Is the U.S. Government at Risk of Failing?

By Molly Jahn, Gregory Treverton and David Bray

The longest government shutdown in U.S. history got most of the media’s attention. But, something worse and more fundamental is happening. Over decades, the federal government’s workforce has been both burdened and demeaned, putting government at risk of simply failing in the face of a national crisis—or multiple domestic or foreign emergencies occurring at the same time.

These findings—which we detail in a study published by the nonpartisan Senior Executives Association after analyzing 20 years of federal personnel data and conducting interviews and focus groups with senior federal civil servants—should be cause for serious concern to all Americans. Regardless of whether you think the federal government should be smaller or larger, we all want it to be effective during emergencies. Yet it is not difficult to foresee a situation in which massive wildfires in California are followed by floods with landslides with a devastating hurricane hitting the Gulf Coast at the same time. Similarly, it is not difficult to imagine U.S. diplomats facing nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran simultaneously. In 2019, the current federal workforce is ill equipped to address either scenario.

The deterioration of the federal workforce did not happen overnight. In nearly 60 years, the country’s population increased 81 percent and federal government spending quintupled—far more citizens for civil servants to serve, assist and protect. Yet the federal workforce has not kept pace—from 1.8 million civilian employees in 1960 to 2.1 million in 2017. Contractors and productivity increases could only take up so much of the slack. Government services are harder to automate than manufacturing; they typically span several departments and require coordination with local and state partners in ways that cannot easily be streamlined the way business pipelines can, especially when responding to emergent events or crises.

As the staff-to-citizen ratio has shrunk, budgets and programs have expanded. Consider Congress. Recent workforce studies indicate that each appropriations staffer in the House is now responsible for 52 percent more federal dollars than he or she was just 16 years ago; the workload of Senate appropriations staff has increased 30 percent during the same period. The failure to adequately staff the federal government is creating exactly the kind of waste politicians hoped to avoid. Since Congress is now unable to properly oversee the more than $4 trillion it appropriates each fiscal year, its expenditures have become less efficient and effective.

Nor did this shift occur under a single political party’s rule. The promise to restrain what some perceive as overreach by government has long been evident in Republican administrations, but it is also consistent with Clinton-era efforts. The problem has worsened in the current administration, with unprecedented rates of staff departures at senior ranks. More than twice as many Cabinet-level employees quit in 2017 as in 2009, the first year of President Obama’s tenure. This has been compounded by widespread vacancies in senior executive branch positions.

Federal employees described to us an environment where they are penalized for action, hampered by outdated processes and not rewarded for innovation. Workplaces are more and more toxic, especially but not only for women. Complaint channels are turned into weapons, threatening careers, often unfairly. Mistrust of senior career civil servants by incoming political appointees, always present to some degree, has become endemic. Career employees serving their country under one administration are often marginalized by the next. The result is “paralysis by analysis,” with civil servants reluctant to take a decision lest it be deemed wrong by political superiors, ending a career.

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organizations, states and many individual federal agencies. Randy Johnson, former Commissioner for Hennepin County, Minnesota, and a past president of the National Association of Counties, said Bruce “always fully knew and promoted the importance of the federal government working with states and localities. He had a particularly keen understanding of the role of counties, which differs in each state.”

The quality and volume of Bruce’s work is quite remarkable across his 24 years with ACIR, 13 years at the Academy, 12 years as a practitioner in regional organizations and miscellaneous time with other projects. In total, Bruce authored or led more than 85 major publications, including government reports, journal and magazine articles and contributions to eight published books. He thoroughly analyzed his subjects, both in detail and in a broader context, and always had practical recommendations.

Bruce also drafted portions of federal bills dealing with IGR, regional planning coordination, federal aid simplification and regulatory relief for state and local governments; he influenced others. This work led him to similarly investigate and develop model state legislation on many topics, requiring his deep understanding of the varying authorities and other differences among the 50 states.

Bruce was known for his strong work ethic, output, memory and dedication, but also for his willingness to help others. He presented at various conferences and professional events, and at more than 12 academic institutions in the United States and abroad. He taught courses at his local community college and served on accreditation review teams for Master’s degree programs in planning at several universities.

Former ACIR Executive Director John Kincaid remarked that Bruce “was a hardworking, competent and meticulous director who ensured quality and timeliness in contract performance.” Sharon Lawrence, a former staff member, said it was “an honor to work with him. His knowledge base was immense, his dedication to the cause tremendous and his kind and gentle nature made him the sort of person you considered yourself lucky to know.”

Pat Atkins, former staffer at the National Association of Regional Councils remembered that her PhD dissertation committee could include an external member. “There was only one outside expert that was qualified and needed, and that was Bruce. He was professional, thoughtful, generous and facilitative. Bruce’s place in my life as a colleague and a friend was beyond what most are blessed in this way to have.”

Bruce was a unique “go to” person for so many in public administration, planning and other disciplines about IGR, states, regions and localities nationwide, as well as federal agencies. He provided details, citations, history, insight, contacts and other resources to understand the complexities and nuances of American government that was hard to find elsewhere. As former Academy Vice President Bill Gadsby said, “Bruce was a credit to himself, his profession and the country. Godspeed.”

You can find the full version of this piece online at https://patimes.org/a-tribute-to-bruce-mcdowell/.

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All of this is happening as public servants face new challenges. Cyberattacks can disable or abuse substantial parts of the government—from voting machines during elections to the electrical grid to even National Security Agency tools discovered and used for widespread hacking, as we saw with the WannaCry ransomware attack in 2017. Couple these with targeted misinformation campaigns by foreign governments, like Russia’s intervention in our 2016 elections, that discredit democratic processes and seed conflict.

It is past time for the adults in Congress—in both parties—to address these federal workforce issues for the sake of our Republic. An effective, stable government is essential to maintain the economy, safeguard public resources and keep citizens safe. We hope Americans in the 21st century do not have to learn that lesson the hard way.

The ultimate question from this study is one for the American people: What do they want from their government? Is the current government—one that finds it hard to attract and retain talent, demeans nonpartisan civil servants, prevents its workforce from making decisions, discourages a culture of adapting and risks failing when stressed by foreseeable contingencies—good enough for us, for our hopes and aspirations as a people?

Molly Jahn served as deputy and acting under secretary of Agriculture. Greg Treverton served as chair of the U.S. National Intelligence Council. David Bray served as senior National Intelligence Service executive. You can reach the authors through Treverton at gregtrever@gmail.com. To read their study, visit https://seniorexecs.org/1132-sea-federal-workforce-study