the largest and most well-appointed, and they get the highest-quality and most expensive furniture and equipment available in the government. These offices are redecorated or renovated almost every time a new incumbent arrives on the scene, which is quite often. Appointees also spend a disproportionate share of travel funds, traveling more frequently and incurring higher expenses than career staff. Other direct costs easily amount to another \$150 million annually, bringing total direct costs for political appointees to well over half a billion dollars.

However, these costs and numbers pale when compared to those of the thousands of career employees who work directly in the immediate offices of appointees, or who devote the preponderance of their working hours in direct support of appointees. Most obvious is the sizable staff of career secretaries and receptionists. Noncareer SES appointees have at least one personal secretary each, while Executive Schedule appointees typically have three or four. In addition to the small army of Schedule C employees, many professional career staff also serve appointees as special assistants.

Thousands more federal employees, working outside appointees' immediate offices, also serve their needs. Every department or agency has a motor pool of cars and drivers used exclusively by Executive Schedule and noncareer SES appointees. Administrative staffs, correspondence units, personnel divisions, public relations offices, photographers, travel offices, budget and voucher examiners, and security details devote all or a substantial portion of their time to support

⁸ Salaries for Executive Schedule and noncareer SES appointees range from just under \$100,000 to \$150,000. Salaries for Schedule C appointees vary from the \$20,000s to the mid-\$90,000s, with most in the upper half of that range. This estimate of \$350 million is based conservatively on an average salary for all appointees of \$90,000, and fringe benefits of approximately one-third of salaries.

political appointees. The personnel and related costs of these support staff is enormous, totaling hundreds of millions, or perhaps billions, more.

The time that career staff in all other departmental or agency offices spend nonproductively in the support of political appointees is incalculable. Endlessly preparing briefings for appointees' meetings and trips, writing reports that are requested but go unread or unused, planning conferences with little purpose other than to promote the appointee's image, devoting weeks and months to projects that don't go anywhere, or doing everything two or three times because the appointee didn't know what he wanted--these all eat heavily into the career staff's work day. The flat dollar cost of this squandered time also totals into the billions, but the cost in employee productivity, initiative, and morale--such as highlighted in the Gore National Performance Review--is immeasurable.

The Impact of Delays in the Appointment Process

An extraordinary amount of time, energy, and manpower is expended on just filling those 3,000 political positions. News articles occasionally bewail the slow pace of appointments, decrying the large number of key vacancies, but no one has calculated how many person-hours of effort are expended annually in recruiting, interviewing, vetting, investigating, clearing, nominating, and confirming political appointees, or on processing, absorbing and orienting them once they are finally appointed.

While appointments are concentrated at the start of any new Administration, the process is really continuous. Since the tenure of the typical appointee is short, positions, once filled, soon become vacant again. Sizable head-hunting and personnel staffs in the White House and each department and agency, including, again, many career employees, work permanently on filling political appointments. Their efforts are augmented by the thousands of person-hours logged by career field investigators in the FBI and/or Office of Personnel Management who carry out extensive background checks of Executive Schedule, noncareer SES, and managerial-level Schedule C appointees.

This enormous drain in time and manpower is not limited to the Executive Branch. Each of the nearly 600 Executive Schedule appointees must be confirmed by the Senate, entailing extensive background work by Senate Committee staff. Senators spend hours meeting privately with the nominees and the many public interest groups and lobbyists affected by the appointment. Formal committee hearings must be scheduled and held and reports prepared and issued. Floor time is required in the Senate itself for debate and final disposition. This normally time-consuming and costly process can be even more draining for controversial appointments, and can pre-empt or seriously impede the passage of critical legislation. Individual Senators may delay action on an appointment, holding it hostage to their personal or legislative agendas and adding weeks or months to the time a position remains vacant.

The costs of the appointment process in both the executive and legislative branches thus add millions of dollars to those already calculated in the appointees' home agencies. The distraction created and resources diverted from the critical substance of government are enormous. It would be far cheaper to simply pay every campaign supporter a generous cash bonus than to try to give them all a federal job.

In addition to the hours of staff time spent--and often wasted--in the appointment process, the ever-increasing time it takes to make appointments seriously impedes employee productivity. Political scientists such as G. Calvin MacKenzie, have tracked this disturbing trend, documenting that the nomination/confirmation process for a President's initial appointments has lengthened dramatically in each succeeding Administration in the last 30 years, nearly quadrupling from 2.4 months under Kennedy to 8.5 months under Clinton.⁹

While the appointment process winds on, back at the affected department or agency there is a real live vacancy which impacts the work lives and productivity of potentially hundreds of employees. Whether or not the position is really needed, leaving it unfilled usually hurts the organization.

⁹ G. Calvin MacKenzie, "The Presidential Appointment Process: Historical Development, Contemporary Operations, Current Issues" (paper prepared for Twentieth Century Fund Panel on Presidential Appointments), March 1, 1994.

If an Executive Schedule position, such as an assistant secretary, remains vacant, a major subcabinet organization is left without a viable leader or advocate. A political deputy may be made acting assistant secretary, but may lack the standing or confidence to function as anything more than a caretaker. In rare cases, where no other political appointee is yet on board, a career senior executive may temporarily be made acting assistant secretary, but he is probably held at arm's length by the in-place political cadre. Knowing that his appointment is only an expedient and that his tenure is limited, he treads softly, and neither takes decisive action nor breaks new ground.

If the vacancy is in a noncareer SES position, such as a deputy assistant secretary, it may actually be a boon by temporarily reducing excess layering. However, even at this level, vacancies are often debilitating. Another political appointee may be temporarily assigned to the position, and, because of other duties, may not give it the attention it demands.

A career executive temporarily appointed to fill a vacancy at the noncareer SES level faces power constraints as severe as those noted above when he temporarily fills an Executive Schedule vacancy. He knows he will never get the job permanently and wisely avoids initiatives he will not be around to bring to completion. He cannot exert much management control over former peers whose supervisor he has temporarily become, for he knows that he soon will be their colleague again. He also knows that if he runs afoul of his political superiors, he risks hurting the organization he heads in his permanent capacity.

Political and career staff alike thus spend a lot of time treading water while the appointment process grinds slowly along. Some part of every organization is always figuratively "waiting for Godot" to arrive, postponing decisive action or critical choices. Even when "Godot" gets there, it takes a long time for him to get up to speed, causing inertia, false starts and uneven performance. The cumulative penalty paid throughout the federal government for lengthy and recurrent vacancies is staggering.

The Impact of Superfluous Positions

Even believers in the spoils system would readily admit that many political positions are created solely to provide jobs to loyal supporters. The thickening of management resulting from stacking layer upon layer

of political appointees is a critical problem, but it is exacerbated by the sad truth that some of those layers have no real work or management function to perform.

Although the majority of Executive Schedule positions are fully supportable, most noncareer SES positions and a large share of the Schedule C jobs are simply not needed. Even the political appointees to whom they report would often just as soon not have them around. Since noncareer SES and Schedule C appointees constitute around 80 percent of all political appointees, it is safe to say that upwards of half of all political jobs are pure fat that could be cut from the federal Government without being missed. They are not only not needed, but get in the way of executives and staff who are, and thus have a net negative impact on productivity.

The typical deputy assistant secretary position illustrates the problem. It is an artificially created sinecure with a fancy title and a fancy salary, bears no operational responsibilities, and only clutters up the organizational hierarchy. The deputy assistant secretary constitutes a superfluous bureaucratic layer between the assistant secretary, who has real power and a defined functional portfolio, and the career senior executive, who has real work and programs to manage.

The deputy is assigned an ostensible policy portfolio with one or more program or staff offices to oversee, but his responsibilities are more apparent than real. If he exercises real power, it may often indicate that the assistant secretary is shirking his responsibilities and prefers to remain above the fray. Alternatively, out of conscientious desire to be useful, he may end up usurping, duplicating, or second-guessing the assigned functions of subordinate career staff.

Even under the best of circumstances, certain correspondence and all paperwork are routed through this position. Every additional layer in a bureaucracy means production delays. At best, it simply extends the time it takes to do anything, adding a minimum of two to three days to paper-processing time if he approves or signs a document, and a week or more if he wants changes. At worst, it can create damaging bottlenecks.

All experienced managers in government organizations soon learn that some compromise with perfection is essential if the public's business is to move forward. If a letter or memorandum is grammatically

correct, gets the facts straight, is intelligible, and ends up with the right decision, the wise manager signs or approves it, even if it is not phrased as felicitously as he would like.

Superfluous political appointees with ill-defined roles often fail to understand that exercising stylistic restraint is the prudent course of action. The cost of insisting on a stylistic revision is enormous in terms of delays, loss of productivity, and irritation of the staff who wrote, typed, and cleared the document, and who now have to spend more time revising it. One thing is certain; the ultimate recipient probably could not care less. If the answer is "yes," the sooner it is received, the better, no matter how it is phrased. If the answer is "no," it is irrelevant that the document gets an A+ in English composition.

Many appointees eventually come to see the light and realize the counterproductivity of over-exercising their editorial instincts, but others never learn this lesson. Not realizing, or caring, what it takes to produce a document, they are insensitive to the costs of changing it. Lacking real power or operational responsibility, they compensate by abusing whatever discretionary authority they do have, and derive ego satisfaction from making subordinate staff jump through editorial hoops.

Time Spent Training the Boss

Political appointees unnecessarily consume much of the career executive's energies--energies better focused on managing his office and program operations. Because the typical appointee is so inexperienced and so unfamiliar with the organization he heads or serves, the career manager spends a great deal of valuable time training his bosses and/or their aides.

When the appointee first comes on board, career staff prepare extensive written materials and present numerous briefings to bring him up to speed on all facets of the organization and its operations. The education process continues afterwards on an ad hoc, informal basis. As the appointee first confronts a particular management system, deals with another part of the agency or department, or meets with an outside interest group, he requires more briefings and explanations.

As the appointee announces each of his desired initiatives, the career staff lay out the options, the obstacles and pitfalls, the procedures to be followed, the parties whose support and/or

concurrence is needed, and the costs and the availability of funds. If he wants to create a new staff position or hire a consultant, he must be walked through the government's personnel procedures. If he wants to promote an action which is not authorized under current legislation or regulations, he must first be briefed on existing statutes and implementing rules, and the procedures for amending or changing them. All such briefings must first be scheduled and are dependent on the appointee's availability, resulting in frequent delays before necessary action can be taken.

Given the rapid turnover of appointees, career staff are always orienting some new assistant secretary, deputy assistant secretary, or one of their numerous special assistants. A substantial investment in staff effort is thus required to keep the revolving door of appointees up to speed. If the appointee's position is a critical one in the organization, the investment, however costly, at least has a pay-off. If the appointee's position is superfluous, the investment is a total loss.

Time Spent Servicing the Boss

Once an appointee is in place and "trained," whether his position is needed or not, he makes substantial demands on the time of all around him. As previously noted, those who are most immediately impacted are the secretaries and special assistants who work full time to meet his needs. The time and productivity of these subordinates, some of whom are political appointees themselves, can perhaps be written off as the unavoidable cost of doing business through political appointees. But the impact on other career staff--particularly the senior executives and other supervisors who have the most direct and frequent contact with appointees--cannot be blithely ignored.

Senior career staff spend an inordinate portion of their time doing work to service political appointees, work that produces little or no direct benefit to their own primary program or functional duties. They attend numerous meetings whose purpose is usually to keep the appointee informed, not to resolve issues that would advance the career manager's agenda. Some of these meetings are scheduled, but are often canceled or rescheduled with little advance warning. Others are totally unscheduled, but career staff are expected to drop what they are doing and come running on a moment's notice.

In addition to the endless hours spent creating or collecting materials and briefing appointees, career staff may be asked to accompany them to meetings as "back-up." They may be called upon to do a lot of advance work for appointees' trips or appearances, making arrangements and preparing speeches. Regardless of the service being provided, career staff waste a lot of down time, including the time spent covering the considerable physical distance from the careerist's office, at the other end of the building or on another floor, to the appointee's suite. More time is lost waiting for him to show up at the appointed hour or to get off the telephone, or while he takes calls (always "emergencies") or sees visitors in the middle of meetings which he himself has called. Such interruptions leave large numbers of high-salaried staff sitting on their hands, when they all have pressing priorities back in their own offices.

Political appointees are seldom sensitive to the ripple effect of their requests for immediate attention and support. Postponement of gratification is not their strong suit. When they have a need, however reasonable, they want it met *now*, frequently interrupting important activities. Career managers are constantly embarrassed by being compelled to abruptly leave their own meetings or to cancel upcoming commitments with little or no notice. Hundreds of career staff down through the ranks find their schedules and productivity torpedoed by this "I want it now" behavior.

Servicing political appointees also often involves doing everything two or three times, not because it was done poorly the first time, but because the appointee didn't really know what he wanted until he saw the product he initially requested. Careful planning and thoughtful weighing of alternative options are not part of the appointee's *modus operandi*. He is sure of the "right" solution and is ready to charge full steam ahead.

If career staff constructively identify obstacles or practical alternative approaches, this may be misperceived as resistance or lack of cooperation. In the interest of survival, the career manager suppresses the impulse to say "I told you so" when his or her advice is ignored and the predicted failure occurs, and simply learns to grin and bear it.

Unfortunately, the experience seldom teaches the political appointee to proceed in a more rational and deliberate fashion the

next time. He never counts, or quickly forgets, how many revisions and returns to square one were required to produce the desired product. Nor does he ever notice the cost in lost time and staff frustration, or the critical work shunted aside or left incomplete because he was unable to do a little planning and exercise a little patience.

Quality Shortfalls and Ethical Shortcuts

The price we pay for entrusting the federal executive branch to political appointees is measured not only in millions of dollars of unnecessary costs, crippling delays in filling vacancies, superfluous positions which slow the decision-making process, and debilitating drains on the productivity of career managers and staff. It is also measured in lower-quality services and in actions and decisions which often skirt, and sometimes violate, ethical standards and legal requirements.

Political appointees are anxious to make a splash, to make dramatic changes and improvements, and to make them quickly. Even if advancing a new program takes precedence over advancing their own personal ambitions, they lack the management experience to get the job done or to appreciate how long it will take. Implementing a new government initiative or program is a multi-year process, beginning with the crafting of authorizing legislation, clearing it through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and shepherding it through both houses of Congress. A parallel or subsequent legislative process must be followed to appropriate the funds to run the program. It may take a year or two just to get a program authorized and funded.

The administering department or agency must then develop implementing regulations to spell out the operational rules governing the program. This, too, is a lengthy process, involving publication of a proposed regulation, review and consideration of public comments, publication of a revised final regulation, and another series of OMB approvals. Meanwhile the administering department or agency must be developing the necessary funding, reporting, record-keeping, monitoring, and evaluation systems for managing the program. Staff must be trained, and if the program passes funds through state, local or private agencies, their staffs must also be trained. Issuing regulations, developing systems, and conducting training can easily take another year following passage of enabling legislation.

Program implementation can now commence. The first year of operations is largely a start-up phase when initial funds are dispensed and activities get underway. If the program is carried out through third parties, just getting the funds into the hands of the grantees and contractors can take months. Not until the second year can significant results occur and begin to be measured. In a research, construction or equipment development program, it may take several years before results can be assessed. A minimum of four years is thus normally required to get a new program fully implemented. Even for directly administered programs without state, local, or private intermediaries, it may take at least three years.

Focus on Image over Substance. Political appointees are not prepared for this lengthy program development/implementation process. It comes as a shock to learn they cannot carry out their programmatic mission in just a year or two, yet even when that realization dawns, most never make the necessary adjustment in their expectations or behavior. They continue to seek the "quick fix" for all problems. Since the three to four years required to implement a new program exceed the typical political appointee's tenure in office, many are never around when the program does become fully operational, and are thus never really held accountable for their performance.

While they are in office, they consistently opt for superficial short-term success over lasting, long-term quality. The effective manager--whether political or career--must, of course, maintain a focus on the goal and continuously fight to surmount the many obstacles in his path if he is to make a difference in government. But in a 10-kilometer run you don't cross the finish line first--or even reach it--by covering the first 100 meters in 10 seconds.

The political appointee, anxious to make a name for himself, typically charges forward without doing his homework or thinking through a realistic strategy. Ignoring sound advice and riding roughshod over procedural protections, he often produces shoddy results and a lot of fall-out that come back to bite him or, more likely, his successor. Ironically, this management style often results in greater delay. His staff end up having to do it all over, and by the time they do, he has antagonized his clients, colleagues, and subordinates.

Many appointees approach their managerial duties as if they were running (or still running) a political campaign. Governing and

campaigning are very different endeavors. While it does have a public relations component, public administration is largely an anonymous, long-term service-delivery activity, where success is measured in terms of productivity, operational efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and client benefit. In sharp contrast, a political campaign is a relatively short-term enterprise which markets a particular person, and where success is measured by a plurality of the votes cast.

Campaigns are also contests between opposing forces, whose object is to demonstrate why one choice is good and the other is bad. With television dominating modern campaigns, the short commercial or news sound-bite becomes the primary communications vehicle. This lends itself readily to slogans, code words, and superficial treatment of complicated issues. Image triumphs over substance.

The political appointee is thus prone to place more emphasis on publicity than on achieving real results, and the image he promotes is often as much his own as that of the program he is administering. Appointees also have a marked tendency to promise too much or claim success too soon. A lot of money and energy is spent on announcements of new initiatives, replete with press conferences, fancy charts, and glossy hand-outs. New programs or major reorganizations are accorded great fanfare before they are fully designed and staffed out. Promised completion dates are unrealistic, and conveniently forgotten when they are missed. Nevertheless, much staff time is devoted to preparing glowing progress reports of how much the appointee has accomplished, within such a short time, to correct the mess he found.

Like candidates in a campaign, political appointees personalize their programs and initiatives, and promote them by creating villains against whom invidious comparisons may be drawn. The appointee gets no mileage from acknowledging his predecessor's achievements and quietly building on that foundation. Not realizing--or caring--what it takes to terminate an existing program or launch a new one, he would rather start all over with a program that bears his name than to improve a well established one by retaining its sound elements and correcting its weaknesses.

Political appointees seldom bring new ideas to government. Their initiatives are often old ideas which are simply recast or repackaged. Naive appointees haven't been around long enough to know it's been

tried before, and fancy themselves management visionaries promoting dramatic "breakthroughs." The cynical ones may realize they're peddling a retread, but aren't willing to make full disclosure.

As a result, every couple of years critical momentum is lost, while both the career staff and the agency's clients shed programs and management systems, as if they were clothes, and put on something "new." Everyone is always playing catch-up. Just when all participants have mastered a new set of program or system requirements, procedures and jargon, the rules of the ball game are changed just enough to necessitate a new learning curve, and all because of the ego needs of a political appointee.

Immediate Gratification over Institution Building. For representative government to work, in an age when it performs an increasingly complex range of functions and services, much depends on the recruitment, training, utilization, morale, and productivity of its civilian work force. Maximizing that work force's responsiveness and effectiveness requires strong, sensitive, and far-sighted leadership, constant vigilance, and a readiness to devote the requisite resources. In short, it requires a commitment to institution building. Political appointees almost uniformly lack this commitment. Their short tenures, their lack of management experience, their personal ambitions and outerdirectedness, and their search for the quick fix and immediate results all militate against it.

Political appointees have no real stake in the future of the organizations they manage. They do not see themselves as the caretakers of ongoing public institutions, as responsible for leaving those institutions stronger than when they arrived. A few appointees, whether from insecurity or egomania, may deliberately weaken their organizations or emasculate their strongest managers in a misguided attempt to assert control or eliminate "the competition." The vast preponderance of appointees, however, are not malevolent Machiavellians but are simply oblivious to their institution-building mandate.

Appointees don't understand that in a rapidly changing, increasingly diverse, down-sizing, computerized work environment even bright and adaptive staff need a lot of training. They seldom are willing to devote the appropriate share of available resources to staff development or to forgo yet another initiative that will require even

more training. Since they care little about building for the future, they give short shrift to recruiting new talent, retaining the best and the brightest already on board, or developing attractive career opportunities to exploit their full potential.

Political appointees don't appreciate the critical importance of respecting the chain of command. They repeatedly bypass career executives and managers, directly requesting information from, or giving instructions to, their subordinates, without any idea of how confusing and destructive that can be to organizational discipline and morale. To satisfy an "I want," they may pull staff out of current organizational units and assign them to special task forces, sometimes not even first consulting the employees' supervisors or considering less disruptive alternatives to get the work done. Even the appointee's immediate needs are thus not well served.

Travel resources are often critical in carrying out a department's or agency's mission. Travel is essential for communicating with federal field personnel and state, local, and private sector clients, for delivering training, and for insuring program effectiveness and compliance. Political appointees often squander a large portion of limited travel dollars on their own travel and public relations boondoggles. If it promotes their pet initiatives or allows them a personal platform, the money gets spent. Meanwhile, crucial operational priorities are starved of travel funds.

Abusing the Rules and Breaking the Law. Despite the vengeance with which the media may pounce on examples of scandalous behavior by high-level political appointees, these are not common occurrences. While a few miscreants do get bounced or land in jail, political appointees are seldom directly on the take or willfully corrupt.

Nevertheless, many have a faulty ethical compass. Most exhibit a marked indifference to, or ignorance of, government rules of conduct, and have a hard time distinguishing between public and personal spheres of activity, or between acceptable ends and unacceptable means. Many appointees come from the private sector where such distinctions are less well-defined, and where positions of authority automatically bring a basketful of perks. Others come from the world of elective politics where ethics are underdeveloped, corners are frequently cut, and a lot of questionable behavior is legal--where innocence of an indictable criminal offense is sufficient to claim

absolution. In addition, many political appointees are young, inexperienced, and enamored of the power and financial resources which they now control.

The ethics rules for federal employees are very strict. Among career civil servants, these rules are widely understood and enforced, mostly by voluntary compliance. Civil servants get no free lunches; under conflict-of-interest rules, they pay their own way when dining with actual or potential government contractors or grantees and can have no financial interest in activities they oversee. They are prohibited from using government time, space or property for personal purposes, and may not serve during non-work hours in private sector, or even certain volunteer, positions which conflict with their official duties. They are still limited, even under a liberalized Hatch Act, in their freedom to engage in certain political activities.

Virtually all of these rules apply to political appointees as well. Nevertheless, few appointees ever really become thoroughly acquainted with the rules of conduct and many, knowingly or unknowingly, regularly abuse them. Appointees often use their subordinates to run their personal errands and handle their personal business during work hours. In egregious cases appointees have had their secretaries type, on government time, manuscripts for private, for-profit publication. Appointees regularly do all sorts of personal and family business during work hours without charging the time to annual leave. Travel itineraries, or even entire trips, are planned to allow the appointee to get back, at government expense, to his out-of-town home, family, or private financial activities. Government cars and drivers are used for nonofficial purposes and personal convenience. Travel expenditures are poorly documented and costs that career bureaucrats are forced to eat somehow get covered for the political appointee.

These common abuses of federal time, property, and personal services probably do not translate into huge sums. Nevertheless, they reflect an arrogant sense of entitlement and of being above the law which sets a bad tone and breeds a cynical disrespect for the rules. However, such abuses which benefit the appointee financially are relatively harmless compared to abuses of power and procedural safeguards which seriously damage the quality and integrity of government processes and services.

These institutional abuses include compromising competitive procedures, hiring friends or associates as "expert" consultants for spurious "official" purposes, and creating career positions or tortuously tailoring job requirements so as to "competitively" hire a pre-selected non-career candidate. Other examples are fabricating sole source justifications to award favored firms contracts for which they could never have fairly competed, or assigning legitimate contractors work that is barely within, and sometimes outside, the legal scope of their contracts, threatening them with cancellation if they object.

Grant competitions, in which applications are objectively evaluated against published selection criteria, are tainted when political appointees improperly intervene, extending application deadlines to allow submissions from favored applicants, or allocating rating points to benefit preferred applicants with known strengths or weaknesses. Rating panels may be stacked with malleable staff who have been duly briefed or improperly pressured. Funds may be increased to allow the approval of a lower-ranked application, or, if all else fails, ratings may be "corrected" to get the desired results.

Finally, a number of appointees are political ideologues or single-issue zealots, who abuse their authority to promote their narrow policy agenda. They see the world as divided into the like-minded who accept the truth and the forces of evil who oppose it, and employ power to reward those who see the light and to punish those who disagree. Every major management decision is filtered through their ideological prism. The results are often disruptive and seriously undermine program integrity and organizational performance.

The Number of Political Appointees Must Be Drastically Reduced

The President, the Congress, and the American public are now engaged in a continuing debate on how to reinvent the federal government. Many believe that "big government" is inherently bad, others that we simply can no longer afford the government we have, given an enormous and still-growing national debt. Whether we believe that the federal government can be a solution to the nation's problems or that the government itself is the problem, we all agree that we need to find a way to make it work better.

How do we produce a smaller, yet more efficient, more responsive, and, as some would insist, less intrusive, federal government? Nearly all proposed solutions assume that the number of career employees must be dramatically reduced, whether because every "bureaucrat" who bites the dust is counted as a blow for freedom or simply because reducing the federal payroll is a logical way to cut the budget.

What is remarkable, however, in this ongoing national debate is that few have focused their attention on the top rung of our federal executive branch, the political appointees. Even the reinvention forces, most notably the Vice President's National Performance Review, have overlooked this obvious starting point for any objective analysis of federal government performance. Those in the Congress who have proposed cutting the number of appointees do not seem to have been motivated by a recognition of their negative impact on operational effectiveness, but primarily by the potential cost savings and by the example-setting symbolic importance, politically, of cutting political as well as career positions.

No expert consultant would presume to evaluate an organization's performance and efficiency without taking a hard look at its management team. Similarly, any national commitment to reforming the federal government must also address the performance of the 3,000 political appointees who set the tone, call the shots, establish the priorities, and determine how the career staff spend much of their time. Yet there seems to be an unspoken consensus that the current system is not on the table for discussion, and that, perhaps, we have no choice.

But we do. The United States Constitution does not mandate an extensive cadre of political appointees. It provides only that the President, with the advice and consent of the Senate, may appoint such "Officers of the United States" as "shall be established by Law" and that "the Congress may by Law vest the Appointment of such inferior Officers, as they think proper, in the President alone. . . or in the Heads of Departments."¹⁰ The current system was established by law and can be changed by law.

Of course, most of the participants in the government reinvention debate are themselves politicians, who either have a direct stake in the

¹⁰ Article II, Section 2.

current system or believe that having political appointees run the bureaucracy is how the game should be played. Moreover, as previously noted, these Administration and Congressional participants are rarely managers themselves and are thus largely unaware of the typical political appointee's management incompetence.

While the 3,000 political appointees at the top cannot be blamed for all the ills of the federal government, they are a large part of the problem. They make the job of the career civil servant harder, draining his energy and dampening his creativity and initiative. They comprise whole layers of unnecessary bureaucracy and impede communications and work flow. They often have fish other than their management duties to fry, and some of those fish have a bad smell. They also cost us a lot of money.

It is high time we changed the system. Reform makes equally good sense regardless of one's convictions on the proper size and role of the federal government.

It would be futile to try to mandate that political appointees meet certain professional and managerial credentials. It just won't work. If political appointees are limited to folks with the necessary credentials, the whole point of the spoils system is defeated. The Administration would not be able to reward its supporters, campaign workers, and political soulmates. As has been shown, candidates with the right political resume seldom have managerial credentials, and the people making or confirming the appointments are in no position to judge who does or who does not meet the required criteria. Moreover, the government would never be well-served by even professional managers who were largely new to the federal government or who would never stay in the job long enough to become optimally effective.

A Workable Alternative

Bold action is required to reform the political appointee system. The essential core of a reform strategy would be to: (1) drastically reduce the total number of political appointees; (2) restrict political appointments to only the very top echelon of federal departments and agencies; and (3) professionalize any remaining leadership positions by replacing political appointees with career executives.

- ◆ The total number of political appointments should be reduced by 80 percent, from 3,000 to 600. The only political appointees in each department should be the secretary, deputy secretary, and their special assistants.

The President should be entitled to name the members of his cabinet and the heads of all other independent agencies in the government. Such authority is implicit in the Constitution itself. Because department and agency heads have vast authority and broad spans of control, have time-consuming representational responsibilities, and cannot devote full time to oversight of their organizations, their deputies should also be appointed by the President. In the event a department or agency head resigned or was removed, this would also assure that a Presidential appointee would be in office to take his or her place, if only until a new head is appointed and confirmed. Presidentially-appointed officials should be entitled to hire a small number of trusted confidants and aides from outside of the career service.

Two Executive Schedule positions (the secretary or administrator and a deputy) for each of the approximately 75 departments and agencies in the Executive Branch, would total 150. An average of three Schedule C executive or special assistants for each Executive Schedule appointee would total 450.

- ◆ All assistant secretary positions or their equivalent should be converted to career positions.

Nearly three-quarters of all Executive Schedule positions are in this key category of officials who oversee major program or functional areas and report directly to the department or agency head. It is at this level that professional managers, with long-term commitment to program and institutional needs, are so critical. These assistant secretary/assistant administrator positions should be filled by members of the career Senior Executive Service who would be paid salaries comparable to Executive Schedule political appointees at this level. This would require establishing an additional, higher pay level in the Senior Executive Service.

The head of each department or agency would select the individuals to fill these positions, by reassigning career Senior Executives already in the department or agency or by holding

merit-based competitions open to all federal Senior Executives and qualified executives from outside the government. To insure that "political" appointments were not made in the guise of merit-based selections, oversight and/or approval of all such appointments should be entrusted to an appropriate public body free from political interference. Also, to preclude a new department or agency head from replacing career incumbents in such positions before he or she had an opportunity to fairly evaluate them, all such changes should be prohibited during an initial "get acquainted" period of, perhaps, 120 days following the appointment of a department or agency head.

Replacing political appointees in assistant secretary or assistant administrator positions with career Senior Executives would reduce the number of Executive Schedule positions by about 420, from 570 to 150. It would, of course, require an equivalent increase in the number of authorized career SES positions, and result in no savings in salaries. Professionalizing these 420 positions would also eliminate 750-800 Schedule C appointees who now serve as executive assistants and special assistants to assistant secretaries or their equivalent. While career Senior Executives would also need some support staff in their immediate offices, fewer special assistants would be needed, and any such positions would be filled with far more experienced and knowledgeable career professionals.

- ◆ Abolish all political deputy assistant secretary positions or their equivalent.

These positions form an unnecessary bureaucratic layer whose primary purpose is to provide job opportunities for political appointees. They not only meet no real management need, but typically reduce organizational efficiency, slow down the information and paper flow, and undermine timely and effective management decision-making. These positions are an enormous waste of dollars and of the time and energy of career executives who have real jobs to perform.

Implementing this proposal would eliminate all 700 noncareer SES appointees and preserve the SES as a 100 percent career corps. By also eliminating the Schedule C political appointees who now

serve as special assistants to these 700 appointees the number of Schedule C appointees will be further reduced by approximately 500.

Many other deputy assistant secretary positions are filled with career executives. In some cases such positions were spawned to support the layers of political appointees above them, or to assure that some one was there to compensate for the nonproductivity of superfluous appointees. In many other cases, these career deputy positions are also egregious examples of the management layering and thickening that has added to the problems highlighted by Paul Light and the Gore National Program Review. Such career executive positions should also be eliminated. Many of the current incumbents might be prime candidates for Executive Schedule positions proposed to be professionalized.

A Win-Win Solution

This proposal is a winning combination for everyone except the 2,400 political appointees who would lose their jobs.

The President and his White House staff would be relieved of the burdens and distractions of recruiting, investigating, placing, and replacing 2,400 political appointees. They would also save precious time and political capital now expended promoting and defending nominations for 420 positions, now subject to Senate confirmation, which would be converted to career status. With fewer key jobs and recurring vacancies to fill, the Administration could concentrate its energies on its substantive agenda and get its programs up and running more quickly. With seasoned professional managers in subcabinet executive positions, a counterproductive political layer eliminated, and fewer loose political cannons on the deck, the government would be more responsive to the President's policy and program priorities.

The United States Senate and its committee staffs would have 420 fewer nominations to confirm, freeing up valuable time for its legislative calendar. Individual Senators would have fewer opportunities to pigeon-hole nominations or extort legislative concessions to release them.

Department secretaries and agency administrators would benefit from flatter management hierarchies and a more responsive management team, free from independent political agendas. They would have direct access to the most experienced career managers, and to informed, candid, and less self-serving advice and counsel.

Career Senior Executives would be liberated from the burden of training, briefing, and servicing a stream of short-term bosses with limited management experience or technical knowledge. They would be offered new and challenging career opportunities and financial rewards, thereby helping to attract and retain outstanding professional managers in the Senior Executive Service.

2.1 million career civil servants would enjoy a more stable and professional working environment which would enable them to function at higher levels of productivity. They would be assured greater continuity of leadership, receive more consistent and informed direction, and spend far less time in false starts and wasted efforts.

All American citizens would be served by a less costly and more efficient, productive, and responsive federal government. Reform at the top would produce not only more professional and accountable managers but also improved performance down through the ranks. If career staff worked under a more stable, more competent, and less self-serving cadre of leaders, their own motivation and job satisfaction would improve. Good role models make a difference, and the American public would be the real beneficiaries.

There is a national consensus--among political leaders of all partisan stripes, Administration officials, civil servants, and taxpayers--that the federal government is *broke*, both in the fiscal and colloquial meanings of the word. Whether the answer is *less* government or *better* government, the United States can no longer afford amateurism in the senior-most echelons of the executive branch. The critical first step must be the professionalization of its top managers and a wholesale reduction in the number of political appointees.