

CHANGE THE APPOINTMENT PROCESS OR YOU'LL GET MORE MIKE BROWNS; *Paul C. Light*. The Hill. Washington, DC: Dec. 7, 2005.

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By Paul C. Light

The White House continues to deny that there could be anything wrong with a presidential appointments process that produced Mike Brown as head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), David Safavian as head of the federal government's procurement-policy office and Timothy Flanigan as deputy attorney general.

For those who do not remember, Brown resigned after the Hurricane Katrina disaster, Safavian was removed three days after being indicted for obstruction of justice and Flanigan withdrew because of questions surrounding his association with Washington superlobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Even acknowledging the long presidential history of defending damaged appointees, the administration's praise for the appointments process that produced Brown, Safavian and Flanigan stretches credulity.

"I believe the appointments work done by this administration is as fine as has ever been done," said Clay Johnson, who ran the president's appointments office when Brown was tapped for his first job in 2001 and played a key role in hiring Safavian last summer.

In taking the defense on the failed appointments, Johnson dismissed the failing management grades the president's budget office gave FEMA while Brown was on the rise, implicitly excused an appointments system that has produced a 20-25-percent vacancy rate in the federal government's top jobs and congratulated the recruiters who served up such a meager pool of candidates that he could truthfully describe Safavian as the best person interviewed for the job.

Johnson would be well-advised to take the offense against the presidential appointments process instead. He would be right to criticize the Senate for using frivolous holds on nominees as a way to extract concessions from the White House. He would also be right to highlight the lengthy delays caused by needless paperwork and the obsessive Washington focus on drawing blood.

Most important, he would be right to focus on the recent meltdowns as an opportunity to bring the Senate and White House together to fix a desperately broken appointments process.

The process clearly failed the nation before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, for example. Although Johnson is rightfully proud that the White House was faster in nominating appointees than any administration in recent history, more than half the jobs that would become directly involved in the war on terrorism were still unfilled when the attacks occurred.

The process failed the nation again when Katrina hit. Five of the top 10 FEMA jobs were filled by political appointees with little or no disaster experience, while seven of the agency's 10 other top jobs were filled by acting appointees, including the director of the agency's operations, recovery and mitigation bureaus and the heads of four of the agency's 10 regional offices.

The subglacial speed in filling the top jobs would be bad enough for good government, but the pool of available candidates appears to have dwindled as the process has become more onerous. According to a 2001 Brookings Institution survey of nearly 500 civic leaders, most of America's most talented citizens know little about how to get a presidential appointment, yet still view the process as confusing, slow and personally disruptive.

It is little wonder that 60 percent of the Clinton and Bush appointees came from inside the Washington Beltway. It is the only place to be for someone who has to wait out the process.

The pool has also narrowed during the Bush administration, with its increased emphasis on ideological purity as an entry test for appointment. It is hard enough to find talented candidates willing to put up with the 60 pages of ridiculous questions about past embarrassments without demanding that each candidate swear never to disagree with the president. As the administration has hardened its stand against dissent, the pool of available candidates has evaporated to the point where Brown, Safavian and Flanigan truly are the most qualified for their positions.

Luckily, there are dozens of good ideas for improving the situation, ranging from cutting the total number of appointees to a more manageable number to streamlining the financial disclosure forms. All have been vetted by blue-ribbon commissions, task forces and scholars, but none will get anywhere until the Senate and White House agree that the system needs reform.

Instead of defending his work as among the finest in history, Johnson and his White House allies should start by admitting that the system produces too many vacancies and too much abuse, even as the Senate must admit to its share of the blame. My bet is that the first people to endorse the reforms would be the talented Bush appointees who had to go through the process.

Light is the Paulette Goddard professor of public service at the New York University Robert Wagner School of Public Service.