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Candrea, Philip J., and Douglas A. Brook. "Transitions in defense management reform: A review of the government accountability offices chief management officer recommendation and comments for the new administration." *Public Administration Review* 68.6 (2008): 1043-1049.

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/38092>

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Transitions in Defense Management Reform: A Review of the Government Accountability Office's Chief Management Officer Recommendation and Comments for the New Administration

The Government Accountability Office believes the answer to the U.S. Defense Department's persistent management problems is to be found in the creation of a new position, chief management officer, to oversee defense business transformation. The recommendation for this position is reviewed and used to raise questions and spur inquiry in the areas of evidence-based reform, the relationship between policy and administration, auditor overreach, and sustaining reforms through transition. The latter portion is expanded in this time of transition, and recommendations are made to the new administration to develop a management agenda, to the defense career executives to facilitate the transition, and to the next comptroller general to consider how the Government Accountability Office's varied roles produce outputs that align with the desired outcomes in both the policy and administration domains.

Persistent management issues plague the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). The department is a perennial presence on the high risk list of the Government Accountability Office (GAO), its financial statements are not auditable, and many of its acquisition programs are characterized by cost growth and program delays. Over the years, the DoD has embarked on a series of reform agendas aimed at addressing these and other business management challenges. The complexity and size of the department, coupled with frequent senior leadership turnover, appear to thwart reform effectiveness. What is needed for the DoD to sustain and successfully manage its business transformation efforts? The GAO believes the answer is to be found in the creation of a new position, chief management officer (CMO), to oversee defense business transformation. The GAO's most recent report on this subject, *Defense Business Transformation: Achieving Success Requires a Chief Management Officer to Provide Focus and Sustained Leadership*, was issued in September 2007, just as Congress was considering the fiscal year 2008 defense

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authorization bill. While not exactly what the GAO recommended, the final bill, enacted in January 2008, designates the deputy secretary of defense as the department's CMO and establishes a new position of deputy CMO who will oversee the Defense Business Transformation Agency and otherwise support the CMO. Further reforms are proposed in pending fiscal year 2009 defense authorization bills.

Readers may recognize in this report several areas of enduring and contemporary interest to the field of public administration and management. This review raises questions about the manner in which management reform is addressed in the federal government, as represented in the GAO report, specifically in the areas of (1) evidence-based management and the genesis of reform prescriptions; (2) the relationship between policy and administration; (3) whether auditors are overreaching and the effects on audited organizations; and (4) the challenges of sustaining reform initiatives in the context of transient leadership.

The Report

This report was self-initiated by the GAO and is part of a consistent effort by the comptroller general to address the management problems that contribute to the DoD's large and persistent presence on the GAO high-risk list (GAO 2007b). That list includes several DoD business processes, including financial management, acquisition, and supply chain management. Ironically, in 2005, the GAO added the DoD's *approach* to business transformation to the high-risk list, and the report reviewed here is part of a series that has addressed that issue. The report concludes that the DoD does not have an enterprise-wide strategic plan or planning process to support business transformation and that the DoD does not have a full-time leadership position dedicated to leading and managing business transformation. The GAO recommends (1) that the DoD issue directives to institutionalize the

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responsibilities, relationships, and roles of the various entities involved in governance and implementation of business transformation; (2) that the DoD create a strategic planning process for business transformation; and (3) that Congress legislate the creation of a chief management officer in the Department of Defense. The last recommendation is the principal focus of this review.

For more than three years, the GAO has asserted that a CMO is needed in the DoD to devote full-time attention to business transformation, and that the duties of this position should be codified in statute (GAO 2004). It has envisioned a permanent full-time Executive Level 2 position, with a five- to seven-year term of office, reporting to the secretary of defense. The incumbent is seen as dedicated to the planning, integration, and execution of business transformation throughout the department. The GAO believes that such a position would elevate the attention given to business transformation, create unambiguous expectations, institutionalize accountability, and serve to reconcile competing priorities. The GAO describes the CMO as professional, nonpartisan, and having significant authority and experience. A high-level CMO with a long-term appointment and an exclusive focus on business transformation is seen as the means to achieve an institutional approach that is sustainable over time and across changes in leadership and administrations.

The DoD's response to this report was mixed. The department concurred with the first recommendation, partially concurred with the second recommendation, but did not concur with the recommendation that Congress legislate a chief management officer. The DoD asserted that no official below the secretary or deputy secretary has sufficient rank and perspective to provide the necessary leadership and decision making for implementation and integration of department-wide business activities. Instead, the DoD argued that continuity of business transformation is best achieved through institutionalizing processes and organizations, utilizing the knowledge and perspective of the department's career workforce, outlining clear and mutually agreed goals, and nominating and confirming highly qualified executives to serve in future DoD administrations.

Public Administration Issues

The report raises important questions confronting the field of public administration. We hope this review will spur new lines of inquiry in four areas.

The genesis of reform prescriptions. What process did the authors of this GAO report use to reach the findings and recommendations? Led by the director of defense capabilities and management, the GAO research team examined documentary evidence including

previous GAO reports, annual reports, and other related documents from DoD meetings and briefing documents. Testimonial evidence was sought from various defense officials and outside defense experts, and from the records of a forum hosted earlier in the year by the GAO. Congressionally mandated studies of the CMO concept by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA 2006) and the Defense Business Board (DBB 2006) were also consulted.

By our count, of the 16 documents cited in the report, 13 are previous GAO reports, one is an act of Congress, and one each is credited to the studies by the IDA and the DBB. The related GAO products cited at the end of the report have a combined 507 footnotes, of which only seven cite sources other than the GAO's own work, DoD or other executive branch documents, or statutes. Five of those seven are related to information technology management, and only one is directly related to the idea of sustained leadership. This practice of self-citation can be problematic. If the GAO undertook independent expert review of their reports, a practice referred to internally as "referencing," it is not mentioned in the report.

There are no works cited from change management or organizational behavior literature, for instance, and no evidence about the effectiveness of CMOs offered from other government or private sector organizations. The two external sources, the studies by the IDA and the DBB, should be viewed cautiously. Both were commissioned by congressional directive (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, P.L. 109-163, § 907) to "examine alternatives for establishing a Chief Management Official for the Department of Defense" (IDA 2006, iii), thereby foreordaining apparent support for the concept of a CMO. They examined alternatives *for* a CMO, but not alternatives *to* a CMO. A more appropriate directive would have been to "examine alternatives for managing and sustaining business transformation efforts." Neither report cited examples of CMOs in the federal government analogous to the GAO proposal, nor could we find any.

A review of the thousands of positions listed in the Plum Book reveals that existing political appointments with tenures extending beyond the duration of the presidential administration are overwhelmingly found on boards, commissions, authorities, and foundations and tend to have governance or advisory functions.¹ Such tenures can also be found among the judiciary, the architect of the Capitol, and the comptroller general, who have unique responsibilities in the U.S. federal government. Only the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service have primarily managerial responsibilities with term appointments, but they sit at the head of the organization, not a layer or

two down. In short, the CMO recommendation is unprecedented.

The GAO reports have apparent legitimacy because they are authored by a well-respected and independent agency, but is that sufficient? Denise Rousseau raised the question of evidence-based management in her 2005 Presidential Address to the Academy of Management. She noted that proponents of evidence-based management “are skeptical about experience, wisdom or personal credentials as a basis for asserting what works,” favoring solving organizational problems from principles derived from empirical research translated into practice. Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert I. Sutton (2006) make a similar argument. One cannot be certain that a CMO is the right prescription without sufficient evidence.²

Generalizing the point, public administration scholars should ask questions parallel to those raised by Rousseau and the Academy of Management: To what extent are prescriptions for public administration ills based on empirical evidence and scholarship-based conceptualizations of managerial and organizational behavior, as opposed to personal experience, anecdote, consultants’ opinions, and the popular press? Are our schools of public administration providing a foundation that creates public servants who seek evidence on which to base decisions rather than relying solely on heuristics learned through anecdotal case studies? Are research findings being employed by executives or legislators in policy formulation and by public managers in practice?

Policy–administration relationship. The GAO’s recommendation for a CMO with a long-term appointment that spans administrations evidences another long-standing issue in public administration: the relationship between policy and administration. The GAO’s recommendation appears to fall on the side of the debate that believes that the administration of the department can be managed independently of the policy side—that is, that such a dichotomy exists. A recent issue of *PAR* (January/February 2008) once again addressed the relationship between policy and administration. If there was any common ground in that Junior–Senior Exchange, it is that the nature of the relationship (or distinction or dichotomy) is something “the field of public administration seemingly cannot live with or without” (Rosenbloom 2008). What is salient here is the recognition that the prescribed remedy to the DoD’s management problems is based on the assumption that policy and administration are separable—an assumption that is not universally held. Part of the DoD’s argument against a term CMO is that it would create dysfunction,

confusion, and competition among the various undersecretaries—an argument that implies a belief that the

roles are less easily cleaved than the GAO suggests. A question for the field: If policy and administration are more intertwined than the GAO suggests, what might be the alternative prescriptions? As there is a fundamental disagreement on the nature of this relationship, and as management ills in the DoD

are persistent, do we have a “wicked problem”—a situation in which neither the problems nor the solutions are easily defined—that demands a more sophisticated process for seeking a remedy? (Roberts 2002).

Auditor overreaching. A recent concern in public administration is the possibility of auditor overreach and the effects on the audited organization and other organizations likely to be audited. Michael Barzelay (1997) compared OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations’ central audit institutions and the common types of audits and evaluations they conduct. He found increasing circumstances of “performance management capacity audits” and “program effectiveness audits” that extend beyond the traditional roles of verification and evaluation into an expanded role of “advancing the cause of good management,” which he cautions may be more “politically sensitive.” Similarly, Michael Power (2005) warns of the dangers of an “audit explosion” in which more is expected of the audit community in the policy domain than the auditors are, and perhaps should be, capable of producing. There is the danger of “transfers of institutional power to audit bodies who decide on a wide range of issues and who, by definition, overstep their purely accounting jurisdiction to become de facto policy makers.”

The public administration community should examine these trends of increasing numbers of program audits containing recommendations and ask whether they are having positive or negative effects on the economy, efficiency, or effectiveness of programs. If the answer is yes, in the end auditors are adding value, but the means to that end, the transfer of power, may be democratically problematic. If no, the expanded role of the auditors should be questioned. In both cases, the effects on audited organizations should be better understood. Shore and Wright (2000) and Power (2005) note an increase in attention to auditability, possibly at the cost of distracting management attention from more pressing areas. Future research should ask what other responses to audit overreach have occurred. One area worthy of study, for instance, is the motivation for implementing recommendations. Is the implementation motivated by a consensus that the recommendation is sound, is it motivated by fear

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of sanction by the legislature or animosity in subsequent visits by the auditors, or is it simply the path of least friction?

These questions are particularly important in the case of the GAO. In the mid-1990s, the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) expressed concern that the GAO had “on occasion moved too far into advocating policy, pushing into policy formulation more appropriate to elected officials and then urging congressional acceptance of GAO recommendations” (NAPA 1994). Repeated testimonies and reports by the GAO on the CMO issue could be construed as “urging,” particularly the comptroller general’s own expressions of frustration (Friedman 2007). Since the NAPA report was published, the GAO has emphasized making recommendations and even tracks the numbers of recommendations and their subsequent implementation as part of its annual performance report. Between 1998 and 2007, the number of GAO products containing recommendations doubled from a minority (33 percent) to a majority (66 percent). During that same period, the percentage of recommendations that were implemented within four years rose from 69 percent to 82 percent.³ Clearly the GAO is taking a more activist role, and agencies are reacting. The GAO presumes these recommendations improve government operations, but do we know?

This question is linked to the issue of evidence-based management. George Julnes (2007) addresses the question of evidence-based evaluation in the public sector and notes that the choice of evidence and evaluative method depends on the purpose of the evaluation and the stakeholder to be served. As more audit evaluations contain recommendations for executive agency managers, it is important to examine whether these evaluations are primarily addressed to policy makers or to managers and whether they are framed appropriately.

Sustaining agendas through transition. A core argument for the GAO’s conception of a CMO is that it comes with a term “of at least 5 to 7 years so that the position could span administrations to sustain business transformation when key personnel changes occur” (p. 18). The GAO report justifies the term of the appointment because “major transformation initiatives often take at least 5 to 7 years in large private and public sector organizations” (p. 17). Given that the proposed position is subordinate to the secretary of defense yet serves a term that transcends the

secretary’s, what authorities and structures would ensure a continuity of reform while simultaneously permitting the new secretary to implement the subsequent administration’s policy objectives? Such organizational issues have not been sufficiently addressed.

This leads to our last recommended line of inquiry, a line that is particularly timely in an election year. The history of defense management reform is characterized by many well-intentioned and thoughtful reform

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agendas that fail to produce lasting change, probably partially as a result of frequent change in leadership. Each administration—not just presidential but also defense secretaries, military service secretaries, and even uniformed service chiefs—brings reform ideas. What is the key to sustaining effective management across these transitions? There is an ample literature that has examined transitions in the White House (see, e.g., Burke 2001; Pfiffner 1996), but fewer that have examined the perpetuation of administrative reforms inside bureaus and agencies through transitions (e.g., Hamilton 1996; Ingraham 1988). Further work in this area may help us understand whether a role such as a CMO is more effective than, say, boards composed of senior career employees, suborganizational entities (such as the Defense Business Transformation Agency), persistent legislative oversight, or better alignment of strategies and organizational structures (Thompson 1991).

Looking Ahead

This review raises again the perennial question of the relationship between policy and administration and the episodic question of the transition of policy (or reform) agendas across administrations. The proverbial horse is out of the barn with respect to whether the DoD should have a CMO; now that one is mandated by statute, observing its effects as the role is implemented provides an opportunity to address some of these questions. Practically, a new administration takes office in January 2009, and a new comptroller general needs to be appointed. What recommendations might we offer the next president, the career executives in the DoD, and the next comptroller general?

At the time this is written, campaign rhetoric about defense has been focused on the policy questions concerning Iraq and other military action around the globe. Whether defense management reform is a policy priority or not, the next president will inherit long-standing problems and a disparate set of reform initiatives in various states of progress. Taking lessons

from the history of presidential transitions, the incoming team will likely (1) perceive a mandate for change; (2) not listen to the exiting officials as carefully as they should; (3) look upon the career executives as “tainted” or “holdovers” of the past administration; and (4) depending on their level of experience, find it difficult to take control of and manage the department quickly enough to meet expectations (Bruce 1996; Burke 2001; Pfiffner 1996). What should they do?

Develop a management agenda. The new administration and the DoD’s new leaders will need a management agenda. They will face the same management challenges as their predecessors, and oversight from Congress and the GAO is likely to keep pressure on the department to accelerate its management reforms. The new administration will want its reform agenda to be politically distinct. “Transformation” has been the watchword of the George W. Bush administration, and each candidate is running a campaign of change. The new administration will therefore likely want to change the label, but it should take care not to discard worthwhile substance underneath the old label. Change may be good; progress would be better. The new administration’s management agenda should focus on the most pressing problems and build on recent gains. The evolution of DoD management reform between 2001 and 2008 has resulted in a permanent governance structure under the deputy secretary. Governance bodies such as the Defense Business Board, the Defense Business Systems Management Council, and the Business Transformation Agency have institutionalized management reforms that address the most critical questions regarding business systems, processes, and organization. To ignore this structure and start over would be to waste significant investments that have produced results or are poised to do so.

Moreover, the DoD and the service components will have implemented, but not institutionalized, the new CMO requirement. The basic structures have been put in place, including defining the domain of the CMO, identifying existing management reform portfolios, and understanding the authorities and responsibilities of the role. This can be a useful starting point for the new administration, even as Congress pushes it to implement new business management offices in each of the service components. In addition to the reform structure, the transition team should take the time to understand the critical bureaucratic processes and the state of extant reform initiatives before establishing new reform policy positions and changing course. Some very real progress has been made. Listen to the exiting team about their trials and successes. Look at the history of attempted reforms (see Dawe and Jones 2005; Francis and Walther 2006), and seek to understand the current context of the proposed

policy that would lead one to believe that this time really is different. The GAO’s recommendation and the statutory requirement for a strategic management plan is sound, and the department’s start on such a plan forms a good foundation on which to build.

Work with career executives. Career executives and military officers possess critical knowledge to help formulate new policy, and they are the only ones who can ensure its implementation. While civilian agencies experience changes in leadership relatively infrequently, career civilian and military employees in the DoD have a heightened understanding of what is involved in a change at the top. Their loyalty tends toward the position, not the individual. Admirals and generals come and go in elaborate ceremonies; power and authority, and the organization’s respect and compliance, are transferred instantaneously, not transitioned gradually. Respect tends to be presumed, yet it may be lost; it often does not need to be earned. The transition team for the incoming administration will witness loyalty to the outgoing DoD leaders until January 20. That loyalty should not be interpreted as ideological alignment, nor should it be perceived as a hurdle to be overcome. Rather, it should be perceived as intended—signaling by the uniformed and civilian career workforce of the type of loyalty that awaits the new team.

The career executives have an obligation to educate the new political leadership on contemporary issues and critical bureaucratic processes, including being forthright about what is working and what is not. At present, there are reform initiatives that are vested interests of the outgoing political leadership and others that are vested interests of the career uniformed and civilian executive leadership. Each set needs to be evaluated for its contribution to improved management of the department. Career executives can expect to see the former challenged or even replaced and they should expect to be called upon to justify the latter.

They, too, should be cognizant of the lessons of history and avoid the pitfalls of past transitions: (1) interorganizational relationships that depend on personal relationships at the top, (2) the tendency of the bureaucracy to become rigid rather than flexible in anticipation of change, and (3) a leadership vacuum during the lengthy period between nomination and confirmation of appointees (Gaertner, Gaertner, and Devine 1983; Pfiffner 1996; Rainey and Wechsler 1988). During the interregnum and early days of the new administration, before the new political appointees are installed, the career executives need to facilitate the transition of power and run the department. They must be prepared to lead through the difficulty of two inherent contradictions. On an organizational level, there is a tendency to respond to external change

by becoming rigid just at the time when flexibility is needed; on a political level, there is a bureaucracy that has a constancy of purpose that must simultaneously be responsive to changes in policy direction (Gaertner, Gaertner, and Devine 1983).

The Defense Department must continue to be held accountable and will benefit from ongoing objective, evidence-based recommendations.

management reform at the DoD virtually ensures that the new administration will be faced with pressure to continue work in this area. That may increase the likelihood that management reform survives transition. However, it may be time for the GAO and Congress to become less prescrip-

The role of the GAO. Finally, we turn attention to the GAO and the next comptroller general of the United States. An issue that this review raises is the expanding role of the central audit agency. The Sarbanes-Oxley reforms of the private sector auditing community addressed concerns about auditors as consultants. At issue were concerns about the veracity of audits because the auditor also had lucrative, potentially conflicting, consulting business with the firm. The concern with the central audit agency in the federal government is different. The Federal Government Auditing Standards begin,

Government audits also provide key information to stakeholders and the public to maintain accountability; help improve program performance and operations; reduce costs; facilitate decision making; stimulate improvements; and identify current and projected crosscutting issues and trends that affect government programs and the people those programs serve.

Each of these goals has merit, yet all cannot all be served by similar output. If the GAO is going to provide recommendations to both policy makers and program administrators, a single audit report may not sufficiently serve both purposes. Using an example from accounting, the transactions of an organization are captured in both financial (accrual-based) accounting as well as managerial (cost-based) accounting. The former generate reports that are most beneficial to owners and lenders, whereas the latter generate reports that are most beneficial to internal managers. The same events are recorded, but in different ways to satisfy different information requirements for different types of decisions. The traditional audit methodology and report structure which was optimized to produce assurances and accountability is likely insufficient to the task of providing sound advice to both program administrators and policy makers.

The Defense Department must continue to be held accountable and will benefit from ongoing objective, evidence-based recommendations. Sometimes legislated remedies are necessary. The GAO can play a helpful role by providing continuous accountability across both political and career leadership transitions and by supplying regular, evidence-based recommendations tailored for their intended audiences. The ongoing involvement of the GAO and Congress in

management reform at the DoD and allow the department's new political leaders and career executives the time to implement currently mandated reforms and to develop their own.

Conclusion

We began with a review of the GAO report and its recommendation for a chief management officer in the Department of Defense. We were critical of the thinking behind the CMO proposal, while acknowledging that the DoD has persistent and significant management problems that need to be addressed. As time passed, Congress enacted a CMO requirement and leaders inside the DoD began to consolidate their management reforms. We suggest that management reform can defy the patterns of history and survive through transition. This led us to consider the roles of three sets of actors: the new political leadership, the career bureaucracy, and the GAO and Congress. We conclude that the new administration will inherit management challenges and will face pressures that will stimulate a new management reform agenda. We suggest that new management policies be politically distinct while also taking advantage of the work that has gone before. The career executives have a vital role in facilitating this transition effectively; they should be involved in both shaping and implementing policy. These three sets of actors must conspire to break the cycle of the past—jettisoning anything and anyone associated with the *ancien régime* and installing new versions of the same.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the PAR editors and reviewers; their support and comments were particularly helpful.

Notes

1. See *United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions*, 2004 edition, available at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/plumbk/2004/index.html> [accessed July 28, 2008].
2. In fact, it could be easily argued that it is not a good recommendation. As one astute reviewer put it, citing Henry Mintzberg, "layering functional managers atop a multidivisional structure is not a logical way to improve performance or even coordination."
3. Information compiled from GAO annual performance and accountability reports for the years 2007, 2005, and 2001.

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