

Profiles in Excellence:

Conversations with the Best of America's Career Executive Service



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The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for
The Business of Government

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Foreword

November 1999

On behalf of The PricewaterhouseCoopers Endowment for The Business of Government, we are pleased to publish this report by Mark Huddleston, "Profiles in Excellence: Conversations with the Best of America's Career Executive Service."

Dr. Huddleston's report is the result of interviews with 21 members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) members who received Presidential Distinguished Executive Rank Awards in 1997. In speaking with members of the SES, Professor Huddleston reveals the characteristics associated with excellence in administrative leadership. He also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the SES, in light of his discussions with members of the SES, and presents recommendations on ways to strengthen the SES.

Created by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, the SES is a select group of government executives who are the permanent federal government. It is the members of the SES who manage major federal programs year after year, attempting to effectively serve each new administration. Dr. Huddleston concludes that unless the federal government changes the way they recruit, develop, and compensate senior career executives, Americans may face a steady erosion in the quality of public service in the decade ahead.

We hope that you find this report insightful and helpful as the government continues to search for ways to attract and retain a high-quality public service.

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Executive Summary

This study reports on a series of recent conversations with 21 members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) who received Presidential Distinguished Executive Rank Awards in 1997. Included in the sample are such key career administrative leaders as the nation's head of food safety and inspection, the key author the START II treaty, the government's lead anti-terrorism attorney, and the Pentagon's director of procurement.

The study has three main purposes. First, it explores the characteristics associated with excellence in administrative leadership. Second, it examines from the perspective of these award winners the strengths and weaknesses of the SES as an executive personnel system. Third, it uses these insights to discuss what needs to be done to improve the SES and prepare the United States higher civil service for the next century.

Six broad themes emerged from these conversations with distinguished executives:

1. Truly outstanding executives have a strategic vision for their agencies, know how to animate employees, work exceedingly hard, and exhibit remarkable integrity.
2. The strong sense of government service as a vocation found in current senior executives will likely be replaced in the next generation by a commitment to profession, a shift with major implications for the career executive service.
3. Excellence is now largely serendipitous: In most agencies, there is no system in place to ensure that outstanding executives are developed.
4. The original promise of the SES has not been fully met. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and other concerned parties need to work to transform the SES into something more than a pay system, a process that has begun with OPM's "Framework Document."
5. Executives remain frustrated with elements of the career-appointee relationship. They are also troubled by a political environment in Washington that has become increasingly corrosive.
6. The pay system needs further reform, with particular attention to the ongoing problem of pay compression. Heightened attention also needs to be paid to work recognition and other non-monetary incentives.

The principal conclusion drawn from this study is that failure to address these issues will impair the federal government's ability to perform key public services. Because the quality of public service is a direct function of the quality of public servants, unless agencies change the way they recruit, select, develop, and compensate senior career executives, Americans will see steady erosion in the quality of both.

To forestall this erosion, a series of proposals are offered, aimed at the White House, Congress, OPM, agencies, and members of the SES themselves. Among these proposals are:

- Re-engagement of the career service by the White House
- Improvements in the orientation and training of non-career appointees
- Decoupling executive and congressional pay systems
- Greater support for executive development by OPM and agencies

1997 Presidential Distinguished Rank Award Recipients by Agency

Department of Agriculture

Thomas J. Billy*
K. Darwin Murrell*
Lawrence Wachs*

Department of Commerce

Alexander E. MacDonald

Department of Defense

Air Force

Anthony J. Perfilio
Gerald L. Yanker

Army

Michael F. Bauman
Janet C. Menig*
James M. Skurka

Navy

Daniel E. Porter
John E. Sirmalis
Roger N. Whiteway

Office of the Secretary of Defense

Gary W. Amlin
Michael L. Ioffredo
Franklin Carroll Miller*
Eleanor R. Spector*

Defense Agencies

Diann L. McCoy
Gary S. Thurber*

Department of Education

Steven Y. Winnick*

Department of Energy

Spain Woodrow Hall

Federal Trade Commission

Eileen Harrington

General Services Administration

Paul E. Chistolini*

Department of Health & Human Services

George Grob*
Arthur C. Jackson
Kenneth Olden
Dennis P. Williams*

Department of the Interior

Robert J. Ewing

Department of Justice

Stephen R. Colgate*
Ronald W. Collison
William J. Esposito
Nancy B. Firestone
Dennis F. Hoffman
Neil H. Koslowe
Carolyn G. Morris
James S. Reynolds*
Kathleen Hawk Sawyer*
Gary R. Spratling

National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Larry A. Diehl
Roy S. Estess
Tommy W. Holloway

Daniel R. Mulville
Leonard S. Nicholson
Joseph H. Rothenberg
Robert E. Whitehead
Richard J. Wisniewski

Office of Management & Budget

Philip A. DuSault
Kathleen Peroff*

Office of Personnel Management

Carol J. Okin*

Social Security Administration

Martin E. Baer
John R. Dyer
Larry G. Massanari*

Department of Transportation

William H. Campbell*
Michael Delpercio*

Department of the Treasury

Walter B. Biondi
Bradley A. Buckles*
Andrew Cosgarea
Robert T. Johnson
Lewis C. Merletti*

Department of Veterans Affairs

D. Mark Catlett
Kenneth J. Clark
Larry R. Deal
James A. Goff
Kenneth B. Mizrach

* Interviewed for this report

Introduction

At the top of the executive branch, just below the President, cabinet secretaries, undersecretaries, deputy undersecretaries, and various other transient political figures, are 6,000 or so senior career executives who constitute the heart of our permanent government. These are the men and women who, year after year, day in and day out, manage major federal programs. They maintain our national security, guarantee the purity of our food, protect our natural resources, reinforce the rule of law, facilitate our commerce and otherwise ensure that life in the United States remains safe, bountiful, and civilized. Who these individuals are — their talents, character, commitment to the public good — and how they are selected, developed, and managed are thus questions of considerable interest for those who care about the quality of American government. Excellent public service requires excellent public servants.

This report is intended to assess the health of the personnel system — the Senior Executive Service (SES) — responsible for managing these senior public servants, and hence for underpinning this crucial stratum of American government. The report is based on a series of conversations held in the summer of 1999 with some of the best of the best: 21 of the men and women whose achievements in the SES were so outstanding that they were recognized with Presidential Distinguished Rank Awards, an honor bestowed on only 1 percent of all career federal executives. Among this group are Thomas Billy, whose leadership in redesigning food safety and inspection procedures has markedly reduced food-

borne illness in the United States; Franklin Miller, a career Pentagon official who was the key author of the START II treaty and a principal drafter of NATO's post-Cold War policy; James Reynolds, the government's lead anti-terrorism attorney, a man responsible, among other things, for coordinating responses to the bombings of the World Trade Center and the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City; and Eleanor Spector, who in her role as Director of Procurement for the Department of Defense, has played a pivotal role in streamlining the weapons acquisition process, saving billions of dollars a year in taxpayers' money.

How did these executives approach their work? What characteristics made them such outstanding leaders? What, more generally, facilitates or impedes excellent performance in government today? What does the future hold for the senior executive personnel system? Can Americans rest easy that government management is secure for the next generation, or is there cause for concern?

The SES and Presidential Rank Awards

This is a propitious time to address these questions, for this year we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the launch of the SES. Established pursuant to the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, the SES was the first serious attempt in American history to forge a distinct personnel system for senior career executives. Modeled roughly on the military and foreign services, its members were conceived as the general officers on the civilian side of government —

mobile, high-performing managers who could be sent by political leaders from one tough assignment to the next. They, unlike members of the lower rungs of the civil service, would carry their rank with them wherever they went. SES members would even be eligible for positions traditionally considered "political." Moreover, high risk would entail high reward: Basic pay rates would rise, performance bonuses would be generous, and a select few SES members would be eligible to receive presidential ranks, with large cash awards.

As one who has monitored the SES closely over its two decades of life — as an academic analyst, rapporteur for a Twentieth Century Fund study, participant in workshops, and consultant to government agencies — I, like most other observers, have found that few of these expectations have been fully met. Mobility has been minimal. Few SESers have risen to appointee positions. And pay has remained capped, compressed, and generally troublesome. Yet I have also found a continuing appreciation in almost all quarters of the challenges that gave rise to the SES 20 years ago, an abiding belief that the system, however flawed, needs to be fixed rather than abandoned; it is to this end that this project has been mainly devoted.

One part of the system that has functioned very well indeed, however, is the presidential rank award program, and as it is also central to this report I shall describe it in some detail. Intended to recognize particularly outstanding performance among career members of the SES, the presidential rank award program provides for two levels or ranks, "Meritorious" and "Distinguished." The rank of "Meritorious Executive," which may be given to no more than 5 percent of the government-wide career service in any one year, is reserved for members who have made "sustained accomplishments." SESers so recognized receive a one-time, lump-sum payment of 20 percent of base pay. The rank of "Distinguished Executive" is bestowed for "extraordinary sustained accomplishments." Recipients of the Distinguished Executive rank, whose numbers may not exceed 1 percent of the career SES, are granted a lump-sum award of 35 percent of base pay.¹

¹ Prior to FY1999, the awards were flat payments of \$10,000 and \$20,000, respectively.

In addition to the broad requirements established in law that recipients show "sustained" "or extraordinary sustained" accomplishments, each year OPM publishes a set of specific criteria against which rank award nominees are to be judged. For the 1997 round of awards, there were seven such criteria. Nominees were to show:

1. career achievements that are recognized throughout the agency and/or acknowledged on a national or international level;
2. specific achievements of cost reduction or cost avoidance;
3. successful use of human resources as evident through improved workforce productivity and effective development and recognition of subordinates;
4. personal initiative and innovation in meeting the administration's goals and policies;
5. substantial improvement in quality, efficiency, and customer service;
6. unusual levels of cooperative effort with other federal agencies, government jurisdictions, or the private sector;
7. especially successful efforts in encouraging and maintaining a diverse workforce.

Following their own procedures, agencies are permitted to nominate up to 9 percent of their career SES members for rank awards, providing that no more than one member is nominated for the Distinguished rank for each five members nominated for the Meritorious rank; agencies are also prohibited from nominating a member for a rank award that he or she has won within the past four years. Once the nominations are submitted to OPM, typically by late January, and checked for compliance with basic eligibility requirements, executive review boards are convened. There is one review board (the "D Board") for Distinguished Executive nominees, which meets in Washington, D.C., usually in March. Four review boards ("M Boards"), which meet in four locations around the country, are empanelled for Meritorious Executive nominees; the four M Boards usually meet in the late spring, which allows them to review the Meritorious award nominees who did not make the cut for the Distinguished rank. Each of the D and M Boards is com-

posed of three individuals from the private sector selected by the Director of OPM and the White House.

After each board member rates each nominee, scores are summed, and a ranked list forwarded to OPM. OPM's Office of Executive Resources establishes "cut scores" that reflect allowable numbers of recipients under the law in each category and weighs the distribution of awards by agency and "other relevant factors." The director of OPM then reviews the list of potential winners and forwards the information to the agency heads for final certification. After this "eyes only" process is completed, the director transmits the list to the President for his approval. Final announcement of awards is usually made by the White House in September or October, with an awards ceremony held early the following spring.

The Design of the Study

This study is based on the 1997 class of SES Distinguished Executives, a cohort chosen because it was the one that had been most recently announced at the time the research was launched. Comprised of 54 men and nine women, the 1997 class came from 21 separate nominating agencies. Approximately two-thirds of the winners were located in agency headquarters or regional centers in the greater Washington metropolitan area. It was this geographic subset, drawn for ease of interviewing, that comprised the frame for the sample in this study.

My initial research plan called for me to conduct in-depth interviews with eight or 10 selected executives. Expecting it to be difficult to find willing participants, I wrote letters of inquiry to all 41 award recipients living in and around Washington, introducing myself and explaining the purposes of the project. I then followed each of these letters with a telephone call requesting an appointment for an interview. To my surprise, the acceptance rate was very high — nearly 70 percent if we exclude from the base people who were wholly unavailable owing to relocation, retirement, or travel. As I decided it would be ill-advised (and certainly ungracious) to stop making follow-up phone calls after I had met my initial target of eight or 10 executives, I wound up making appointments with all 21 of those who were available.

Because this set of 21 executives over-represents headquarters staff and women, and because it does not include, owing to the vagaries of responses from potential interviewees, winners from two relatively large agencies — National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Department of Veterans Affairs — it cannot be considered a rigorous representative sample. It does contain considerable variety, however. The 15 men and six women in the final set of respondents come from 16 different agencies. Their ages range from mid 40's to mid 60's. Although most are general "managers," with backgrounds in finance and administration, a few are scientists or engineers, and a handful are attorneys.

At the time of the interviews, their average length of service (mean and median) in the SES was nearly 13 years. One respondent was a charter member of the SES; the newest had been appointed in 1993. Sixteen of the 21 executives had previously won rank awards, three at the Distinguished level, 13 at the Meritorious level; one, indeed, had received three previous awards, including a Distinguished rank in 1990. Two of the respondents had left federal service between the time of their award and the interview, one to retire, the other to take a job in the private sector. Although many of the executives, over the course of their careers, had experience in more than one agency, as executives they had moved little: Only three of the 21 had held SES jobs in agencies other than those in which they had won the 1997 Distinguished rank award; this is a pattern that holds for the SES as a whole.

Nineteen of the executives were interviewed in person, in their offices; owing to scheduling problems two interviews were conducted by telephone. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and was semi-structured and open-ended, taking the form more of what I have described as a conversation. Although I had a list of broad topics to cover — what makes a successful executive, career history, the current state of the SES, and so forth — each interview had its own unique character, reflecting the interests and perspectives of the particular executive.

The Conversations

From these interviews emerged six broad themes. The first deals with the qualities that produce excellence in administrative leadership. The final five themes bear on the state of the senior executive personnel system today and its likely fate as we move into the next century.

The art of excellence: Qualities of an outstanding senior executive

One of the main aims of this project was to try to understand what qualities or characteristics made these award winners what they are. How does one become “distinguished” from a group, the broader SES, that is already quite distinguished? Exactly what constitutes excellence in public service?

These are questions, as I knew going in, with elusive answers, not the least because I had a small sample and no control group. Still, there is value in asking people who are acknowledged to be excellent to reflect on exactly how it is that they do what they do. So as not to run into an immediate brick wall of modesty, I approached this subject indirectly. What, I asked each of the executives, do you tell young people on the verge of joining the SES, the GS-14s and GS-15s in candidate development programs? What qualities make really successful senior executives?

The recipe, according to these distinguished executives, is deceptively simple. It has only four key ingredients: have a clear strategic vision for your agency, animate other people, work hard, and have integrity.

Four Qualities of an Excellent Executive

- Strategic vision
- Ability to animate others
- Ethic of hard work
- Integrity

To have a clear strategic vision means knowing exactly where you want your agency to go. You have to have “that funny feeling in the pit of your stomach,” as Thomas Billy, administrator of Food Safety for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), put it, that you’re headed in the right direction. Moreover, Billy added, “You need to set impossibly high goals.” His strategic vision for the next five years is that “the food Americans eat will pose *no* risk.” At first glance, he said, that sounds crazy. “But it starts you thinking. We may not have *all* the answers, but we can start now to plan the laws, design the regulations, and develop the technologies we need to get there.” Michael Delpercio, director of ship operations for the Maritime Administration, used a similar example: “My goal was that every ship in the fleet get activated on time. Period.”

Although all of the executives talked about the importance of articulating a vision, setting goals, and having a performance orientation, they did so in common sense terms. Across the board they rejected canned techniques and modish nostrums.



Thomas J. Billy*
Department of Agriculture
Administrator, Food Safety
and Inspection Service

- Reduced food-borne illness in the U.S., significantly improving public confidence in food safety
- Developed a multi-year regulatory strategy to reform the federal meat and poultry inspection system



Bradley A. Buckles
Department of the Treasury
Deputy Director, Bureau of
Alcohol, Tobacco and
Firearms

- Drafted Distilled Spirits Tax Revision Act, which simplified tax collection
- Guided ATF's evaluation of adding taggants to explosives

"I tell young people to ignore management speak and the buzzwords of the week," said Lawrence Wachs, USDA's associate budget director. Deputy Inspector General for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) George Grob agreed: "Management theories and fads, which always come with new administrations, are things to live through, not to use."

The greater challenge for a leader, of course, is learning to **animate other people**. I use the word "animate" here rather than the more traditional "motivate" to convey the sense of enthusiasm, even exhilaration that these executives seek to inspire. It is essential, noted Kathleen Peroff, deputy associate director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), "to keep the people who work for you energized and excited." Carol Okin, associate director of the Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness for the Office of Personnel Management, agreed, "My subordinates do the real work. They make me look good."

HHS's Grob maintained that team-building was the key here. Group work multiplies competence, breeds enthusiasm, and stimulates creativity. Most important, Grob said, it makes work *fun*: "If you don't hear laughter, you're doing something wrong." It also helps, according to Grob, to develop incentives that fit what your subordinates really want, which for most federal employees is "to make a difference." To that end, he has developed a ritual for his staff, akin to a Presidential signing ceremony: Once legislation passes that his office had worked on, the staff gets together and identifies the sections on which they had a particular impact. Then, between popping flashbulbs and mouthfuls of cake and ice cream, they sign their names next to the relevant paragraphs.

Much of their success these executives attribute to nothing more than **hard work**. "Everyone has shortcomings," observed William Campbell, director of finance and procurement for the Coast Guard. "Successful executives just work around them. They're like three-legged dogs — they don't know they have only three legs. They just work extra hard." In fact, all of these executives described work schedules that most people would consider crushing, 65 or 70 hours a week on average. And the word "schedule" is probably inapt. As James Reynolds, chief of the Violent Crime and Terrorism

* Source: *Executive Resources Management, U.S. Office of Personnel Management*. These are the bulleted points used in the slides accompanying the awards ceremony.

Section at the Department of Justice (DOJ), emphasized, "If you want to be successful, you've got to be available. You've got to forget about sacrosanct nights, weekends, and vacations."

"You can't be a successful executive," said Paul Chistolini, associate director of the General Services Administration's Public Buildings Service, "as an '85 percenter.' You have to invest whatever it takes to finish a project." The Coast Guard's Campbell raised the ante even higher: "You have to remember that this is a service business. You give 99 percent, you get an 'F.' If you want an 'A,' you give 100 percent. Excellence is more than doing a job. It is doing it, wanting to do it, in a way that the people you are serving are *delighted*."

Finally, mentioned more than any characteristic was another enduring virtue, **integrity**. Outstanding executives are not loose with the truth or inclined to try for quick wins by cutting bureaucratic corners. "What makes an excellent executive?" USDA's Wachs asked rhetorically. "In addition to innate ability and intellectual curiosity, it takes integrity and a desire to do the right thing." "Never forget that your role is to be an honest broker," said Steve Colgate, assistant attorney general for administration in the Department of Justice. "Honesty and integrity are everything." Eleanor Spector, director of procurement for the Department of Defense (DoD) agreed, "Integrity and honesty are the standard traits of leadership."

A changing sense of vocation: Today's senior executives commit to government service; tomorrow's will commit to a profession.

One of the first questions that I asked in every interview was, "What led you into the federal service?" With all but a few of the executives, I got answers that started with words like "calling" or "vocation." These are men and women who are products of the 1960s — the *early* 1960s — a time before Americans became deeply and routinely cynical about government and what it could accomplish. Even some of those whose chronological age would have put them in middle school in 1962 and 1963 talked about how inspired they were by John F. Kennedy's impassioned call to serve our country; more than one, in fact, had a



William H. Campbell, Jr.
Department of Transportation

Director of Finance and Procurement

- Fostered improvement and customer service in the Coast Guard's finance and procurement program
- Promoted competition through innovative management of the Competition Advocacy Program, saving the Coast Guard \$60 million annually



Paul E. Chistolini
General Services Administration

Deputy Commissioner, Public Buildings Service

- Created a Pentagon-wide recycling program that saved \$50,000 per year
- Started an employee tutoring program at GSA for sixth and seventh graders to receive basic computer training and be exposed to a wide range of job skills in a work environment



Stephen R. Colgate
Department of Justice
Assistant Attorney General
for Administration, Justice
Management Division

- After the Oklahoma City bombing, led the Marshals Service blueprint for protecting vital federal interests against terrorist attack



Michael Delpercio, Jr.
Department of Transportation

Director, Office of Ship
Operations

- Enhanced readiness, responsiveness, and capacity of the Maritime Administration's sealift assets of the Ready Reserve Force (RRF)
- Directed management initiatives that improved the RRF and saved over \$9 million in one year

bust of JFK in his or her office. But — and this is a sad commentary on our own time — this was not always an easy topic for them to talk about. Phrases like “the nobility of public service” were spoken with a sort of guarded embarrassment. The unspoken question, “Will I be thought silly or old-fashioned?” seemed to hang in the air. For instance, after he talked about the continuing importance of attracting young people to government to work for “the public good,” one executive asked, “Does that sound corny?”

To some young people, it may well sound corny. And that may create new challenges for the higher civil service and American government down the road. Although most executives expressed high levels of satisfaction with the quality and character of new recruits to their agencies, there was a pervasive sense that a sea change is underway with respect to motivation and commitment. As HHS's George Grob put it, “There isn't such a public service vocation among [the younger] cohort today. They are more narrowly focused. I said, ‘I want to be a government employee’. These young people are more profession-focused.” The widespread expectation is that most people entering government service today will be around for a few years and then move on, perhaps to the private sector or the nonprofit sector, perhaps to state and local government, perhaps even to return eventually to the federal government. They will commit to interests rather than institutions.

This sort of “in-and-outing” has some distinct advantages for the government, of course, as many of the executives observed. Certainly it will provide a regular infusion of fresh ideas and maybe greater adaptability. In an era that will undoubtedly see even faster change and a greater need to incorporate innovative technologies, there is much to be said for such qualities. At the same time, it is hard to imagine how the federal government will function without considerably more continuity, especially in the senior ranks, than such career patterns will afford. Institutional memory is scarcely less important than institutional adaptability. As Larry Massanari, regional commissioner of the Social Security Administration, put it, “the culture of responsibility” that now undergirds the public service cannot be maintained without a high level of commitment to the organization by employees.

Part of the answer may lie in an observation made by Dennis Williams, deputy assistant secretary for budget at the Department of Health and Human Services: "There is," he said, "a place for continuity and a place for change. We don't need both at all levels of government." Put into other words, this means that we need to design personnel systems that ensure that, however limited the tenure of employees in most lower and mid-level jobs, there is considerable continuity for those marked for promotion to senior ranks. This is a theme to which we shall return.

Although "Gen Xers" are presumably still some years away from most SES slots, there is, according to several executives, another generational problem on the horizon that we may need to worry about rather sooner. The downsizing and hiring freezes of the 1980s and early 1990s so decimated the middle management ranks of some agencies that the talent pool of up and coming SESers isn't nearly as deep as it ought to be. Social Security's Massanari pointed out that a "retirement wave" is moving through his agency now. When it crests in 2004-2005, "there will be a mass exodus, and we don't have the cohort ready to step in." Lawrence Wachs of USDA expressed a similar concern: A whole class of agency heads is about to retire and "there isn't the talent base to replace them." For Wachs, though, the problem had less to do with earlier bouts of downsizing than with a young SES cohort that was inexperienced and inadequately trained.

It is tempting to dismiss these concerns as the curmudgeonly grumblings of the soon-to-retire. Which of us, after all, has not looked over our shoulders at the next generation, shaken our heads sadly and sagely, and announced that these young people simply don't measure up? In this case, this is a temptation to be resisted, for at least three reasons. First, there is a lot of data around to support the conclusions of these executives. It is a fact that workforce mobility and attachments are changing; and it is a fact that in the 1980s, the federal government experienced, at least in certain agencies, what a Brookings Institution conference called a "quiet crisis," hiring and retaining fewer of "the best and brightest."

Second, even when their conclusions differed, the empirical observations of the distinguished executives about the skill set of the rising cohort were



George F. Grob
Department of Health & Human Services
Deputy Inspector General
for Evaluation and
Inspections

- Reduced excessive Medicare and Medicaid payments by \$1.6 billion in 1996
- Pioneered the use of customer satisfaction surveys for Medicare



Larry G. Massanari
Social Security Administration
Regional Commissioner,
Philadelphia

- Leader in improvements to telephone service to the public. SSA's 800 number received a Hammer Award
- Short-term Disability Project reduced pending initial disability claims by 119,000



Janet C. Menig
Department of Defense
Deputy Assistant Chief of
Staff for Installation Man-
agement (Army)

- Improved the efficiency and reduced the cycle time to produce products that saved \$3 million in the first year
- Led the effort for parametric modeling to reduce amount of planning and design costs for military construction



Lewis C. Merletti
Department of the Treasury
Special Agent in Charge,
U.S. Secret Service

- Innovated protection techniques to assure the security of the President
- Increased female agents by 29 percent and minority special agents by 48 percent in Presidential Protection Division

remarkably similar. Almost everyone I spoke to praised the technical competence of would-be SESers but questioned their leadership skills and political acumen, a point we shall explore in more detail later.

Third, the fact that exceptions to this pattern were noted consistently by executives in certain types of agencies may well prove the rule. Respondents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the Bureau of Prisons, Secret Service, and the Violent Crimes and Terrorism Section of the Justice Department, in particular, stressed that there was no dearth of talent in their pipelines. As Bradley Buckles, deputy director of ATF, put it, "We are not just an agency, not just a job. Law enforcement attracts people with a life-long commitment." Similarly, Lewis Merletti, former director of the Secret Service, stressed that while the "24/7 demands" of the job take their toll in terms of turnover, his agency tends to draw people with fierce loyalty and dedication to the organization and its mission, people who "would rather die than fail." Besides, as Justice's James Reynolds noted, if you are interested in doing this kind of work, "you have to do it by working for the government."

All of these comments underscore the unique strengths of military-like agencies when it comes to certain matters of personnel management and, by contrast and implication, the particular weaknesses of civilian agencies. With this in mind, we shall turn from the broad theme of generational mobility and commitment to particular problems in recruitment and career development that emerged in these conversations with America's distinguished federal executives.

Excellence is serendipitous: Far more attention needs to be paid to executive development.

That Americans are, thanks in large part to the men and women of the Senior Executive Service, the beneficiaries of truly excellent government is beyond dispute. Reading the nomination forms for these presidential rank award winners is an inspiring, humbling, and gratitude-evoking experience. Leafing through these files leads one to think how very lucky a society so enamored of bureaucrat bashing is to have such remarkable public servants.

And luck — or “serendipity,” as Carol Okin from the OPM put it — is precisely the focus of the third theme that emerged from my conversations with these career executives. The United States government has for years churned up senior managers from the depths of federal agencies with the regularity of boulders rising in the fields of New England. Nineteen ninety-seven, the year that my respondents received their rank awards, was no fluke. This has gone on for decades. And, more to the point, it has gone on without apparent exertion or design by federal personnel managers; indeed, some would say that it has gone on *despite* the exertions and designs of federal personnel managers.

Like farmers harvesting bumper crops without ever seeding, watering, weeding, or fertilizing, Americans and their elected officials have consistently received the fruits of outstanding administrative leadership without investing any time or effort. We have taken what might be called, to pursue the agricultural metaphor, a “Field of Dreams” approach to senior executive development: “If we need them, they will be there.” That this complacency has seemingly been rewarded for decades should not lead to further complacency. Listening to some defenders of our senior executive personnel system, one is reminded of the old joke about the man falling from the top of the skyscraper. “How is it going?” shouted a startled onlooker as the fellow zipped past the 20th floor. “So far, so good!” was the cheery response.

In fact, defenders of the senior executive personnel system were in short supply among the 1997 distinguished executives. Even those who believed their own agencies were well stocked with future administrative leaders were critical of career development efforts. “Haphazard” and “slipshod” were words I heard more than once. K. Darwin Murrell, director of the Beltsville Area Agricultural Research Service (ARS), suggested that training and development has actually deteriorated in recent years. A once reasonably vigorous program in his agency built on superiors identifying potential leaders early and ensuring that they were given appropriate “developmental assignments” has been replaced by an undirected, applicant-driven system. Official candidate development programs have become so clogged with self-selected, often unqualified people, most of whom are destined to fail, that no one takes the new program very seriously.



Franklin Carroll Miller
Department of Defense
Principal Deputy Assistant
Secretary of Defense (Inter-
national Security Policy)

- Recognized nationally and internationally as a key policy-maker in nuclear deterrence, arms control, and counter-proliferation
- Played a major role in NATO and was instrumental in building ties between DoD and the Ministries of Defense of the Newly Independent States



K. Darwin Murrell
Department of Agriculture
Deputy Administrator,
National Program Staff,
Agricultural Research Ser-
vice

- Created a research program to find ways to conserve and reuse agricultural water
- Used existing resources to tackle emerging and cross-cutting food and agricultural issues, including assembling multidisciplinary research team



Carol Okin
Office of Personnel Management

Associate Director, Office of Merit Systems Oversight and Effectiveness

- Transformed a financially troubled national/international training function into a real business that became a privatization candidate
- Revitalized OPM's merit systems oversight program, turning it into an effective force for good government



Kathleen Peroff
Office of Management and Budget

Deputy Associate Director, Energy and Science Division

- Led contracting reforms at Energy to save \$10.5 billion over five years via increased competition, fixed price, performance-based contracting, and private-sector risk-sharing
- Led development of a science initiative for improvements to Energy's large science facilities to increase operational effectiveness

Perhaps the most common complaint was that the current executive development "system," a word to be used advisedly, tends to produce officials who are technically competent but managerially lost and politically clueless. Most SES candidates, observed ATF's Buckles, are "naïve about the political process." To succeed at the highest level, said USDA's Wachs, you have to understand the system, especially the budgetary, legislative, and regulatory processes. "I am continually amazed that SESers don't know this stuff. But they often don't." Like Murrell, he noted that his agency had had a better development program in the past, which he in fact had run for three years; but it, too, died, a victim of turf battles. What will happen, Wachs wondered, when the next generation of senior executives, unprepared as it is, is forced to testify on the Hill or is confronted by Dan Rather? Wachs made it clear that it was not a thought he relished.

Franklin Miller, principal deputy assistant secretary of Defense for international security policy, was especially critical of career development programs in the Department of Defense (DoD). In fact, until recently, there simply *were* no career development programs for civilians in DoD, at least not in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD). One could, he noted, "be the German desk officer for 20 years without being disturbed or developed. Consequently, people become so narrow that they are rightly not looked upon as material for higher positions in the SES, much less than for deputy or assistant secretary slots." Although Miller has made an enormous personal commitment to building a career development system in OUSD/P — with systems of rotation, promotion tied to training, opportunities for advancement to job slots normally held by political appointees, and so forth — he is not especially sanguine that his reforms will take root. Although there were a few very significant exceptions among the political appointees he worked with, people who had provided critical support for his initiatives, Miller observed that those in a position to make a difference simply don't have any incentives to care about career development.

In the absence of overall systems of career development, many of the award winners have become personally dedicated to mentoring younger executives or encouraging internship programs. For instance, Janet Menig, the deputy chief of staff for

installation management in the Defense Department, was cited in her nomination form as “the consummate mentor, tutor, trainer and developer of professional staff personnel and talent.” Gary Thurber, associate director of the Defense Logistics Agency, was praised for his establishment of an “Entry-Level Intern Program to recruit college graduates in multiple academic disciplines.” William Campbell of the Coast Guard was cited for his “avid mentoring of his people [including] providing career strategies for increasing their experience through high-visibility assignments, education, and training opportunities.” Were he not to do this, Campbell explained, his subordinates would get stuck, presumably like Miller’s German desk officer, in one spot, and would become, in Campbell’s words, “caricatures of themselves. They will have done one thing and been successful, and then will use this as a default setting. What makes you successful coming up will not make you a successful senior executive.”

But personal mentoring and internship programs alone — even the Presidential Management Internship program, which was consistently cited as a real bright spot in the federal personnel system — obviously cannot fill the career development vacuum. What is needed is a more fully articulated structure that directs career development from recruitment to retirement, a structure in which the needs of the government for executive talent are treated as a question of design, not a matter of chance. The changing character of the workforce makes this even more essential.

Again, it is the military-style organizations such as ATF that provide the most instructive examples. Bradley Buckles described an expansive executive development program within his agency, organized under the auspices of a central executive development board. This is a serious, high-profile enterprise, which Buckles himself, as ATF’s chief operating officer, chairs. Leadership candidates are regularly moved across ATF’s various directorates in an effort both to combat “stove-piping” and to expose officials to all segments of the agency. This effort supports and is supported by a strategic team orientation that pervades ATF. ATF’s assistant directors, each head of a directorate, constitute a board of directors, which has corporate responsibility for the whole agency. Each assistant director is forced to think of ATF as a whole when important decisions



James S. Reynolds
Department of Justice
Chief, Terrorism & Violent
Crimes Section, Criminal
Division

- Enhanced the Department’s ability to address and resolve critical issues relating to terrorism and violent crime
- Implemented a plan to capture and prosecute terrorists responsible for the World Trade Center bombing



Kathleen Hawk Sawyer
Department of Justice
Director, Bureau of Prisons

- Streamlined major Bureau of Prisons divisions; enhanced technological capabilities to improve services and reduce costs
- Planned and directed an extensive prison construction and expansion program to match increasing inmate population



Eleanor R. Spector
Department of Defense
Director of Procurement,
Office of the Undersecretary of Defense (Acquisition and Technology)

- Streamlined the procurement process and created automated standard contracting software
- Facilitated integration of the defense and commercial industrial bases



Gary S. Thurber
Department of Defense
Associate Director, Acquisition, Defense Logistics Agency

- Investigated and resolved major acquisitions problems
- Pursued and implemented key reform activities

are confronted. Moreover, all projects are organized on a team basis, with members drawn from all germane directorates. Dr. Kathleen Hawk Sawyer, director of the federal Bureau of Prisons, oversees a similar executive development program, which initiates and oversees training opportunities for upper-management staff in the Bureau.

Interestingly, despite the military's well-deserved reputation for training and officer development, this culture does *not* rub off on civilian structures embedded in defense agencies. Indeed, DoD's Miller emphatically rejected my suggestion that it might have helped him to initiate a career development program because his shop was surrounded by good military examples. Physical proximity to the military seems to be much less important than cultural proximity, a fact that obviously increases the challenge government-wide.

Who will pick up this challenge? Can the structure of the SES itself accommodate the needs of career development? What leadership can the Office of Personnel Management provide?

The SES as a system: OPM needs to take the lead in helping the SES to reach its full potential.

As it was originally framed, the SES was to be far more than a classification and pay scheme for the "supergrades" (GS 16 to GS 18) it mainly replaced. Instead, it was to constitute a government-wide corps of senior executives, high-performing generalist managers who would be flexible, responsive, and mobile. Because rank would inhere in the person and not in the position, in principle a cabinet secretary or other high-level appointee with a particular management problem would be able to reach into this rich reserve of talent and pluck from Agency A an SESer with just the right sort of abilities to solve a problem in Agency B. When that problem was sorted out, then off he or she would go to put out the next administrative fire.

This is not how the system has worked. Consider these comments, bearing in mind that they come from the *crème de la crème* of SESers. Eleanor Spector, procurement chief at the Pentagon, said that while she supposed "the SES has some prestige, it actually has no content. It really isn't any different from the supergrades." After averring that

he was probably the worst person to ask because he doesn't "pay any attention to the SES," the Department of Justice's James Reynolds said that the "SES is relevant only as a pay grade. I don't see any real difference between the SES and the old supergrades." Buckles of ATF was similarly dismissive: "The SES is irrelevant. The status is meaningless. I have no connection to other SESers, no kinship. It is just like if everyone who is a GS-14 got together."

Virtually identical words came from almost every other interviewee, usually accompanied by a puzzled look, as in "SES? Why are you asking about that?" Although hanging prominently on the wall in almost every winner's office was the framed Distinguished Rank certificate — which is itself dominated by the stylized shield that is the emblem of the SES — no one had any sense of identification with the SES as a system. It is simply a pay grade or a vehicle for receiving a well-deserved cash bonus.

The SES may yet emerge from the shadows and provide the basis for government-wide career development. Certainly some key officials in the Office of Personnel Management think that it can, at least with some tweaking. In the spring of 1998, OPM released what it labeled a "Framework for Improving the Senior Executive Service," better known simply as the "Framework Document." Among other things, this document set forth proposals to replace the SES with a Senior Civil Service (comprised of a management-oriented Senior Executive Corps and a specialist-based Senior Professional Corps), foster career development and "continual learning," strengthen accountability, increase rewards, and enhance flexibility at the agency level.

By OPM's own account, though, support for these proposals was less than overwhelming, a judgment that the distinguished executives generally share. In their conversations with me they were particularly disturbed by what they saw as OPM's continued push for interagency mobility. "OPM doesn't get it," Lawrence Wachs said. "SES jobs are not interchangeable pieces." Similarly, William Campbell insisted that "OPM is fixated on mobility. Some jobs, including a lot of SES jobs, need stability." In fact, Campbell noted that for years the Coast Guard had filled his own position with flag officers, who had to rotate every two years. They finally decided



Lawrence Wachs
Department of Agriculture
Associate Director of Budget
and Program Analysis

- Reorganized USDA to improve customer service and saved taxpayers over \$4 billion
- Designed and implemented an automated budgeting computer model that became the prototype system for the federal government



Dennis P. Williams
**Department of Health &
Human Services**
Deputy Assistant Secretary,
Budget

- Convinced Appropriations Committee to allow the secretary to transfer 1 percent of funds between accounts
- Eliminated one complete organizational level affecting 1,000 employees without separating anyone



Steven Y. Winnick
Department of Education
Deputy General Counsel

- Established an independent Ethics Counsel Division in the Office of the General Counsel, which is used as a model by the Office of Government Ethics
- Instrumental in recovering a \$300 million default payment from a financial institution that participated in the student financial assistance program

that this wasn't working and redesignated the position for a civilian, who would not be subject to rotation.

This is not to say that the executives dismissed mobility out of hand. Some of them, in fact, were models of mobility, having served in a wide range of agencies and positions. Stephen Colgate, Department of Justice, suggested that more selective rotation programs be developed within specific areas such as finance and budgeting. Based on his earlier career as a uniformed officer in the Navy, Michael Delpercio expressed a view with even more nuance, commenting that many people misconstrue mobility as it takes place in the military and then misapply it in civilian settings. Officers are not rotated willy-nilly through vastly different assignments, he said. Instead, "careful skill sets are built. One takes the same experience from ship to ship."

Career-political relations: Frictions remain, and too often elected officials and political appointees unfairly target career executives.

Relations with political appointees and the broader structures of government constituted another major theme in my conversations with these distinguished executives. Based on many published reports over the last 20 years, I had expected to hear a lot of complaints about political interference in the SES by unqualified political appointees. In fact, I heard almost none of this. On the contrary, I often heard praise for the quality of the appointees with whom these executives had worked.

What I did hear was a persistent undertone of frustration with the amount of effort it takes to make the career-political relationship work. And the effort, according to these career executives, is very one-sided. "You have to educate them," noted Eleanor Spector. "Sometimes they just assume that you would have gotten a job outside if you were any good. Yet when they give a speech as they are leaving, they always say, 'My biggest surprise is how good the career people are.'"

Part of the problem is that careerists are initially misperceived as incompetent. A larger part is that they are misperceived as partisan. Almost without exception, appointees arrive deeply suspicious of

the political leanings of careerists. As one executive put it, "I was viewed by Clinton appointees when they first came in as a right-wing troglodyte. If the Republicans win, I'll be viewed by their appointees as a left-wing liberal." This sort of misperception is a problem that starts at the top, suggested DoD's Miller. "The accepted logic is: Be responsive to the President. Fill the halls with appointees. Otherwise, bureaucrats will wait out the administration and do what they want." This is, he said, "deeply wrong," a view that every other executive shared.

While some could cite exceptions, the widespread view was that, as Stephen Colgate of the Department of Justice put it, "if you're going to succeed in this business, you have to be totally apolitical. Your job is to implement, not formulate policy. You have no agenda." Education's Steven Winnick told me, with a sort of wry pride, how he, as a senior career lawyer in the department during the Reagan administration, had played a key role in drafting the legislation that was meant to abolish his own job and the rest of the agency. Indeed, a recurrent motif as we discussed this point was the extent to which these executives try to reach out to understand and embrace each administration's priorities. "If you are going to be successful, you have to mesh what you are doing with the political agenda," noted Carol Okin.

Although most of the career executives seem resigned to the inevitable frictions of the appointee system — one colorfully described his role as a "shock absorber" between the political structure and line employees — they expressed greater unease about the increasingly corrosive atmosphere of American politics in general. Some traced this to the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, which led, in their view, to a breakdown of the bipartisan consensus that had reigned on a broad array of budget and policy issues. Others, like the Bureau of Prison's Kathleen Hawk Sawyer, see a rise in "incivility in the culture generally."

Whatever the cause, the consequences have been ominous for some senior executives. Several cited vicious personal attacks by members of Congress — Republicans and Democrats, by the way — during the course of congressional testimony. One even pulled out of a desk drawer a copy of an op-ed piece, in which a prominent member of the House of Representatives not only excoriated this

particular executive, by name, for articulating what was in fact a settled department position, but even insinuated that the executive had been unethically influenced by a government contractor. "Not only has the environment become hostile," observed Justice's Colgate. "The shield has eroded. The career service used to be out of bounds in the wars between legislative and executive branches. Not any more."

The rewards of public service: Not only is the pay system broken, but more attention needs to be paid to non-monetary compensation.

Gary Thurber is the ranking civilian in the Defense Logistics Agency, an organization of 51,000 men and women whose mission is to keep the military supplied with everything it needs — "except bullets" — to do its job. "If they wear it, eat it, or use it, we supply it," Thurber noted. Last year, Thurber spent over \$5 billion on fuel for the Pentagon — and returned a profit of \$1.3 billion to American taxpayers. He is, in fact, the largest buyer of petroleum products in the world.

What would Thurber have earned last year in a job of this scale and responsibility in the private sector? While it is impossible to know for sure, there are some rough benchmarks. For instance, according to a survey in *Virginia Business*, it took a compensation package in excess of \$1 million just to make the list of the top 100 best-paid executives in Virginia. Gary Thurber was paid \$125,900 by the U.S. government last year, as were many other senior career executives in the Washington area. Even more perverse is the fact that there is no distinction among the top three pay grades within the SES. Thanks to the pay cap, ES-4s, ES-5s, and ES-6s all earned precisely the same amount — \$125,900 in 1999.

Fortunately for the average U.S. taxpayer, who may well consider \$125,900 a handsome salary indeed, Gary Thurber feels no resentment about his salary. "It is my choice. And I can live well enough on it." And, equally fortunately for the taxpayer, many other executives echoed his sentiment. "I make enough," said USDA's Wachs. "Money is not an issue for me personally," agreed Paul Chistolini, associate commissioner of the Public Buildings Service at the General Services Administration.

Still, frustrations remain, not so much about the absolute level of the pay as the pettiness that surrounds the issue and the negative signals that are sent by Congress and the White House. As a group, these executives perfectly illustrated the old management maxim: Pay is never a satisfier in the workplace, but it may well be a dissatisfier. "No one is in this for the money, but the compensation system is broken and pay compression is a serious problem," said DoD's Miller. Even Gary Thurber chafed at the "nickel and diming" on salary by politicians. William Campbell of the Coast Guard described himself as "not bitter, but disappointed about pay. The people who set pay make it clear that they don't value the contributions of senior executives."

So what keeps these distinguished executives going? In every case, the answer I got was the same: the work itself. "No matter how much my counterparts in the private sector get paid, I don't know any one of them in the private sector who says his work is challenging," said Lawrence Wachs. "When I leave work in the evening, I can think about the food stamp program and say to myself, 'I did something good today. I fed a bunch of kids.'" Similarly, Thomas Billy, head of food safety for the USDA, mused, "Yes, I am underpaid and I've thought about the private sector. But I like what I'm doing and I'm making an important contribution." OMB's Kathy Peroff agreed: "The pay isn't fantastic. The hours are long. You are often not appreciated. But the opportunities I've had to participate in policy-making are extraordinary. I have seen things and met people that have enriched my life enormously."

Then why fix the pay system, when career executives are so enamored of their jobs that they will never leave anyway? But to think of it in these terms would be a very serious error. It is exactly this attitude — or at least the perception of this attitude — that most dismays senior executives. They feel, in a word, unappreciated. "You always hear from political appointees, after they leave in a year or two, about how burned out or overworked they are," noted Franklin Miller. "But somehow this is not recognized or appreciated as a phenomenon in civil servants." In George Grob's words, "politicians do not honor good management." Although he thinks that politicians "have punched themselves out on bureaucrat bashing, there is still a fundamental lack of appreciation for the work of public servants."

Ironically, one of the examples several executives cited as proof of the lack of appreciation they receive was the SES presidential rank award ceremony itself. In years past, said another, "winners were invited to the Oval Office. That really meant something. It was a big psychic reward. It doesn't happen any more." Several recalled with pride that in 1989 George Bush made much of the fact that his first public meeting was with his "management team," the assembled members of the Senior Executive Service. "President Bush was proud of his public service," observed George Grob. "He said to us, 'Of all the candidates who ran for President, I had the best SF-171' (the standard government employment form). That meant something."

When Kathleen Hawk Sawyer says, "I really don't want a lot — just a little recognition," she is right on target: It really isn't a lot to ask. It costs politicians and the public nothing. But it is a lot to receive. In fact, the symbolism of Oval Office visits and presidential handshakes means more than a lot to members of the SES. It is a source of vitality. It buttresses their sense of professional responsibility and nourishes their deepest motivation for public service.

Beyond basic appreciation, the one incentive that several executives believed was absent from the current system was opportunity, specifically the opportunity to rise to the assistant secretary level in the federal government. Although such opportunities are officially countenanced by the Civil Service Reform Act, they are almost never made available. The main reason is the widespread but unfounded belief that only political appointees can be entrusted with the administration's policy agenda. "Our government has never really known what to do with civil servants," Franklin Miller pointed out. This is especially true, he said, in comparison with England and the other NATO countries with which he deals regularly. "They have real career systems. People *do* rise on a merit basis to top positions. In the British Ministry of Defense there are four or five political appointees. In the U.S. Department of Defense, there are hundreds." Under the circumstances, there is little room at the top for career federal executives in America.

Recommendations

Americans have made it clear in the waning years of the 20th century that while they may no longer want *big* government, they do want *good* government — government that is honest, capable, and effective. Americans want government that can protect the nation's environment and public health, government that keeps streets and schools safe. They want government that provides wise leadership in international affairs and facilitates continued economic growth at home. This is not now and never has been an ideological question. It is not about the scope of government. It is about the quality of government, whatever its scope.

Yet the overriding message that I heard in my conversations with distinguished federal executives is that good government in America is in jeopardy. As a nation we have come to take it for granted and have stopped nourishing it at its roots. We act as if there is no connection between the public service we expect and the public servants who provide it. We have been drawing down capital invested by earlier generations, living on the efforts of men and women whose sense of public duty led them to the “noble calling” of government. Who will pick up the torch when they lay it down?

This is a profoundly serious question. Every corporation in America knows that to survive, much less to prosper, it must put the development of executive talent at the very top of its agenda. This is a lesson that we can and must put to work in the federal government. Here, distilled from the conversations reported here and from years of research, are

some concrete proposals to do just that, aimed at five important constituencies — the White House, Congress, the Office of Personnel Management, federal agencies, and members of the SES itself:

The White House

- *Re-engage the career service.* The President and his appointees should see career executives for what they are: a tremendous resource that can be mobilized to implement the administration's program. Approach them as members of the team, and they will respond in kind.
- *Consider career executives for PAS appointments.* The White House Personnel Office should take advantage of SES provisions that allow careerists to accept political appointments. There is a wealth of under-utilized talent here. A few such appointments will also send very positive signals to the rest of the career service.
- *Participate in awards ceremonies.* A little appreciation from the President goes a long way for career executives. Though it should neither begin nor end there, having the President spend an hour a year at a presidential rank awards ceremony would be a good place to start.
- *Talk about public service in positive terms.* The President can set the right tone by talking about why public service is honorable and important. Failing that, the Eleanor Spectors and George Grobs and William Campbells of

tomorrow won't even think about coming to the federal government, and the pickings for the roster of distinguished executives in 2030 will be very thin indeed.

- *Improve orientation and training for non-career appointees.* Several times in recent decades, attempts have been made as part of transition planning to orient political appointees to the special character of federal management, usually in collaboration with a university. Such training should become a routine part of the appointment process. The more quickly appointees learn how things work, the more quickly productive relationships will form and useful work will get done in agencies.

Congress

- *Fix the pay problem.* At a minimum, executive and congressional pay should be decoupled. Current law prevents SES compensation (basic pay plus locality pay) from exceeding level III executive pay (Congressional pay is set at executive level II). Removing this cap is a matter of both common sense and simple justice: The cap has already erased compensation distinctions — and thus whatever effect graduated material incentives have — among the top three SES pay levels (over 60 percent of the service). Pay compression problems aside, the entire system needs a fresh look, with a greater effort made to ease the comparability gap between public and private sector pay. Failing such efforts, the federal government will be wholly unable to compete with the private sector for top talent in the years to come. The implications for service quality follow naturally.
- *Re-establish a "shield" for career executives.* Continue in hearings and in oversight functions to hold civil servants appropriately accountable, but do so in ways that are commensurate with their positions. Political executives, not career executives, should be the point men and point women for criticism that is essentially political.
- *Join with the President in talking positively about public service.* Members of Congress were all drawn to lives of public service, too. Remembering that — and reminding one's constituents — that the "bureaucracy" is filled with

men and women who have been called to serve their country will pay dividends for everyone.

Office of Personnel Management

- *Continue the work started in the "Framework Document."* Although some features of this initiative — especially the mobility provisions — attracted considerable criticism, the spirit of the document was on target. There is a great need to assess the state of the service at a fundamental level and to see how the vision of 1978 can be more fully realized.
- *Support executive development programs.* Some agencies are doing a better job than others in developing executive talent. OPM can play a useful role by highlighting and sharing "best practices" in executive development.
- *Invigorate the SES as a corps.* Too few SESers have any sense of attachment to the service, an attitude that ultimately inhibits executive development programs and frustrates other goals set forth in the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA). More initiatives by OPM's Office of Executive Resources to build *esprit* — workshops, exchanges, lunches, newsletters, and so forth — would be useful (if initially viewed with a jaundiced eye by some SESers).

Agencies

- *Develop career ladders.* Agency leaders need to be more proactive about developing executive talent. The complacent, "they'll-be-there-when-we-need-them" attitude that has prevailed for years in many quarters is getting prohibitively expensive. Talent needs to be identified early and nurtured deliberately. Identifiable career paths need to be laid out, with training embraced as a serious commitment and careful programs of rotation — not blunt, across-the-board mobility schemes — created.
- *Embrace the PMI program.* The Presidential Management Internship program is universally lauded for its ability to attract bright and committed young people to federal service. Investments in this program pay off handsomely for individual agencies and for the government as a whole.

- *Recognize high-performing executives.*
Although the Presidential Rank Award program is nominally run by OPM, it is paid for in agency budgets. Agency managers need to recognize the importance of this program — and of similar agency-level programs — and to support them fully.

SESers

- *Imagine a service.* Lay aside cynicism about “one size fits all managers” and anxieties about enforced mobility and think constructively about ways in which a genuine government-wide career executive service could co-exist comfortably with an agency-based administrative culture. Other countries do it. Many of the goals that you embrace and at least some of the rewards that you seek may well depend on the creation of such a service.
- *Continue to mentor the next generation.*
Although members of the SES can do little to affect fundamental social norms that appear to be changing a generation’s attitudes toward work and public service, they can operate at the margins and help shape the outlooks of at least some of those who will replace them. The 1997 class of distinguished executives was filled with outstanding mentors. All SESers would do well to follow this example.

These proposals are hardly revolutionary. Most of them echo recommendations made for years by a myriad of government task forces and independent commissions. What is different now is that we are that much closer to the day when we need to take them to heart. The Dickensian ghost of civil service yet to come has paid its visit. It is time to heed the warning.

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