

A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It

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INTRODUCTION



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The Veterans Affairs scandal is a yet another sign that the recent cascade of federal government failures continues to accelerate. Just when one breakdown recedes from the headlines, another pops up, often in a totally unexpected place. Federal failures have become so common that they are less of a shock to the public than an expectation. The question is no longer if government will fail every few months, but where. And the answer is “anywhere at all.”

Government failure was not always so predictably unpredictable. Name a significant domestic or international problem that the nation confronted after World War II, and the federal government almost certainly did something about it, and often with great success. Government made impressive progress in addressing some of the most difficult problems of the postwar era. It worked hard to diminish the effects of diseases such as polio, cancer, stroke, and heart attacks, and did. It worked to reduce poverty among older Americans, and did. It worked to build an interstate highway system, and did. It worked to help veterans readjust to civilian life after war, and did. And although it did not win Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, it did halve the effects of misfortune.

But these underappreciated successes cannot obscure the recent cascade of failures. Government has long worked hard to provide steady care for the nation's veterans of war, but failed to prevent the mistreatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed or their long wait for medical appointments in Phoenix. Government tried to keep a watchful eye on terror, but failed to prevent the September 11 terrorist attacks. It tried to answer the calls for help after Hurricane Katrina, but failed to act with dispatch. It tried to stop the wildfires that produced the great recession, but lacked the policy and courage to do so. And it tried to monitor the hazards that might face automobile drivers after they turn on the ignition, but failed.

This paper is designed to ask four questions about these and other federal government failures: (1) where did government fail, (2) why did government fail, (3) who caused the failures, and (4) what can be done to fix the underlying problems? The easy answer to these questions is drawn from the inventor's adage that "vision without delivery equals hallucination." But delivery without vision equals hallucination, too. Indeed, policy problems contributed to all 41 of the highly visible post-2001 government failures discussed in this paper.

WHERE GOVERNMENT FAILED

The first step in preventing future failures is to find a reasonable set of past failures that might yield lessons for repair. I happily acknowledge that the federal government creates many quiet successes every day, be it in delivering the social security checks on time, producing lifesaving research, or giving many Americans hope for greater justice, tolerance, and safety. Many of these successes may be against the odds in broken, aging bureaucracies, but they are successes nonetheless.

I started this paper with the simple conclusion that all government organizations fail from time to time, but that some fail much more visibly than others. Visibility, however, is not necessarily an indicator of either impact or importance, nor is it a harbinger of continued risk. Thus, just because healthcare.gov failed so visibly does not mean that the president's signature health plan will also fail, though it does suggest there may be delivery problems ahead. And just because the intelligence community so obviously lost track of the Boston Marathon bombers before the attack does not mean other terrorists will have a free hand, though it does suggest continued communication problems. Yet, to the extent that visible failures often provide the deepest insights about vulnerabilities, they can help Congress and the president design better policy and ensure faithful execution.

Most readers will not be surprised by the government failures on my list. After all, many eventually became the focus of a historically significant congressional or presidential investigation. Moreover, many readers of this paper were also readers of the news about the events discussed below. Although I was surprised to find so much public interest in the pet food recall, postal service crisis, Benghazi attack, and the true story of Cpl. Pat Tillman's death by friendly fire in Afghanistan, all of the events discussed in this paper generated enough public attention to merit further review.

Failures in the News

My list of government failures came from a search of the news stories listed in the Pew Research Center's "News Interest Index." The nonpartisan index was originally launched in mid-1986 to measure the percentage of Americans who were following "some stories covered by news organizations" very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely.

These were not just any stories, however. They were the most visible stories from week to week, month to month, and included occasional stories about government failures to design and deliver effective public policy. Stories made the list based on the Center’s “sense” of what was in the news at any given time, which was based in part on a subjective content analysis of the front page and lead stories. Nevertheless, the Center’s analysis has been remarkably stable over the years, as has its staff and methodology.

According to my entirely independent search of the News Interest Index using the Center’s own engine, the federal government had 41 failure stories in the news between 2001 and mid-2014. As Table 1 shows, the 41 stories varied greatly by date, the underlying failure, the percentage of respondents who said they were following the story either very or fairly closely, the government’s primary responsibility (oversight or operations), and the demand curve (steady or surging).

TABLE 1: WHERE GOVERNMENT FAILED (RANKED BY NEWS INTEREST)

Failure	Description	Date	News Interest	Core Activity	Demand Curve
9/11 Terrorist Attacks*	Despite early alerts of the possible threat, al-Qaeda operatives were able to hijack four commercial airliners on September 11, 2001, and use them as missiles to attack the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon.	2001	96%	Oversight	Surge
Financial Collapse*	After years of risky investments and with little regulation, the banking system collapsed under the weight of toxic assets created by risky mortgage loans, poorly understood financial instruments, and a credit crisis that froze the economy.	2008	92%	Oversight	Steady
Hurricane Katrina*	Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana on August 29, 2005, breaching the levees protecting New Orleans; stranding thousands of residents on rooftops, in the Superdome, and on bridges; and freezing the Federal Emergency Management Agency and state agencies.	2005	91%	Operations	Surge
Gulf Oil Spill*	An explosion on British Petroleum’s Deepwater Horizon offshore drilling platform killed 11 oil workers, while the failure of a “blow-out preventer” created a leak far below that lasted 87 days and caused the largest oil spill in history.	2010	88%	Oversight	Steady
Abu Ghraib Prison Abuse*	Prisoners at Iraq’s infamous Abu Ghraib prison were abused and humiliated by U.S. guards and contractors, leading to widespread publication of photos from the incident, and later reports of similar abuse at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.	2004	87%**	Operations	Surge

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Failure	Description	Date	News Interest	Core Activity	Demand Curve
Boston Marathon Bombings	An known terrorist and his younger brother detonated improvised "pressure-cooker" bombs near the Boston Marathon finish line, killing three spectators and wounding 250 others. The older brother was on at least two terrorist watch lists.	2013	85%	Oversight	Steady
Shuttle Columbia Accident*	A breach of the Space Shuttle Columbia's heat shield upon reentry after a 16-day mission killed its seven-member crew, and confirmed many of the same problems that caused the Challenger disaster almost two decades earlier.	2003	82%	Operations	Steady
"Code Orange" Terrorism Alert	The Secretary of Homeland Security succumbed to White House pressure, and raised the threat level from elevated (yellow) to orange (high risk) just days after the Democratic national convention ended.	2004	81%	Operations	Steady
I-35W Bridge Collapse	Thirteen people were killed and 90 injured when an interstate highway bridge perched over the Mississippi River in Minnesota collapsed during rush hour in part due to a repair project devised to fix a flawed design.	2007	80%	Oversight	Steady
Mine Accidents*	Twelve miners were killed when methane gas exploded inside a West Virginia mine, and another six were killed soon after when the walls collapsed inside a Utah mine. Other mine disasters occurred in the interim.	2006	80%	Oversight	Steady
Fort Hood Shootings	Army Major Nidal Hasan shot and killed 13 people and wounded another 43 while shouting, "Allah is great," in a terrorist attack at Fort Hood, Texas. Hassan later described himself as a "soldier of Allah."	2009	78%	Oversight	Steady
Consumer Product Recalls	The Consumer Product Safety Commission issued 473 recalls during a surge in Chinese imports that slipped into the United States without adequate inspection, but could not keep up with the flood of cheap and often toxic toys.	2007	77%	Oversight	Surge
Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction*	United States forces were unable to find even a trace of the alleged biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons of mass destruction that created momentum for the Iraq War. Specially trained U.S. troops spent two years in the search before giving up.	2003	76%	Operations	Surge
Christmas Day Bombing Plot	A terrorist attempted to detonate explosives sewn into his underwear in the final minutes of a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, but was subdued by the flight crew and passengers. After early assertions that the system had worked, the secretary of Homeland Security admitted that it had "failed miserably."	2009	73%	Oversight	Steady
Flu Vaccine Shortage	Flu vaccine supplies plummeted at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention just as the 2004 flu season began, and were late to recover because the agency had no contingency plan for such shortages.	2004	71%	Operations	Surge

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Failure	Description	Date	News Interest	Core Activity	Demand Curve
Benghazi Attack	The U.S. Ambassador to Libya and three other Americans were killed during an attack by heavily armed forces that launched what appears to have been a coordinated attack on the U.S. Special Mission in Benghazi.	2012	67%	Operations	Surge
Enron Bankruptcy*	The Enron Corporation filed for bankruptcy after misrepresenting its financial health through false statements, and committing both securities and wire fraud. Worldcom and Adelphia soon followed suit.	2001	66%	Oversight	Steady
Navy Yard Shootings	Armed with a shotgun purchased only days before, a Navy subcontractor shot and killed 12 people, and injured three others, after using a valid entry pass to smuggle the weapon into the Washington Navy Yard.	2013	66%	Oversight	Steady
Healthcare.gov Launch	Designed as an easily accessible portal to health insurance, healthcare.gov crashed under heavy traffic, producing long wait times, frozen screens, and uncompleted applications.	2013	64%	Operations	Surge
Wounded Soldiers*	Wounded soldiers being treated at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center were abused, neglected, and quartered in filthy, cockroach-infested facilities. Further investigation revealed similar conditions throughout the veterans' health system.	2007	62%	Operations	Surge
Veterans Health Care Waiting List	The Department of Veterans Affairs came under intense criticism in May 2014 for long waiting times and secret waiting lists in providing outpatient appointments. Initial reports alleged that as many as 40 veterans had died while waiting for appointments in Phoenix alone.	2014	61%	Operations	Steady
Madoff Ponzi Scheme	Despite explicit warnings that Bernard Madoff had built an elaborate Ponzi scheme, the Securities and Exchange Commission never investigated his too-good-to-be-true success. Madoff was turned in by his sons in 2008 and eventually convicted of a \$65 billion fraud that had lasted for the better part of two decades.	2008	60%	Oversight	Steady
Texas Fertilizer Plant Explosion	An explosion at an ammonium nitrate plant killed 14 citizens, and destroyed most of the surrounding town of West, Texas. The U.S. Chemical Safety Board blamed all levels of government for failing to identify the hazard and correcting it through policies that would have prohibited building the plant so close to the community.	2013	59%	Oversight	Steady
Vioxx Drug Recall	Despite warnings that its best-selling Vioxx pain killer doubled cardiovascular risk, Merck continued to sell the drug without any Food and Drug Administration post-market review for almost six years before withdrawing it voluntarily.	2004	59%	Oversight	Steady
Food Safety Recalls	The Food and Drug Administration issued dozens of warnings and recalls of food products such as eggs, meat, peanut butter, peppers, and pet food that had slipped through its porous inspection system in 2007.	2007	56%	Oversight	Surge

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Failure	Description	Date	News Interest	Core Activity	Demand Curve
Enhanced Interrogation Techniques	Although the agency had used “enhanced interrogation techniques” such as waterboarding on detainees since 2001, the story finally reached the public in 2007 and returned to the news two years later with further information released by the Obama administration.	2007	55%	Operations	Steady
Haditha Killings	United States soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines killed 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians in Haditha after an improvised explosive device, or bomb, exploded beneath one of their Humvees. The platoon leader was charged with two counts of premeditated homicide, but the charges were later dropped.	2005	55%	Operations	Steady
Shoe Bomber Terrorist Plot	A terrorist attempted to ignite explosives hidden in one of his tennis shoes on board a trans-Atlantic flight, but was subdued by the flight crew and passengers who smelled the bomber’s match smoke and took immediate action.	2001	54%	Oversight	Steady
Secret Service Misconduct	Thirteen Secret Service agents arrived in Cartagena, Colombia, 48 hours before President Obama was to arrive for an international summit, and spent their first night in the city soliciting prostitutes and drinking heavily.	2012	51%	Operations	Steady
Internal Revenue Service Targeting System	The Internal Revenue Service unit that was responsible for granting tax-exempt status created a public relations disaster by setting aside applications from organizations with names such as “Tea Party,” “Patriots,” and “9/12” for further review.	2013	50%	Operations	Surge
National Security Agency Leaks	A contractor named Edward Snowden leaked about 250,000 secret files that he had stolen from the National Security Agency while working for the Booz Allen Hamilton consulting firm. Snowden escaped prosecution by evading capture, and is now residing in Russia.	2013	50%	Oversight	Surge
Postal Service Financing Crisis	Faced with rising costs and declining volume, the U.S. Postal Service hit a severe financial crisis that prompted proposals for post office closings, elimination of Saturday delivery, personnel streamlining, and full privatization.	2011	49%	Operations	Steady
Southwest Airline Groundings	Southwest Airlines was forced to ground 46 of its older Boeing 737 aircraft to search for fuselage cracks. The groundings exposed the Federal Aviation Administration’s porous inspection process, which involved lax oversight of its own contractors and the lack of a clear oversight mission.	2008	49%	Oversight	Steady
U.S. Attorney Firings*	The Justice Department fired nine U.S. Attorneys in 2006 without warning or explanation in an alleged effort to punish perceived under-enforcement of voter fraud and corruption cases against Democrats.	2006	48%	Operations	Steady

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Failure	Description	Date	News Interest	Core Activity	Demand Curve
Valerie Plame Cover Breach	Valerie Plame was exposed in a breach of classified information as a secret operative of the Central Intelligence Agency. Although the subsequent criminal investigation did not identify the source of the leak, it produced evidence that led to the indictment and conviction of Vice President Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, for obstruction of justice, making false statements, and perjury.	2003	48%	Operations	Surge
Chevrolet Cobalt Accidents	Seven years after it rejected an investigation of deadly accidents that involved a faulty ignition switch, the National Highway Safety Transportation Administration (NHSTA) ordered General Motors to recall 2.2 million Chevrolet Cobalt and other vehicles for immediate repairs.	2014	44%	Oversight	Steady
Tillman/Lynch Cover Ups	Two stories of early wartime heroism were discredited in 2007: (1) the capture and rescue of Private Jessica Lynch in 2003, and (2) the enemy fire that killed Corporal Patrick Tillman in 2004. Tillman had been killed by friendly fire, while Lynch had never fired her weapon before being taken prisoner.	2007	43%	Operations	Steady
Blackwater Killings	Operating under a contract with the State Department, heavily armed employees of Blackwater Security Consultants killed 14 unarmed Iraqi civilians. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the civilians were killed "without cause."	2007	40%	Operations	Surge
General Services Conference	The General Services Administration spent \$822,000 on a lavish four-day Las Vegas conference for 300 employees that included numerous "scouting trips" for advance planning. The conference featured skits, a clown, and psychic readings.	2010	39%	Operations	Steady
Abramoff Lobbying*	"Super-Lobbyist" Jack Abramoff, who designed and eventually pled guilty to a complicated bribery scheme that involved at least one member of Congress and a senior White House official, was ordered to repay at least \$25 million in fraudulent billings.	2006	38%	Oversight	Steady
Operation Fast and Furious*	Operation Fast and Furious was a Justice Department program designed to follow illegal firearms as they "walked" across the border to the top of the Mexican drug cartels. However, many of the firearms were lost once they changed hands, and one might have been used to kill a U.S. Customs and Border Protection agent.	2011	37%	Operations	Steady

* Subject of a historically significant congressional or presidential investigation; see Paul C. Light, *Government by Investigation: Congress, Presidents, and the Search for Answers, 1945-2012* (Brookings/Governance, 2014), for the full list. The failed search for weapons of mass destruction and the Abu Ghraib prison abuse were both part of the long-running congressional and presidential investigation of Iraq War conduct, and are included here as separate investigations.

** This figure comes from the Center's May 12, 2004, survey showing that 87 percent of respondents were paying very or fairly close attention to the situation in Iraq, which followed the Center's May 9, 2004, survey showing that 92 percent of respondents had heard about reports of mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. troops, and 76 percent had seen photos from the incident. The proximity of the surveys strongly suggests that respondent interest in the situation in Iraq was heavily influenced by the Abu Ghraib story. Hence, I put the incident on my list in combination with allegations of prisoner abuse at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in 2005.

Early Conclusions about Causes

I did not write this paper as yet another cudgel against “big government.” As I have long argued, the federal government creates miracles every day, often in spite of ever-tighter budgets, persistent criticism, and complex missions. Government failures, however, can provide important insights on how to reduce vulnerabilities and threats. Toward this end, the list in Table 1 has four broad characteristics that are well worth noting:

1. *Most of the failures involved errors of omission, not commission.* The federal government did not hijack the aircraft that killed so many Americans on September 11, 2001, but did not imagine the possibility in time to prevent the tragedy. It did not breach the levees when Hurricane Katrina came ashore in 2005, but did not have the leadership or plans to respond quickly. And it did not design the Byzantine instruments that triggered the banking collapse in 2008, but had little capacity to stop the risk.
2. *Some failures were obviously more visible than others.* The failures to anticipate the 9/11 attacks, prepare for Hurricane Katrina, avoid the financial collapse, and prevent the Gulf oil spill stayed in the news for months, even years, while the Plame cover breach, the Haditha and Blackwater killings, the Vioxx anti-inflammatory drug recall, and Operation Fast and Furious popped up for a week or two in the headlines before disappearing.
3. *Vision with execution is the clear driver of success, just as its absence is an equation for failure.* The News Interest Index did not contain enough successes to build a control group for cross-checking the contributors to failure discussed below. Indeed, I counted just nine successes on the Center’s list, of which six involved the war on terrorism; two involved successful Mars landings; and one involved the 2009-2011 Toyota automobile recalls. Nevertheless, even this short list of successes reinforces my later findings on failure.
4. *Some of the stories contained elements of both success and failure.* The Boston Marathon bombing will always be remembered as a moment of great national anguish and heroic police work, for example, but is also a story about all-too-familiar intelligence failures. “It’s people like this that you don’t want to let out of your sight, and this was a mistake,” Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) said of the two perpetrators almost a year later. “I don’t know if our laws were inefficient or if the FBI failed, but we’re at war with radical Islamists, and we need to up our game.”

Patterns in the Counts

Although government failures were just a small percentage of the stories that reached the Center's survey questionnaires, they are noticeable nonetheless. Table 1 provokes at least three questions about the pace and context of the 41 government failures:

1. Has the number of government failures increased over time? The answer is "yes." Looking through the news interest surveys back to mid-1986, government had 23 failures before 2001 (1.6 per year), compared with 41 failures after that date (3.0 per year). Government failures were relatively rare during the first decade of the roughly thirty-year period, but began to increase during the second, and accelerated during the third. They may peak again before the Obama administration comes to a close at the start of the next decade.
2. Were there any differences between the five presidents in office during the failures? The answer is "yes." Government had four failures during Reagan's final two-and-a-half years (1.6 per year), five during George H. W. Bush's four years (1.2 per year), 14 during Clinton's eight years (1.8 per year), 25 during George W. Bush's eight years (3.1 per year), and 16 during Obama's first five-and-a-half years (2.9 per year). At its current pace, government still has plenty of time to set a record average before Obama leaves office in 2017.
3. Were there any differences by presidential terms in office? The answer is "yes." Government produced a total of 29 failures during the George H. W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama first terms (1.8 per year), compared with 35 during the Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama second terms (2.4 per year). The differences are just large enough to suggest that government may be somewhat more likely to fail during the last few years of a two-term presidency, perhaps because presidents start to lose focus, appointees begin to turn over, the other party becomes more assertive, and the media becomes more aggressive.
4. Were there any differences between the Bush and Obama terms? The answer is a firm "yes," though qualified by an acknowledgment that the Obama administration's second term is still far from over. Government had just 10 failures during the Bush administration's first term (2.5 per year), but 15 failures during the administration's second (3.8 per year). In turn, government had just eight failures during the Obama administration's first term (2.0 per year), but matched its entire first-term total in just eighteen months of the second (5.3 per year).

5. Did the failures involve oversight or operations? The answer is “both.” By my definition, oversight involves ongoing monitoring and enforcement of regulations and trends, while operations focuses on meeting already scheduled delivery of goods and services. Based on this simple distinction, the post-2001 government failures split almost equally between oversight (20) and operations (21). In short, Congress and the president cannot reduce failures by fixing the bureaucratic vulnerability for one or the other type of delivery.
6. Did the failures involve surging or steady demand? The answer is “steady, not surging.” Although most textbooks suggest that organizations are most vulnerable when workloads surge, more of the post-2001 government failures occurred during steady demand (27) than during surging demand (14), perhaps confirming the unconventional notion that surges sharpen organizational acuity. Steady demand, however, does not mean light workloads. It just means that government is not under siege at a particular point in time. Some of the agencies on my list were under steady, but enormous stress for years before they failed, while others were under relatively light pressure for years before they failed during a surge.

Trends behind the Trends

The cascade of failures described in this paper parallels other trends over the past three decades, including the steady aging of the federal government’s infrastructure and workforce; growing dependence on contractors; ever-thickening hierarchy; dwindling funds, staffing, and collateral capacity, such as information technology and accounting systems; increasing frustration with poorly drafted policy; presidential disengagement; and political posturing. These trends help explain much of the cascade, although it remains to be seen what might have sparked the patterns in the first place. It could be that bureaucracies are inherently vulnerable to failure regardless of funding, hierarchy, dependencies, and public angst toward big organizations of any kind. It could also be that the cascade reflects errors of omission and commission by Congress and the president, and the flood of what Alexander Hamilton called the “deadly adversaries” of government: cabal, intrigue, and corruption.

WHY GOVERNMENT FAILED

The second question for this paper is why government failed. My answer is based on a systematic analysis of the policy and delivery problems that created the failures. After all, the constitutional injunction is clear and unequivocal—Congress is to “make all laws which shall be necessary and proper” to discharge its duties, and the president is to “take care that the laws be faithfully executed.”

Searching for Causes

Government can fail for many reasons, including some that are well beyond its control. Poorly designed policies come from Congress and the president, for example, and may be impossible to implement regardless of bureaucratic commitment. Moreover, government cannot always do more with less, compensate for poor leadership, and manage the confusion created by duplication and overlap on Capitol Hill. As Table 2 suggests, the contributors to failure fall into five categories:

1. **Policy:** Government might not have been given the policy, or any policy at all, needed to solve the problem at hand; or the policy might have been either too difficult to deliver or delegated to a vulnerable or historically unreliable organization.
2. **Resources:** Government might not have had enough funding, staff, or the “collateral capacity” such as information technology, oversight systems, or technical experience to deliver consistent policy impact.
3. **Structure:** Government might have been unable to move information up and down its over-layered chain of command, select and supervise its contractors, or resolve the confusion associated with duplication and overlap.
4. **Leadership:** Government’s top appointees might have been unqualified to lead; could have made poor decisions before, during, and after the failures appeared; or might have taken their posts after long delays created by the presidential appointments process.
5. **Culture:** Government might have created confusing missions that could not be communicated and embraced, were easily undermined by rank corruption and unethical conduct, or were beyond careful monitoring through performance measurement and management.

TABLE 2: HOW GOVERNMENT FAILED

Policy	Design	Was the policy poorly crafted for the problem at hand?
	Degree of Difficulty	Was the policy inherently difficult to deliver?
	Assignment	Was the policy assigned to a damaged delivery organization?
Resources	Budget	Was there enough funding to deliver the policy?
	Human Capital	Was there enough staffing to deliver the policy?
	Collateral Capacity	Was there enough collateral capacity (e.g., information technology) to deliver the policy?
Structure	Chain of Command	Was there a clear chain of command between top and bottom of the delivery organization?
	Contracting and Outsourcing	Did contracting, outsourcing, and the failure to oversee performance contribute to the failure?
	Duplication and Overlap	Were there competing delivery organizations, and did the duplication and overlap undermine impact?
Leadership	Expertise	Were the political and career leaders qualified to deliver the policy?
	Decision Making	Did political and career leaders make effective decisions before, during, and after the failure?
	Vacancies and Delays	Was the political and career leadership in place in time to deliver the policy?
Culture	Mission	Was the policy converted into a certain mission, and did it receive full organizational support?
	Corruption/Ethics	Was delivery undermined by corruption, unethical conduct, or external efforts?
	Performance Management	Did the performance measurement system assess the right indicators accurately?

More Patterns in the Counts

Table 3 provokes a short list of questions about the methodology I used to identify the contributors to each of the 41 failures. Although congressional hearings, government investigations, and blue-ribbon commissions informed many of my check marks, in-depth news coverage contributed its share of insights, too.

1. Did the 13 congressional and presidential investigations produce more grist for my coding mill? The answer is “not likely.” Although many of the most complicated failures did generate highly significant investigations, which in turn produced deep fact patterns, all 41 failures produced more than enough information to create comprehensive assessments. Admittedly, most of the failures did not produce glossy reports, just as some of the congressional and presidential investigations produced relatively thin testimony, but all the failures produced enough facts to determine the contributing causes of each failure.
2. Did the media generate more story lines to keep pace with high levels of public interest? The answer again is “not likely.” The top of Table 3 may be populated by high-interest failures, but I believe the depth of the failures generated the interest, not vice versa. Indeed, the first four failures in Table 3 will likely be remembered as defining government breakdowns for decades to follow.
3. Did core activities and demand curves interact to create greater vulnerability? The answer is “yes,” but with contrary effects. On the one hand, operations produced more check marks during surging demand (7.8) than steady demand (6.6). On the other hand, oversight activities produced more check marks during steady demand (7.6) than surging demand (6.8). The challenge in addressing both threats is political: operational surges demand costly reserves that are hard to explain to the electorate, while steady oversight demands frequent wake-up calls that regulated parties may suppress.

Coding the Failures

Table 3 presents the contributing causes for each failure. I assigned check marks to each failure based on the historical record and investigatory postmortems that came from congressional hearings, blue-ribbon commissions, inspector general reports, Government Accountability Office assessments, and news stories. Although I made many subjective judgments as I compiled Table 3, my analysis strongly suggests that there were multiple contributors to every failure, and multiple failures for every contributor. This finding alone makes the case for comprehensive government reform. There are simply too many check marks in too many categories to set a single target for reform.

1. *Policy* provided the largest number of contributors to failure with 79 check marks, and inherent difficulty topped the category at 28 check marks.
2. *Resources* provided the second largest number of contributors with 65 check marks, and persistent understaffing topped the category at 25 check marks.
3. *Culture* provided the third largest number of contributors with 62 check marks, and misguided performance measurement and unclear missions topped the category at 22 check marks each.
4. *Structure* provided the fourth largest number of contributors with 56 check marks, and heavy chains of command topped the category at 24 check marks.
5. *Leadership* provided the fifth largest number of contributors with 40 check marks, and poor decisions topped the category at 22 check marks.

Although all five categories suggest the need for repair, it is particularly important to note the role of policy in government failure. Bluntly put, some policies appear to be virtually impossible to deliver.

TABLE 3: WHY GOVERNMENT FAILED (RANKED BY NEWS INTEREST)

Failure	Date	News Interest	Policy			Resources			Structure			Leadership			Culture		Check Marks
			Design	Difficulty	Assignment	Budget	Human Capital	Collateral Capacity	Chain of Command	Contracting and Outsourcing	Duplication and Overlap	Expertise	Decision Making	Vacancies and Delays	Mission	Corruption/Ethics	
9/11 Terrorist Attacks	2001	96%	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X		11
Financial Collapse	2008	92%	X	X	X		X	X	X		X		X	X	X		11
Hurricane Katrina	2005	91%	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	14
Gulf Oil Spill	2010	88%		X	X	X	X	X	X			X			X	X	10
Abu Ghraib Prison Abuse	2004	87%		X		X	X		X	X			X		X	X	9
Boston Marathon Bombings	2013	85%		X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X			X	10
Shuttle Columbia Accident	2003	82%	X		X	X		X	X	X			X			X	9
"Code Orange" Terrorism Alert	2004	81%	X	X	X			X	X		X	X					8
I-35W Bridge Collapse	2007	80%			X											X	2
Mine Accidents	2006	80%	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X		X	X	11

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Failure	Date	News Interest	Policy			Resources			Structure			Leadership			Culture			Check Marks
			Design	Difficulty	Assignment	Budget	Human Capital	Collateral Capacity	Chain of Command	Contracting and Outsourcing	Duplication and Overlap	Expertise	Decision Making	Vacancies and Delays	Mission	Corruption/Ethics	Performance Management	
Fort Hood Shootings	2009	78%	X	X				X	X			X						5
Consumer Product Recalls	2007	77%		X		X	X	X			X		X		X			7
Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction	2003	76%	X		X				X		X		X				X	6
Christmas Day Bombing Plot	2009	73%	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X					8
Flu Vaccine Shortage	2004	71%		X	X			X		X	X							5
Benghazi Attack	2012	67%		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X					9
Enron Bankruptcy	2001	66%	X	X			X	X	X		X			X	X	X		9
Navy Yard Shootings	2013	66%		X	X	X	X	X		X							X	7

(continued on following page)

Failure	Date	News Interest	Policy			Resources			Structure			Leadership			Culture			Check Marks
			Design	Difficulty	Assignment	Budget	Human Capital	Collateral Capacity	Chain of Command	Contracting and Outsourcing	Duplication and Overlap	Expertise	Decision Making	Vacancies and Delays	Mission	Corruption/Ethics	Performance Management	
Healthcare.gov Launch	2013	64%	X	X	X		X		X	X		X	X	X			X	10
Wounded Soldiers	2007	62%	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X			10
Veterans Health Care Waiting List	2014	61%			X	X	X	X	X			X				X	X	8
Madoff Ponzi Scheme	2008	60%	X	X	X		X	X	X							X	X	8
Texas Fertilizer Plant Explosion	2013	59%	X			X	X				X			X	X			6
Vioxx Drug Recall	2004	59%		X	X	X	X	X	X				X			X	X	9
Food Safety Recalls	2007	56%		X	X						X			X		X		5
Enhanced Interrogation Techniques	2007	55%	X	X			X			X		X	X			X		7
Haditha Killings	2005	55%		X			X		X							X		4
Shoe Bomber Terrorist Plot	2001	54%	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X			X	X			10

(continued on following page)

Failure	Date	News Interest	Policy			Resources		Structure			Leadership			Culture			Check Marks
			Design	Difficulty	Assignment	Budget	Human Capital	Collateral Capacity	Chain of Command	Contracting and Outsourcing	Duplication and Overlap	Expertise	Decision Making	Vacancies and Delays	Mission	Corruption/Ethics	
Secret Service Misconduct	2012	51%	X		X	X						X		X		X	6
Internal Revenue Service Targeting System	2013	50%	X		X		X		X				X		X		7
National Security Agency Leaks	2013	50%	X	X				X	X	X			X			X	7
Postal Service Financing Crisis	2011	49%	X		X		X	X			X			X		X	7
Southwest Airline Groundings	2008	49%	X			X			X			X		X		X	6
U.S. Attorney Firings	2006	48%		X								X	X		X	X	5
Valerie Plame Cover Breach	2003	48%	X									X	X		X	X	5
Chevrolet Cobalt Accidents*	2014	44%	X		X	X		X						X	X		6
Tillman/Lynch Cover Ups	2007	43%		X			X		X	X				X	X		6

(continued on following page)

Failure	Date	News Interest	Policy			Resources			Structure			Leadership			Culture			Check Marks
			Design	Difficulty	Assignment	Budget	Human Capital	Collateral Capacity	Chain of Command	Contracting and Outsourcing	Duplication and Overlap	Expertise	Decision Making	Vacancies and Delays	Mission	Corruption/Ethics	Performance Management	
Blackwater Killings	2007	40%	X						X						X			3
General Services Conference	2010	39%	X						X			X				X		4
Abramoff Lobbying	2006	38%		X		X					X			X				4
Operation Fast and Furious	2011	37%	X	X				X		X		X	X	X		X		8
Check Marks per Category																		
			79			65			56			40			62			
Check Marks per Subcategory			Design	Difficulty	Assignment	Budget	Human Capital	Collateral Capacity	Chain of Command	Contracting and Outsourcing	Duplication and Overlap	Expertise	Decision Making	Vacancies and Delays	Mission	Corruption/Ethics	Performance Management	Total Check Marks
			26	28	25	17	25	23	24	15	17	10	22	8	22	18	22	302

* My coding of the federal government's role in the General Motors failure is based largely on the House Energy and Commerce Committee's continuing investigation of the automaker's use of a defective ignition switch on its Chevrolet Cobalt and other vehicles. The committee's investigation strongly suggests that the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration ignored early warnings about the switch, rejected internal recommendations for an in-depth review, and had limited resources to detect the problem absent full disclosure from General Motors.

A Short Set of Examples

As the following examples show, although failures may produce different levels of public news interest, they often share common causes:

- The government's sluggish 2005 response to Hurricane Katrina is the most complicated failure on my list. According to the findings of the House, Senate, and presidential investigations, the federal government failed in 14 ways, most notably through the lack of a coherent national preparedness and response plan, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's weakened capacity, unqualified and ineffective leadership, senior vacancies as the hurricane advanced toward a historically vulnerable area, and the unrelenting confusion surrounding responsibilities across the duplicative and overlapping response system. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong.
- The 2013 disastrous launch of the healthcare.gov website earned 10 check marks. Designed as the portal for delivering a complex policy, healthcare.gov was highly dependent on a poorly coordinated collection of 55 outside vendors; delegated to an understaffed, underfunded agency; connected to antiquated information technology; embedded in a highly diffuse, over-layered, and poorly coordinated organizational structure; led by the first Senate-confirmed administrator in seven years; leashed to a deadline that required nearly flawless delivery; and aggressively monitored by a House of Representatives that wanted it to implode.
- The August 2004 "code orange" terrorism alert earned eight check marks, including three for policy failures. First, the system was rushed into place without testing or a public education plan. Second, the system was implemented without firm policies for setting alert levels. Third, the huge department was highly vulnerable to bureaucratic and political interference. Given the lack of clear guidelines for raising or lowering the alert level, the White House faced little resistance when it pressured the department to escalate from elevated (yellow) to high (orange) just days after the Democratic national convention.
- The 2007 Consumer Product Safety Commission "Year of the Recall" produced plenty of success during an unprecedented surge of Chinese imports, but also earned seven check marks. On the one hand, the Commission set an all-time record with 473 separate recalls. On the other hand, many of the recalls came well after toxic toys and other dangerous products hit the shelves. The Commission did not have the authority or the staff to inspect foreign products before they arrived in the United States, and was weakened by allegations that its leaders had taken multiple trips paid for by trade associations and product manufacturers.
- The 2013 Texas fertilizer plant explosion that killed 12 volunteer firefighters and two civilians earned six check marks, and is yet another failure that could have been prevented with stronger policy and enforcement. The Occupational and Health Administration could have placed small "mom-and-pop" plants under the same regulations that already required sprinkler systems at much larger operations. And the Environmental Protection Agency could have listed ammonium nitrate as a potential

source of catastrophic community and environmental damage, thereby bringing the West Fertilizer Company under its location and construction rules. But neither agency had inspected West Fertilizer since 1985 to see if even relatively small amounts of ammonium nitrate could cause extensive damage. Most of West, Texas, was gone by the time the agencies discovered that there was a problem.

- The 2005 killings of 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians by U.S. Marines earned four check marks. Although the tragic event was only in the news for a moment in time, more than half of the public was paying very or fairly close attention at the time. Even today, it is not entirely clear what happened in the hours after a roadside bombing took the life of a fellow Marine. But the transcripts and in-depth *New York Times* investigation strongly suggest that the tragedy involved confusing policy on how to operate in the “fog” of war, breaches in the chain of command, training gaps, and unethical conduct as the Marines sought revenge.
- Finally, the 2007 Minneapolis I-35W bridge collapse over the Mississippi River received two check marks. The federal government was only tangentially involved in the headline-grabbing event, but the Government Accountability Office did write of “insufficient Federal and State procedures” for standard-setting on highway inspections and repair, and criticized the federal government’s highway bridge program for performance goals that led to nowhere.

WHO CAUSED THE FAILURES

Except for the healthcare.gov failure, where opponents of the president’s signature initiative no doubt delighted in the bad news, it is hard to imagine that all but the angriest, most anti-government citizens wanted government to fail in so many ways over the past 14-plus years. After all, most Americans want more of almost everything government delivers, and are highly favorable toward most federal agencies and government employees.

Yet, government’s citizen-elected leaders clearly contributed to the government dysfunction that triggered so many of the failures chronicled this paper. Although polarization has not been examined here as the primary cause of the failures, it is most certainly a grand contributor to the many causes identified, whether through benign or deliberate neglect. By frustrating and delaying action on both vision and delivery, the two parties laid out the welcome mat to the problems that undermined the faithful execution of the laws.

Both parties were responsible for the ongoing schoolyard brawl, though each contributed to government’s rising tally of failures in its own way. For their part, Democrats did their best to ignore the slow decimation of government capacity, and refused to embrace the need for bold thinking on how to improve its performance. Time and again, Democrats allowed Republicans and the Tea Party to undermine the bureaucracy, and brought little to the fight.

Likewise, President Obama, who promised to create a government for the 21st century in his 2011 State of the Union Address, never followed through. He was either too distracted to concentrate, too bored by the nitty-gritty of management, or too frightened of the Republican backlash to make the effort needed to make big government work.

For their part, Republicans exploited the Democratic cowardice by doing everything in their power to undermine performance. They stonewalled needed policy changes, and made implementation of new programs as difficult as possible; they cut budgets, staffs, and collateral capacity to a minimum, proving the adage that the logical extension of doing more with less is doing everything with nothing; they used the presidential appointments process to decapitate key agencies, and appointed more than their share of unqualified executives; and they muddled mission, tolerated unethical conduct, and gamed the performance measure process to guarantee failing scores for as many government policies as possible.

This is not to say that the Democrats were angels, however. They played hardball, too, and invented many of the tactics that the Republicans expanded with their new majority in 1995. But the Democratic failure was more one of omission, while the Republican contribution was one of very deliberate commission.

The political dysfunction from polarization is not only “worse than it looks,” as my colleagues Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein recently argued, but it also is more destructive than imagined. And it is becoming more threatening to government performance as the distance between the two parties increases. Readers must wait for another paper for further details on the first-order dysfunction that created the second-order contributors that shaped the 41 failures discussed in this paper. In the meantime, consider the following discussion of short-term repairs that might slow, or even divert, the cascade of failures.

WHAT CONGRESS AND THE PRESIDENT CAN DO

Given the amount of work to be done to prevent future failures, government will certainly continue to fail, but perhaps something can be done now to slow the pileup. In order to succeed at all, government leaders must tackle both policy and delivery. And they must do so boldly. The time for tinkering is over.

Slowing the Cascade

I readily acknowledge that the following reform agenda may be well beyond possible given the polarization that has produced such great dysfunction, but I believe that these steps would certainly open the process to more thoughtful inspection than the current approach of Congress searching for the one employee who caused the failure *du jure* and holding yet another “perp walk.”

1. *Think about policy effectiveness from the start.* The first step toward reducing government failure is to make sure that vision, delivery, and the intersection thereof are considered at every stage of the policy process. Luckily, there is already a technique for accomplishing this goal. Congressional committees estimate the cost, paperwork burdens, and state and local impact of every bill reported to the floor. It is time for them to grade the difficulty of delivery as well. The Congressional Budget Office and Government Accountability Office have the expertise to do so if Congress and the president have the courage to ask.
2. *Provide the funding, staff, and collateral capacity to succeed.* As funding and staffing cuts have become a back-door tool for repealing laws, Congress and the president could easily order the Congressional Budget Office to highlight the ongoing delivery costs associated with each bill, thereby pressuring both branches to set aside the dollars for the staffing and collateral resources needed to succeed. Government also needs information technology that keeps pace with innovation, financial management that prevents improper payments and collects delinquent debt, procurement systems that ensure the highest performance at the lowest cost, and a civil service system that puts the right people with the right training and the right motivation on the job.
3. *Flatten the chain of command and cut the bloat.* Communication continues to be a major source of failure, in part because information has to flow up through multiple layers to reach the top of an agency, while guidance must flow down through the same over-layered chain. The result is a disastrous version of the childhood game of “gossip” in which key information gets lost, discarded, distorted, or ignored as it is passed from one child to another. There is also plenty of bloat in the contracting community and the plethora of policies and organizations that cover the same space. Although some duplication and overlap serves important goals such as tailored support for specific groups like veterans, much of it undermines delivery by dividing responsibilities and wasting dollars.
4. *Select presidential appointees for their effectiveness, not connections.* As the Hurricane Katrina fiasco demonstrated, presidents are free to nominate whomever they wish, but political loyalty is no substitute for basic expertise, nor is venality a sign of effective leadership. Whatever the selection process, Congress and the president must guarantee that presidential appointees receive the training to make quick and effective decisions as new policy and delivery

problems arise. They also must ensure that appointees stay around long enough to make a difference, even if that means limiting their own ambition for high-income lobbying posts.

5. *Sharpen the mission.* Far too many of the failures involved lack of clear direction on the policy mission. Some of the resulting confusion stemmed from divided loyalty, ambiguous policy, and lack of legislative precision. But whatever the initial contribution, many failures began with the failure to compress the mission into an understandable set of expectations and commitments that can be measured, managed, and rewarded. Consistent performance measurement is one way to identify cracks in the delivery infrastructure. So, too, are strong incentives for high performance. Although performance measurement has improved greatly in recent years, it is still a distant concern when Congress and the president allocate the scarce resources that matter to delivery.

Incentives for Reform

The most powerful incentive for action could be the delivery grades outlined above, especially if a failing grade came with a full stop on a prized proposal. Tied by rule to an automatic return-to-sender motion, these assessments could prompt Congress and the president to devote more attention to the intersection between vision and delivery.

There are also powerful incentives for action in the billions that could be saved through reform. By my estimates, Congress and the president could reap as much as \$1 trillion in deficit relief over the next ten years by giving government the authority and capacity to collect delinquent taxes and overdue loans, and tens of billions more by replacing the high-cost jobs at the top of government that many baby boomers are now leaving with lower-cost jobs on the frontlines of government where so many failures occur. Although Congress and the president would have to invest money to reap these and other bureaucratic savings, the costs would be trivial compared to the return on investment.

Finally, there are political incentives for reform in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. After all, neither party wants to see its party's new president mired in the next failure. Absent immediate repairs, however, the next president will face his or her first government failure within months of inauguration day. Something is bound to go wrong. The question is whether Democrats and Republicans will take the chance that bipartisan reforms today might help elect a president of the other party in 2016.

Governance Studies

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