Getting Big Things Done in Government

edited by John M. Kamensky

Two professional associations, the American Society for Public Administration and the National Academy of Public Administration, have joined to sponsor a series of forums addressing the management challenges likely to face whomever is sworn in as president in January 2013.

One of these forums examined the leadership challenges associated with getting big things done, and explored lessons from past experiences. The panel comprised three observers of or participants in the implementation of large-scale federal initiatives.

Timothy Conlan *is a professor at George Mason University. He specializes in federal-state-local relationships and the implementation of large federal programs that affect these relationships, such as the Recovery Act and the Affordable Care Act.*

Dwight Ink *served seven presidents in both career and political positions. He led the recovery efforts after the devastating 1964 Alaskan earthquake and directed numerous large-scale reorganization efforts, including the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.*

Harry Lambright *is a professor at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University. He specializes in the evolution of the politics and administration of space policy and "Big Science." He wrote the definitive book on the U.S. race to the moon,* Powering Apollo: James E. Webb of NASA.

What Do We Mean by Big Things?

Over the course of U.S. history, the federal government has been involved in doing big things such as the Manhattan Project's development of the atomic bomb in the 1940s, the interstate highway construction that began in the 1950s, and the race to the moon in the 1960s. However, the public has become concerned about the instances in which government has encountered difficulty in getting big things done, such as the Katrina recovery and the failure to deal with the fiscal

crisis. Forum participant Tim Conlan observes that "all big things are not alike."

The forum explored government performance in three categories of big things. The first is comprised of new policy implementation, including the $877 billion Recovery Act and provisions of the Affordable Care Act. These types of initiatives reach across sectors of the economy, levels of government, and different federal agencies.

The second category involves an emergency or a set of time-driven urgencies. Examples include the 1964 Alaska earthquake, the Y2k computer bug, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the 2010 Gulf of Mexico BP Oil Spill.

The third category involves technical or scientific initiatives such as the Manhattan Project, the moon race, the International Space Station, and the decoding of the human genome.

Following are excerpts from an edited transcript of the forum dialogue.

Category One:
Large-Scale Administrative Initiatives

∽— Timothy Conlan —∾

The Recovery Act was the signature policy initiative of the early [days of the] Obama administration. In fact, it was signed into law less than a month after he was inaugurated. And even though there are quibbles and debates among economists as to whether it was big enough, or too big, the Recovery Act was an enormous stimulus package, far larger at $787 billion than any other post-New Deal stimulus, and it was a very complex package. It was roughly composed of about a third [each of] tax cuts, grants in aid to state and local governments and federal policy initiatives. Over 90 different federal aid programs to state and local governments got additional funding in the Recovery Act. And the federal initiatives were spread among a wide range of policy areas, including healthcare, science, transportation, and energy.

So, I'm going to try to glean some of the lessons we might pull away from the design and implementation of the Recovery Act and then place it into the context we might want to consider when thinking about how it integrates with the other initiatives we are talking about.

Design Issues. In many ways, I think the Recovery Act really illustrated the pitfalls, but also the potential, of doing policy design on the fly. In an attempt to respond to what was clearly a deepening economic crisis when the president came into office, this legislation was very hurriedly written and the funds were intended to be spent very quickly. Several implications flowed out of that situation. First, much of the legislation was written before the president was inaugurated and long before most of his political appointees were in position. In the House, the bill was largely written in the Appropriations committee rather than the authorizing committees with jurisdiction over often complex areas of public policy. In the Senate, its design largely reflected the need to garner 60 votes for passage of the Recovery Act.

[UCLA professor] Barbara Sinclair has written about unorthodox lawmaking in recent years. Well, this bill was unorthodox lawmaking on steroids. The need for speed, if you will, also dictated the use of a lot of projects and ideas that were literally off the shelf. There wasn't time to invent the full range of components that were integrated into the Recovery Act. It had to be a big package, for economic reasons, and it was largely developed by people opening up their desk drawers in the agencies, in think tanks, and people coming into the White House, and pulling out proposals that were more or less ready to go.

So what did we end up with? We had a big, complex, and speedily crafted piece of legislation, which carries risks. In particular, there were high risks of internal contradictions in this type of endeavor, and the Recovery Act had contradictions with a capital "C." In addition to the mandate to spend funds very quickly to counteract the effects of the recession, there was an equally powerful mandate to spend funds transparently and without mistakes.

Implementation Issues. At the same time, the legislation generally lacked new funding for administrative support, for managing these massive new sums of money involved, with many new programs. However, it did provide a great deal of additional money on the accountability side: to stand up new entities like the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board, and provide additional funding to the Government Accountability Office and to the departmental Inspectors General for oversight. So on the one hand, you had this big green light to spend quickly—it's like being on the drag strip and the light turns green and so you need to go, go, go. And at the same time, you have these red and yellow lights saying, "But don't you dare make a mistake. We're going to get you." All of which leads naturally, I think, into some lessons we can draw about the implementation of the Recovery Act. Overall, these program design features revealed both areas of strength and weakness in the implementation of the program.

One of the areas of strength in the implementation of the Recovery Act was that many of the programs being funded were already established. You were plugging funds into established programs and established policy networks. This certainly promoted the goal of rapid and largely successful implementation, and certainly ensured spending the funds on time.

In addition, much of the aid that was given to state and local governments—the real big dollar amounts—were in relatively flexible forms of funding. The largest single component was the increase in the federal matching share for Medicaid, and that essentially had the effect of freeing up state money that would normally go into the state share of Medicaid, and made it available to plug other holes in state budgets—and there were gaping holes in state budgets as their revenues were plummeting as the recession took hold.

Early Observations. Although it is often overlooked in most assessments of ARRA, the Recovery Act's implementation also highlighted the strengths of the public service at all levels of government. At a time of tremendous fiscal and administrative stress, managers and civil servants at all levels of government, by and large, did an exemplary job of implementing the program despite working under enormous time pressures and with great uncertainty as to what the final rules were going to be. In Washington, there were people who were working nights and weekends to try to get rules out so the monies could be spent. The same thing occurred in many states, where there was no new money for administering the programs.

Where there were implementation problems, they tended to surface in the new or vastly expanded programs like the home weatherization grants in the Energy Department [where funding for this program was increased from $210 million to $5 billion] or the program to expand broadband access, where established procedures and implementation networks were lacking or they were inadequate to the massive increases in funding.

And finally, the early involvement of auditors in the program implementation process was a new role for them, and this new proactive role confused and heightened tensions with program managers, who saw themselves as having the lead responsibility for getting things done.

Category Two: Large-Scale, Urgent Initiatives

↜— Dwight Ink —↝

The public administration community, I think, has reason to be proud of quite a lot of advances that have been made in recent years. But I would argue that in the kinds of management concepts and practices this country needs [in order] to address the large problems that cross agency lines, we have lost ground. The Katrina recovery fiasco and failure of the Iraq recovery efforts after the military success illustrate our frequent inability to coordinate government resources in a crisis.

However, the case of the federal Recovery Act shows that outstanding leadership can succeed in responding to time-urgent challenges. Ed DeSeve [the special advisor to the president responsible for the implementation of the Recovery Act under the political leadership of Vice President Joe Biden] was a professional leader who deserved a tremendous amount of credit for what transpired. Likewise, John Koskinen led the advance from the 20th century to the 21st century in terms of our computer problems [often referred to as Y2K] which posed a potential disaster because we realized, belatedly, how serious the consequences of failure might be. With the help of the president and the OMB, he drew together the most massive intergovernmental and interagency coalition of agencies and private-sector businesses and foreign countries that ever has occurred in the world. Most people said this massive undertaking started too late, couldn't succeed, but it did.

The 1964 Alaskan earthquake was the next-to-the-most severe earthquake ever recorded and when I first went to Alaska [as the President's designated recovery coordinator], we couldn't find a single engineer who said we could relocate, redesign, and reconstruct harbors, water sewer systems, railroads and so forth, in time to prevent two-thirds of the Alaskan population from having to abandon the state with the consequence that it would no longer be a viable state. We had such a short construction season that the dire predictions had a lot of credibility. I didn't quite see how I could go back to the president and say, "Mr. President, I'm sorry. I can't do what you told me to do." On the other hand, I had no idea how we could get it done. But through unprecedented management actions and integration of government-wide resources at all levels, we did.

Each of these three cases, the Recovery Act, the Y2K case, and the Alaskan earthquake, was regarded as virtually impossible. Each was addressing very different challenges. Each was under different presidencies, spanning half a century. Yet, there were some common values and concepts that were key to success and are worth looking at for future major crises.

Leadership. First, when there are challenges of the magnitude we have discussed, the federal government has to quickly assume a leadership role. The leader of the operational recovery needs to report directly to the president, as I did. No political appointees in between. And in each of the three cases, the director was either a career person or a political appointee with extensive prior government experience. They were professionals, and through experience, knew how the government worked. They knew where the strengths were, where the weaknesses were. They knew what risks could be taken. They knew how to meld the political and the career leadership together. They knew how to work with Congress.

Transparency. In each of these three cases, there was an unusual amount of transparency. In some instances, each invested quite a lot of time initially in openness, but it saved a great deal of time over the long run, and in the process we gained a lot of credibility not otherwise achieved. It reduced the opposition because people understood what was going on. There was much greater accountability that people could observe. Most knew where to go to register their complaints, to seek redress. In each instance, there was a great deal of effort put toward the intergovernmental dimension, melding different levels of government together with the private sector and with the public into a n integrated effort. In Alaska, every one of my operational decisions [was] made in public meetings in which the public participated and had a chance to raise their objections. The press was there.

And each of these cases provided a surprising amount of accountability which, in the case of the Recovery Act, was very complex and not at all easy to do. In each of these cases … not only was there the career leadership reporting to the president, but the whole operation was staffed by professionals all the way through.

Procedural Waivers. I had the tacit approval from the President and Congressional leaders to suspend any agency procedures that got in our way of meeting our deadlines. Consequently, I didn't have time to fool around with public hearings. I eliminated almost all of them. The citizens cheered and the reason is because all of these decisions had already been made in public where the public had a chance to ask questions and express their opinions. If one operates openly, one is usually free to eliminate a lot of red tape which is often generated in the best of interests of society but we really can't afford today when we have to develop a greater capacity to move quickly in times of urgency.

Congressional Linkages. In the case of Alaska, President Johnson designated a senatorial ally, Senator [Clinton] Anderson, to a Cabinet level policy commission that provided excellent political leadership and White House cooperation with Congress. With respect to operations, I detailed three experienced Congressional staff to serve full time on my staff, creating a second close linkage between the two branches. Otherwise, we would never have been able to overcome the [political rancor caused by the] bitter Civil Rights debate [ongoing at the time] and the 57-day Senate filibuster it faced. It also helps explain my freedom to provide procedural waivers for agencies.

Category Three: Large-Scale Technical or Scientific Initiatives

∽— Harry Lambright —∾

I've been asked to talk about large-scale science and technology projects. These projects stretch over many presidents and typically they involve three stages; an initiation stage, a development stage, and an operation stage. Presidents come into this very long-term process at different points and their strategies depend on where they come into a particular project.

I'll discuss three projects: Apollo, the Space Station, and the Human Genome Project. I want to talk about these in terms of five factors that, it seems to me, are critical to success or failure relating to these particular projects. One factor has to do with setting the goals, particularly the technical goals. Another has to do with the organization of the project. A third has to do with gaining political support. A fourth has to do with a mix of strategies—which I label competition and cooperation—and how an administrator of these projects uses those strategies. And the fifth is executive leadership, which I think has to pull all of these various other factors together to make a success.

Setting Goals. With respect to goals, what comes across, looking at these various projects, is the technical goals have to be clear. If they aren't clear, it's hard to get the myriad number of actors that are involved to concert their efforts in a common direction. The greatest example of that is Apollo where you had a decision by Kennedy to go to the moon by 1969. Often, these goals are cloaked in deadlines like "by 1969," but they also carry estimates of how much it is going to cost.

In the case of Apollo, the scientists and the engineers in NASA told James Webb, who was the administrator, that it would cost somewhere around $8–$10 billion. Webb, who used to be director of the Office of Management and Budget, said: "I don't believe scientists and engineers. They're all too optimistic." And he doubled it. And that's the number he gave to Kennedy, which was $20 billion, and it wound up costing $24 billion. So, setting goals—technical goals, costs, and deadlines—[is] very important.

The Human Genome Project was supposed to cost $3 billion and take 15 years, and it wound up costing about $3 billion and taking 15 years so it was pretty well estimated by scientists. The International Space Station was initiated by President Reagan in 1984. He said it would take ten years and cost

about $8 billion. It wasn't operationalized until 2011 and it has cost $60 billion so far, and that doesn't count extra shuttle costs, plus maybe $10 billion from international partners. So that particular estimate was quite a bit off.

Organization. Organization has to do with who's in charge and it seems fairly clear that if you look at Apollo, NASA was clearly in charge. The government was really in charge. Industry was in the role of contractors. You've got industry and universities involved.

With the genome project, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was in charge after the Department of Energy started the project. NIH took it over, and it was in charge for most of its life and it clearly was involving a whole series of universities. It was also organized internationally. And I think international organization is the wave of the future.

Apollo was clearly a pure, national project. The Genome Project stretched internationally. There, NIH was a dominant partner but then England was a secondary but critical partner and NIH and its British counterpart worked fairly closely together.

The International Space Station was an international project from the word "go" and involves Russia, Europe, Canada, and Japan. It's the biggest international science and technology project in human history and is certainly a model of what is right and what is wrong with international projects; all of the things that went right and all of the things that went wrong are right there.
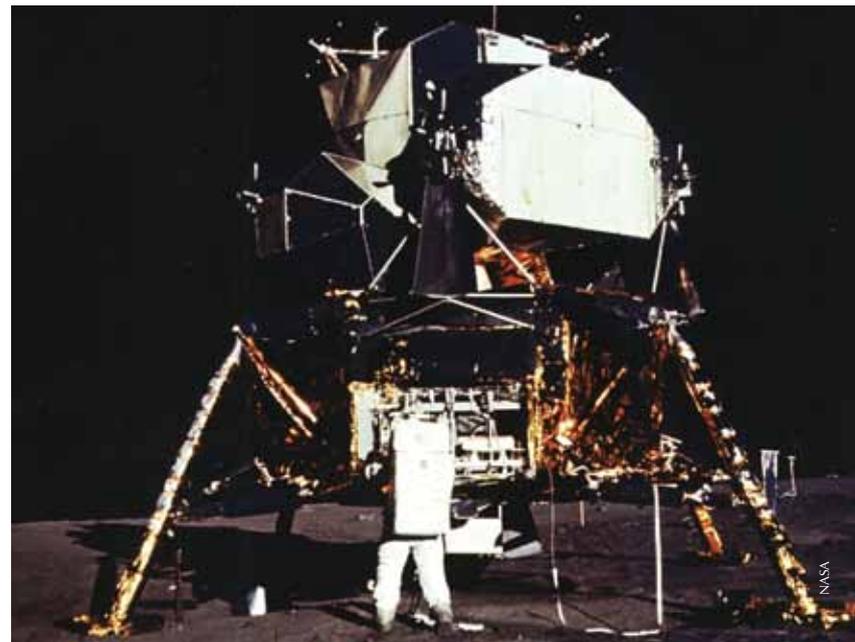
Political Support. You couldn't have had better political support than you had with Apollo because you had Kennedy and also Congress. It had a national mandate. But then, Kennedy goes and LBJ comes on and gives it his full support. It doesn't lose support until Nixon comes on and he terminates it in 1972, and that's where our moon project ceases to be. Certainly, in the case of the genome project, it had political support all of the way through President Clinton and Tony Blair, prime minister of England.

The Space Station came within one Congressional vote of being killed in 1993. Clinton rescued it by making it a symbol of post-Cold War technology. The Soviet Union had just fallen and Russia was in disarray and there was a great deal of worry about the fact that if we didn't do something about the Russian scientists and engineers, they might go in the direction of our enemies. So while it was called space policy, it was really national security policy that rescued it and Clinton gave it full support the whole way through his tenure. Bush kept it going when he was president. Obama made a decision just recently to extend the space station to 2020, now that it is in the operational stage. Each president has had different roles along the way from 1984 to today.

Mix of Strategies. Each of these projects uses different techniques but they all involve some dimensions of competition and cooperation. The cooperation usually was internal, keeping cooperation among the various players: government, industry, universities, and in the case of international projects, keeping cooperation going between governments.

At the same time, competition was always a major factor in how these projects evolved and certainly the nature of the competition affected the urgency of the project. The more international competition you had, the more you could affect cooperation inside the project because you had an enemy on the outside. In the case of the Genome Project, there [was] competition from the private sector. Craig Venter was trying to decode the genome himself faster than the government. So the government was competing against the private sector in that case. This made it easier for the leader [of NIH, Francis Collins] to get cooperation among all of the universities participating in the project, as well as England and America because they had a common "enemy." Of course, with space, you had the Soviet Union [as the "competition"] for a long period of time.

Executive Leadership. Leadership is so important. You can't really talk about these things without talking about leadership. And leadership comes at various levels: the political, the executive, and the technical. Apollo was blessed with leadership at all three levels. The key guy at the executive level of Apollo was, of course, James Webb, the head of NASA, who is probably one of the great administrators in American history. He had all of the ingredients: the knowledge of how to deal with bureaucracy, the knowledge of how to deal with OMB and the president, the knowledge of how to deal with Congress, and how to deal with industry. He had these multiple excellences that were almost amazing and you couldn't have had a success without a man like that. But the other projects that did pretty well also had outstanding leadership.

Moving the Genome Project from DOE to NIH was extremely important because it was a health project and it just got started in DOE almost by accident. So when it was moved to NIH, a Nobel Prize winner was put in charge— probably the most famous biologist in the world, James Watson, the co-discoverer of DNA. He was an egomaniac but he got the project started and then along the way, another man was put in charge [Francis Collins] who had the talents needed [to complete the project]. I think this brings out the fact that, at the executive level, as a project moves through different stages, the leader you have at the initiation stage may have certain kinds of personality and skill requirements. But as you get into the development stage, where it's a more steady state, you have another set of requirements for the kind of leader you need.

With respect to the International Space Station, there has been a sequence of leaders but two men were utterly critical to the fact that we have a station today. One was
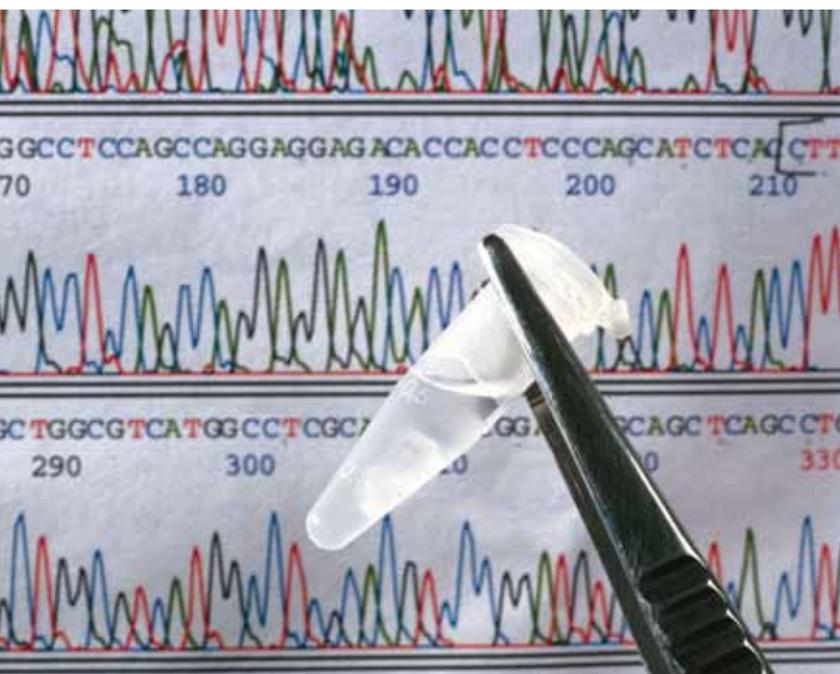
Dan Goldin, who was head of NASA in the 1990s under [President] Clinton. He was a man who was irascible and hard to work for. But he was totally committed and he stayed with NASA for a long time. He was appointed by [President] George H.W. Bush and lasted until [President] George W. Bush. That continuity was extremely important and was the critical factor that kept ISS alive. The other key executive—I think this kind of linkage is a model for the future—was in Russia. There was a man named [Yuri] Koptev who was Goldin's counterpart in Russia. The two men basically convinced their political levels to work together and you had a nexus between two countries where you had two executives who worked hand-in-glove. So the alliance between these two men who built their coalitions in each of the two countries is why we have a space station today. It could have gone down the tube and I think that alliance was a very important factor in getting ISS built.

Common Characteristics

Dr. Conlan observes that "all big things are not alike;" that timing and context matter. For example, doing something early in an administration would be approached differently than something undertaken three years into a four-year administration. And the context matters. Is it an emergency? A discretionary project? A technical project? The strategic approach to each will vary. However, the forum surfaced eight characteristics that seemed present in each of the three categories:

- The project leader reported directly to the president (or the seniormost official at a lower level, depending on size, significance, and urgency). Clear top-level access and support is essential, as was the case with the implementation of the Recovery Act.

- There was a shared clarity of goals. All key stakeholders have to provide their support and consent.

- There was cross-sector collaboration around common outcomes. Again, there was alignment among key stakeholders, inside and outside government.

- There was a sense of urgency and agreement to quickly resolve day-to-day problems. This often took the form of daily decision-making meetings, in virtually every case cited.

- The project provided an unusually high level of transparency. In the case of the Recovery Act, the website Recovery.gov reported every dollar spent, and where.

- There was freedom to innovate and be free from existing rules. In the case of the Alaska earthquake, it was the authority to waive agency rules impeding construction.

- Leadership needed to exist at both the political and the technical levels. Credibility is needed at both the political and technical levels, and this was evident in every project discussed.

- A creative tension was built into these projects in a way that channeled the sense of urgency. For example, in the case of the Recovery Act, there was a tension between the Recovery Board and the White House's implementation office under DeSeve, and in the case of the genome, there was a competitive tension between NIH and private entrepreneur Craig Venter. ◻