

The Constant Call for Smarter Government

By Rachel Emas

As public administrators are continuously challenged by increasingly the limited resources and growing demands of the 21st century, we ask government to work smarter and do more with less. In July of this year, President Obama echoed this demand that “we should all want a government that’s smarter, quicker, and more responsive to the needs of the American people” (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). This call for smarter government, though, is no recent trend. Since the foundation of the colonies, American citizens have constantly called on the public sector to advance and enhance in order to meet their needs (Kettl, 2008). The dynamic and ever-evolving nature of the American people necessitates the continuous development of its government.

Though the cry for smarter government is laudable, it can also be somewhat vague and subjective. So, what does it mean to make government smarter? The question underlying this continuous call for improvement is “Smarter than what?”. The simplest and most straightforward answer is “Smarter than before”. And so, with each new Administration and every generation, the American people demand a government smarter than it has ever been before.

As the Obama Administration recently stated, “It makes sense for us to be able to redesign government so that it can deliver on the functions that the American people are looking for” (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). As the needs of the American public shift over time, so too must the efforts of the government. With each generation, government must simply BE better than it has ever been. A smarter government is one that improves, innovates, and evolves

along with the people it represents. Throughout the history of the US government, there has been a constancy of change in reaction to those changes that came before.

In order to make government smarter in the early 1800s, politicians toiled to move the federal civil service system away from an elitist regime to an egalitarian arrangement. Under President Monroe's Administration, the Tenure of Office Act of 1820 was passed, marking the formal foundation of the spoils system (Office of Personnel Management). Widely considered the most ardent supporter of this patronage system, President Andrew Jackson looked to prevent corruption in, restore virtue to, and democratize the federal government through the vigorous application of this rotation system. However, this four year turnover required by the Tenure Act “placed men with little or no experience in specialized positions, creating inefficiency, corruption and outright theft in the different government posts” (Office of Personnel Management). The spoils system, though initiated to make government smarter, led to additional and unforeseen consequences.

With the consequences of the spoils system readily apparent, at least one civil service reform bill was introduced in each session of Congress from 1870-1890 (Office of Personnel Management). Finally, in reaction to the 1881 assassination of President James Garfield by a disgruntled party loyalist denied an administrative post, President Arthur's Administration pushed through the Pendleton Act of 1883 which called for a smarter, merit-based civil service system. In his efforts, President Jackson worked to improve government by democratizing federal office-holding and avoiding corruption; with unintended consequences, the spoils system failed to make government smarter. The passage of the Pendleton Act, though, in reaction to the various direct and indirect effects of the spoils system, was also offered in order to make government smarter. By setting merit-based standards for federal employment, the Civil Service

Act provided the public sector with the opportunity to form institutional memory based on expert knowledge, moving away from a system with four-year turnover cycles based on political connections (Mintz & McNeil, 2013). These reactive and repeated efforts to make government smarter offer also served to lay the foundation and shape the practice of the American civil service system. Steered by the Executive Branch, shifts in the federal government would continue throughout the next century and a half, often offered as reforms to the previous Administrations' efforts to make government smarter.

Led by Former Vice President Gore, the federal administrative reforms of the 1990's were known as the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR; previously known as the National Performance Review). With the intention to "make the entire federal government less expensive and more efficient, and to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment", the Administration vowed to reinvent government by focusing on four principles: putting customers first, cutting red tape, empowering employees, and cutting back to basic missions (Kamensky, 1997). Built on the broad market-based ideals of the New Public Management (NPM) movement, the NPR evolved to become "a broader movement in the federal workforce to reshape the governmental bureaucratic culture to be more entrepreneurial and less rule driven" and offered over 1,200 recommendations in order to affect these changes (Breul & Kamensky, 2008; Vik, 2011). This effort to reinvent government worked to answer the perpetual demand for smarter government, constantly inviting new initiatives and shifting foci as needed during implementation.

In August 2001, President George W. Bush released his President's Management Agenda (PMA) which focused on solving five management problems: strategic management of human capital, competitive sourcing, improvement of government financial performance, expansion of

e-government, and budget and performance integration. With the goal of a government that is citizen-centered, results-oriented, and market-based, this set of reforms included the passage of the Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART), a “necessary enhancement to the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) [from the Clinton Administration], a law that the [Bush] Administration views as not having met its objectives, in order to hold agencies accountable for performance and to integrate budgeting with performance” (Brass, 2004). Although framed as an addition to and not a replacement of the GPRA, a U.S. General Accounting Office report argued that “by using the PART process to review and sometimes replace GPRA goals and measures, OMB [Office of Management and Budget] is substituting its judgment for a wide range of stakeholder interests” (Posner & Fantone, 2004). While somewhat similar to the NPR in its foundation of market principles and focus on performance over process, Bush’s Agenda utilized a top-down approach which concentrated on implementation through existing institutions and the chain of command, sometimes even replacing the policy frameworks set by the previous administration (Kettl, 2008). In order to make government smarter, President Bush revised, replaced, and revamped the reform efforts of the previous administration.

To the Obama Administration, smarter government must be more efficient, transparent, and accountable than in the past. In order to achieve the goal of a better government, the Administration has focused on reducing government waste (efficiency), providing greater and more accurate information (transparency), and improving service delivery (accountability). The innovative government envisioned by President Obama relies on the knowledge and technological skills of both the public and private sector, and the consolidation and reorganization of the federal bureaucracy (Office of the Press Secretary, 2013). These aims, as well as the means of public-private collaboration, again echo the elements of New Public

Management reforms, comparable to the NPR under Clinton and the PMA of the Bush Administration (Vik, 2011). President Obama's increased attention to and heavy reliance on technology is an innovative element in the implementation of these market-based reforms.

The past three presidential administrations have similar visions of what smarter government requires; namely, a government that is more accountable and efficient. This consensus is in stark contrast to the major ideological and institutional shifts early in our nation's history, as the foundation of the federal government was still under construction. As each new administration is ushered into office, the executive branch must seek a balance between their vision for a smarter government and the reality formed by the efforts of those presidents that came before them. We all recognize that as the needs and demands of the American people shift over time, so too must the government. It seems that the constant call for smarter government, however, is one element that will remain timeless in American society.

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