

Introduction

Despite an ever-growing public debt—almost \$20 trillion at the latest count—federal policymakers have failed to think seriously about the size and scope of the executive branch. Today, there are 22 departments, agencies, and offices that rise to Cabinet level in the executive branch, with hundreds of sub-agencies underneath them. The fact that Americans are living under a federal government that knows no fiscal bounds, with bureaucratic decisions affecting nearly every aspect of their lives, clearly demonstrates that a major overhaul of the executive branch is long overdue.

Led by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), President Donald Trump has called for a systematic restructuring of the executive branch. The President’s Executive Order No. 13781 is “intended to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of the executive branch.”² Further, OMB is directed “to propose a plan to reorganize governmental functions and eliminate unnecessary agencies.”³

Tinkering around the edges of the executive branch will not rein in the excessive growth of a federal government that has become bloated and lethargic. Instead, executive branch reorganization should encompass bold actions to terminate or significantly reform federal agencies and programs that function outside of the federal government’s core constitutional responsibilities. The following section contains numerous bold and timely recommendations to downsize and reform the executive branch. However, the success of the President’s executive order faces considerable obstacles.

Government Programs Never Die. While the old adage that death and taxes are the only two certainties in life, there is perhaps a second: Government programs never die.⁴ The termination of government programs is such a rare phenomenon that its occurrence is hardly studied by social scientists.⁵ As acknowledged decades ago, the rare elimination of government programs usually occurs “with either a bang or a very long whimper.”⁶ When government programs have been terminated, immediate elimination has been the most common strategy.⁷ This appears to be the most successful method, since it does not give special interests the time to pressure Congress into reversing its decision.

Concentrated Benefits and Diffuse Costs. The congressional legislative process generally favors keeping failed or outdated government programs alive, often with growing budgets, due to the dilemma of concentrated benefits and diffuse costs. Because of this dilemma, appropriations legislation that continues an ineffective or outdated program is unlikely to raise the ire of taxpayers. Those who are receiving concentrated benefits through government programs are more likely to lobby Congress for continued and increased funding than are taxpayers who pay for the diffused costs of those programs.

The beneficiaries of government programs, as Princeton University Professor of Politics R. Douglas Arnold has demonstrated, “are often organized into groups and easily mobilized for action.”⁸ Further:

Even when these concentrated interests are not well organized, legislators know that the affected publics are both more attentive to Washington action

and more likely to show their appreciation at the polls than are those citizens who have less at stake and who are less attentive to what happens in Congress.⁹

Concentrated interests are highly organized and entrenched in Washington, D.C., which allows them to have access to and sway over policymakers. Any time Congress attempts to downsize or terminate ineffective or constitutionally questionable programs, special interests predictably rise to the defense of these programs. The all too frequent result is that fiscally and constitutionally responsible decisions are defeated and the fleecing of American taxpayers continues.

Due to the intense nature of special-interest coalitions that benefit from them, politicians tend to be reluctant to eliminate government programs, even if there is strong evidence that a particular department or agency wastes taxpayer dollars or has no constitutional authorization underpinning its existence.

The current appropriations process makes it easier for Members of Congress to approve generous budget increases year in and year out instead of exercising wise stewardship of Congress' power of the purse. Rather than regularly authorizing or terminating agencies and programs, along with passing individual appropriations bills, Congress has practiced ineffectual oversight and allowed continuing resolutions and enormous omnibus spending bills to dominate the legislative process.

Because of this dilemma, Americans should welcome President Trump's call to rethink how the executive branch does business. If the following recommendations are adopted, Americans will see a leaner, more efficient federal government that is focused more on performing core constitutional missions and less on serving special interests.

—David B. Muhlhausen, PhD

ENDNOTES

1. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Bureau of the Fiscal Service, "Monthly Statement of the Public Debt of the United States," April 30, 2017, <https://www.treasurydirect.gov/govt/reports/pd/mspd/2017/opds042017.pdf> (accessed June 5, 2017).
2. News release, "Presidential Executive Order on a Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch," The White House, March 13, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/13/presidential-executive-order-comprehensive-plan-reorganizing-executive> (accessed June 5, 2017).
3. Ibid.
4. Herbert Kaufman, *Are Government Programs Immortal?* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1976), and Mark R. Daniels, *Terminating Public Programs: An American Political Paradox* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).
5. Eugene Bardach, "Policy Termination as a Political Process," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 7 (1996), pp. 123–131.
6. Ibid., p. 125.
7. Ibid.
8. R. Douglas Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 3.
9. Ibid.