

**PEOPLE ON PEOPLE ON PEOPLE:**

**FACT SHEET ON THE CONTINUED THICKENING OF GOVERNMENT**

Paul C. Light

New York University

The John Brademas Center

March 17, 2017

The past half century has witnessed a slow, but steady thickening of the federal bureaucracy as Congress and presidents have added layer upon layer of political and career management to the hierarchy. The past six years have been no different. Despite President Obama’s promise to create a 21st century government that is open and competent, he followed the precedents set by previous presidents by bequeathing a taller, wider federal hierarchy to his successor. Alexander Hamilton’s believed that “clarity” of command was central to a government well executed, but “foggy” is the more accurate term today:

* Whereas John F. Kennedy entered office in charge of seven cabinet departments, Trump was put in charge of 15.
* Whereas Kennedy entered office in charge of 17 layers of senior managers who worked for cabinet secretaries, deputy secretaries, undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, and administrators, Trump took charge of 71.
* Finally, whereas Kennedy appointed or oversaw 451 leaders, Trump inherited 3,265.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The impact of the thickening is in the headlines regularly. Information must pass through layer upon layer before it reaches the top of the hierarchy, if it reaches the top at all, while guidance and oversight must pass down through layer upon layer on the way to the frontlines, if it ever reaches the frontlines at all. It is little wonder that no one can be held accountable for what goes wrong or right in government, especially in a hierarchy where presidential appointees serve for two years on average and information is often delivered by word of mouth through a process that has come to resemble the childhood game of telephone or gossip.

COUNTING LAYERS AND LEADERS

Every president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt has criticized big government on the campaign trail and Trump has embraced his White House counsel’s fight to “deconstruct of the administrative state,” but the height and width of the five compartments of senior political appointees has risen with few breaks: (1) secretaries, (2) deputy secretaries, (3) undersecretaries, (4) assistant secretaries, and (5). All these titles have been enshrined in statute as part of the Presidential Appointee System (PAS) and include an assortment of other highly-placed presidential appointees such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administrator at executive level II and General Counsels, Inspectors General, and Chief Financial Officers at executive level IV.

The evidence of increased thickening comes from my inventories of the number layers (titles) and leaders (title-holders) collected every six years between1960 and 2016. The inventories are based on a careful coding of the *Federal Yellow Book* the six-year intervals.[[2]](#endnote-2) The directories contain the titles, name of the current occupant, and phone number of every senior appointees in the federal government’s departments and agencies, but my inventories focus exclusively the layers and leaders who occupy the five leadership compartments in the 15 cabinet departments.

These inventories only include titles with a direct link to the Senate-confirmed appointees who head each compartment of PAS appointees. These links are built on terms such as chief of staff to the secretary, associate deputy secretary, principle deputy undersecretary, deputy assistant secretary, or assistant deputy administrator. Similar “title-extenders” exist for the FBI director and the Inspectors General, General Counsels, and so forth.

According to these inventories, the layers of leaders and leaders per layers has grown with few interruptions every six years 1961 and 2016. As of 2016, my inventory shows the tallest, widest leadership hierarchy since I began doing the painstaking analysis of every department in 1961. The thickening occurred in every department, including many that are not involved in homeland security, healthcare reform, education, the economic stimulus, the United Nation’s international development goals, or climate change. Table 1 shows the 2016 inventory of titles, while Table 2 shows the number of titles and occupants from 1960 to 2016.

TABLE 1: LAYERS OF LEADERS, 2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| I1. Secretary
2. Chief of staff to the secretary
3. Deputy chief of staff to the secretary

II1. Deputy secretary (or FBI direct and FEMA Administrator, etc.)
2. Deputy secretary with portfolio
3. Chief of staff to the deputy secretary
4. Deputy chief of staff
5. Principal associate deputy secretary
6. Associate deputy secretary
7. Deputy associate deputy secretary
8. Assistant deputy secretary
9. Associate assistant deputy secretary

III1. Undersecretary
2. Chief of staff to the undersecretary
3. Deputy chief of staff to the undersecretary
4. Principal deputy undersecretary
5. Deputy undersecretary
6. Chief of staff to the deputy undersecretary
7. Principal associate deputy undersecretary
8. Associate deputy undersecretary
9. Principal assistant deputy undersecretary
10. Assistant deputy undersecretary
11. Deputy assistant deputy undersecretary
12. Associate undersecretary
13. Assistant undersecretary
 | IV1. Assistant secretary (or Inspector General, General Counsel, etc.)
2. Chief of staff to the assistant secretary
3. Deputy chief of staff to the assistant secretary
4. Principal deputy assistant secretary
5. Associate principal deputy assistant secretary
6. Deputy assistant secretary
7. Chief of staff to the deputy assistant secretary
8. Principal deputy to the deputy assistant secretary
9. Deputy to the deputy assistant secretary
10. Associate deputy assistant secretary
11. Deputy associate deputy assistant secretary
12. Chief of staff to the associate deputy assistant secretary
13. Deputy associate assistant secretary
14. Assistant deputy assistant secretary
15. Principal associate assistant secretary
16. Associate assistant secretary
17. Chief of staff to the associate assistant secretary
18. Deputy associate assistant secretary
19. Principal assistant assistant secretary
20. Assistant assistant secretary
21. Chief of staff to the assistant assistant secretary
22. Deputy assistant assistant secretary
 | V1. Administrator
2. Chief of staff to the administrator
3. Assistant chief of staff to the administrator
4. Principal deputy administrator
5. Deputy administrator
6. Chief of staff to the deputy administrator
7. Associate deputy administrator
8. Deputy associate deputy administrator
9. Assistant deputy administrator
10. Deputy assistant deputy administrator
11. Principal assistant deputy administrator
12. Associate assistant deputy administrator
13. Senior associate administrator
14. Associate administrator
15. Chief of staff to the associate administrator
16. Deputy chief of staff to the associate administrator
17. Deputy executive associate administrator
18. Deputy associate administrator
19. Senior associate deputy administrator
20. Assistant administrator
21. Chief of staff to the assistant administrator
22. Deputy assistant administrator
23. Associate assistant administrator
24. Associate deputy assistant administrator
 |

Some titles may challenge credulity, but all 71 can be found in the federal phone directories used for this analysis. For example, the 2016 federal phonebook listed an associate principal deputy assistant secretary at the Energy Department, an associate assistant deputy secretary at the Education Department, a principal deputy associate and a principal deputy assistant Attorney General at Justice, and an associate deputy assistant secretary at the Veterans Affairs Department.

Table 2 shows the remarkable spread of the Senate-confirmed and associated titles over time. The number of layers of leaders increased more than 400 percent between 1961 and 2016, while the number of leaders per layer increased almost 750 percent. There are no federal phonebooks dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, but it is safe to say that federal government never had more layers of leaders or more leaders per layer than on January 20, 2017.

TABLE 2: LEADERS PER LAYER, 1964-2016

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Layers of Leaders | Leaders in Layers |
| 1960 | 1992 | 1998 | 2004 | 2010 | 2016 | 1960 | 1992 | 1998 | 2004 | 2010 | 2016 |
| TOTAL | 17 | 33 | 51 | 64 | 61 | 71 | 451 | 2409 | 2385 | 2592 | 3123 | 3265 |
| ABSOLUTE INCREASE | --- | 16 | 18 | 13 | -3 | 10 | --- | 1958 | -24 | 207 | 531 | 142 |
| PERCENT INCREASE | --- | 94% | 55% | 26% | -5% | 16% | --- | 434% | -1% | 9% | 21% | 3% |

Presidents usually criticize big government during their campaigns and often create reform SWAT teams of the kind now headed by presidential advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner to create a government as good or one that works better and costs less, but always create new layers at the top of the hierarchy. For example, Ronald Reagan entered office having promised to abolish two of the 14 departments he inherited, but left office with 15; George W. Bush shaved off three layers between 2004 and 2010, but had a net increase of seven; and much as Barack Obama complained about the ridiculous duplication and overlap across government in his 2011 State of the Union address, he left office with more layers of leaders and leaders in layers in all five compartments of the hierarchy.[[3]](#endnote-3) Reagan once said the nine most terrifying words in the English language: “I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”[[4]](#endnote-4) But he could just have easily added “I’m from business and I’m here to help you, too.”

DISTANCE AND DISTORTION

Even though this title creep increases the distance between the top and bottom of government, the total number of presidential appointees is often described as an insignificant fraction of total federal employment, but is quite significant as a percentage of the layers between the top and bottom of government.[[5]](#endnote-5) According to my past research on high-impact federal jobs, veterans hospital nurses reported upward through nine formal layers of command, including five at the Veterans Affairs Department’s Vermont Avenue headquarters, while air traffic controllers reported upward through 12, including six at the Federal Aviation Administration’s headquarters on Independence Avenue in Washington.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The number of layers includes more than presidential appointees and their title-extenders, however. Add in the informal layers composed of gatekeepers such as chiefs of staff are factored into the chain of command. Suddenly, Veterans hospital nurses reported upward through 19 layers, including nine in Washington, as did air traffic controllers and park rangers.

The chain of command becomes even more complicated when it makes policy or budget decisions that are passed down and back up within each compartment for sign off and review before moving down to the next relevant compartment. Suddenly, Veterans hospital nurses received their policy guidance and budgets through 43 policy and 63 budget signoffs, including regional offices, districts, and hospitals to nurse supervisors.

FURTHER DETAILS

The number of layers and leaders is not even across the federal government. All departments thicken over time, but do so at different rates depending in part on mission and budget. According to theories of what sociologists call “institutional isomorphism,” all organizations buffeted by the same economic, political, and social pressures will structure themselves to look alike.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Even though some departments and agencies are shorter and lighter than others, this instinct to look like the competition is common in many industries such as higher education, religious institutions, the high-tech industry, and even think tanks. All things being equal, organizations will become more similar over time. The theory is well illustrated in the movement toward common structures described below.

1. The federal hierarchy has grown taller and wider over time as Congress, the president, and departments invented or extended new titles. Of the 71 titles open for occupancy somewhere across the cabinet, 20 existed in at least seven departments in 2016, while another 13 existed in at least four departments. Only one cabinet secretary had a chief of staff in 1981, but all 15 had one in 2016; only one had a deputy chief of staff in 1981, but 14 had one in 2016.
2. History strongly suggests the new layers will spread as departments copy and compete to adopt perceived best practices—the first chief of staff to a cabinet secretary was created in 1981, spread to another 10 departments by 1992, and the final four by 2016. Chiefs of staff account for 13 of the 71 layers listed in Table 1, while deputy or assistant chiefs of staff account for six more. This one title also accounts for almost 10 percent of the leaders in layers as of 2016. It seems that presidential appointees are nobody if they do not have a chief of staff, while chiefs of staff are nobody if they do not have a deputy chief of staff.
3. Departments vary significantly in height. The Defense Department had the tallest federal hierarchy in 2016 with 37 layers, followed by Agriculture with 31, Homeland Security with 30, Education, Energy, Interior, and Treasury with 28 each, Health and Human Services with 27, Transportation with 26, Commerce with 25, Justice with 24, Labor and Veterans Affairs with 21 each, State with 16, and Housing and Urban Development with 15. The total number of layers added to 71 in 2016 because departments vary greatly in the number of agencies and offices at the middle and lower levels—some departments such as Defense are large and complex, while others such as Housing and Urban Development are small and focused.
4. Departments also vary significantly in width. The Defense Department had the widest hierarchy in 2016 with 405 leaders, followed by Agriculture with 364, Health and Human Services with 340, Justice with 296, Homeland Security with 287, Treasury with 236, State with 214, Transportation with 204, Commerce with 191, Interior with 177, Energy with 175, Housing and Urban Development with 145, Education with 115, Veterans Affairs with 112, and Labor with just 102. The 15 departments varied somewhat in the rate of increase over time, the federal personnel process is almost perfectly designed to move employees ever upward until they hit a ceiling that can only be broken by new layers. Bound by the same system, all departments widen over time, but some have the funding and missions to widen even more.
5. The number of layers fell during the Clinton administration because of Vice President Al Gore’s targeted cuts on high-level management layers, while the number of leaders fell during the Obama administration’s 2010-2013 budget battles and shutdown as departments and agencies struggled to protect their budgets. However, the reductions were small and short-lived, in part because promotions have long been used to evade pay freezes.

Departments generally recover the layers and leaders they lose through radical reorganizations such as the creation of the Homeland Security Department in 2003. Even though the Justice, Transportation, and Treasury departments all lost units as part of the 22-agency merger, their hierarchies recovered quickly the lost. Adding the Homeland Security department to the combined total, the four departments had 602 leaders in 1998, dropped to 583 one year after losing the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (Justice), U.S. Customs Service (Treasury), Secret Service (Treasury), and Transportation Security Administration (Transportation), move up to 697 with Homeland Security fully operational in 2010, and hit 736 in 2016.

PEOPLE ON PEOPLE

Most presidents use these positions to reward their friends and policy advisers. However, Trump took a different position when he told *Fox & Friends* he did not want to fill many of the 600 high-level posts still open for occupancy in early March 2017:

Well, a lot of those jobs, I don’t want to appoint, because they’re unnecessary to have. You know we have so many people in government, even me, I look at some of the jobs and its people over people over people....There are hundreds and hundreds of jobs that are totally unnecessary jobs. [[8]](#endnote-8)

As my inventories show, he was wrong about the number of positions open for occupancy on January 20, 2017, wrong to believe that the positions would simply disappear if left open, and wrong to think the jobs were unnecessary. Some of the jobs were created by statute, others were established through the federal government’s highly formalized classification system, and still others by department memoranda.

Most importantly for governing, these positions were hardwired into a bureaucratic process that links the top of the federal government to the bottom. With of 13 cabinet officers confirmed by late March when this fact sheet was released and two still mired in controversy (Labor) or disinterest (Agriculture), the Trump administration was not so much headless, but neckless.[[9]](#endnote-9)

By then, the Trump administration was already far behind past administrations in nominating its most senior officers, but it is filling up faster at the sub-cabinet level than most observers believe. Most of the new cabinet secretaries have already appointed the chiefs of staff who will oversee their organizations, while the White House also appointed a coterie overseers to watch over the cabinet secretaries and their chiefs of staff. This process of title assignment was already well underway when ProPublica published a list of the first 400 of White House agents.[[10]](#endnote-10)

However, at least some of the appointments involved substantive positions that have been filled as links between the top and bottom of departments by past presidents. By mid-March, for example, the Trump Administration had already appointed a Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General and a Principal Deputy Associate Attorney General, as well as a chief of staff to the Secretary of Defense. ProPublica is not clear on who made these choices, but it would be highly unusual if a chief of staff to a secretary was appointed as a White House agent, especially at a department headed by a secretary nicknamed “Mad Dog.”

Moreover, many of the White House overseers do not have the requisite experience to monitor their agencies or track their targets. Indeed, many of the 400 appointees are former campaign aides and members of the administration’s transition “landing teams” who were clearly being rewarded more for their service than knowledge.

This is not to discount the self-interested former lobbyists who found lucrative employment for their K-Street futures, but even lobbyists may have trouble tracking a cabinet secretary such as Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis from meeting to meeting. If they lobbied the regulatory process at all, they will have their tightest connections with the offices of public affairs, regulatory review, and policy development than the office of the secretary and other high-level appointees.

The variation in status among these 400 political appointees is clear in the pay grades. The chiefs of staff and senior White House advisors on the ProPublicalist were appointed at the top of the salary schedule as political members of the Senior Executive Service, while the rest of the 400 appear to be personal and confidential assistants at the middle of the schedule or even temporary appointees at the very bottom of their departments and agencies. The SES’ers are the most likely to ramble in and out of meetings, but, again, many of the Trump cabinet officers have plenty of experience with boards of directors, federal regulators, clever enemies, and government itself.

Based on the pay grades, most of the 400 will eventually receive one of the lesser titles in the inventory listed above. This does not mean they will be irrelevant, but it does suggest that they will not be particularly effective overseers and “commissars,” as one Defense Department official described the White House loyalist sent to the Pentagon to keep watch.[[11]](#endnote-11)

 Trump is not the first president to salt the cabinet ranks with loyalists. Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama all did some salting, too, and they could always find an appointment for a friend. However, most presidents eventually decide that the best way to control the cabinet was to ignore it or appoint policy czars to eclipse it. Assuming Trump believes the cabinet is spy-worthy, he may be showing his naiveté about governing yet again.[[12]](#endnote-12) His loyalists are easy to identify and are not well linked to the White House itself. They report to lower-level White House staff housed in the Old Executive Office Building, which Vice President Walter Mondale once described as like being in Baltimore.

Nevertheless, with so many Senate-confirmed appointees stuck in the nomination or confirmation process, and so much pressure to tamp down spending and regulation, the Trump administration’s watchful eye makes sense. It also makes the administration look faster than it is—he may be moving at a snail’s pace on his subcabinet, but he has been surprisingly fast in putting people on people on people to keep the cabinet in line.

OPTIONS FOR DELAYERING

 Trump’s decision to simply ignore unnecessary jobs will undermine his ability to avoid the fog of bureaucratic action. Moreover, it will decimate the governing links between the top of his departments and bottom of his agencies. The less he knows about what is happening in government, the more likely he is to be at the helm of highly-visible breakdowns such as the veterans waiting list scandal and the continued problems at the Secret Service.

If Trump is truly serious about eliminating unnecessary leadership posts, he should order a careful evaluation of every non-statutory title. If these evaluations find layers and leaders that serve more to fog the chain of command than create accountability, their positions should be eliminated and their jobs reclassified downward. Even when an evaluation shows mission-critical impact, it should be tested for potential reorganization when the current occupant leaves. No position should be exempt unless listed in statute, and even these posts could be challenged through the budget process.

Trump may believe that vacancies are just as effective as targeted downsizing, but Al Gore and his team of reinventors know better. Targeting is the secret to impact, but can only be done with care. Most experts agree that the federal leadership hierarchy is now much too tall, wide, and isolating, but the flattening must be done with care, not benign or deliberate neglect.

At least for now, the neglect has weakened the president’s ability to stop the recent cascade of federal breakdowns and undermined his ability to send directions and collect information from the bottom of his organization. He would never leave a key position open in his own business and should either remove non-essential layers and leaders or fill the jobs with experts who know how to deliver and collect information. Loyalists may fit the job descriptions, but nonpartisanship is also essential for providing options up and down the chain of command.

1. These counts are based on coding of the *Federal Yellow Book* published quarterly by Leadership Directories, Inc. I have found the leadership directories to be much more accurate the congressional inventories contained in the *Plum Book* of presidential policy positions released before every presidential election. The *Plum Book* is only as accurate as the selected information forwarded from the public affairs or management offices within each department and agency, while the leadership directories are collected and carefully validated to match every phone number in each department and agency phonebook. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The *Federal Yellow Book* is published quarterly by Leadership Directories, Inc., and is also available online. Further information is available at https://www.leadershipdirectories.com/Products/LeadershipinPrint/Government/FederalYellowBook. Prior to the mid-1990s, the *Federal Yellow Book* was only published in print. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For the story of the elevation of the Veterans Administration to cabinet status as the Department of Veterans Affairs during Reagan’s term, see Paul C. Light, *Forging Legislation*, (W.W. Norton, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ronald Reagan, “The President's News Conference,” August 12, 1986, made available online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=37733. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Paul C. Light, *Thickening Government: Federal Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Accountability* (Brookings Institution Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. See pp. 82-85 for counts of the distance between the top and bottom of the chains of command from the top of departments such as Veterans Affairs all the way down to the front-line nurses. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” in Powell and DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 60-79, quoted at pp. 63-64, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For the transcript of the interview, see Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump’s A+/C+ Presidency,” *Washington Post,* February 28, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. #  I used this phrase in an NPR interview with Bryan Naylor on March 6, 2017; See Bryan Naylor, “Trump Has Many Jobs Unfilled; Is He 'Deconstructing the Administrative State'?” NPR, March 6, 2017.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. #  Al Shaw, Justin Elliott and Derek Kravitz*, “*Here are More than 400 Officials Trump has Quietly Deployed Across the Government” ProPublica, March 8, 2017*,* Updated March 17, 2017*,* available at https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/beachhead

 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Lisa Rein and Julliet Ellperin, “White House Installs Political Aides at Cabinet Agencies to Be Trump’s Eyes and Ears,” *Washington Post*, March 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Glenn Thrush, “Locked in the Cabinet,” *Politico*, November 2013 for a history of cabinet frustrations. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)