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5 on 45:
On 'surgical' cuts to federal agencies

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

(Music)

GALSTON: I'm Bill Galston, a senior fellow in Governance Studies, and among other things I study how the government works and whether it works well or badly, and if badly, why. Not too long ago, the president issued an order to the departments and agencies to begin to cut personnel, and the Office of Management and Budget has followed up with a more precise directive to the different departments and agencies. It's pretty well known that some of the agencies are going to be in for bigger personnel cuts than others. For example, the EPA, which does a lot of things that the Trump administration doesn't particularly like, is likely to have some of the biggest cuts. I suspect that the Department of Defense will end up with smaller cuts, if any. But overall, it does amount to a significant reduction, if the program is executed, in the personnel of the federal government.

There are number of different ways of cutting the government. You can adopt a meat-cleaver approach, or try to employ a scalpel. Meat-cleaver approach is simply issuing an order to a particular department, get rid of 20% of your people one way or another through attrition if possible, and if it's necessary to let some people go then you're going to have to do that in a way that complies with existing federal employment laws and regulations, which isn't easy. The scalpel approach is to look at each department and agency, figure out which functions are overstaffed, if any, which are understaffed, if any, and transfer personnel and adjust the size of your workforce.

Behind all of this is the belief that the federal government workforce is too large in the aggregate, and when President Trump promises to drain the swamp, part of what he's talking about is the downsizing of the federal workforce to what he regards as its proper level. The question is whether the popular belief that the federal government is overstaffed is true. Many scholars believe it isn't. Some even think that the federal government is understaffed. What we know for sure is that the federal government workforce is not significantly larger today than it was 50 years ago, but the government is much larger and is doing many more things. How is this possible? Answer: it's a kind of an optical illusion. Although the people on the books in the federal government haven't increased in numbers, a lot of the federal government's business is now done off the books through a system of federal contractors. This produces all sorts of complications. First of all, much of the government is hidden from public scrutiny; and secondly, it turns out that federal contractors are more likely to make mistakes, particularly in the area of security.

So a real reform proposal might cut some people from the books, but it also might bring many people who are now off the books onto the official roster of federal government personnel. That is a course that I and many others favor, and all in all most people who study government believe that the workforce ought to be scaled to the needs of the actual work to be done, and that adopting arbitrary targets or limits is probably going to be counterproductive. One thing is clear: you wouldn't want to start cutting the federal workforce by prohibiting secretaries of departments and agencies from hiring senior deputies; and so far that is a strategy that has been pursued, and the president himself has said that he hasn't submitted nominations for many of these

positions because he thinks the federal government is overstaffed. I suspect very much that the Cabinet secretaries will be weighing in with the president to try to convince him that they need senior deputies in order to be effective in carrying out the president's orders and implementing his agenda.

(Music)

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