I’m pleased to have been given the opportunity to briefly comment on Professor O’Leary’s insightful and thought-provoking paper. My first comment is that I hope this paper is widely read and discussed. In this age of animas, more effective governance has to be predicated on improving the way we manage dissent. From personal experience, I can confirm that “guerrilla” activity in government is not at all unusual. On rare occasions, I have engaged in guerrilla actions myself and have also been subject to guerrilla actions. In both situations, more constructive alternatives were potentially available that might have prevented lost opportunities, erosion of trust, and wasted emotional energy. We need to do better.

So how can we do a better job of encouraging dissent and managing related conflict? I think Professor O’Leary has researched this well, and I have little to add. I wholeheartedly support her “advice from the experts.” I do, however, take exception to the notion of a “whole organization dispute resolution system.” I’m not clear on exactly how such an institutional process would work, but I fear it would be reactive, not proactive. More importantly, it could shift responsibility away from individual managers. In my judgment, what we need to do is increase, not decrease, individual accountability for managing dissent. My belief is that a formal process is unnecessary if management is collectively doing its job well. But what if management isn’t doing its job well, or at all, in this regard? Fair point, but I think we have to attack the root cause and not obscure it.

Instead, I would prefer to see a concerted effort to build dissent and conflict management criteria into management selection and performance appraisal, coupled with appropriate training. I’m a firm proponent of the old management axiom that “what gets rewarded gets done.” I’m also a firm proponent of 360-degree performance appraisal. We need managers at all levels to be continuously modeling openness, transparency, and mutual respect, who also can skillfully manage conflict. An institutionalized dispute resolution process strikes me as a poor substitute.

Let me close with a few words about how political appointees may complicate any attempt to change organizational culture. In brief, I think they will make it more difficult to achieve the goal of creating a culture that welcomes and constructively manages dissent. Why? Political appointees historically have relatively limited terms of office. This makes it difficult to build the bonds of trust that promote candor. Career employees need to believe they won’t be subject to reprisals if they speak their minds, and political appointees need to know that private communications will remain private. This takes time.

I also think it is important to understand that political appointees have different agendas and motivations than career staff. Both want to make a difference. Additionally, I think it is fair to say that political appointees want to make a name for themselves upon which they can build their future. As a consequence, they have little motivation to invest their time in something that is not visible to outsiders; cultural change is not very visible.

At least recognize that they march to a somewhat different drummer. Remember—managers do what they get rewarded for, so we need to think hard about how to reward political appointees for something that may not be very marketable. Please don’t take this to mean we should ignore training for political appointees. Certainly they are central to the issue and can benefit from perspective changing training and experiences. But if it were my money, I would focus any intervention primarily on senior career managers. These people are the organizations’ cultural guarantors. Without their buy-in, lasting change just won’t happen.