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Rebooting the Bureaucracies
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The next administration should carefully consider three problems associated with the bureaucracies that comprise "big government":

1.   the growth of overt political bias at the leadership levels (as described in my previous article "Lois Lerner, IRS scandal are not unique"),

2.   rampant regulatory maneuvers that harm both business and individuals, and

3.   the cost of bureaucratic "business as usual."

With continued "burrowing" (the transfer of political appointees to permanent positions), the number of small business failures outnumbering startups for the first time since such measurements were first taken, and a 19 trillion dollar national debt, a fix or a "cure" - perhaps in the form of a systemic reboot - is desperately needed.

Efforts made to rectify any one of these three major problems would be laudable; but addressing them singularly may exacerbate the other two. A never-ending spiral of corrective action could be just as harmful as the expansive solutions (e.g. reorganization, adoption of new missions, and creation of new organizations) previously applied by political leadership. These issues are linked - perhaps inextricably - and must be treated as symptoms of the same disease.

While it would be relatively easy to reapply the aforementioned, time-honored corrective actions, resorting to "Band-aids" will only delay the inevitable collapse of this bloated, infected megasystem. Still, those in charge can almost be forgiven for caving-in when confronted with the difficulties and obstacles inherent in proposing dramatic bureaucratic change. A great deal, it is generally claimed, simply cannot be done. Placebos and antibiotics are plentiful, but there are limits to the doctor's ability to prescribe truly effective medications for the virus that has overtaken the body. In digital terms - the system has turned on its owner. (Anti-virus software can't guard against everything).

Regardless, it is instructive to examine all possible pathways to good systemic health, even if many are ultimately disregarded. What could be done to overhaul the bureaucracies so that they serve the needs of the people, as opposed to feeding on the people they are supposed to serve?

A typical approach might be to form a committee, a study group, or a new organization to develop and enumerate options. Finding the right people and providing conditions for them to dedicate their time to the task, however, is extremely difficult. And ultimately, results will always be called into question for many reasons, to include the legalities of proposed changes as well as charges of political bias.

The time may be right for a new, much faster, and potentially "unbiased" alternative - a digital method appropriate for the times. An artificial intelligence-based system developed for analysis and decision-making may be exactly what is needed for this type of complex, comprehensive problem-solving. Cognitive agents, such as those currently under development at George Mason University's Learning Agents Center, could potentially be tasked with formulating solution sets (finding a cure) to the problems associated with our bureaucracies.

A basic, 7-question framework for study, whether undertaken by committee or cognitive agent, should be used to examine each bureaucratic organization:

1.   Is there a constitutional basis for the organization's existence?

2.   Are the tasks associated with the organization's inception still needed, desired, and appropriate?

3.   If not, a line-item deletion of tasks may be necessary. What tasks can be deleted?

4.   Are any new, relevant tasks or missions unaddressed?

5.   If no tasks remain - the organization should be disbanded.

6.   If only a few remain, could they be incorporated into another organization's mission? Alternatively, is an organizational merger be more effective?

7.   Would relocation to the state or local levels be more appropriate?

Ideally, plans to eliminate laws and regulations that unnecessarily tie the hands of business - especially with regard to hiring - would be initiated prior to the beginning of this venture. Unfortunately, the processes involved are extensive and time-consuming; therefore, it may be wise to begin the reboot before a significant number of civil sector positions become readily available.

Communication is key. At the outset, an "advisory" should be issued to all federal employees, explaining the process. Upon completion of an organizational review, all billets must be advertised (including executive positions) and employees encouraged to compete according to their qualifications, alongside members of the public who may never have held a government job. Due to the number of inflated component structures that currently exist, a staggered methodology might be considered.

Lawyers are critical to the effort - a necessity for the scrutiny of legal, regulatory, and human resource issues. Moreover, someone with business acumen and a proven ability to hire and fire according to need, individual capabilities, and trustworthiness is a crucial element of any administration attempting such change.

Reboot accomplished? Maybe - maybe not. This is obviously a simplistic description of a highly complex undertaking, and the ramifications of job loss associated with drastic governmental downsizing would be a difficult pill for any politician to swallow. The disruption caused by a reboot, or any other similar "cure" could easily be described as worse than the disease; but we may soon reach a point where delay in treatment is no longer an option. Our bureaucratic megasystem, combining both human and digital frailties, may be on the verge of failing.

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