The phenomenon of “guerrilla government” unquestionably exists, and to varying degrees, it is embedded in the public service class. Guerrilla government manifests itself in many forms. Although there are examples of bona fide rebellion by civil servants—some excellent ones are documented by Professor O’Leary—my experience is that the majority of instances in which civil servants present signs rising to the level of guerrilla government include a common denominator: management breakdown.

We often think of management in terms of policy. In a macro sense: How do we deliver cost-effective health care? Or, in a micro sense: Should the government allow an additional 100 nursing home beds in a particular jurisdiction? However, because the implementation of policy and the delivery of services based on such policy are subject to a gauntlet of processes controlled by civil servants, a single government employee can become the enemy from within and derail an initiative.

Effective management at the political appointee level or in the senior civil service ranks can deal with many situations before they affect an administration’s goals. After witnessing repeated mistakes leading to guerrillas or “wannabee guerrillas,” three points come to mind.

Respect. Nothing deteriorates effective government quicker than the civil service class losing respect for agency management. Once it is gone, it seldom, if ever, returns. Gaining respect by listening to varying viewpoints and explaining the rationale behind policy decisions can ameliorate root causes for guerrillas in government.

Teamwork. A concept that should not be something we leave on the baseball fields, basketball courts, or in the service programs of our youth is teamwork. In governing, teamwork is critical, and it can be particularly effective in minimizing breakdowns caused by guerrilla government. Teamwork aspects of shared responsibility, accountability, streamlined focus, and a sense of accomplishment breed loyalty, something that is inconsistent with the typical government renegade.

Ego. Successful leaders, particularly in the political appointee class, suppress their ego, while at the same time maintaining their prerogative as the ultimate decision maker. In doing so, the manager does not lose control over the permanent government class under his or her temporary authority. I recall that the former secretary of state for New York, Sandy Treadwell, would walk to the State Ethics Commission every year to file his financial disclosure statement in person. In a simple but meaningful gesture, Secretary Treadwell would make sure to personally thank each and every staff member for their work. The story of his thoughtfulness and appreciation is still told by civil servants at the commission many years later. Beyond the human element, managers who seek insights from the civil servant class into the institutional reasons behind past policy demonstrate commitment. This can be an effective way to reduce the guerrillas in your midst.

While effective management can reduce the adverse system impacts of the marginal guerrilla, situations on the extreme margins will always exist, though malcontents probably outnumber the truly virtuous.

For every noble Chiune Sugihara, there are likely many more empowered civil servants who, for one reason or another, are not rowing in one direction toward the stated governmental goals. It seems...
appropriate to pose a fundamental question to the self-righteous guerrilla: What right do you have to supplant the government’s moral basis for a decision with that of your own? There must be a presumption of correctness by the government, and the burden must fall on the individual public servant to demonstrate otherwise. In cases in which, for example, laws have been broken, the individual public servant will succeed in trumping the governmental rationale and will transform from guerrilla to savior.

More often than not, however, the civil servant will not be able to meet this necessarily high standard. In the final analysis, absent a moral imperative, justification will be lacking in most guerrillas.

Their personal perspective on policy must take a backseat to those in charge of the reins of power. Without a willingness to work within the acceptable framework of government, the now or soon-to-be guerrilla’s responsibility is to the citizenry through its government process, and therefore he or she must take himself or herself out of the equation and leave the particular governmental dynamic.

Professor O’Leary’s work examines an important subject that exposes issues of efficiencies and moral underpinnings in government. The piece should be required reading for government managers, as they will surely be faced with this issue early in their careers.