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The Next U.S. President's Unspoken Challenge: Management

BY LINCOLN P. BLOOMFIELD, JR. SEPTEMBER 2, 2016 - 2:02 PM

In this political season, news reporting and commentary have touched on many issues expected to influence voters. But regardless of who takes the oath of office next January, America's 45th president will find that success rests on a very few basic, but profoundly important, metrics.

Foreign policy positions matter, but will only influence others if they form a coherent strategic vision reinforcing principles and norms aligned with shared interests. Economic policies affect all Americans, but what will matter above all is whether net expenditures and revenues — and growth — point the country toward, or away from, future solvency. Ethics is a third pillar of sound government, as any perception of self-dealing in public service is corrosive to legitimacy, here as elsewhere.

There is a fourth metric that receives far less attention from correspondents and commentators than strategy, economics, or ethics, and that is management. The president is responsible for 440 federal

departments, agencies, and sub-agencies, according to the Federal Register. The federal government employs over 2.8 million civilian employees and more than 2 million members of the armed forces, active and reserve. Among the attributes voters should seek in a president is the ability to enlist a capable leadership team and manage this vast enterprise well.

Politics aside, no one can dispute that management concerns have arisen in recent years across the federal space: waiting lines at Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities, cyber breaches at Office of Personnel Management, Medicare fraud, troubling incidents with the Secret Service, alleged political bias by the Internal Revenue Service, the Obamacare website rollout, and others. In the national security sector, investigations have harshly critiqued major assistance projects in Afghanistan; "serious, systemic problems" within the State Department were a key finding of the Benghazi Accountability Review Board; and moves by Russia, Iran, the Islamic State, and others seem to have caught policymakers by surprise, raising questions about gaps in U.S. intelligence.

It is increasingly apparent that the same old mix of declaratory policies, consultation with other governments, and assistance resources is generating diminishing returns for America's reputation and influence. The remedy may not be new policies or more resources. In Washington today we have an overabundance of policy inputs. We also have an overabundance of policy offices, policy officials, and policy processes. The organizational charts for the key national security entities — State Department, Office of the Secretary of Defense, National Security Council Staff, Office of the Joint Chiefs, and the Intelligence Community — have in recent years exploded with new subcabinet positions, specialty offices, and staff.

Concerns arising over one issue after another have been addressed by adding to the bureaucracy: new issue-specific offices, special coordinators, and Senate-confirmed positions. With every new office or official added to the ranks, all other offices lose a little influence. In the State Department today, Secretary John Kerry has the following positions reporting to him: two deputies, six under secretaries, over 60 bureaus and offices, 18 special envoys, 18 representatives, six ambassadors-at-large, 14 issue-specific coordinators, and seven special advisors — all this before considering U.S. ambassadors abroad. No business school in the world can cite an optimally functioning organization with so many direct reporting channels to the top executive. Indeed, as one Asian former diplomat has noted, where most governments take 20 percent of the time developing policy and 80 percent implementing it, in Washington these numbers are reversed.

As hard as it is today for an innovative proposal within the State Department to gain building-wide concurrence and reach the secretary's desk, the chances that it will reach the president are further complicated by a National Security Council staff that is today more than five times larger than, for example, when Colin Powell ran the Council for President Ronald Reagan. One could cite similar expansions of staffs at military combatant commands, and on both the military and civilian sides of the Pentagon. The Directorate of National Intelligence, created post-9/11, added hundreds of personnel to "manage" the Intelligence Community.

With “1,000 bowls of rice” vying for resources, authority, and authorship of policy, one can understand why President Barack Obama has often relied on a tight circle of trusted White House aides rather than expecting the interagency to provide consistent and timely policy responses to world events.

This is a hard issue for Congress as well as the Executive Branch. All of the responsibilities reposed in single-purpose offices lead to more subcommittees of the House and Senate charged with oversight. What will it take for both branches to give up some titles, consolidate offices, streamline decision processes, and increase unity of effort in pursuit of American interests?

The answer must include a chief executive committed to mastering the management challenge. Sound strategy, budgetary discipline, and uncompromising ethics are essential, but hopes for a brighter future will be more realistic if the captain can run an effective ship of state.

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