

Reinventing Government in America : A Controversial Concept Behind the National Performance Review

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I. Introduction

American governmental administration, also known as the American bureaucracy, has been generally regarded by most countries in the world as competent and effective. Ironically, American citizens always think that their government is wasteful, incompetent, mediocre, and has unchecked power. Most academics and researchers contend that by possessing these characteristics, an organization tends to fall into certain patterns of behavior such as rigidity, proceduralism, resistance to change, oppressive control of employees, dehumanized treatment of clients, incomprehensible jargon, empire building, and concentration of political powers (Goodsell, 1994: 3-5). The ugly portrayal of bureaucracy, whether right or wrong, has threatened the public sentiment and degraded the image of bureaucracy.

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On March 3 1993, President Bill Clinton initiated the National Performance Review (NPR) by asking Vice President Al Gore to investigate how the federal government could be made more responsible to the American people. This is because Clinton had campaigned promising change in government before he became the President, and a comprehensive reorganization was part of his effort. Six months later, on September 7, 1993, Vice President Al Gore and the NPR released a report, entitled From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less. This report was presented to the President and the public with its long term goal to change the culture of the federal government. The NPR aims at a government that works for people, freed from red tape and senseless rules of bureaucracy. More importantly, the concept guiding these changes is based on Osborne and Gaebler's proposal,² which shifts administrative culture and behaviors from bureaucratic government toward an entrepreneurial government (Moe, 1994: 111).

The NPR report has created controversial issues among scholars and practitioners in public administration. Some agree with the current performance reform of government without paying much attention to the concept behind it, while others oppose the concept behind the NPR.

²This proposal can be studied in their book Reinventing Government : How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector and also will be partly discussed in this study.

This study is predicated upon the assumption that changes in the present bureaucracy are not only possible, but also inevitable. However, the bureaucracy is associated with the political process. If the course of such changes can be reasonably anticipated, the administration and structure of government will be shaped toward the desired goal. The main purposes of this study, then, are to study the concept of reinventing government behind the NPR, and analyze the arguments against it. To do this, this study will first examine the historical background of administrative reforms in America in order to understand the current issues and will finally suggest the direction of the NPR in the future.

II. Evolution of Administrative Reforms in America

President Clinton first announced the National Performance Review on March 3, 1993, stating: "Our goal is to make the entire government both less expensive and more efficient, and to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment. We intend to redesign, to reinvent, to reinvigorate the entire national government" (Report of the National Performance Review, 1993: 1). The reform initiative announced by President Clinton is neither new nor profound. In American political history, presidential efforts to make government work better and cost less have been acknowledged among scholars for a century.

According to Moe (1992), a major revolution in the American administrative reform took place after 1905. Eleven major commissions to improve the executive branch were undertaken from 1905 to 1993 (See Appendix 1). Unsurprisingly, the administrative reforms were the result of

the progressive American society, which entailed expansion of both governmental activity and government's administrative capacity. Arnold (1995) in his article "Reform's Changing Role" proposes three stages of examining government performance. The first stage focused on *the expanding state* which began in 1905. The second stage was the policy state which began in the 1960s with the aim of strengthening executive control of policy design, implementation, and assessment. In the last stage, after the mid-1970s, executive reorganization's role changed to campaigns *against Government*. To better understand the historical background, these three stages will be discussed briefly.

2.1 *Executive Reorganization and the Expanding State*

Six historical efforts can be seen in this stage. The first effort was the Keep Commission, created by Theodore Roosevelt in 1905. It addressed a decentralized executive branch in which agencies were subject to control by Congress and party. The commission attempted to standardize and centralize administrative processes such as salary policy, clerical procedures, and purchasing. President Roosevelt asked Congress to grant him authority to concentrate related lines of work and reduce duplication by executive order. However, Congress refused to delegate reorganization authority to the President.

The second effort was the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency, created by President William Taft in 1910. This commission adopted a view of agencies organized comprehensively within the executive branch. The commission sought to place the President at the center of administration and also recommended an executive budget, giving the President responsibility for managing the executive branch's appropriation

requests to Congress.

The third effort was the Joint Committee on Reorganization, created by President Warren Harding in 1921. This committee initiated the methods of redistributing executive functions among the departments. The committee also helped support the concept of the President as manager of the executive branch.

The most important executive reorganization was the fourth effort, the President's Committee on Administrative Management. President Franklin Roosevelt initiated this plan by assigning Louis Brownlow as the chair of the committee in 1936. The Brownlow Committee report of January 1937 was plain-spoken about its aim. The President was responsible for managing the executive branch. The President as administrative manager required foresight into national problems and sought administrative competency to solve them. The Brownlow Committee's key recommendations were for expanded presidential staff, centralization of personnel policy in the presidency, and institutionalization of presidential reorganization authority (Rohr, 1986: 135-153).

The next two efforts were the First Hoover Commission created in 1947 and the Second Hoover Commission created in 1953. During the First Hoover Commission between 1947 and 1949, former President Herbert Hoover led the commission which was launched by a congress with anti-presidential aims. The First Hoover Commission recommendations were to strengthen government through administrative improvement with a concern for economy and efficiency. The commission called for a renewal of a hierarchical administrative structure during President Harry Truman's term. The Second Hoover Commission was created

under President Dwight Eisenhower. The commission had worked between 1953 and 1955 with the aim at reducing the functions of the federal government. As time passed, the Commission began to focus more on policy problems than organizational structure.

2.2 Executive Reorganization and the Policy State

In the second stage of executive reorganization, reform's focus shifted from the president's managerial problems regarding organizational structure to presidential problems with policy formation, control, and efficacy. By the 1960s, the positive state¹ was widely accepted as legitimate, and presidential primacy was becoming the conventional conception of the American regime. Increasingly, government's central problem was to fulfill its promise to address complex social, economic, and national security problems. Thus the reform agenda took government's most pressing needs as increased capacities for designing and assessing the efficiency of public policies. This shift in reform's focus was first apparent within the Johnson administration (Arnold, 1995: 411).

President Lyndon Johnson used executive reorganization to attain his goal of controlling policy while reducing expenditures. The problem Johnson posed for reorganization may have itself invited a new approach: How could new programs be made so effective as to reduce government's expenditures in a policy arena? During Johnson's term, he created many task forces on executive reorganization. There were a series of low-key reforms that produced quiet but important changes.

¹This term means a government which is large, competent, and responsive in order to cope with various problems in the society.

In April 1969, President Richard Nixon established his Advisory Council on Government Organization, led by Roy Ash. Its first focus was on the executive office's capacities for presidential governance. The second plan was to reorganize the Bureau of the Budget and established the Domestic Policy Council. The Ash Council proposed the Domestic Council to create a forum for policy formation and a staff with the resources to plan and assess policy initiatives (Arnold, 1995: 412). In March 1971, President Nixon, acting on the Council's recommendations, proposed four reorganized departments into which almost all domestic programs would fit: national resources, economic affairs, human resources, and community development.

2.3 Reorganization against Government

In its most recent stage, executive reorganization's connection to presidential power over administration was changed. After the middle 1970s, executive reorganization was posed by presidents as a weapon against government. Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and now Bill Clinton, initiated executive reorganization in the explicit manner of streamlining government. However, efforts to improve governmental performance turned away from a long-term project of expanding the capacities of executive government to acquiring a "populist accent," promising to change government to make it more acceptable to popular American expectations (Arnold, 1995: 412).

Before he was elected, Carter also promised in his presidential campaign to make the government understandable, efficient, and economical. He then established his Reorganization Project. Most of its recommendations proposed uncontroversial reforms in mid-level agencies

and their activities. However, the project's major effort, a plan for large scale departmental reorganization, failed to receive his approval (Arnold, 1995: 413). Carter's reorganization proposals were significant. In 1978, Congress gave him most of what he wanted with respect to civil service reform. The Civil Service Commission was replaced with a new Office of Personnel Management, responsible to the President, and a Merit System Protection Board to hear appeals from grieved employees (Dye, Green, and Parthemos, 1980: 392).

Like Carter's strategy to gain popular votes, Reagan also used several strategies to impose his will on government. In February 1982, President Reagan initiated the President's Private Sector Survey on Cost Control, chaired by J. Peter Grace. The Grace Commission was the largest executive reorganization to date. In line with President Reagan's political philosophy, this Commission argued that the public and private sectors were alike and should be judged by the same set of economic variables and managerial principles, particularly top-down control. However, the Grace Commission report contained little to guide real reform. A number of the Commission's recommendations were ill founded and many of its savings estimates were groundless. The Grace Commission recommendations failed, perhaps, because they were really intended to castigate government and not change it (Arnold, 1995: 413).

III. Reinventing Government under NPR Perspective

3.1 What is Reinventing Government?

The phrase "reinventing government" was originally portrayed by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992) in the best-selling book, Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector. Osborne was later recruited to help the NPR map out a plan for changing the federal bureaucracy. According to Osborne and Gaebler, change at the federal level is inevitable. They argue that many of the same tools used to improve the performance of the private sector such as employee empowerment, internal competition, and measurement can be applied to "reinvent" government as well.

Osborne and Gaebler use the phrase "entrepreneurial government" to describe the new model of good government. They signify the word "entrepreneur" as the organization that uses resources in new ways to maximize productivity and effectiveness. Thus, the entrepreneurial model means public institutions that habitually use their resources in new ways to heighten both their efficiency and their effectiveness. Their book focuses on three levels of government—federal, state, and local-- and its subject is not what they do, but how they operate.

Osborne and Gaebler (1992: 322-323) further suggest a new paradigm to solve the government problems by supporting the fact that government administration has been faced with various problems. The field of government was filled with new phrases: "public-private partnership," "alternative service delivery," "contracting out," "empowerment," "Total Quality Management," participatory management," "privatization," "load shedding." These are symptoms of what is called a

paradigm crisis. The paradigm crisis can be simply described by saying that existing administrative theory has not served the performance of American government well (Kettl, 1995: 49).

3.2 *The Principle of Reinventing Government*

The Report of Reinventing Government suggested that the NPR focus primarily on how government should work, not on what it should do. Its job was to improve performance in areas where policy makers had already decided government should play a role. According to the report, there are four keys principles of the NPR: Cutting Red Tape, Putting Customers First, Empowering Employees to Get Results, and Cutting Back to Basics: Producing Government for Less.

(1) *Cutting Red Tape* Effective entrepreneurial governments cast aside red tape, shifting from systems in which people are accountable for following rules to systems in which they are accountable for achieving results. They streamline their budget, personnel and procurement systems—liberating organizations to pursue their missions. They reorient their control systems to prevent problems rather than simply punish those who make mistakes. They strip away unnecessary layers of regulation that stifle innovation. Finally, they deregulate organizations that depend upon them for funding, such as lower levels of government.

(2) *Putting Customers First* Effective entrepreneurial governments insist on customer satisfaction. They listen carefully to their customers. They restructure their basic operation to meet customer' needs. And they use market dynamics such as competition and customer choice to create incentives that drive their employees to put the customer first. By "customer," it doesn't mean "citizen." A citizen can participate

in democratic decision making; a customer receives benefits from specific service. All Americans are citizens. Most are also customers.

(3) *Empowering Employees to Get Results* Effective entrepreneurial governments transform their cultures by decentralizing authority. They empower those who work on the front lines to make more of their own decisions and solve more of their own problems. They embrace labor-management cooperation, provide training and other tools employees need to be effective, and they humanize the workplace. While stripping away layers and empowering front-line employees, they hold organizations accountable for producing results.

(4) *Cutting Back to Basics: Producing Better Government for Less* Effective entrepreneurial governments constantly find ways to make government work better and cost less --reengineering how they do their work and reexamining programs and processes. They abandon the obsolete, eliminate duplication, and end special interest privileges. They invest in greater productivity, through loan funds and long-term capital investments. They embrace advanced technologies to cut cost.

3.3 How to Reinvent Government

Since the principles of reinventing government are offered as statements rather than explicit theory, all management theories and approaches which have dominated private sector can be applied to reinventing government. However, three terms, downsizing, reengineering, and continuous improvement, have dominated the NPR as well as the private sector (Kettl, 1995: 37-45).

(1) *Downsizing* This word simply means the reduction in the number of agencies, the level of government spending, and the number

of government employees. The downsizing movement spilled over the federal government in the mid 1980s. The downsizing movement itself does not guarantee quality of services and the efficiency of administration. Downsizing just becomes a symbolic tactic, a way for elected officials to resonate with the concerns of voters without attacking the problem of making government work better. Public officials, both elected and appointed, have turned instead to reengineering and culture change for that purpose.

(2) *Reengineering* The word “reengineering” was created by Michael Hammer and James Champy in their best-selling book, Reengineering the Corporation. They tell a tale of corporations faced not only with new challenges but with threats to their existence. They argue that in order to succeed and survive, business leaders must jump past incremental improvements to a fundamental reexamination of their operations. They contend that completely new work processes and organizational structures can produce quantum leaps in performance. Reengineering begins by having managers consider the three Cs: Customer, Competition, and Change. It also requires fundamental and radical redesign of work processes within their organizations to ensure that the customer’s needs are met. Hammer and Champy (1992: 221-222) assert that reengineering can be applied to government and other public institutions. However, one unique challenge facing reengineering in the public sector is the difficulty of measuring performance. Another difficulty is that breaking down departmental barriers within a corporation is much easier than breaking them down between government agencies.

(3) *Continuous Improvement* Other management reformers have pursued a very different direction. These scholars have advocated a more gradual, continuous, bottom-up movement. In the last decade, the movement has been strongly associated with Total Quality Management (TQM), which was launched by W. Edward Deming. TQM emphasizes that the quality of the products matters most. Better quality leads to lower costs and higher productivity. TQM should be built from the bottom to the top of an organization. Deming's concept was to create the management equivalent of the Ten Commandments. His points were based on the following six principal ideas. First, quality is defined by the customer. Second, understanding and reducing variation in every process is a must. Third, all significant, long-lasting quality improvements must emanate from top management's commitment to improvement. Fourth, change and improvement must be continuous and all encompassing. Fifth, the ongoing education and training of all the employees are a prerequisite for achieving the sort of analysis that is needed for constant improvement. And sixth, performance ratings that seek to measure the contribution of individual employees are usually destructive (Gabor, 1990: 18).

IV. Opposing Arguments Concerning the Concept of Reinventing Government

Most American scholars in public administration have not opposed the efforts to improve administrative performance. However, some try to guide and suggest more appropriate ways for the reformers to achieve their objectives. Two aspects of disputing arguments emerge among scholars interested in administrative reforms. The first is the disagreement

on an entrepreneurial paradigm which is the main concept behind reinventing government. The second is an argument pertaining to the conflicting concepts adopted by the reinventing government itself.

4.1 Disagreement on Entrepreneurial Paradigm

Moe (1994), in his article "The 'Reinventing Government' Exercise: Misinterpreting the Problem, Misjudging the Consequences," argues that the debate over paradigms is not simply a clash of abstractions, but should be taken seriously as it provides the basis for evaluating both the general objectives and specific proposals of the Gore Report. He asserts that the entrepreneurial management paradigm seeks to institute a highly pluralist organizational and management structure upon the executive branch. Congress is viewed as a minor and negative factor in this new paradigm. The President, in turn, is seen more as a catalytic agent than as the legal agent of the sovereign power. This paradigm goes against the administrative management paradigm in which the institutional presidency was considered central to the management of the executive branch. The entrepreneurial paradigm seeks to render management responsibility to the lowest practical level. Primary accountability will no longer be to the President through departmental lines and central management agencies, but to the customer. The problem posed here is that the degree to which public servants become leaders will depend both on their educational preparation and their first experience with a government agency. The first requires new competencies to be taught by an educational system that specializes in highly technical fields. The second requires public managers to exert leadership on the job where and when they can.

According to Moe, entrepreneurial government degrades the presidential roles and ignores the roles of Congress. By and large, Congress seeks to organize its committee systems to reflect the organization of the executive branch. Congress passes laws that assign program responsibility to a single department or agency head. Therefore, there must be cooperative action between Congress and the agency. This relationship between Congress and the agency originates in law and effort by the President. To change this relationship means to weaken democratic accountability.

Caiden (1994) in his article "Administrative Reform--American Style" indicates that businesslike methods have run some public services nearly into the ground. Public administration in a democracy is not like running a business or commanding the army. In many contexts, debureaucratization and deregulation have been part of the problem, not the solution. Many of the reform proposals are misdirected and fail to tackle the deeper problems of American public administration without threatening democratic accountability or strengthening self-interest at the cost of the public interest.

Arnold (1995: 415) also supports the fact that administrative agencies are created by law to implement policies that are specified in law. For good or ill, interest group politics affects government's policy-making and implementation because American government is both constitutional and open. He contends that current executive reorganization is disconnected from the problem of executive management and has become the instrument of presidential public politics.

Kettl (1995: 47-48), in his article "Building Lasting Reform: Enduring Questions, Missing Answers," summarizes all criticisms of reinventing government. These criticisms include the notions that "real entrepreneurialism cannot be created in government," "market incentives cannot be a substitute for the law," "the reinventers undercut critical public management capacity," and "the real problems are primarily political, not administrative."

4.2 *Conflicting Concepts of Reinventing Government*

Terms like "downsizing," "reengineering," and "continuous improvement" have dominated the NPR as they have driven private-sector reforms. However, these concepts often float in and out of discussions as if they were interchangeable. In fact, the ideas behind them are complicated and hard to understand. Therefore, reform movement requires sorting out the driving concepts behind it (Kettl, 1995: 37).

According to Kettl, these three movements of downsizing, reengineering, and continuous improvement, are different in goal, direction, method, central focus, and action. *Downsizing*, enforced from the outside in by angry citizens, seeks lower government expenditures. Its methods are blunt targets, driven by the assumption that there is ample waste in government to accommodate the cuts. Downsizers seek to shrink the size of government by firing a weapon of sufficient size to signal their fundamental disdain for existing policy makers and managers. *Reengineering* seeks greater organizational efficiency by seeking a radical change in organizational process. Top leaders attempt to harness competition and the urge to serve customers and thereby transform their organizations. *Continuous improvement*, by contrast, seeks greater responsiveness to the

needs of customers by launching an ongoing process to improve the quality of an organization's products. Advocates of continuous improvement believe that workers know best how to solve an organization's problems, so unlike reengineering, continuous improvement builds from the bottom up.

The fundamental precepts of each of these three movements directly conflict with the other two. Assessing the conflicts is itself an important problem. No one knows which one works best. Finding out is impossible, not only because governments tend to underinvest in program evaluation but also because no organization adopts any reform in its pure form (Kettl, 1995: 45-46).

V. Conclusion and Implication

It is no exaggeration to state that reinventing government gained public attention because it addressed the problems of the bureaucracy and offered the solution to solve these problems. However, the fact is that reinventing government is only an attempt of administrative reforms to improve government performance. Under the current government, led by President Clinton, we may infer that reinventing government has dual purposes. The first is explicit, the repair of administration. This explicit purpose generates various efforts to improve government performance through creating a government that works better and costs less. These efforts to improve government are based on the concept of entrepreneurial government. The second purpose is implicit and addresses the executive power of the American political system. It is generally acknowledged that the President gains not only popular votes, but also influence over administrative agencies. Therefore, almost all Presidents, regardless of the

their parties have supported the issue of improving government performance as their political tool to control bureaucracy and draw public attention..

After exploring the past experiences of administrative reforms, we clearly see that the past attempts at reform reflect four important lessons. First, the task of reform is frightening. If solutions were easy, repeated efforts would not have been necessary. Second, despite the difficulty of the job, progress has been made gradually. These earlier reform efforts more or less made government work better today. Third, reforms have worked best when they grew from a strong strategy and had intellectual support. These reforms need to be guided by a strategic plan, a clear vision of the problem, and of the direction in which solutions lie. Finally, only sustained presidential attention to management problems will produce a difference (Dilulio, Garvey, and Kettl, 1993: 7-9).

The Discussion of the NPR efforts to improve government performance poses two problems. The first problem is based on an entrepreneurial paradigm, while the second is conflicting concepts of the NPR. Discussing administrative paradigms represent problems in theory, rather than in practice. No one can dispute that things are changing. Without participation by public administrators and scholars, restructuring will continue to occur. The administrative practice goes beyond the theory. In general, scholars seeking to control bureaucracy set two standards, responsiveness to public needs and competence in performance of tasks. Therefore, every proposal for changing government operation and authority must now be evaluated carefully in order to minimize this disagreement in focusing the concepts of responsiveness and competency.

To make reinventing government work more successfully, David Brown (1978: 383-386) suggests that the President be deeply involved in the process. The President must understand the limitations of the system such as strengths and weaknesses of individual public organizations and also encourage concerned bureaucrats to participate in reforming government performance. Moreover, the President should be aware of congressional support, and the feeling of clients and citizens.

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Since public agencies and their performance must be reorganized and improved for the betterment of changing society, reinventing government, called “improving government performance,” “administrative reform,” “government performance review,” or “executive reorganization,” is necessary and persistent. No one can dispute that things are changing and government performance reforms continue to occur. Therefore, those who have stakes in their outcome should actively engage in the process by any means they can.

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Appendix 1

Efforts to Improve the Executive Branch: 1905-1993

Keep Commission (1905-1909)

This first national commission provided President Theodore Roosevelt with a set of comprehensive reports that created a new vocabulary of terms and concepts to be applied to public administration.

President's Commission on Economy and efficiency (1910-1913)

Under President Taft, this commission recommended comprehensive changes in the areas of human resources, financial management, and business. In addition, it proposed creating a national executive budget.

Joint Committee on Reorganization (1921-1924)

During Harding's administration, this committee helped galvanize support for the concept of the president as manager of the executive branch.

President's Committee on Administrative Management (1936-1937)

During FDR's second term, this committee recommended a hierarchical executive organization with clear lines of authority and accountability. In addition, it held that responsibility for policy and standards resided with the president and department secretaries.

First Hoover Commission (1947-1949)

The former president led a comprehensive review of the executive branch, with a concern for economy and efficiency. The commission called for a renewal of a hierarchical administrative structure during the Truman years.

Second Hoover Commission (1953-1955)

Under Eisenhower, this commission attempted to reduce the functions of the federal government.

Study Commissions on Executive Reorganization (1953-1968)

Under Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, a variety of commissions made recommendations regarding governmental change, policy planning, evaluation, and making departments and agencies more responsive to the president.

Ash Council (1969-1971)

This council during Nixon's administration concluded that fundamental restructuring of the executive branch was needed. It recommended that narrow, constituency-oriented, traditional departments be replaced by broader, functional departments.

Carter Reorganization Effort (1977-1979)

This reform drive rejected most principles of public administration and attempted a bottom-up, process-based reorganization effort that, for the most part, ended in failure.

Grace Commission (1982-1984)

In line with President Reagan's political philosophy, this commission argued that the public and private sectors were alike and should be judged by the same set of economic variables and managerial principles, particularly top-down control.

National Performance Review (1993...)

President Clinton launched a concerted efforts to "reinvent" government to improve its performance and save money.

Source: Ronald C. Moe, Reorganizing the Executive Branch in the
Twentieth Century: Landmark Commission, Report 92-293
GOV (Washington, D.C.,
Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, March
19, 1992.)
(Excerpted from Posner and Rothstein.)

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