



# Backgroundnder

## Executive Summary

No. 1413

February 27, 2001

## WHY THE PRESIDENT SHOULD IGNORE CALLS TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF POLITICAL APPOINTEES

*ROBERT MARANTO, PH.D.*

Many in Washington and the public administration academic community assert that the President of the United States relies on far too many political appointees to manage government agencies. Charging, for example, that such appointments are made more to reward supporters than to improve the federal government, critics have begun to call on President George W. Bush to appoint fewer people to run the executive branch. However, as a review of history and survey research shows, and as interviews with career and political government executives suggest, such proposals are based on misconceptions about how political appointees and career civil servants work in government.

The President makes roughly 3,000 political appointments, far more than do the leaders of most other democracies. His appointees serve at his pleasure and generally recognize that their appointments are not long-term. Career bureaucrats in the federal government, by comparison, usually have tenure and serve for long periods. Accordingly, while political appointees will generally represent the interests and agenda of the President and orient their activities toward changing government to reflect that agenda, the roughly 1.7 million career federal bureaucrats are more likely to support the status quo.

There are seven types of misconceptions about presidential political appointees and the career civil service:

**Misconception #1: The number of political appointees has grown because of a lack of faith in the bureaucracy's abilities.**

In fact, history shows that the number of political appointees increases as agency missions become more controversial. Noncontroversial agencies are run mainly by career gov-

ernment executives; but for obvious reasons, the President must put his own stamp on more politically controversial agencies, and he needs larger numbers of political appointees to do so.

**Misconception #2: There is no reason for the number of political appointees to grow as the career civil service shrinks.** Political appointees account for less than two-tenths of 1 percent of the total civil service. They join government largely to

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Produced by the  
Domestic Policy Studies  
Department

Published by  
The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Ave., N.E.  
Washington, D.C.  
20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400  
<http://www.heritage.org>



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do *political* work, such as negotiating with interest groups and congressional staffs and dealing with the media. When agency missions become more controversial, this work grows exponentially, overwhelming the capacity of the career staff. This was the case from the 1960s to the early 1990s, when the number of presidential political appointees roughly doubled while the size of congressional staffs and interest groups more than tripled.

**Misconception #3: Political appointees are less competent than career executives.** In fact, most political appointees have substantial experience and educational credentials, and stay in their jobs long enough to make a difference.

**Misconception #4: Political appointees add little value to the bureaucracy.** Surveys of federal executives suggest instead that most appointees work hard, are reasonably competent, and spend much of their time working with Congress, interest groups, the White House, and the media—effectively handling the high-risk political work that career officials eagerly avoid.

**Misconception #5: If tenure protection were removed from the executive branch, Presidents would replace large numbers of career civil servants with political appointees, with disastrous results.** Critics presume that, without strict controls on the numbers of political appointees, the President would thoroughly politicize the bureaucracy and replace large numbers of career civil servants with his supporters, thus retarding effective government service. The reality is that elected politicians lack the incentives and capacity to conduct a massive restructuring of the civil service. Even during the heyday of the spoils system in the 19th century, Presidents replaced surprisingly few career bureaucrats, realizing that doing so would weaken government performance and endanger their reelection.

**Misconception #6: Tenured bureaucracies are representative.** Many critics presume that, whereas political appointees represent the party in power, career bureaucrats represent the American people. In fact, bureaucrats are more supportive of their agency missions than is the public at large. There

is nothing wrong with government employees believing in and supporting their agency missions. At the same time, political appointees play a vital role in providing an outside perspective to ensure that normal agency loyalty does not degenerate into institutional “groupthink.” It is no surprise that the American federal bureaucracy, with its relatively large numbers of political appointees, seems more representative and efficient than its European counterparts, which have very few political appointees.

**Misconception #7: The merit system works, or at least can be made to work, better than the alternatives.** There is a pernicious misconception that the political personnel system is substantially less effective than the career personnel “merit” system. But as both career and political executives in the Clinton Administration observed, the traditional merit system was ineffective at hiring and compensating competent officials and separating the incompetent from service. Political appointees who do not measure up can be separated with relative ease.

**Maximizing Executive Branch Effectiveness.** The executive branch of government is where the rubber of policy hits the road of implementation. Political appointees are vital for ensuring that the President’s agenda is implemented. President Bush would do well to ignore the calls to slash the numbers of political appointees. Instead, he should select political appointees of competence and distinction who share his vision of governing and strive to mold those appointees into a team, as Presidents Ronald Reagan and Dwight Eisenhower did. He should also empower a bipartisan commission to study alternatives to the conventional civil service “merit” system and submit a proposal to Congress no later than the middle of his first term.

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*ROBERT MARANTO, PH.D.*

Like all who have served before him, President George W. Bush will seek to put his stamp on the sprawling executive branch establishment, which today includes 14 Cabinet departments, more than 60 independent agencies, and over 1.7 million federal civil service employees. But the President faces intense pressure from critics of the appointment process, including the public administration academic community, who assert that he should reduce the number of appointees.

It is commonplace for such critics to argue that political appointees are, at best, taking up space and getting in each others' way and, at worst, interfering with the expert workings of the finely honed career civil service. In particular, critics in the public administration community contend that political appointments have grown in number for questionable reasons; that political appointees are less expert than career executives, in part because

they are selected for reasons other than competence; and that other democracies succeed with far fewer appointees.<sup>1</sup>

President Bush should ignore these assertions, which rest on misconceptions about how the American political appointment system works and how the career civil service personnel system operates. Like most other misconceptions, these are based on limited data and are sorely in need of historical context and empirical verification.<sup>2</sup> There is

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1. Numerous works make this point, including the report of the National Commission on the Public Service (known as the Volcker Commission), *Leadership for America: Rebuilding the Public Service* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989); David M. Cohen, "Amateur Government," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Vol. 8 (1998), pp. 4, 450-497; Delmer D. Dunn, *Politics and Administration at the Top: Lessons from Down Under* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); Paul C. Light, "The Changing Shape of Government," *Brookings Institution Policy Brief*, February 1999, at <http://www.brook.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb045/pb45.htm>; Paul C. Light, *Thickening Government* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995); and Thomas J. Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995). Cohen presents the most strident argument. Several of the authors follow the Volcker Commission's lead by suggesting that one-third of political appointees can be cut, though none present detailed analyses to justify this figure.

sufficient evidence in historical analyses, survey research, and interviews of career and political government executives to demonstrate that the American federal executive branch, which combines a unique mix of “in-and-out” as well as career executives, actually works better and is more effective than the alternatives. Extending the career personnel system to include additional positions farther up the civil service hierarchy would do more harm than good. Evidence suggests, in fact, that it would make more sense to abolish civil service tenure than to extend it.

President Bush should not only resist calls to slash the numbers of political appointees; he should also follow the examples set by Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan and select political appointees who have substantial and varied experience and who share his political agenda. The President should take steps to mold his appointees into a team who will work across traditional agency and departmental barriers to implement his policies. And he should empower a bipartisan commission to examine and recommend substantial reform of the existing civil service system.

## THE INCREASING ROLE OF POLITICAL APPOINTEES

The growth of the American political appointment system reflects changes in the political environment of the executive branch. Within that environment, presidential political appointees have a vital role that most career executives would not relish playing. Increasingly, however, misconceptions about how the political appointment system works are clouding the debate over President George W. Bush’s prerogative to make numerous appointments.

**Misconception #1: The number of political appointees has grown because of a lack of faith in the bureaucracy’s abilities.** Specifically, it is charged, the number of political appointees tapped to manage government agencies has grown in recent years not because American Presidents fear that bureaucrats may not handle their work competently, but because of their disagreements with agencies over policy and their desire to match the broader political environment.

Through the first half of America’s history, government jobs were awarded in part to do the work of government, but also in part to reward and hold together a winning electoral coalition. Federal jobs were used, at least to some degree, to reward campaign workers. Save for the New Deal years, when new agencies were staffed outside the merit system (with no apparent loss of competence), the numbers of political appointees declined fairly steadily, from the official development of the merit system in 1883 to the 1950s. To some extent, the decline in the numbers of political appointees reflected the interests of the politicians, who lacked the capacity to staff and oversee an ever-larger executive branch.<sup>3</sup>

This changed with the Eisenhower Administration. The New Deal growth of government had made the very existence of many federal agencies controversial and public administration more ideological. As President Eisenhower wrote of the civil service in a letter to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, “almost without exception, these individuals reached these high administrative offices through a process of selection *based upon their devotion to the socialistic doctrine and bureaucratic controls practiced over the past two decades.*”<sup>4</sup> The same words could have been written by President Richard Nixon or President Reagan, though not by the pre–New Deal Presidents. Accordingly,

2. The analyses that follow are based on mail surveys of presidential political appointees conducted in 1987–1988 and 1996, mail surveys of career executives conducted in 1987–1988 and 1993–1994, 131 interviews with career and political executives conducted from 1987–2000, the author’s experience as a participant observer in the federal bureaucracy for three years, and academic literature on political appointees in government.
3. Ronald N. Johnson and Gary D. Libecap, *The Federal Civil Service System and the Problem of Bureaucracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Patricia W. Ingraham, *The Foundation of Merit* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); David Schultz and Robert Maranto, *The Politics of Civil Service Reform* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

President Eisenhower used political appointees to push the executive branch to implement his ideology. His Administration created the Schedule C personnel classification for policymaking positions.

Traditionally, partisan supporters were placed where they could do little harm to government while at the same time remaining politically active in their local communities. Such reward-based patronage was concentrated in the U.S. Postal Service. In the modern presidency, however, patronage moved from political parties aiming to reward partisans to Presidents aiming to lead government. Politically appointed positions went from postal to policy, from noncontroversial departments and agencies to highly controversial ones, and from the field to Washington.<sup>5</sup>

This process intensified during the Johnson and Nixon presidencies, which created a plethora of controversial regulatory and social welfare agencies. As the controversy surrounding government grew, so too did the numbers of political appointees. George Mason University political scientist James P. Pfiffner reports, for example, that the number of Executive Level I–IV (Senate-confirmed) officials rose from 221 in 1960 to 590 in 1992 (an increase of 167 percent). Schedule C appointments grew from 911 in 1976 to 1,699 in 1992 (86 percent). The Senior Executive Service (SES) was created in 1979, and noncareer SES slots increased from 582 in 1980 to 704 in 1992 (21 percent).<sup>6</sup>

These figures suggest a steady increase in the numbers of appointees through the entire Great Society and post–Great Society periods, at least until the Clinton Administration.<sup>7</sup> Of course, more political positions did not appear at the same time

for each agency. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which was created by President Nixon, was not “politicized” at first, since Democrats and Republicans agreed on environmental policy. EPA became politicized when the Reagan Administration attempted to reorient it. Such politicization involved both increasing the numbers of political appointees and altering career–noncareer relations in government.

As one career executive who served in the EPA lamented to this author in a 1987 interview on executive branch operations:

Once you work closely with an Administrator in this new vogue, you get identified. Before, the people who worked for [Ford Administrator Russell] Train kept working for [Carter Administrator Douglas] Costle. That appears to be the trend now, that [Reagan Administrator Lee] Thomas’s people are now identified with him, and they’re being placed around the Agency.

In contrast, until the Clinton Administration, the U.S. Forest Service had only a single political appointee, traditionally from its career SES ranks. Interviews suggest that former President Clinton’s selection of the Chief of the Forest Service and the Deputy Chief in charge of the National Forest System from outside the organization represented “politicization,” even though these officials are career federal employees. The Clinton Administration, particularly Vice President Al Gore, made a legitimate political decision to change the Forest Service by emphasizing the preservation mission and de-emphasizing timber harvesting. President Bush is free to make a different political decision.

4. Carl M. Brauer, *Presidential Transitions: Eisenhower Through Reagan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 42–43 (emphasis in original).
5. Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency*; Roger G. Brown, “Party and Bureaucracy: From Kennedy to Reagan,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 97 (1982), pp. 2, 279–294; Robert Maranto, *Politics and Bureaucracy in the Modern Presidency: Careerists and Appointees in the Reagan Administration* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993); Paul P. Van Riper, *History of the United States Civil Service* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1958).
6. James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).
7. Light, “The Changing Shape of Government.”

**Misconception #2:**  
There is no reason for the number of political appointees to grow as the career civil service shrinks. Brookings Institution public administration scholar Paul C. Light suggests that it is unfair that the number of political appointees has grown even as the size of the federal civil service as a whole has stabilized and, during the Clinton years, shrunk.<sup>8</sup> As noted above, a President makes his political appointments in part to force change upon career executives. A President who wants to change an agency is more likely to make larger numbers of political appointments there.<sup>9</sup>

	Senate Confirmed Appointees	Schedule C	U.S. House Staff	Senate Staff	PACs	PAC Contributions
1960	224	n/a	2441	1115	n/a	n/a
1976	n/a	911	6939	3251	992	\$53 million
1992	590	1699	7597	4249	4125	\$394 million

This is not the whole picture, however, and the relevant guide to the number of political appointees is not the size of the executive branch, but rather the number of political actors with whom a President must contend. For better or worse, political appointments are not the only growing employment category in Washington. As Table 1 shows, through the Great Society period and afterwards, the entire Washington political class mushroomed.

- The numbers of political appointees doubled from the 1960s to the 1990s, but the number of congressional staff more than tripled over the same period.
- Political action committee (PAC) contributions, unmeasurable until the early 1970s, grew by a factor of seven thereafter.

- The number of associations tripled from 1960 to 1990, and the Washington-based press corps burgeoned as well.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Washington politics is a growth industry, and the number of political appointees actually lags behind the rest of the sector.

In short, the entire Washington political universe has expanded. It is no surprise that the numbers of political appointees have increased to help the President manage an ever larger and more fractious political environment.

### HOW THE POLITICAL APPOINTEE SYSTEM OPERATES

**Misconception #3: Political appointees are less competent than career executives.** This is the crux of the argument against political appointees. Presumably, while career executives spend years and often decades leading their organizations, political appointees enter government with relatively little management skill and experience and leave before they can learn how to do their jobs.

8. *Ibid.* Downsizing the career civil service has been made possible by mechanizing and privatizing unskilled jobs, making real cutbacks in the defense sector, and reengineering work processes. Only the last cause can reduce the numbers of policy-determining jobs.

9. While a President cannot on his own increase the number of positions subject to confirmation by the Senate, he or she can increase the number of Schedule C officials and can alter the number of noncareer Senior Executive Service personnel serving in a specific agency; thus, executive actions can substantially increase the numbers of political appointees.

10. Jonathan Rauch, *Government's End* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 42; Herbert Stanley and Richard Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1995), pp. 164, 616; Norman Ornstein, *Vital Statistics on Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1998), pp. 135–138.

Though numerous studies have noted the short tenure of political appointees, their staying power in a two-term Administration is not insignificant. An analysis since the end of the Reagan Administration suggests that while political appointees stayed in a particular position for a mean of only 2.6 years, they stayed for 3.7 years in their agencies—probably long enough to have an impact and too long to be waited out.

At times, the myth of the hapless political appointee becomes reality, particularly when a President does not care about a department or agency's mission. As a career executive at the Department of Housing and Urban Development complained to the author in the late 1980s, "At best, since HUD was low on Administration priorities, we didn't get the cream. Now it's primarily losers."

Contrary to myth, however, modern political appointees are not mere stuffers of campaign envelopes. As Syracuse University scholar Judith E. Michaels found, 53 percent of President George H. W. Bush's Senate-confirmed (PAS) officials had an M.D., L.L.D., or Ph.D.; 65 percent were over the age of 50; and 49 percent had prior budgetary responsibility of over \$1 million. Moreover, 51 percent of the senior Bush's PAS officials reported losing income to join the federal government. (Lower-level noncareer SES and Schedule C officials are less credentialed.) The variety of experiences held by political appointees helps their agencies break down traditional bureaucratic "stovepipes" and build new partnerships across sectors. As Michaels reports, 41 percent of the Bush appointees (and far more in most Administrations) came from positions outside Washington; over half came from the private sector or from academia.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, tens of thousands of campaign workers want to join the executive branch of government. Since Administrations have the time and capacity to select only a few of these applications, it seems likely that those few will be highly competent and will add to their agencies. A mail survey conducted in 1994<sup>12</sup> suggests as much: Career federal executives serving in Washington rated their Bush political appointees as competent or very competent (4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5) by a 40 percent to 26 percent margin. The then-new Clinton appointees earned a nearly identical margin of confidence of 39 percent to 25 percent.

**Misconception #4: Political appointees add little value to the bureaucracy.** Do political appointees use their skills to improve government, or do they merely serve time? According to surveys of appointees by the National Academy of Public Administration, the percentage of appointees who report working more than 60 hours a week rose from 64 percent for the Johnson Administration to 77 percent under President Reagan. The percentage reporting stress in their private lives rose from 52 percent to 73 percent.<sup>13</sup> Few since then believe that the workload has declined. As one Clinton appointee who left office after two years told this author during the survey, "there is something to be said for having a group of people who will burn themselves out for the President for a year or eighteen months, and then go back to what they were doing before."<sup>14</sup>

What do political appointees do in their long hours at work? Although some critics believe that appointees do little other than learn their jobs while campaigning for the President and their next job,<sup>15</sup> surveys suggest that, in fact, political appointees are deployed on tasks that differ from those of their career counterparts. For example:

11. Judith E. Michaels, *The President's Call* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), pp. 198–212.

12. The survey of GS–15 and SES-level career officials in Washington yielded a 45 percent response rate for an *n* of 612. The Clinton political appointee survey described below yielded an estimated response rate of only 26 percent.

13. Dominic B. Bonafede, "The White House Personnel Office from Roosevelt to Reagan," in G. C. Mackenzie, ed., *The In-and-Outers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 30–59.

14. Comments made to the author in 1998.

15. Cohen, "Amateur Government."

- While 36 percent of Clinton political appointees at level GS–13 and above reported daily or weekly contact with reporters, only 12 percent of career officials (at level GS–15 and above) did.
- While 52 percent of the political appointees reported contact with congressional staff on at least a weekly basis, only 19 percent of career executives did.

Interviews suggest that in most agencies and departments, the career officials try to avoid interaction with congressional staffers and especially with reporters, since such relationships can be risky. The short tenure of political officials enables them to take those risks. Further, politicians often *expect* to work with other politicians. As a former appointee of President George H. W. Bush put it, “If Congressman \_\_\_ called, he expected to talk to me, because I am the political appointee. Even though we’re from different parties, he figures we speak the same language.”<sup>16</sup>

Notably, 59 percent of President Clinton’s political appointees reported at least weekly contact with the White House, and it is partly for this reason that career executives often lament when the political appointments within their organizations are not filled. In short, political appointees are likely to do *political* work—including negotiating with and presenting an Administration’s positions to reporters, legislators, and interest groups. This is risky activity that career executives who want to work across changes in Administrations may not want to handle.

## IS MERIT MERITABLE?

Along with the myths and misperceptions about the political personnel system are others about the nature and role of the merit system and what would happen if that system were replaced.

**Misconception #5: If tenure protection were removed from the executive branch, Presidents would replace large numbers of career civil servants with political appointees, with disastrous results.** Superficially, this appears to make sense. After all, politicians want to win elections, and one way to continue winning elections is to reward supporters. As Tammany Hall political boss George Washington Plunkitt predicted nearly a century ago, without a spoils system political participation would plummet. The reason: Unless campaign workers can get government jobs, they will wonder “what is...in it for them.”<sup>17</sup>

The popular conception of spoils-prone politicians gives a misleading view of public service, or at least the *federal* service, under the spoils system.<sup>18</sup> As numerous scholars report,<sup>19</sup> turnover in the 19th century federal civil service after a party change in Administrations normally affected less than one-third of the positions, with almost no turnover in jobs that required expertise. Why was there such stability in a system in which, in theory, political leaders could replace *all* the government workers with their own partisans?

Fears of massive turnover without merit system controls rest on two assumptions: (1) that politicians do not care about government service and (2) that they have unlimited time and capacity to take over government bureaucracies. Regarding the first assumption, as Michael Nelson has pointed out, even in the 19th century, more voters

16. Personal communication, 1999.

17. William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (New York: Dutton, 1963), p. 15.

18. This was not always true of state and local governments, which may operate in less competitive political environments and under more individualistic political cultures. See A. Freedman, *Patronage: An American Tradition* (Chicago: Nelson–Hall, 1994).

19. Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), and *The Republican Era: 1869–1901* (New York: Macmillan, 1958).



sent mail than delivered it.<sup>20</sup> And successful politicians know that massive turnover in the civil service will disrupt government service, thus endangering their reelection.

Regarding time and expertise, scholarship shows that modern political parties lack the expertise to staff the executive branch, and modern Presidents do not relish taking up the chore. Rather, Presidents see political appointment as wading through a political minefield policed by networks of hostile (and friendly) interest groups, congressional staffers, and reporters who are far more numerous and aggressive than they were in the old days of reward-based patronage. A single controversial appointment can divert attention from the President's agenda for months or harm the operation of an agency for years. Even successful appointments disappoint the politicians and interests that were not selected. Quite simply, if tenure were removed, Presidents would be unlikely to raid the civil service because they lack the desire, incentives, and capacity to do so.<sup>21</sup>

**Misconception #6: Tenured bureaucracies are representative.** Taken as a whole, the American federal civil service is remarkably representative; yet individual organizations do not necessarily represent the public will in their stated missions. Government agencies generally are staffed by people who believe in their agency's mission; thus, career officials in military organizations are more conservative than the nation as a whole, while those in social welfare and regulatory agencies are more liberal than the nation as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

That public managers believe in their agency missions is not a bad thing, but dedication to mission can easily become "groupthink." Political appointees often serve a vital role in pressing external views on government bureaucracies to assure that they reflect changing public needs and demands.<sup>23</sup> This is acknowledged by many career executives, who often ally with political appointees to reform their agencies. As one longtime career SES official told the author:

People say that political appointees don't support the public interest, but I think that most of the time they actually have a more strategic view of the public interest, one less tied to the agenda of the organization. Conversely, senior careerists have a strategic view of their organization (as opposed to the notion of the public) tied to its narrower mission. These views are often seen as conflicting when they actually have every potential for being mutually supportive and synergistic.

As Ludwig von Mises<sup>24</sup> wrote in *Bureaucracy* over half a century ago, the American bureaucracy is more open to new ideas than its European counterparts because of the influence of political appointees. This particular form of American exceptionalism seems to work rather well. Indeed, the few measures that have been proffered suggest that the American federal service works very well compared with the foreign alternatives; and perhaps as a result, it earns more trust from the public.<sup>25</sup>

20. Michael Nelson, "A Short, Ironic History of American National Bureaucracy," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 44 (1982), pp. 747–778.

21. Weko, *The Politicizing Presidency*; Stephen L. Carter, *The Confirmation Mess* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Shogun, *Obstacle Course* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1996).

22. Using survey research, this commonsense view is demonstrated in Maranto, *Politics and Bureaucracy in the Modern Presidency*.

23. Philip B. Heymann, *The Politics of Public Management* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987).

24. Ludwig von Mises, *Bureaucracy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1944).

25. Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy*, (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 1994); Hal G. Rainey, "Public Opinion Toward the Civil Service," in H. A. G. M. Bekke, J. L. Perry, and T. A. J. Toonen, eds., *Civil Service Systems in Comparative Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 180–203.

**Misconception #7: The merit system works, or at least can be made to work, better than the alternatives.** This myth seems to be accepted by some personnel specialists, some public administration professors, and civil service unions, but by relatively few others. The federal personnel system lacks legitimacy among government managers—its most important and knowledgeable audience.

As University of Georgia political scientist Hal Rainey writes, comparative surveys show that “[r]oughly 90 percent of the public managers agreed that their organization’s personnel rules make it hard to fire poor managers and hard to reward good managers with higher pay, while 90 percent of the business managers disagreed.”<sup>26</sup> The author’s 1994 survey of Washington career executives and 1996 survey of Clinton political appointees find overwhelming agreement among each group that the personnel system is broken. Asked to agree or disagree whether “personnel rules make it too difficult to hire personnel,” 80 percent of political appointees and 68 percent of career officials agreed, and more than 30 percent of each group strongly agreed. Asked whether “personnel rules make it too difficult to fire personnel,” 88 percent of political appointees and 83 percent of career managers agreed, with more than half of each group in strong agreement.

Overall, there is considerable pent-up anger at a personnel system that is too slow and too unresponsive. As one career executive complained to this author, his office “had been without a manager for almost a year. . . . [S]taff people rotated through on temporary promotions and they were competitors for the position.” There was all manner of hate and discontent and ill will when the position finally was permanently filled.

It is not uncommon for people to report waits of over two years to fill positions, with even longer and riskier time periods needed to deal with poor performers. In a recent U.S. Office of Personnel Management study titled *Poor Performers in Gov-*

*ernment*,<sup>27</sup> surveys of federal managers found that they considered few of their subordinates to be poor performers. The OPM study estimates that only between 2.8 percent and 4.6 percent of federal employees are poor performers. This may be an underestimate, since respondents might be reluctant to admit the presence of poor performers in their domains to a phone interviewer. Bureaucratic lore suggests that poor performers concentrate in “turkey farms.” Managers of such places would probably be reluctant to report their status as such. Nevertheless, the OPM study serves a useful purpose in strongly suggesting, if not proving, that there are far fewer poor performers in government than the public suspects and probably no more than in the private sector.

But why would the public *suspect* that there were large numbers of poor performers in government? And more important, why would many public managers concur in that belief? I suggest two reasons:

**First**, the cumbersome character of the federal personnel system makes it very difficult to deal with problem employees when they are found. The OPM study finds that only 7.5 percent of the managers of poor performers moved to reassign, demote, or remove those employees, and 77.8 percent reported that such efforts had no effect. As the interviews of OPM officials show, managers who take action against problem employees must be prepared to pay a serious price for doing so in terms of time and the risk of lawsuits. Perhaps for these reasons, while OPM estimates that there are approximately 70,000 poor performers in government, between September 1997 and September 1998, only 159 federal employees were removed by performance-based personnel actions; another 1,693 were removed for reasons other than performance, such as breaking the law.

Federal managers put up with poor performers or try to act informally to improve their work, and rarely resort to using the federal personnel system

26. Hal G. Rainey, *Understanding and Managing Public Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 190.

27. U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Poor Performers in Government: The Quest for the True Story* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Personnel Management, 1999), pp. 10–11.

because it is simply too cumbersome. This relative inability to act against a small number of poor performers may have the effect of making that small number more vexing to managers who try to solve problems rather than ignoring them. Such discomfort with the traditional federal civil service largely explains why the Federal Aviation Administration, Internal Revenue Service, and other agencies are moving to create their own alternatives to the merit system.

**Second**, among both the public at large and in much of the civil service, *tenure lacks legitimacy*. After all, few voters have tenure, so it is not surprising that citizens begrudge guaranteed lifetime employment to their public servants, whether those servants are bureaucrats, teachers, or university professors.

The movement against tenure is cross-sectional and international. Notably, tenure is as likely to be attacked by pro-government Democrats anxious to restore the legitimacy of government as by Republicans wanting to prune government. In 1996, for example, then-Georgia Governor Zell Miller, a so-called New Democrat, pushed through a law making new state government hires “at-will” employees. Early indications are that the new system has enabled public managers to separate poor performers more easily and without undue politicization. It seems likely that, increasingly, government organizations will adopt new organization models based on outcomes rather than traditional hierarchies with guaranteed lifetime employment. Perhaps by embracing more fluid personnel forms, the federal government can increase respect for the civil service.<sup>28</sup>

## TOWARD VALUES-BASED CIVIL SERVICE

For over 100 years, public administration theory and practice have supported government bureaucracies staffed by tenured officials serving for long periods in order to maximize expertise

and minimize political interference in service delivery. This was thought to be necessary because politicians otherwise would be tempted to treat the civil service as their plaything, using government jobs to reward supporters.<sup>29</sup> As the foregoing discussion shows, such arguments are questionable. Even during the era of a federal spoils system, relatively long service in government was common—particularly in positions requiring expertise—because politicians wanted government to function and because they lacked the capacity to take over government agencies.

What was true in the 19th and 20th centuries is even more true today, since executive positions in 21st century government will require considerable expertise and because political appointments will be made in the full glare of media, most notably *The Washington Post*, to be scrutinized by a vast array of interest groups, congressional committees, and independent counsels. Indeed, it may be that political factors and capacity rather than legal constraints on the numbers of political appointees limited their growth in the past to a fraction of that of congressional staffs and interest groups.

Further, the evidence suggests that appointees who do survive the political personnel system are qualified and do help their agencies navigate the shoals of the political system—a risky role that most career officials would prefer not to have. Those who want fewer political appointees in the executive branch must face facts: Even if the executive branch were to downsize its political component, Congress would not likely follow suit. *Any President who slashed the number of executive branch political appointees would be committing unilateral disarmament in the inter-branch conflict.*

Accordingly, a tenured bureaucracy seems less necessary than ever to assure government outputs and guard against undue presidential power; but the complex personnel processes set up to protect the career service from politics have retarded the efficient management of government. By allowing

28. Michael Barzelay and B. J. Armajani, *Breaking Through Bureaucracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); David Osborne and Peter Plastrik, *Banishing Bureaucracy* (Reading, Pa.: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

29. See Schultz and Maranto, *The Politics of Civil Service Reform*.

a small number of poorly performing employees to continue service, moreover, the tenure-based civil service system has falsely and perniciously stigmatized civil servants as too incompetent to survive without tenure protection.

As George Mason University political scientist Hugh Hecló pointed out more than 20 years ago, the term “civil service” has come to mean cumbersome personnel rules rather than civic institutions.<sup>30</sup> America can do better. Just as both career and political officials are part of the civil service, neither career nor political officials have a monopoly on idealism or on venality. Yet the personnel system is based largely on the theory that crass motives dominate, especially for political officials.

For both career and appointed officials, what is needed is a public personnel system based less in law and more in norms and values in support of agency missions and aligned with notions of public interest. As James P. Pfiffner<sup>31</sup> and Paul C. Light<sup>32</sup> both suggest, such a public service ethic already exists among government officials and government contractors. Political appointees also want to create public value. What is lacking, however, is a personnel system oriented to permitting officials, both career and political, to manage well.

In order to safeguard his own power and, more important, to continue the effective functioning of the American government, President Bush should:

**1. Resist calls to cut back the numbers of political appointees,** who account for less than two-tenths of 1 percent of the total civil service. Until such time as congressional staffs, in particular, are cut back in size, it would be foolhardy for any President to reduce the numbers of his own executive branch helpers.

**2. Spend substantial time, effort, and political capital to select as political appointees people of competence and distinction who share his vision of governing.** As comparisons of the Carter and Reagan Administrations suggest, more effective leaders appoint people of strength who share their goals and then empower those appointees to achieve.

**3. Make efforts to mold his appointees into a team to increase their effectiveness and enhance their ability to cooperate across agency lines.** Presidents Reagan and Eisenhower did this successfully. To the degree that President Bush can push his appointees to work and think as a team, his Administration<sup>33</sup> will be more effective.

**4. Develop a civil service reform agenda to enhance the performance of the civil service for his own Administration and for future Presidents.** Rather than react to the administrative agenda of others, President Bush should ensure that career government executives, political appointees, and the public all agree with him that it is time to reassess and substantially weaken civil service tenure. Accordingly, the President should empower a bipartisan commission to study alternatives to the conventional civil service system and submit a proposal to Congress no later than the middle of his first term. Several recent U.S. Office of Personnel Management Directors, such as Scotty Campbell under President Carter, James King under President Clinton, and Constance Horner and Donald Devine under President Reagan, have significant knowledge of this issue and could make worthwhile contributions to such a commission. Experts such as former Federal Executive Institute Director Curt Smith also could contribute.

30. Hugh Hecló, *A Government of Strangers* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1977), pp. 240–247.

31. J. P. Pfiffner, “Government Legitimacy and the Role of the Civil Service,” in J. P. Pfiffner and D. A. Brook, eds., *The Future of Merit: 20 Years After the Civil Service Reform Act* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000).

32. Paul C. Light, *The New Public Service* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000).

33. Maranto, *Politics and Bureaucracy in the Modern Presidency*. Ideas about how to orient political appointees so that they can work as a team are provided by former senior Bush appointee John Martino in his excellent work, *The Case for the Orientation of Political Appointees*, MPA thesis, Pennsylvania State University at Harrisburg, 1994.

## CONCLUSION

The executive branch of government is where the rubber of policy hits the road of implementation. The President's 3,000 political appointees play a vital role in policymaking and in overseeing implementation of the public's business.

Yet President Bush is under significant pressure to select far fewer political appointees than have his predecessors. A review of the evidence suggests that this would reduce the President's power without leading to more effective or efficient govern-

ment. President Bush must safeguard the traditional role of presidential political appointees and act now to reform the career civil service both to increase its effectiveness and to enhance the level of public trust in the government.

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