

The right way to streamline bureaucracy

The Bush administration should focus on management and ideology, not individual programs.

By [Paul C. Light](#) / September 14, 2006

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The Bush administration's audacious plan to create a sunset commission to review every last federal program and agency is now facing its own congressional sunset. Under intense opposition from interest groups that represent thousands of potential targets, the commission is now stalled in the House and Senate and seems unlikely to survive the fall.

There are good reasons to worry about the Bush proposal. By creating a commission that would operate at least until 2026, the administration's proposal would create a platform for terminating programs. Coupled with fast-track, up-or-down congressional review, the sunset commission would have unprecedented authority to eliminate any program that did not measure up to the fuzzy criteria the administration has proposed.

More important, the Bush proposal misses the forest for the trees. By focusing on individual programs, the administration ignores the much more important governmentwide problems that currently frustrate performance. Poorly designed programs did not undermine the federal response to hurricane Katrina – bad management did; poor intelligence did not produce the rush to war in Iraq – ideology did.

If the Bush administration truly wants to deal with poorly performing programs, it should propose an entirely different national commission with a much broader mission. Instead of focusing on programs, such a commission should focus on the management practices that have produced a cascade of recent failures. Given the same fast-track legislative authority to give its proposals a fighting chance, an astutely independent commission just might be able to tackle the persistent problems that plague all aspects of federal management.

It should certainly examine long-overdue reforms in the federal personnel system, which continues to fail at virtually every task it was designed to do. It is slow and confusing on hiring, permissive on promoting, lax on disciplining, and negligent on paying for performance. As a result, today's merit system includes plenty of process, but very little merit. The hyper-inflated annual appraisal process assures that pay goes up for everyone, while the sluggish disciplinary process assures that bad performance goes mostly unpunished.

The commission should also address the continued thickening of the bloated federal hierarchy. Despite its commitment to businesslike management, the Bush administration has overseen one of the largest expansions of the executive hierarchy in recent history. Thus far, the administration has added 13 new layers to the top of government, including soon-to-be classic titles such as deputy associate assistant secretary. The Bush administration has never met a new title it could not embrace, even if the result is a convoluted chain of command that holds no one accountable for what goes right or wrong in government.

The commission should also grapple with the lack of congressional support for the very programs it creates. Federal employees rightly complain that their organizations rarely provide enough technology, training, or employees to do the job. Many also ask how their jobs fit into the broader mission of government in this post-Sept. 11 world. The president needs to answer that question directly, not pass the buck to a standing commission.

The commission might even examine the unwieldy presidential appointments process, which, despite repeated calls for reform, this administration has largely failed to streamline. Appointees must still fill out nearly 60 pages of forms, including questions about personal and business dealings that were first asked during the McCarthy era, few of which have anything to do with program performance, and none of which ask how long appointees intend to stay past the 18-24 month average.

Finally, the commission should review the dramatic expansion in the largely hidden federal workforce of contract employees, which grew from an estimated size of 5.2 million in 2002 to more than 7.6 million in 2005. These employees operate with minimal supervision from the federal government's beleaguered procurement offices, and are often employed by private contractors that win their contracts with token competition, if any competition at all. The big story today is not poorly performing programs, but poorly performing contractors, something the Bush administration has ignored.

The Bush administration is right to believe that big reforms cannot come through the traditional legislative process. But it's wrong to focus on programs as the source of bad management. The overall structure and operation of the federal bureaucracy has not had a thorough review since the 1950s, when former President Herbert Hoover led a five-year review that produced hundreds of specific proposals that are still relevant today. It is time to take the federal government through another top-to-bottom shake-up, but not through the president's sunset commission.

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