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Exchange

The Tides of Reform Revisited: Patterns in Making Government Work, 1945–2002

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The past six decades have witnessed acceleration in both the number and variety of major administrative reform statutes enacted by Congress. This increase can be explained partly by the increased involvement of Congress, a parallel decrease in activity and resistance by the presidency, and heightened public distrust toward government. At least part of the variation in the tides or philosophies of reform involves a "field of dreams" effect in which the creation of new governmental structure during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s generated increased interest in process reforms. However, part of the acceleration and variety of reform appears to be related to the lack of hard evidence of what actually works in improving government performance. Measured by federal employees' perceptions of organizational performance, what matters most is not whether organizations were reformed in the past, but whether organizations need reform in the future and can provide essential resources for achieving their mission.

Congress and presidents have been reforming government ever since the first federal departments and agencies were created. They have also been applying widely different philosophies of reform to the task.

Indeed, the Constitution contains harbingers of all four "tides," or philosophies, of administrative reform that populate the federal statute books today. It spoke to the logic of scientific management by creating a single executive with tight day-to-day control over the officers and departments of government. It laid the basis for future wars on waste by requiring an annual accounting of expenditures and revenue while reserving the appropriation power for Congress. It emphasized the need for a watchful eye on government excess through an elegant system of checks and balances. And it invited future efforts to liberate government from excessive regulation by vesting all executive powers in the president.

These four philosophies expressed themselves almost immediately in legislation. Scientific management was at the heart of Alexander Hamilton's plan for a national bank, not to mention his detailed instructions that every Coast Guard cutter possess 10 muskets, 20 pistols, two chisels, one broadax, and two lanterns (Chernow 2004, 340). The war on waste emerged as the centerpiece of Thomas Jefferson's 1800 campaign and his subsequent downsizing of government; watchful eye was the core of the First Amendment and its guarantees of free speech, press, assembly, and petition. And liberation management can be seen in Andrew Jackson's spoils system, which was originally intended to loosen the grip of the old guard through "rotation in office."

After defining the four philosophies in more detail, this article will track the ebb and flow of recent reform, examine the impact of public distrust and congressional and presidential engagement on the mix of reform, and explore links between reform and actual government performance, as measured by the perceptions of federal employees in the summer of 2001.

Defining the Four Tides

All government reform is not created equal. Some reforms seek greater efficiency through the application of scientific principles to organization and management, whereas others seek increased economy through attacks on fraud, waste, and abuse. Some seek improved performance through a focus on outcomes and employee engagement, whereas others seek increased fairness through transparency in government and access to information. Although these four approaches are not inherently contradictory—and can even be found side by side in omnibus statutes such as the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act—they emerge from very different readings of government motivations.

These approaches also offer an ideology for every political taste: scientific management for those who prefer tight chains of command and strong presidential leadership; the war on waste for those who favor

coordinated retrenchment and what one inspector general once described as "the visible odium of deterrence" (Light 1993); a watchful eye for those who believe that sunshine is the best disinfectant for misbehavior; and liberation management for those who hope to free agencies and their employees from the oppressive rules and oversight embedded in the three other philosophies.

The four reforms also have their iconic statutes: the 1939 Reorganization Act for scientific management, the 1978 Inspector General Act for the war on waste, the 1964 Freedom of Information Act for watchful eye, and the Clinton administration's 1994 reinventing government package for liberation management. And they have their own administrative mechanisms: tight rules governing behavior for scientific management, auditing and investigating for the war on waste, freedom of information and open meetings for watchful eye, and devolution, team building, and employee empowerment for liberation management. Each conveys a very different view of government and its employees, as well as a very different implementation approach (see table 1).

Thus, scientific management relies on rule-making agencies such as the Office of Management and Budget to develop clear guidelines for efficient administration, whereas liberation management rests on the innovation and commitment of agencies, teams, and individual employees to reap improved performance. In turn, the war on waste relies on centralized oversight and deterrence created by quasi-independent bodies such as the Office of Inspector General, whereas watchful eye relies on decentralized and persistent e-media, interest groups, and ordinary citizens to prevent abuse.

As I argued in *The Tides of Reform: Making Government Work, 1945–1995* (1997), each philosophy plays a role in maintaining the Constitution's delicate balance between government strength and limits on strength—that is, between a government that is strong enough to protect the nation from foreign and domestic threats yet not so strong that it threatens liberty itself.

However, as this article suggests, there can be such a thing as too much reform. Hyper-reform can distract

Congress and the president from providing needed resources to accomplish the core missions of government and create confusion about which reform to implement. To restate the conclusion of my 1997 book, the problem with the federal government today is not too little reform but too much. There have never been more reform statutes on the books but so much employee concern about having enough resources to do their jobs.

The Pace and Mix of Reform

Just as the administrative philosophies of scientific management, war on waste, watchful eye, and an invitation to liberation management coexist in the Constitution, they also coexist in the federal statute books. There, one can find the remnants of great statutes such as the Civil Service Act of 1883, which touched all four philosophies of reform: scientific management in its focus on job definitions, competitive examination, a fixed appointment ladder, and merit-based hiring; the war on waste in its promise of lower costs and greater efficiency; watchful eye in its creation of a five-member independent commission to monitor the merit system; and even a bit of liberation management in its effort to insulate career public servants from political manipulation (Skowronek 1982).

Tracking Reform

The statute books also contain a long list of recent reforms representing all four philosophies. In 2002, for example, Congress returned to scientific management by merging 22 agencies and more than 170,000 federal employees into a new U.S. Department of Homeland Security that reports directly to the president. In 1998, Congress extended its long-running war on waste under the Federal Activities Inventory Reform Act by requiring agencies to list all programs and activities that are not inherently governmental and, therefore, potential targets for outsourcing and budget cutting. In 2000, Congress gave the public— or more accurately, businesses—a better view of government by requiring the president to develop annual estimates of the costs and benefits of all regulations by agency, program, and major rule. And Congress liberated federal agencies from writing hundreds of reports by enacting the Federal Reports Elimination and Sunset Act in 1995 and further amendments in 1998.

The question is not whether Congress and presidents have adopted eclectic, even contradictory approaches to reform, but whether there are discernible patterns in reform over time and how these patterns explain the success or failure of improvement. Although there are many ways to track the history of reform— through administrative regulations, blue-ribbon commissions, executive orders, budget circulars, job descriptions, organizational charts, congressional committee hearings, articles in the *Public*

Table 1 The Four Tides of Reform

Implementation Approach	View of Government and Its Employees	
	Trusting	Distrusting
Centralized	Scientific management	War on waste
Decentralized	Liberation management	Watchful eye

Administration Review, and so forth—this article is based on a careful reading of major administrative reform statutes enacted between 1945 and 2002.[1]

Not only are statutes easier to identify and track, they tend to be much more durable over time, in part because they spawn offspring through amendments and expansions in future sessions of Congress. Without naively suggesting that they remain relevant or even enforceable in perpetuity, formal statutes do endure for a moment or two across the boundaries of administrations. While the Clinton administration's heavily promoted National Performance Review gathers dust in an aptly named "cybercemetery" at the University of North Texas,[2] its most significant reform statute, the Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994, remains alive and mostly well in procurement offices across government (Kelman 2005).

In all, Congress enacted 177 major reform statutes in the 68 years covered by this study.[3] Table 2 shows the number of major reform statutes enacted each year and the accumulation over time.

The Pace of Reform

Table 2 clearly shows the quickening pace of reform over time. It took Congress 28 years to enact the first third of the 177 statutes but just 16 years to produce the second third and 14 years to produce the final third. Divided in political time by Watergate and President Richard Nixon's resignation, it took Congress 28 years to produce the first 61 reform statutes, averaging two a year, and another 30 years to produce the next 116, averaging almost four per year. By decade, the averages increased from 2.2 per year in 1945–54 and 1.7 in 1955–64 to 3.5 in 1974–85, 4.0 in 1985–94, and 4.1 in 1995–2002.

Even as the pace of reform has accelerated, so has the complexity of individual reform statutes, at least as measured by the number of separate provisions within each act that represent a different philosophy such as war on waste and scientific management. Between 1945 and 1994, for example, 68 percent of major reform statutes contained just one philosophy compared with just 46 percent from 1995 to 2002. War on waste is the most frequent companion of other reforms, while watchful eye the most likely to be enacted alone.

If the provisions representing each philosophy within a given law are counted as discrete reforms, the average number of reforms per year rose from 3.5 in 1945–54 to 5.6 in 1985–94 and 6.7 in 1995–2002, which suggests continued acceleration, not leveling off. Simply put, the time between today's reform and tomorrow's has closed to months, not years—there were 13 years before Watergate during which Congress enacted either one or zero reform statutes, and just six after.

Table 2 Cumulative Frequency of Reform, 1945–2002

Year	Number of Statutes Enacted	Cumulative Percentage
1945	3	1.7
1946	3	3.4
1947	2	4.5
1948	0	4.5
1949	5	7.3
1950	3	9.0
1951	1	9.6
1952	1	10.2
1953	4	12.4
1954	0	12.4
1955	0	12.4
1956	1	13.0
1957	1	13.6
1958	4	15.8
1959	0	15.8
1960	0	15.8
1961	5	18.6
1962	3	20.3
1963	0	20.3
1964	3	22.0
1965	1	22.6
1966	4	24.6
1967	2	26.0
1968	0	26.0
1969	1	26.6
1970	7	30.5
1971	1	31.1
1972	2	32.2
1973	4	34.5
1974	13	41.8
1975	1	42.4
1976	2	43.5
1977	4	45.8
1978	7	49.7
1979	1	50.3
1980	6	53.7
1981	1	54.2
1982	4	56.5
1983	1	57.1
1984	3	58.8
1985	2	59.9
1986	8	64.4
1987	2	65.5
1988	10	71.2
1989	4	73.4
1990	4	75.7
1991	0	75.7
1992	3	77.4
1993	3	79.1
1994	4	81.4
1995	5	84.2
1996	8	88.7
1997	4	91.0
1998	8	95.5
2000	5	98.3
2001	1	98.9
2002	2	100

N = 177

It is not yet clear whether this recent increase in complexity is the product of Republican control of Congress because the only years of Republican control happen to have occurred during the same decade as the increased complexity. What is clear is that the complexity is not the result of unified government led by Democrats, when the percentage of one-philosophy statutes rested at 68 percent, or divided government between Republican presidents and either Democratic or split-party control of Congress, when the percentage of one-philosophy statutes stood at 62 percent.

Table 2 also shows five major spikes in reform activity, the first associated with the implementation of the first Hoover Commission's agenda in 1949; the second in 1969, the first year of Nixon's presidency, during which there was a mix of reorganization and financial reforms; the third in 1974, with a range of watchful eye reforms prompted by Nixon's resignation; the fourth in 1986 and 1988, with a mix of Reagan administration war on waste statutes and streamlining reforms; and the fifth in 1996 and 1998, with a combination of Clinton administration reinventing government programs and a mix of regulatory reform and reorganizations. Together, these spikes covered less than a tenth of the time covered by the analysis but produced more than a third of the statutes. Even here, however, one sees the acceleration of reform—two of the spike years occurred before Watergate and four occurred after.

It is useful to note that the recent acceleration in reform activity has occurred during a period when overall congressional action has slowed considerably. At least measured by statutory output, Congress has produced less legislation over the past two decades than at any point since the end of World War II. Even though they are spending more time in session and taking more recorded votes, members are introducing fewer bills and passing fewer laws. As we shall see, the market for spending legislation and new programs may have collapsed somewhat in the wake of budget caps and tax cuts, but the market for administrative reform has grown stronger.

It is also useful to note that the federal government is not alone in its high rate of reform. The most recent survey by Bain & Company (Rigby 2005) shows that private firms used 13 different management reforms in 2004, and my own research on the nonprofit sector

shows a similar level of change (Light 2004). All three sectors are plagued by a lack of evidence-based research on which reforms work under which circumstances.

The Mix of Reform

As the pace of reform has increased, so has the mix of potentially competing reform philosophies and the amount of process reform, including changes in rule-making systems, personnel management, financial controls, and administrative procedures. As I have already noted, major reform legislation has become more complex over time, perhaps suggesting that reform must carry more philosophies to assure enactment. Moreover, as noted earlier, adding a war on waste provision such as an employment ceiling or promised dollar savings may have become the price of passage for other reform.

Scientific management was the dominant philosophy of administrative reform from the 1930s to the 1960s, whereas the war on waste, watchful eye, and liberation management have been ascendant since then. Congress and presidents built the basic structure of the modern administrative state during the first period, creating one department and agency after another to administer the New Deal and the Great Society. Once created, the process reforms followed, whether in the form of new administrative systems, attacks on bureaucratic waste, or efforts to give managers and employees greater space to do their work through what Lois Recascino Wise (2002) calls the pursuit of social equity (e.g., pay comparability), democratization (e.g., labor–management partnerships), and humanization (e.g., job enrichment and employee empowerment). The pattern suggests a "field of dreams" effect—that is, if Congress and the president build it, process reforms will come. Table 3 shows the rise and fall and rise again of the four reform philosophies from 1945 to 2002.[4]

Scientific management did not disappear entirely from the reform agenda, of course. Indeed, it supplied 33 (28 percent) of the 116 major post-Watergate reform statutes. But it clearly had to share the reform agenda with process reforms, including a long list of war on waste statutes authored during the first and second terms of the Reagan administration, the watchful eye reforms boosted to the agenda after Watergate, and the liberation management reforms authored under the aegis of reinventing government.

Table 3 Patterns in Reform Philosophy by Decade, 1945–2002 (percentages)

	1945–54	1955–64	1965–74	1975–84	1985–94	1995–2002
Scientific management	82	82	43	30	18	39
War on waste	9	0	3	37	28	21
Watchful eye	9	12	29	27	33	21
Liberation management	0	6	26	7	23	18

$N = 177$

Although the proportion of reform statutes associated with scientific management decreased with time, its influence continued and came back forcefully with reorganizations at the Internal Revenue Service, Food and Drug Administration, and Amtrak and the creation of the Transportation Security Administration and the Department of Homeland Security. It also was the primary philosophy that underpinned new rules governing information management under the Information Technology Reform Act of 1996.

The changing mix of reform is expressed in other characteristics of the 177 reform statutes. The percentage of statutes that clearly focused on a specific process of government, such as personnel, financial management, information management, and so forth, increased from 41 percent in 1945–54 to 67 percent in 1975–84, 73 percent in 1985–94, and 88 percent in 1995–2002. Scientific management played a role in creating strict rules governing some of these processes, of course, but found dwindling outlets for the creation of new units of government until September 11 and the call for new agencies to wage the war on terrorism.

From 1945 to 2002, the nature of compliance changed dramatically, largely because scientific management tends to emphasize providing the basic structures and capacity for government to work, whereas the war on waste and watchful eye place their faith in compliance with strict rules of accountability. Despite the rise of liberation management and its focus on giving managers and employees greater freedom, compliance accountability rose from just 32 percent of statutes in 1945–54 to 57 percent in 1974–85, with statutes such as the Ethics in Government Act; to 53 percent in 1985–94, with the expansion of existing statutes such as the Freedom of Information Act; and to 64 percent in 1995–2002, with passage of a raft of statutes covering lobbying reform, paperwork reduction, and electronic freedom of information.

The Executive Office Accountability Act of 1996 may be the best example of all. Under that statute, Congress applied 11 existing statutes to all components of the Executive Office of the President, including the Fair Labor Standards Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and federal laws relating to veterans' employment. The act also prohibited retaliation against any whistleblowers making a charge under any of the 11 statutes. The original proposal even created a White House Office of Inspector General to make sure the laws were obeyed, but Congress backed off at the Clinton administration's insistence.

The Return of Structural Reform
September 11 sparked a renewed interest in structural reform as the answer to the nation's vulnerability to terrorist attacks. Pressed to show they were doing more than just tinkering with existing structures, Congress and the president created three entirely new organizations within 18 months: the Transportation Security Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Office of the National Intelligence Director.

All three statutes reflected an emerging consensus among study groups, think tanks, and blue-ribbon commissions that the structure of government was ill suited for the war on terrorism. As the second National Commission on the Public Service, chaired by former Federal Reserve Board chairman Paul A. Volcker, argued in 2003,

> Federal agencies that share closely related missions should be administered by the same organizational entity. A few large departments in which those agencies are grouped should enhance their employees' sense of purpose and loyalties, provide opportunities for advancement and job mobility, and encourage interagency cooperation. It is a much more sensible approach to government organization than the current pattern in which agencies with similar responsibilities have been scattered throughout the government (2003, 6).

Such reorganizations are fraught with risk, however, partly because past reforms create their own sediment of administrative inertia in the form of implementing rules, agencies, and new personnel, and partly because an increasingly active Congress often imposes its own preferences on the organizational chart. The Department of Homeland Security has struggled to integrate the customized administrative systems that its 22 agencies brought into the merger, and the Transportation Security Administration has operated under persistent hiring and spending caps imposed by congressional appropriators who opposed the creation of a federal screener workforce. Both the TSA and DHS have also struggled to implement the new personnel systems that many in Congress hoped would accelerate the hiring and disciplinary process and that some also expected to weaken employee bargaining rights.

It is too early to predict whether reorganization will become fashionable for other government endeavors such as food safety, job training, and childhood education, all of which have been the subject of recent congressional hearings on possible structural reform. What is clear is that today's reorganizations are markedly different from the reorganizations of the 1950s and 1960s, which created a host of new agencies such as the U.S. Departments of Health, Education, and Welfare, Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Science Foundation, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

First, the newly created organizations have been far more narrowly specified in terms of what they will look like and how they will work. The Airport Security Act was loaded with deadlines on everything from the choice of logos and uniforms to the installation of baggage-screening equipment, and the Homeland Security Act carried a long list of instructions on how the new department would operate. All three statutes also contained precise language naming officers, duties, and chains of command. Because all three statutes originated in Congress, they also carried instructions from a host of committees and subcommittees, all of which were designed to ensure timely service to the many constituencies involved while protecting congressional turf through spending formulas and oversight schedules.

Second, the new organizations carried all the accoutrements of the war on waste and watchful eye, including offices of inspector generals, long lists of required studies and reports, and repeated language about spending priorities. The Transportation Security Administration was to spend as little as possible on the new federal screener workforce, and the Department of Homeland Security was to be neutral on revenue and personnel by using expected economies of scale to reduce budget demand. As a result, the statutes gave the president relatively little authority to design the new agencies.

Thus, even if reorganization is back (as California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger might say), it is back in a very different form. Because the Bush administration resisted all three new agencies created in the war on terrorism, Congress was very much the designer, producing a mix of reform philosophies that has required a much greater focus on congressional politics than the reorganizations that came through the first Hoover Commission of the late 1940s.

The Market for Reform
The broad patterns in the tides of reform reflect deep shifts in the market for administrative reform that are rooted in changing public attitudes, rising congressional involvement in administrative reform, and declining presidential engagement in either generating legislative initiatives or resisting Congress. The following section describes this marketplace for reform.

The Rhetoric of Reform
There is little doubt that the war on waste and watchful eye rose in tandem with increasing public distrust of government. In 1945–54, for example, 59 percent of statutes carried a trusting view of government, meaning that legislative text or history conveyed a sense of confidence in the ability of government to achieve its mission. Watergate and Nixon's resignation marked a significant change in tone. In 1975–84, 73 percent of statutes were wrapped

in retrenchment and antigovernment rhetoric, a percentage that is not significantly different from the 75 percent in 1985–94 and 70 percent in 1995–2002.

Some of the harshest rhetoric has been reserved for the reform of specific agencies, such as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), which was reorganized in 1998 following a long investigation of taxpayer abuse. Rising to support passage of his Internal Revenue Service Restructuring and Reform Act, Senate Finance Committee chairman William Roth (R-DE) described the agency as a "hall of mirrors" in which taxpayers have no place to turn:

> What we bring with this important legislation is a new era of openness to an agency that has too long been able to operate beyond the view of Congress....We bring a new era of accountability to an agency marked by a culture that protects even the most lawless employees from the consequences of their actions. We bring an era of efficiency and modern management to an organizational structure that dates back to before the industrial age.

Ironically, there is good reason to argue that at least some of the taxpayer abuse was provoked by the implementation of an earlier reform sponsored by Senator Roth. Under the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act, the IRS had created the Field Office Performance Index to measure progress toward agency-wide goals. Pressured to increase their property-seizure rates, some IRS managers set productivity quotas that led to increasingly aggressive collection tactics. In a letter to the Finance Committee, then–Deputy Treasury Secretary Lawrence H. Summers said, "Not a single staff member or member of Congress expressed any concern about the IRS's use of revenue measurements, or suggested that there should be less emphasis on the revenue-related goals" (Barr 1997). Thus, one reform begot another and another.

It is hardly surprising to find antigovernment rhetoric toward the IRS, which remains one of the nation's least popular agencies in spite of an aggressive effort to improve citizen satisfaction (Rossotti 2005). It is more surprising, perhaps, to find such rhetoric surrounding the creation of entirely new agencies, particularly ones established after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The Transportation Security Administration is a case in point. Mixed in with references to the need for action are repeated attacks on the federal government and its employees. Representative Walter B. Jones (R-NC) said,

> Previous experiences with various federal workforces, in particular the Immigration and

Naturalization Service, is an example of a federal workforce that faces difficulties performing at acceptable levels of accountability. Time and again taxpayer dollars are spent to fund agencies that talk a good game while training through a difficult learning curve and providing very little in the way of actual services....The American people deserve to feel safe when they fly. They also deserve and demand an accountable federal government. I believe strongly in the free enterprise system and I further believe that the least economical and least efficient way that you can do anything is to give the federal government more power.[5]

What the Public Wants

This rising tide of distrust is part of what Peri Arnold describes as the role of reform as an instrument of presidential public politics. "Contemporary reform confronts a different, newer problem of regime-level politics, the widespread public doubt about the legitimacy of the big, administrative state," writes Arnold. "From Carter through Reagan to Clinton, executive reorganization's promise is not better governance but, rather, a transformation that promises a government that is less disquieting to the American electorate. Existing government is portrayed as wasteful, incompetent and inexplicable" (1995, 416).

Arnold also notes that the Clinton administration's complaint was different from previous antigovernment attacks. Whereas the Reagan administration operated from the president's famous inaugural statement that government was not the solution but the problem, the Clinton administration's reinventing government program argued that bureaucracy was the problem, not the bureaucrats. According to a content analysis of every slogan uttered during the 1992 presidential campaign, candidate Bill Clinton used the word "bureaucrat" exactly twice in more than 100 speeches, advertisements, and debates, compared with 23 times by his opponent, incumbent president George H. W. Bush (see Light 1999 for a more detailed analysis of campaign rhetoric in 1960, 1980, 1992, and 1996).

Moreover, Clinton only talked about bureaucrats when promising to fire them. "He won't streamline the federal government and change the way it works," Clinton said of President George H. W. Bush when he accepted the Democratic nomination. "Nor will he cut a hundred thousand bureaucrats and put a hundred thousand new police officers on the streets of American cities. But I will." By turning the debate away from the term "bureaucrats" and toward "bureaucracy," which he used 54 times during the campaign, Clinton set the stage for liberation management, albeit liberation with a war on waste justification. Bureaucrats get fired; federal employees get reinvented.

The question is why Clinton decided to streamline rather than dismantle, to trim rather than eviscerate. The answer is that the market for reform contains an inherent contradiction: Americans cannot live with government, but they cannot live without it—government may be wasteful toward others, but not toward them. This leads to a conundrum for reformers, especially those who want a more activist government. How can they justify new programs and agencies when 93 percent of the public says that the federal government in Washington wastes a great deal or fair amount of money and that federal employees are motivated more by pay, job security, and benefits than by pride in their organizations, the chance to help people, and the desire to accomplish something worthwhile?[6]

One answer can be found in public opinions toward the size and scope of government. Asked whether government programs should be cut back greatly to reduce the power of government or maintained to deal with important problems, approximately 55–65 percent of Americans consistently say they want programs maintained to one degree or another. Asked next whether the bigger problem is that government has the wrong priorities or that it has the right priorities but runs its programs inefficiently, approximately 55–65 percent of Americans consistently pick the latter response.

When the two questions are combined, one can discern four segments of the public, each with a distinct attitude toward reform: (1) the *dismantlers,* who believe that government programs should be cut back and that government has the wrong priorities; (2) the *realigners,* who also believe that government has the wrong priorities but still say that government should maintain programs to deal with important issues; (3) the *downsizers,* who believe that government has the right priorities and is inefficient but should cut back greatly; and (4) the *reinventors,* who believe that government has the right priorities and is inefficient but should maintain its programs to deal with important issues. Table 4 shows the relative lack of movement in public attitudes on these combined questions from 1997 to 2003.[7]

The opinion surveys suggest remarkable stability in contemporary public attitudes toward reform—a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too attitude that would encourage precisely the kind of rhetoric that surrounded the Clinton administration's reinventing government campaign. Despite all of the underlying support for employee empowerment, job enrichment, labor–management partnerships, and liberation, the reinvention campaign also carried a strong dose of downsizing, which allowed the administration to capture the support of roughly 6 in 10 Americans,

Table 4 Patterns in Public Opinion toward Reform, 1998–2004 (percentage of respondents)

	Dismantlers	Realigners	Downsizers	Reinventors
October 1997	16	14	22	39
August 2001	13	14	21	39
October 2001	7	12	17	43
May 2002	10	17	17	35
October 2003	10	17	19	35

N = 1,782 (1997), 1,003 (August 2001), 1,033 (October 2001), 986 (2002), and 770 (2003).

assuming that these attitudes were similar in the early 1990s.

The opinion surveys also help to explain the second Bush administration's general reluctance to cut government and its modest management agenda built around outsourcing, performance management, and personnel reform. There is simply no support for widespread cutbacks—the administration could claim the support of barely a quarter of Americans (the dismantlers and realigners) for an aggressive attack on the federal bureaucracy.

The Congressional Response

The rising tide of public distrust has created electoral incentives for congressional participation in government reform (Fiorina 1977), especially reforms that exploit the sizable majority of Americans who appear to support downsizing and reinventing government. In turn, congressional engagement appears to have generated the rising tides of war on waste and watchful eye. When Congress has been the source of ideas for reform, the institution has usually, though not always, brought its own skepticism and preference for compliance accountability to the debate.

This is not to argue that Congress suddenly discovered government reform when public confidence began to sag during the 1960s and early 1970s. To the contrary, 41 percent of the reform statutes passed in 1945–54 originated in Congress, including the legislation that created the first and second Hoover Commissions, the Administrative Procedure Act, the 1949 Classification Act, and the 1950 National Science Foundation Act.

However, much of this early activity involved legislation that had been deferred during World War II (e.g., the Administrative Procedure Act) or came from a Republican Congress looking for ways to constrain the New Deal and weaken the four-term Democratic hold on the presidency. From 1954 to 1964, the number of congressionally initiated reforms fell dramatically to just 18 percent compared with 51 percent in 1964–74. Congressional initiatives rose steadily thereafter, rising to 60 percent in 1975–84, 83 percent in 1985–94, and 88 percent in 1995–2002.

The increased activity may have been driven partly by public disquiet, but there has always been a strong link between congressional involvement and a distrusting approach to administrative reform. In 1945–54, 56 percent of congressionally initiated reforms were coded as distrusting toward government compared with just 31 percent of presidentially initiated ideas during the decade.

Congressional preferences for compliance accountability show a much stronger imprint of public distrust. In 1945–54, just 33 percent of the 110 congressionally initiated reforms carried a compliance or rules-based approach to accountability. The percentages rose to 56 percent in 1965–74 and 72 percent in 1975–84, dropped back to 60 percent in 1985–94, then rose again to 69 percent in 1995–2002.

The Presidential Retreat

Public distrust also had an impact on the presidential reform agenda. In the three decades before Watergate, only 31 percent, 7 percent, and 24 percent of presidentially initiated statutes, respectively, were coded as distrusting; in the three decades after, the percentages rose to 58 percent in 1975–84, 57 percent in 1985–94, and 75 percent in 1995–2002. Just 20 percent of statutes that came before Watergate were coded as distrusting, whereas the percentage jumped to 58 percent in the decades after. As presidents became less active in generating reform ideas, they became more distrusting.

What did not change was the natural presidential aversion to compliance-based accountability. Altogether, just 20 percent of the 67 presidentially initiated statutes carried a compliance orientation, and the percentage never exceeded 33 percent in any decade.

Interesting though they may be, these trends in presidential preferences are far less important than the dramatic decline in presidential participation in statute-based administrative reform. It could be that presidents have simply given up on legislative solutions to administrative tasks, turning more to executive orders and memoranda, blue-ribbon commissions, task forces, management agendas, and even reinvention labs (Thompson and Ingraham 1996)

to accomplish their ends. What such vehicles lack in durability, they may more than make up for in pliability.

Yet there is also ample evidence that presidents may be participating less because they no longer have the capacity or interest to develop the kinds of statutes that emerged in this study. None of the recent reorganizations in homeland security came from the White House, for example, nor did most of the major process reforms, such as the Chief Financial Officer Act, Government Performance and Results Act, or Information Technology Reform Act (better known as the Clinger-Cohen Act, in honor of its House and Senate cosponsors). Notwithstanding the handful of statutes associated with reinventing government, presidents have mostly relied on Congress and the Government Accountability Office to set the reform agenda.

Relying on Congress as the engine of reform may be the best that presidents can do to generate new ideas or to resist congressional involvement given the weakening of their own ability to set the reform agenda through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). This decline has been well documented in *PAR*'s pages by scholars such as Ronald C. Moe (1990, 1994), who summarized the state of the "M" in OMB in 1999 before the House Government Reform Committee:

> The contemporary presidency has been steadily losing its capacity to lead the executive branch on a day-to-day basis, in large measure because of the absence of a supportive institutional presence to project and protect the President's interests in government operations....It is not enough for management purposes to rely on the budget process with its short-term deadlines and spending biases. Nor can ad-hoc groups tied to some unit

without the Executive Office...substitute for permanent management leadership, properly defined and understood (1999, 9).

This is not to suggest that presidents are incapable of crafting a reform agenda or unable to participate in the reform process, as the Bush administration did in expanding the homeland security merger to include more agencies. However, it does suggest that presidents cannot go very deep in building such agendas, nor can they mount particularly effective counterarguments to the rising flow of reform from Congress.

Explaining the Choice of Reform

These institutional preferences help to explain at least some of the variation in the tides of reform over the past 60 years. As the percentages in table 5 show, Watergate, the source of ideas, and links to blue-ribbon commissions are the strongest explanations for the rise or fall of a particular philosophy of reform.

The statistics confirm three points. First, presidents have been the source of most scientific management reform—they are the Kevin Costners of their fields of dreams—whereas Congress has been the source of most watchful eye statutes. Second, Watergate marked a critical dividing line in three of the four reform philosophies: It diminished scientific management and intensified both war on waste and watchful eye statutes. Third, divided government shows a strong relationship with watchful eye—separation of powers, not partisan politics, is the significant driver.

Table 5 also shows a strong relationship between blue-ribbon commissions and both scientific management and war on waste. Under pressure to fix a problem, blue-ribbon commissions either recommend new structure, as the Hart-Rudman Commission on U.S.

Table 5 Predictors of Reform Philosophy, 1945–2002

Condition	Presence of Each Reform Philosophy under Each Condition (percentage and chi-square)			
	Scientific management	War on waste	Watchful eye	Liberation management
Watergate: Before, after	71%, 28% 28.8***	5%, 25% 10.9***	13%, 29% 5.8*	12%, 17% 1.0
Party control of Congress: Republican, Democratic	47%, 46% 0.03	18%, 10% 1.9	18%, 27% 1.0	16%, 18% 0.06
Party control of presidency: Republican, Democratic	37%, 48% 2.2	21%, 15% 0.9	28%, 20% 1.6	14%, 17% 0.2
Party control of government: Unified, divided	59%, 34% 10.1***	11%, 22% 3.7**	17%, 28% 2.6	14%, 16% 0.16
Origin of ideas: President, Congress	59%, 27% 29.1***	13%, 21% 1.6	2%, 27% 29.5***	16%, 15% 0.1
Blue-ribbon commission involvement: No, yes	37%, 83% 17.0***	4%, 20% 3.4*	2%, 27% 8.2***	13%, 16% 0.1

$N = 177$
$* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.$

Security in the 21st Century and the 9/11 Commission did, or enunciate new rules to reduce government waste, as the Grace Commission and the Packard Commission on Defense Procurement did. As the percentages suggest, commissions almost never suggest more sunshine and relaxation.

Finally, table 5 offers little help in explaining the rise and fall of liberation management, largely because it peaked between the beginning of the Nixon administration and the end of Clinton's term. As a result, liberation management rose both before and after Watergate, when Congress was controlled by Democrats and Republicans, when the White House was occupied by Democrats and Republicans, and when the two branches were unified (1993–94) and divided (1969–74, 1995–2000).

Assessing the Impact of Reform

The crucial measure missing from the tides of reform database is the extent to which a given statute worked. Has the Freedom of Information Act produced greater access or just more secrets? Has the Government Performance and Results Act generated greater performance or just more internal paperwork? Has the Department of Homeland Security produced more homeland security or just more layers of government? Has the Unfunded Mandates Act produced fewer mandates or just political cover for new unfunded mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act?

Alas, the questions are impossible to answer systematically. Despite the "longest and best" rhetoric surrounding each reform campaign, legislation takes time to work its will, whether for good or ill, and is best seen as an expression of the conventional wisdom about making government work.

Moreover, all but four of the 177 major reforms in this analysis were implemented without a preliminary test somewhere in the executive branch. If a reform is good enough for one unit or agency, or so the history suggests, it must be good enough for the entire government.

Perceptions of Improvement

There are plenty of opinions about whether reform actually works, not the least of which comes from the reformers themselves. Whether they are seen as victims or beneficiaries, however, federal employees may have the greatest insight into the sediment of past reforms. Asked in 2001 whether their organization had been reformed, reorganized, or reinvented in the past five years, 75 percent of a random sample of 1,051 federal employees said "yes" compared with 60 percent of a random sample of 1,140 nonprofit employees and 56 percent of a random sample of 1,005 private-sector employees.[8]

In turn, 50 percent of the federal employees said the reforms had made their jobs either somewhat or much more difficult, compared with 31 percent of nonprofit employees and 30 percent of private sector employees.[9] In turn, 80 percent of the federal employees said their organizations were basically sound or did not need much change at all, compared with 88 percent of nonprofit employees and 87 percent of private sector employees.[10]

Nevertheless, members of the Senior Executive Service were much more positive regarding the impact of past reforms on their jobs. For example, 60 percent of the senior executives said the reforms had made their jobs a lot or somewhat easier to do, compared with 43 percent of middle- and lower-level managers and 41 percent of middle- and lower-level nonmanagers. It is not clear who is right. Senior executives have the higher perch from which to view organization-wide impacts, but middle- and lower-level employees have the front-row seats.

There are two obvious problems with asking employees about reform. First, as Steven Kelman cautions, not all federal reforms are designed to make jobs easier.[11] Moreover, as Terry Moe argues, some reforms are even designed to make federal jobs impossible. According to Moe, government organizations reflect an amalgam of choices that lead almost inexorably to disaster: "Just as policy can get watered down through compromise, so can structure—and it almost always does....In the economic system, organizations are generally designed by participants who want them to succeed. In the political system, public bureaucracies are designed in no small measure by participants who explicitly want them to fail" (1990, 127).

Second, all employees have an obvious self-interest in downplaying the need for major reform, particularly because it might involve more work for them, not to mention the potential loss of their freedom and jobs. Given the heavy dose of compliance in the recent past, one might expect federal employees in particular to worry about any invitation they might give to further reform.

Explaining Perceptions of Performance

One way to address these biases is to ignore employees' impressions of reform altogether and focus instead on perceptions of their organizations' overall performance in four basic tasks: (1) helping people, (2) spending money wisely, (3) being fair in decisions, and (4) running programs and services. After all, improved performance is the theoretical goal of reform.

Fortunately, perceptions of federal performance in these four areas are highly correlated and sum to a very useful measure of just how well government was

Table 6 Determinants of Reform Success, 2001

Independent Variable	Standardized Beta Weight in Predicting Job Improvement
Fellow employees are not competitive with each other	.040
Fellow employees are open to new ideas	−.030
Fellow employees are willing to help other employees learn	.027
Fellow employees are concerned about achieving their organization's mission	.158***
Organization encourages employees to take risks or try new ways of doing work	.070**
Respondent is given a chance to do the things he or she does best	−.015
Respondent is satisfied with job overall	.043
Respondent is satisfied with opportunities for advancement, opportunities to develop new skills, public respect, and chance to accomplish something worthwhile (summed scale of four questions)	.082**
Respondent can describe how his/her job contributes to mission	.074**
Respondent's job contributes to the organization's mission	−.007
Overall morale of fellow employees is high	.002
Estimated percentage of fellow employees who are not doing their job well	.013
Overall competence of senior leaders, middle-level managers, middle-level employees, and lower-level employees is high (summed scale of four ratings)	.221***
Quality of senior leaders has increased in past five years	.059
Quality of middle-level managers has increased in past five years	−.002
Quality of middle-level employees has increased in past five years	.001
Quality of lower-level employees has increased in past five years	−.033
Respondent is a senior leader or middle-level manager	.101***
Respondent's organization has been reformed in past five years	−.010
Respondent thinks organization does not need major reform in the future	.129***
Organizations always or often provides access to information, technology, training, and enough employees to do its job well (summed scale of four ratings)	.099***
Respondent's length of service in government	.055*
Respondent believes there are too many layers between him/her and top of organization	.077***
R^2	.579
Adjusted r^2	.568
F test	52.130***

$N = 1,051$

$* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.$

doing its job at the time of the 2001 survey, which was completed before September 11. Using ordinary least-squares regression, table 6 shows the relationships between perceptions of work life and this summed measure of performance.

These findings provide a simple message to Congress and the president: Reform only matters if it actually strengthens organizational capacity. This message should be reassuring to those who worry about the steady erosion of capacity (Ingraham 2005), as well as those who have invested enormous energy in improving the federal government's antiquated personnel system. Thus, recruiting and retaining quality employees while disciplining poor performers clearly matters greatly to perceptions of successful reform, as does giving employees the opportunity to do what they do best. So do providing needed resources and creating a market basket of satisfaction with opportunities for advancement, the chance to develop new skills, public respect, and the ability to accomplish something worthwhile.

The results are also reassuring for those who, like this author, worry about layering in government, which

emerges as one of the most significant predictors of organizational performance. The further employees are from the top, the more they lose track of the mission of the organization, how their jobs contribute to that mission, and the basic resources to do their jobs. It appears to be a sense of drift and isolation that these employees attribute to their colleagues.

There is other evidence that the view of performance looks better from the top—the number of years of service is correlated with one's rank in the organization, which is correlated with perceived performance. Years of service and rank are also correlated with perceptions of layering—obviously, the distance between the top and bottom of government is greatest at the bottom. Years of service may also capture a bit of the numbing that comes from repeated reforms, cutbacks, and hiring and pay freezes. The longer one stays in government, the greater the reservoir of doubt about access to the resources one needs.

The analysis also reinforces the general notion that reform does not improve employees' perceptions of performance unless it contributes to organizational

capacity. What matters most is whether employees believe their organizations need major reform in the future, not whether they have been reformed in the past.

These findings should caution future reformers, including members of Congress and senior presidential appointees, to think carefully about both the rhetoric and reality of change. To the extent that they exploit public distrust through caps and cuts, they may create intense resistance to future reforms. They also create a climate of internal distrust that weakens commitment to the organization.

Although trust in one's organization may be as much a consequence of perceived performance as a cause, it clearly matters to satisfaction, morale, and the embracing of mission. The more government can do to build a climate of trust, explain the overall mission of each agency and unit, and reduce the distance between top and bottom, the higher the perceived performance. Although these perceptions are just perceptions, they do suggest the value of plain-speaking reforms designed to help employees understand how they contribute to the greater good. This understanding is of little help, however, if employees do not have the resources to do their jobs.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the deluge of recent reform may have done little to actually improve government performance. On the contrary, it may have created confusion within government about what Congress and the president really want, distraction from needed debates about organizational missions and resources, and the illusion that more reform will somehow lead to better government. As the Internal Revenue Service example illustrated, every reform, no matter how well intended, has at least some unintended consequences, whether through misinterpretation, maladministration, or conflicts with already existing reforms.

Moreover, the acceleration of reform gives government and its employees little time to fully test and implement the most promising ideas for improvement. Yesterday's reform is swept aside by today's, which will be quickly forgotten by tomorrow, just as yesterday's training is rendered obsolete by today's, which will be overwritten tomorrow. All the while, federal employees are left to wonder when or whether Congress and the president might tackle the systemic problems that act as barriers to the high performance they want to achieve.

Reluctant though one should be about proposing blue-ribbon commissions, it seems reasonable to suggest a moratorium on new reform until an independent body can complete a detailed examination of just how past reforms have worked. When coupled with an action-forcing device of the kind used in the military base closing exercise, such a commission could provide Congress and the president with a single list of statutes, rules, and reforms that should be abolished.

There comes a time when the sediment of past reforms becomes so thick that agencies simply cannot operate with any semblance of the efficiency, economy, fairness, or performance envisioned in the four tides of reform. Nor is it possible to implement new reforms within a hierarchy that is packed with offices and titleholders who are still struggling to implement past reforms. Much as a blue-ribbon commission would embrace scientific management, it could also strengthen the other tides by reconciling the continuing conflicts between often-contradictory goals such as openness and privacy, speed and fairness, compliance and creativity, and consistency and innovation. As past reformers might say, at least it's worth a try.

Acknowledgments

Notes
1. I define major statutes by judgment through a reading of the legislative history of each law, media coverage, and status accorded by *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*. Many statutes crossed over into my database from other organizations, such as the Administrative Conference's *Federal Administrative Procedure Sourcebook* (1992) and Ronald C. Moe's *General Management Laws: A Selective Compendium* (1997). Others crossed over from David C. Mayhew's *Divided We Govern* (2005) and from my own database on the president's agenda. Still others made the list through reviews of legislative hearings conducted by the U.S. Senate Governmental Affairs Committee and the U.S. House Government Operations and Government Reform Committees, as well as reviews of U.S. Government Accountability Office reports.

2. The National Performance Review can be found in a cybercemetery at the University of North Texas at http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/.

3. My original tides of reform database consisted of 141 statutes. In updating the database for this study, I added three additional statutes: the 1950 National Science Foundation Act, the 1969 Tax Reform Act, and a 1977 act prohibiting the first year of salary increases authorized under the 1977 Federal Salary Act Amendments. The first of these was listed in the appendix to *The Tides of Reform* (Light 1997) but was not actually included in the database.

4. The table shows the primary focus of each reform statute. Sixty-four percent of the 177 statutes embraced one reform philosophy only, whereas 29 percent included a primary and secondary philosophy, and 7 percent contained a primary, secondary, and tertiary theme. The determination of primary, secondary, and tertiary emphasis was based on a plain reading of the legislative text and history. Each major provision of the 177 statutes was coded for its basic philosophy, using the legislative text, committee hearings and reports, and floor debate to discern the underlying purpose of the reform.

5. See the *Congressional Record*, September 23, 2001, p. H7643.

6. These statistics come from ongoing surveys by Princeton Survey Research Associates (www.psra.com) on behalf of the now-defunct Brookings Institution Center for Public Service. The percentages on perceived waste in government came from a telephone survey of 770 randomly selected Americans conducted in October 2003, in which 73 percent said the federal government in Washington wastes "a great deal" of money and 20 percent said "a fair amount." The opinions on the perceived sources of federal employee motivation came from telephone surveys of 1,003, 1,033, and 986 randomly selected Americans conducted by the Center for Public Service in August and October 2001 and May 2002, respectively. Additional information on the 2001–03 surveys can be found at www.brookings.edu/gs/cps/cps_hp.htm.

7. These figures came from a 1997 telephone survey of 1,762 Americans conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (1998) and the four surveys described in footnote 6. Further details on the Pew Center survey can be found at http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?pageID = 592.

8. These surveys were conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates on behalf of the Brookings Institution Center for Public Service. The samples were identified through random-digit dialing. To protect against biases associated with being identified as a government, nonprofit, or private sector employee, respondents were told that they were participating in a survey about work life. All questions were designed to elicit opinions about each respondent's job or organization without reference to sector.

9. This question was only asked of employees who said their organizations had been reformed, reinvented, or reorganized in the past five years.

10. This question was asked of all employees in the samples.

11. Personal communication with the author.

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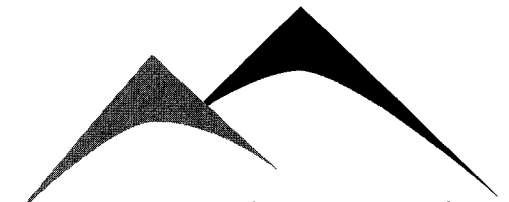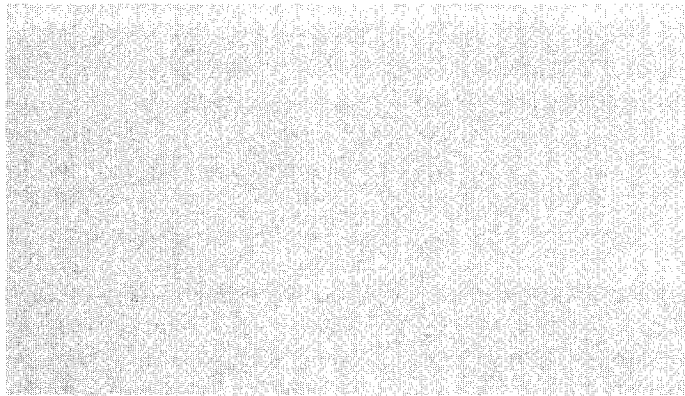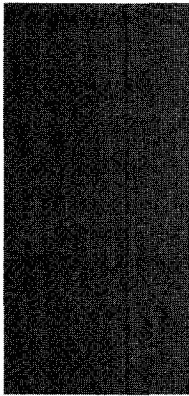
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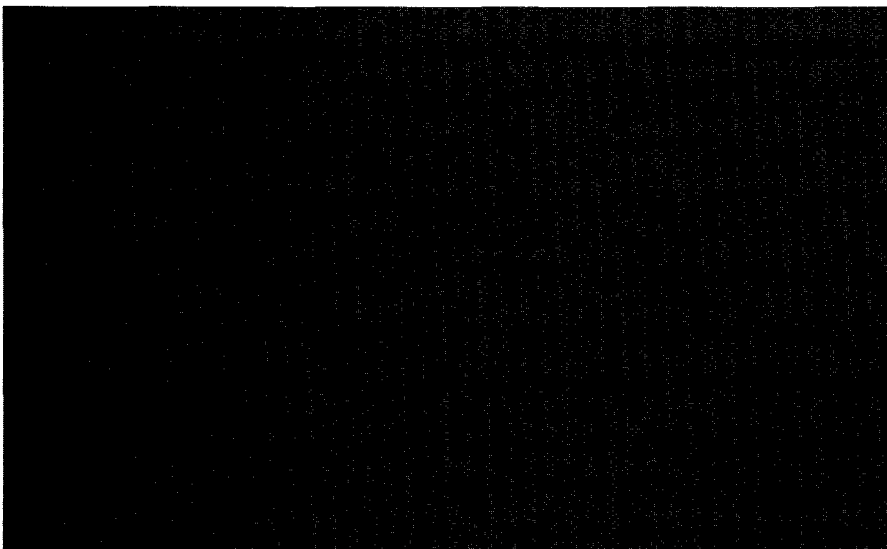
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