Getting Dirty-Minded: Implementing Presidential Policy Agendas Administratively

With polarization in Congress persistent, with staggering issues and international threats facing the nation, and with fiscal stress an enduring fact of life, presidents have for decades turned to the tools of the administrative presidency to advance and implement their policy agendas. As the Barack Obama administration completed its first six months in office amid great challenges and hopes, the president was no exception in counting on his appointees to wield the tools of the administrative presidency to advance his protean policy agenda for America. This essay offers 10 research-based lessons for new appointees charged with advancing presidential agendas administratively to ponder as they do so.

As Jerry Mashaw writes, “Much public law is legislative in origin but administrative in content” (1997, 106). That content is made up of the average 4,000 rules that are promulgated and interpreted annually by the federal bureaucracy. Take the 106th Congress (1999–2000), one of the most active in recent times. While it was passing 560 laws, the executive branch of government was producing 157,173 pages of new rules and regulations (Ginsberg 2007, 166). In fact, rules and regulations outpace statutes in any given Congress, typically by a factor of 10 to 1 (Kerwin 2007). As Nathan (1983) aptly put it a quarter century ago, administration is policy.

In the face of these administrative realities, presidents routinely have turned to what Kagan (2001) calls the tools of presidential administration. These unilateral tools include executive orders, presidential proclamations, presidential bill signing statements, executive agreements (rather than treaties), and national security directives. Moreover, these administrative strategies go beyond unilateral tools to include presidential reorganization, appointment, rulemaking, decision rule, and budgetary powers. And at the heart of implementing these presidential efforts—what has come to be called the administrative presidency—are political appointees (Nathan 1983; see also expanded treatments of this topic in Aberbach and Rockman 2000; Durant 1992; Durant and Resh, forthcoming; Durant and Warber 2001; Lewis 2008; Maranto 1991, 1993, 2005; Rudalevige 2002; Waterman 1989).

As traditionally conceptualized by presidents and their appointees, administrative strategies for advancing presidents’ policy agendas are premised on several assumptions. First, the federal career civil service will either sabotage presidential agendas, be too slow in implementing even those they support, or be indifferent in fighting for their implementation. Second, as a consequence, presidential success depends on controlling—that is, limiting—bureaucratic discretion (a notable exception is President Bill Clinton’s National Performance Review, which was focused to a degree on empowering careerists). Third, presidents can indirectly influence policy by naming to agencies political appointees who support their policy agendas and who will quietly change agency rules, budgets, structures, and personnel requirements to suit presidential policy goals. Fourth, these overhead controls can directly affect key decisions by federal bureaucrats that shape the implementation of presidential agendas. Finally, careerists’ resistance is willfully obstructionist rather than in response to factors over which they have scant control.

This article illustrates how prior research reveals these assumptions to be misguided. It then culs from this research lessons about the administrative presidency that are not meant to substitute for excellent and more nuts-and-bolts daily operational guidance to appointees offered by others (e.g., DeSeve 2009; NAPA 2008). Rather,
and at the risk of apostasy amid the celebratory feelings surrounding Barack Obama’s election, the article offers to new appointees in the Obama administration a “dirty-minded” approach (Bardach 1977) to understanding the broader realpolitik—and hence the strengths and weaknesses—of implementing presidential agendas administratively over the long term in Washington.

Dirty-mindedness refers to asking oneself the following questions before implementing presidential agendas administratively: What can go wrong as I apply this strategy, and how can I think strategically and tactically about applying the tools of the administrative presidency to advance presidential agendas? Dirty-mindedness is akin to what behavioral economists call a “pre-mortem” analysis, in which policy proponents look ahead five years and explain why their preferred policy failed rather than succeeded. Thus, like pre-mortem analysis, dirty-mindedness is neither a counsel of despair nor a call for underhandedness, but rather one of optimism capable of anticipating and strategically navigating the realpolitik of the American Madisonian system.

Leaving judgments about the merits or demerits of Obama’s policy agenda aside, the discussion is organized around three sets of factors that students of the presidency, policy implementation, public policy, public management, and public administration have identified as critical for appointees to understand if they are to improve their chances of implementation success. The first involves skills in understanding the political, electoral, and presidential rhythms that affect administrative strategies. The second emphasizes aligning structures, processes, and procedures (SPPs) for implementing presidential priorities. The third set of factors highlights understanding the discursive and affective elements of issue framing and the selection of policy tools. Respectively, these can either advance or retard any president’s policy priorities and either advance or put democratic values at risk.

**Lesson 1: Appointees should think electorally, cyclically, and relationally before assuming that mandates exist for the presidential policy agenda they wish to advance administratively.**

Political appointees need to appreciate that while the election is behind President Obama, its results and the electoral cycle ahead are not, and these should be kept clearly in mind as they try to implement his policy agenda administratively. The ebb and flow of partisan politics during a presidential term can determine the extent and nature of congressional oversight of their agencies’ programs, as well as the level of ambiguity, consistency, and contradictions of any statutes enacted—and hence the amount of discretion that agencies will have in implementing them. They also can affect the amount of attention that the White House pays to their agency’s or program’s activities, as well as the timing of initiatives that they might need to launch within agencies to pursue the president’s policy priorities administratively. Sensitivity to these dynamics will especially be needed during the Obama administration. The president’s stated objectives for health care, global warming, energy policy, and financial management alone will impose massive rule-writing, implementation, and monitoring tasks on federal agencies.

In the first year of a president’s first term, relatively impressive presidential victories such as President Obama’s offer unique opportunities for claims of broad policy mandates for presidents and their appointees, as do crises (real, imagined, or contrived). Moreover, greater allowance for presidential initiatives is especially true on more substantive policy matters if the president’s party controls at least working majorities capable of overriding cloture votes with 60 votes in the U.S. Senate, as the Democrats did by gaining three Republican votes for the 2009 stimulus package (i.e., the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act). Perceptions of crises offer presidents and their appointees a broad range of actions to take, as Americans tend to tolerate expenditures and experiments better and have more patience with them (e.g., FDR’s First and Second New Deals). Perceptions of crises that could get worse definitely were rampant as Obama took office. Not only did unemployment stand at 7.2 percent (a 16-year high), but also the nation was witnessing a mortgage meltdown, a freezing up of liquidity in lending by banks, a decline of 34 percent in 2008 of the Dow Jones Industrial Average (its biggest yearly loss since 1931), a drop of 38 percent in the Standard & Poor...
Still, appointees need to put this situation in political and historical perspective, lest they become overconfident that threats of crises (actual or imagined) will either not need the administrative presidency or afford unfailing support to the presidential agendas that they are trying to advance administratively. Politically, opponents of the president’s agenda may find thwarting it within the bureaucracy much more attractive than doing so in the more visible legislative arena. Historically, the extent of the crisis and political reactions to it also need perspective. When the Ronald Reagan administration took office, inflation stood at 10.3 percent, compared to 7.6 percent when Bill Clinton took office in 1993. Under March 2009 estimates by the Congressional Budget Office, employment will shrink at 4.4 percent at the end of 2006 (up from a low of 4.4 percent at the end of 2006) and stay there for years. Yet it will have to go to 10.8 percent to hit the peak unemployment rates near the end of the 1981–82 recession. In addition, the United States was deeply into a severe depression when Roosevelt took office, and 32 states had shut down every bank within their jurisdiction. In the United States, the persistence of the economic crisis “raised grave doubts about the viability of republican government” itself (Milkis and Nelson 1999, 263). The point is not that these do not represent crises or may get worse by the time this article appears. Rather, the point is that in these (as yet) more dire situations, Reagan and Roosevelt experienced strong challenges to their leadership—both legislatively and administratively—throughout their administrations.

Other less than positive electoral signs exist that appointees need to appreciate because they, too, can affect the use and successful implementation of presidential priorities pursued through administrative strategies. While impressive and historic, Obama’s election victory was not extraordinary when placed in comparative statistical perspective. Although Obama won by sizeable margins and his party picked up seven seats (possibly eight once Minnesota’s election challenge is resolved) in the Senate and 21 seats in the House, his situation is more akin to Clinton’s in 1992 than to FDR’s in 1932 or even Reagan’s in 1980. Obama’s impressive 53 percent popular vote victory (to McCain’s 46 percent) was higher than Reagan’s in 1980 (51 percent) but produced an electoral vote total (365) that was only marginally better than Clinton’s in 1992 (352). Moreover, Reagan garnered 489 electoral votes in 1980 and 525 electoral votes in 1984. Even the Democrats’ addition of House seats is substantially less than the Republicans’ net gain of 54 seats in the House in 1994. In addition, Democratic gains in Congress in both 2006 and 2008 came frequently from the election of more moderate to conservative members. In fact, Democrats presently hold seats in approximately 80 districts that George W. Bush won in 2004. Unless they, too, attribute their election to unprecedented turnout in their districts because of Obama and his popularity remains higher than theirs as his term evolves, party discipline on Obama initiatives (legislative or administrative) is not a foregone conclusion during his tenure in office.

Relatively, as both the Jimmy Carter and Clinton administrations learned to their chagrin, unified party government is not an unvarnished policy blessing for presidents and their appointees. Prior research suggests that the greater the partisan divide favoring a president’s party in Congress, the more likely it is that party fissures will develop. Members of Congress see more room for dissent, challenge rulemaking, or vote with constituent rather than presidential preferences as they eye their midterm reelection chances. Nor can one ignore how the House’s Blue Dog Coalition of fiscally conservative Democrats—at 49 members and growing—may clash on major issues throughout the president’s tenure in office, at least as long as a largely liberal party leadership exists in Congress. As of March 2009, for example, projections of support for a climate change bill in the House showed that 32 of 126 undecided House members were Blue Dogs, while 12 of the 36 Democrats on the key Energy and Commerce Committee were from heavy industrial districts. Both may extract cost concessions that will lose more liberal votes on cap and trade systems (Samuelsohn 2009). Challenging enough in their own right, these dynamics also are played out against the historical struggle for institutional prerogative between Congress and the president that transpires under both unified and divided government. In combination, these factors make administrative strategies for advancing presidential aims alluring to any White House.
Scholars also have chronicled “rhythms” across presidential administrations that can affect the use and success of administrative strategies to advance presidential policy goals. These patterns include, first, activist presidents such as Obama seeking to “hit the ground running” (Pfiffner 1996) with priority issues during the first year of their administration to seize on a so-called honeymoon period. Congressional support for presidential initiatives then tends to wane in the second year of any administration, as turnout typically shrinks in off-year elections and as members of Congress begin looking ahead to midterm reelection contests. This is especially true for members who are defending their seats for the first time (they are most vulnerable at that point), in marginal districts or states (incumbents with less than a 3 percent to 5 percent victory margin), and in districts typically carried by the opposing party. Again, on pending climate change legislation, 56 of the undecided Democrats won their 2008 victories by less than 60 percent, and 34 of these were freshmen legislators (Samuelsohn 2009). By the third year of a president’s term, the focus historically is on foreign policy issues, where presidents have more constitutional leeway to operate, especially if—as is typical—the president’s party loses seats in Congress. And by the fourth year, the White House is in full stride for the president’s reelection campaign.

This cycle has several important implications for political appointees trying to advance presidential agendas administratively. For starters, the “hitting the ground running” model pursued by appointees can be dangerous as a result of errors that often come early in an administration because of another cycle: Over time, administrations understand the job and issues better, but public support for their efforts wanes (Light 1999). Thus, early policy initiatives come when knowledge is at its lowest and can come back to haunt presidents and their appointees. These tend also to be the first policy rules overturned by the courts because of shoddy justification of the policy redirection sought. This is especially true if appointees target changes in existing rules, because the judiciary views this as the agency changing its mind rather than as a prerogative of presidents to enact a real or purported electoral mandate (Shapiro 1988).

This cycle also means that White House attention to the initiatives of political appointees will wax and wane over an administration as the demands on an agency shift—whether from the White House or congressional oversight committees. If an appointee’s agency is not one of those implementing priority policy items during these cycles, the good news is that they may have more time to build coalitions, understand their organizations, and pursue agenda items that do not violate or compromise presidential policy preferences. It also means, however, that appointees cannot automatically rely on presidential support to advance their agendas and will need to look more to Capitol Hill and the courts. Consequently, they may be more constrained in implementing their agendas and take more cues from oversight committee members than from the White House—a potential source of future conflict with the Oval Office.

At the same time, political appointees must not be perplexed when careerists look horizontally to congressional oversight committees and interest groups for guidance rather than vertically to them or to the White House. Program bureaucrats do so because they, too, know that presidential attention and support cannot be counted on, and also because presidents and appointees come and go, but the composition and policy interests of congressional overseers remain relatively constant. Moreover, because the career bureaucracy’s authority to act comes from Congress and the statutes it enacts, federal employees have a fiduciary responsibility to the law and the Constitution as well as to the president (see more later). Indeed, with President Obama’s longer-range goals of refashioning a third of the American economy (with health care, energy, and the financial sector representing 17 percent, 10 percent, and 8 percent of the gross domestic product, respectively), a vast mobilization of interest groups tethered tautly to congressional committees lies ahead and will have to be crafted into supportive coalitions. Still, appointees need to understand that, historically, political appointees’ appreciation for the skills of careerists increases, including their skill for navigating these political minefields (Maranto 2005).

Certainly, events may or may not disrupt these rhythms. Moreover, domestic and foreign policies increasingly blend together in a globalized economy (e.g., trade policy and domestic industry) because of the need for continuing attention to failed states as a breeding ground for terrorism and because of threats to the global commons (e.g., climate change). The Obama administration also might successfully “reinvent” these cycles. It might, for instance, adapt the organizational and technological acumen that his campaign displayed to advance his policy agenda. This would be a difficult task, however. As Jones argues, a “presidential campaign is singularly, even selfishly, focused on two things: the candidate and Election Day. A president often doesn’t have that luxury. . . . Events demand attention and reaction. When you become president, you don’t get to control that in the same way” (cited in Balz 2008).
Thus, the most likely scenario is for technology to stymie the normal loss of congressional seats in midterm elections or to “turn out” the base on critical legislative votes rather than to wage a sustained campaign supporting the thousands of rules that the Obama administration will issue each year. Nor are Republicans likely to surrender the technological battleground to the administration. Technological advantage or not, political appointees must prepare for principled, petty, and petulant struggles as they try to advance the president’s agenda administratively—regardless of a president’s initial electoral margins and his party’s standing in Congress—as electoral, learning, and public opinion cycles continue apace.

Lesson 2: Appointees must understand their role in the Madisonian system. Hubris will get them nowhere in the long run and may embarrass their president. The Madisonian system is designed to preclude concentrated power, require successive majorities to agree to policy, and slow down hasty policy choices. Patience, persistence, and pragmatism are virtues that appointees ignore at the president’s peril.

Lord Melbourne once said sarcastically of the historian and literary critic Thomas Macaulay, “I wish I were as cocksure of anything as Macaulay is of everything.” Avoiding hubris like Macaulay’s is good advice to take to heart for political appointees who are convinced of the correctness of their president’s policy goals (or their own). But if they do not, the Madisonian system will disabuse them of their hubris in short order (Heclo 2007). Our system of checks and balances, separation of powers, and continuing legislative and bureaucratic agendas quickly shows appointees that they are not the center of the political universe as representatives of the president (Jones 2005). Appointees need to understand and prepare for this, and wise appointees understand that policy disagreements are functional in a democratic republic. Indeed, the founders saw ambition countering ambition—and the need for multiple successive majorities of actors to occur before action is taken—as the means for building unity of purpose.

One of the assumptions of the administrative presidency is that appointees using its tools can move quickly and under the radar to advance presidential agendas. Even if political appointees want to seize what economists call “first-mover” advantages, however, Congress and the courts have effective means for slowing down policies pursued administratively. Among these are the informal rulemaking provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act, the application of the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act, control over the appropriations process, the stipulation of congressional mandates in the legislative reports accompanying statute reauthorization, and the affording of standing to sue to parties disaffected by policy redirection. In 1999 alone under unified Democratic government, for example, Congress placed 611 limitation riders in the 11 appropriations bills that it passed (Shipan 2005).

As a consequence, appointees with only private sector or nonfederal backgrounds do not appreciate that one of the primary assumptions of administrative strategies is problematic: With the policy stakes so high, changing significant rules and implementing them in new ways to advance major or controversial presidential policy agendas cannot be done quietly, below stakeholders’ radar screens. There are too many opportunities afforded in the rulemaking process and too many access points in the Madisonian system of diffused power to allow controversial, significant, and ill-thought-through policy redirections to escape notice and contestation by opponents of any president’s policy agenda—whether pursued legislatively or administratively.

Much the same can be said for the demands placed on political appointees when presidents wield the unilateral tools of the administrative presidency to advance their policy agendas. Prior research suggests that presidents use these tools to gain credit from constituencies without having to deal with Congress, to alter the political and institutional contexts of agencies to advance their agendas, to offer bargaining chips to Congress, and to preempt or embarrass presidents of the opposite party by reversing their executive orders or laying policy traps for their successors (Cooper 1986; Howell 2003; Mayer 2001; Moe and Howell 1999; Rozell 1994; Warber 2006). Researchers find that only 3 percent of all unilateral actions (e.g., executive orders and presidential signing statements) ever receive immediate legislative scrutiny, and most efforts to overturn them fail (Howell 2003).

The apparent short-term advantages of these actions for advancing presidential agendas notwithstanding, their use can cause appointees fits when implementing them. Presidents often do not fund them at all, or appointees must await future budget cycles for resources. They also may require a reprogramming of funds that may be politically difficult and harm other programs that are either dear to representatives’ hearts or that presidents also want advanced administratively or legislatively. They also gain legislative attention during implementation by agencies through ex post monitoring and sanctions (e.g., budget cuts for implementation). Other types of unilateral actions taken by the White House are of similar consequence for appointees charged with implementing them. For example, presidential signing statements are used by presidents to communicate to the bureaucracy and the courts what they do not like about the bills they are signing into law and what bureaucrats should not implement (Cooper 1997). A Congressional Budget Office study,
however, found that agencies ignored 9 out of 12 signing statements they examined, suggesting that appointees should expect resistance to them as well.

**Lesson 3: Careerist opposition may be rooted in a lack of clear communication of goals or the absence of statutory authority to do what appointees want them to do, not in bureaucratic lethargy, opposition, or desire to sabotage them. Listen to careerists and agency lawyers on these issues. Otherwise, presidential agendas may be beached on the shoals of federal courts that still will be populated by Republican appointees through President Obama’s first term.**

The amount of policy redirection and implementation that political appointees can effect administratively depends on the clarity of the goals and the amount of policy discretion the career bureaucracy has available to it. Appointees should expect agency responsiveness to presidential agendas to be more difficult when goals are “confused or confusing, ambivalent, or even downright conflicting”—a common condition when agencies are receiving signals from so many actors in the Madisonian system (Aberbach and Rockman 2009, 55). Even when signals are unambiguous, appointees must deal tactically with the discretionary limits that are placed statutorily—and enforceable judicially—on agencies. Rosenbloom (2000) persuasively challenges executive-centered theories of public administration. He notes that the discretion that bureaucracies exercise comes from congressional grants of their own authority to agencies. Consequently, Congress demands accountability from agencies as they exercise these powers.

Recent work on congressional delegation of discretion to agencies also shows how and why the levels of discretion available for appointees to influence vary across and within statutes (Epstein and O’Halloran 1999). Available discretion can vary across six different dimensions of a statute: what the goals of the legislation are, what objectives to shoot for, what agents to use in carrying out the law, what specific tools to use (e.g., regulations, subsidies, guaranteed loans), what rules they must follow (e.g., consider risks to health but not costs), and what assumptions to work under (normative, behavioral, and technical). Thus, careerists who are pressured by appointees to exercise discretion that they do not have will resist out of a sense of legal responsibility rather than opposition to the substance of what appointees are asking. To do otherwise risks court suits that can set back presidential agendas significantly.

Appointees also must tailor their administrative strategies to the reality that Congress often has added procedural requirements to statutes that go beyond the Administrative Procedure Act. Judges scrutinize these for compliance if appointee initiatives are challenged in court. Congress also has added legally enforceable deadlines for agency action, as well as hammer provisions for substituting congressional decisions for agency rulemaking and implementation when agencies fail to act. In addition, appointees may find their decisions to either pursue or not pursue policy options more easily challenged in court because Congress has given parties standing to sue agency rules on procedural or substantive grounds (e.g., the Clean Air Act).

Relatedly, appointees should anticipate that polarization in Congress has made “appeals court shopping” and “sue-and-settle” strategies by opponents of presidential agendas important tools for delaying or halting policy implementation. Once promulgated, rules can be appealed to favorable circuit courts to get stays in their execution or to get them remanded to the agency for reconsideration. Importantly, however, appointees can use the same tactics to advance presidential agendas by appeals to the White House. The Justice Department can decide whether to appeal judicial decisions about regulations, avoiding appeals of those they agree with and vice versa. In these instances, the courts want to know what has changed since the original rules were issued that justifies the redirection of policy. Again, appointees need to be sure that haste does not drive out the marshaling of adequate evidence supporting changes.

Finally, appointees need to adapt their administrative strategies to consider the interaction of various laws. Statutes from different eras, for example, are layered upon each other without replacing earlier laws, thus causing them to interact in contradictory and even antagonistic ways. For example, pro–commodity use and development natural resource statutes from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries routinely collide with pro–environmental and natural resource laws enacted in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Protection Law (Klyza and Sousa 2008). This means that while appointees may think they are merely administratively fine-tuning a single statute or program to implement presidential agendas, federal careerists tend to understand better the interaction of various laws, and their counsel should be sought. Moreover, appointees who do not recognize this may misguided-ly interpret resistance as bureaucratic efforts to stymie their initiatives rather than to protect the agency from political or legal attack.

**Lesson 4: Appointees should not expect persistent or coordinated strategic direction from the White House. Nor should they expect that policy initiatives launched from different agencies and programs or pursued with different tools of the administrative presidency will be integrated or cohesive. In fact, they may even be conflicting.**

Recent decades have seen an increasing tendency to pull policy decisions into the White House from the
agencies, as well as toward clearance of agency rules by the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (Moe 2000; Patterson 2008). This tendency has important implications for political appointees working administratively to advance presidential agendas generally, and especially in the Obama administration. Lauded for the intellectual firepower the president has marshaled in the White House as policy “czars” to coordinate policy and in his cabinet, traditional tensions may be exacerbated by the strong-willed personalities of these seasoned veterans and by the tendency of czars to want to make rather than coordinate policy (Burke 1992; Kernell 1989; Hult and Walcott 2004). Indeed, Obama’s team of rivals may stoke unrivaled tensions that produce both grist for conflict-obsessed pundits painting an administration in disarray and also dysfunctional stops and starts for appointees and career civil servants in agencies. In the process, czars can sap the importance, energy, vitality, and morale of agencies and departments.

Disarray or not, prior research offers several lessons for new appointees. First, they should understand that the White House is a bureaucracy in and of itself, with competing professional and personal agendas (Heclo 2007). Second, they need to understand that even if there is strategic thinking on the part of the White House, tensions between cabinet secretaries and White House officials are legend, and the Washington landscape is strewn with the bodies of “czars” lacking formal authority to alter budgets and behavior. Czars also tend to have influence only so long as presidents pay attention to their policy areas, and the more czars, the greater and more unworkable these demands are likely to be on a frazzled chief executive.

Third, an appointee’s agency may not be part of any strategic thinking that does occur. This might be because their agency does not house programs that the White House has prioritized. It might be because the White House fears overloading congressional agendas or wishes to defer more controversial items that can split coalitions. Or it might be because the White House prefers to avoid public battles by using sue-and-settle strategies instead. In a study of presidential policy development and implementation from 1949 to 1996, for example, Rudalevige (2002) found little evidence of consistent White House dominance of the policy process. His findings suggest that appointees are more likely to see White House centralization occur the greater the number of issues involved in a problem, the more novel the policy to address it, and the more necessary reorganizations of agencies are to implement policy solutions.

Fourth, the strategic savvy of centralization strategies has been widely called into question. Recent work by West (2006) on OIRA regulatory review, for example, challenges the conventional wisdom that centralization is motivated by presidents trying to obtain cohesiveness, coordination, and rationality across bureaucratic policy initiatives. West argues that OIRA has neither the goal nor the capacity to ensure overall planning and coordination. He found that “little if any effort is made in the review process to think about the implementation of different programs in a comprehensive and comparative way” (2006, 445) or “to reduce conflicts [and] to ensure consistent application of the regulatory analysis process” (GAO 1981, 53). Thus, just because the clearance of regulations is centralized in OIRA, appointees should not expect presidents to seek or produce strategic cohesiveness and coordination across all programs. Instead, they should expect that OIRA’s resource constraints will mean a focus on regulations central to presidential policy priorities. And without coordinating that agenda, steps taken in other programs or agencies may make implementation more difficult for appointees.

A Way Out of “No Way!” Putting Administrative Strategies in Bureapoltical Perspective

Appointees trying to advance presidential agendas administratively also should appreciate why the structures and processes they inherit look the way they do and what it means to reorganize them; how and why career civil servants respond to policy initiatives the way they do (i.e., what motivates career civil servants); and how best to stress purpose over control so as to unleash creative tensions rather than breakdowns within the career bureaucracy (Maranto 2005).

Lesson 5: Appointees should understand that the “irrational” agency structures they inherit and seek to align with their strategy to implement presidential policy administratively epitomize political and cultural, rather than functional, rationality.

One of the hardest things for new political appointees to appreciate—and to design strategies and tactics for coping with—is that public agencies are not designed for effectiveness (Moe 1989; Zegart 1999). Appointees who come directly from the private sector especially arrive imbued with the venerable management principle that structures must be aligned with strategies in order to be effective. They should be, and it has been done successfully by appointees—but not without a sense of strategic savvy. This, in turn, requires appointees to appreciate (1) that agencies and their structures are the epitome of political and cultural—rather
than functional—rationality, and (2) that reorganization will depend on a combination of their political and management skills. Appointees must be aware of how careerists and other stakeholders view their actions through the lenses of the history of the agency, including how recent political appointees have interacted with them (positively, negatively, or with indifference). In turn, much of that history is reflected in existing agency SPPs, which, in turn, help shape and reinforce agency cultures and behaviors.

In light of all this, appointees first must appreciate that the members of Congress who are sitting on the committees that oversee their agency care deeply about programs that affect their reelection chances, as do related interest groups. Thus, agency SPPs are designed less with management effectiveness in mind and more in terms of their implications for power, access, and influence (Seidman 1998). Consequently, when appointees try to reorganize or change SPPs in order to implement presidential agendas administratively, they are, in effect, trying to reorganize congressional oversight systems as well. These committees and interest groups will fight back. And even if they succeed in reorganizing agency structures, little behavioral change can be expected as long as the congressional committees overseeing them remain intact or block new initiatives. The ongoing difficulties in revamping the missions of various agencies incorporated into the Department of Homeland Security attest to this reality.

Second, appointees must understand that the organizational location of their agency or program is not an accident (Clarke and McCool 1996). They may even be working in an agency or program that is deliberately designed by opponents to fail, or unintentionally in such a position because of legislative bargaining or a member’s effort to place a program within his or her committee’s jurisdiction. One of the oldest tactics used by opponents of agencies or programs is to place them in departments (or agencies, if programs) hostile to their missions or without the capacity or resources to implement them effectively (e.g., assigning the Endangered Species Act to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Interior Department). Another is to place them in agencies that have experienced frequent reorganizations (indicating a lack of a strong constituency to protect programs) or deep within organizations without direct line reporting to assistant secretaries and the resources they allocate. Research indicates that such strategies can permanently place these programs at a disadvantage for power, access, influence, and resources with other programs, agencies, or departments (Clarke and McCool 1996). Thus, all things being equal, infusions of constant presidential attention, support, and resources will be necessary if appointees are to advance presidential agendas administratively in these kinds of agencies.

It is also important for appointees to grasp that agency SPPs have been designed by prior winning coalitions to increase the political and administrative difficulties (i.e., transaction costs) for new appointees who wish to change policy or organizational behavior significantly in the future. Winning coalitions do so because they fear that electoral shifts in Congress or changes in legislative oversight committees will divert policy implementation to their own ends (”coalitional drift”) or that agencies implementing statutes will do the same (”bureaucratic drift”) (Hammond and Knot 1996; Lewis 2003; Lupia and McCubbins 1994; Wood and Bohte 2004). Conversely, opponents of a policy seek to hinder implementation by adding reporting requirements, requiring annual budget reauthorizations, imposing significant analytical requirements, and giving states major responsibilities. Combined, these efforts place agencies on a path where the transaction costs are steep for political appointees making significant changes.

Still, prior research suggests, first, how appointees can anticipate and cope with the extent and nature of the opposition they will face in trying to align SPPs with presidential agendas. Lewis (2003) gives one clue for appointees trying to anticipate levels of difficulty in advancing presidential agendas administratively: Was their agency chartered legislatively or administratively (by presidents using executive orders, reorganization plans, and departmental orders)? His analysis of 182 agencies chartered between 1946 and 1997 finds that those created administratively were structured to insulate the agency from congressional interference. Thus, appointees have less to fear from Capitol Hill in pursuing presidential agendas administratively. Conversely, agencies created with a high level of congressional influence were more insulated from presidential control—and, hence, from political appointee influences. Members of Congress do this by creating multiheaded independent commissions, by limiting the number of presidential political appointees allowed in agencies, by affording partial funding independence, and/or by requiring party balancing and staggered terms of appointees. As such, appointees should expect battles with oversight committee members if their goals clash with the president’s goals.

Prior research also suggests that appointees trying to use structural reorganization will encounter less resistance from careerists whenever constituencies of the agency are weak, esprit de corps is low, poor leadership has existed in the past, and nonscientific or non-military missions are involved (Clarke and McCool 1996; Meier and Bohte 2007). Conversely, these same characteristics should alert them that creating implementation structures favoring their perspectives will be difficult, both within agencies and in partnering with others, whenever agencies already have strong constituencies, high esprit de corps, effective leadership, and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrative strategies</th>
<th>Inhibitors of success (from prior research on the administrative presidency, organizational reengineering, performance results, cultural change, and partnering). Appointees are less likely to advance presidential agendas administratively to the extent that:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Organization structure, processes, and procedures** | • They try to consolidate agencies rather than programs  
• They focus on reorganizing discrete functions rather than flow-of-work processes  
• They focus on cutting employees rather than layers of hierarchy  
• Restructuring either creates or acquires unsupportive constituencies  
• Restructuring gives oversight responsibilities to unsupportive congressional committees  
• Restructuring creates conflicting constituencies regarding the agenda  
• Restructuring creates a new dominant or professional coalition opposed to the agenda  
• Restructuring increases/reduces the visibility of the agency in ways that will reduce public support  
• Restructuring creates stovepipes that foster “buck passing” rather than agenda advancement  |
| **Networking (partnering and collaboration)** | • No history of trust exists among potential partners  
• No focus exists on long term by partners  
• The opaqueness of the partnership makes monitoring difficult  
• A divergence of interests among partners is likely  
• Harm to citizens would result if the partnership breaks down  
• Prospects for future interaction among partners are minimal  
• Partners do not view dependence as critical or complementary  
• Rewards to partners are not linked to cooperation  
• Large program goals cannot be broken into smaller ones to avoid defection of partners  
• Government fears loss of control over final product quality  
• Partners fear loss of autonomy, changes in service models, goal displacement, and power loss  
• Frequent and formal communication is not institutionalized  
• Clear understandings of roles and responsibilities do not exist  
• Effective constitutive norms, values, and procedures are not institutionalized  |
| **Performance monitoring and managing for results** | • Unsupportive central administrative agencies exist (e.g., OMB)  
• Legislators view inputs rather than results as critical  
• Lack of external pressures exists for results orientation  
• No statutory requirement exists pushing a results focus on information for managers  
• Absence of strong leadership exists favoring results orientation  
• Lack of cascading coalitions exists for results orientation  
• Performance measures are not well linked to goals  
• Too many measures of results are created without input of managers  
• No “milestones” to chart progress toward goals are incorporated in the measures  
• Measures are not linked to consequences  
• Measures constrain flexibility  
• Lack of employee training exists  
• Mutual suspicion by agencies and legislators about “gaming” of measures exists  
• Employees fear that measures give them responsibility incommensurate with authority  |
| **Market-based reforms (contracting, privatizing, competitive bidding, etc.)** | • Competition does not exist  
• Contract renewal diminishes competition because of unfair advantage to incumbent  
• Vital service interruptions could occur if contract lapses or strikes can occur  
• True arms-length relationships between principals and contracting agents do not exist  
• Inadequate capacity exists to monitor contract execution and performance  
• Little or no possibility of future contracts exists among principals and agents  
• Requests for proposals specify process rather than outcomes desired  
• Outcomes cannot be measured, milestones are not included, and benchmarking is difficult  
• External political support for contracting is not high  
• Money will not be saved premised on costs, including administration of contract  
• Reimbursable costs are not robust enough to ensure sufficient competition for contracts  
• Contractors are not required—or able—to enforce contextual goals (e.g., diversity)  |
respected scientific or technical expertise (as opposed to “softer” expertise in the social sciences).

As the top row in table 1 summarizes, multidisciplinary studies also indicate that structural changes geared toward advancing presidential agendas are most successful when appointees focus on cutting layers or levels of bureaucracy rather than numbers of people (Light 2006). It is the distortion of appointee initiatives because of the layering of hierarchical levels that most thwarts communication of presidential agendas to the career bureaucracy. Thus, to the extent that pressures arise from the White House to add layers of additional appointees between themselves and career servants, they should be resisted on these grounds (but see Maranto 2005 for a thoughtful and spirited defense of increasing appointees). They also should appreciate, however, why the White House pushes for more appointees; a president has approximately 2,500 policy-related appointees, compared to 1.9 million career civil servants and 15,000 congressional staffers overseeing the administration’s work. Steps should be taken, however, to minimize vertical fragmentation of additional appointees and increase horizontal integration at least to avoid further stovepiping when cross-unit collaboration is central to policy accomplishment.

Relatedly, appointees are also more likely to succeed in advancing presidential agendas administratively when they focus on the flow-of-work processes related to attaining presidential policy goals rather than on structural reorganization per se (Durant 1992, 1999). In this regard, appointees should first identify the “assembly line” of parts of their organization (and across organizations) necessary to advance presidential agenda items and then revamp those processes accordingly. Their aim should be to break down within- and cross-agency stovepipes that serve as perverse incentives against careerists working with each other. Again, it may not be disagreement with presidential goals but rather perverse incentive structures created by stovepiping that animate what appointees think is bureaucratic indifference or even deliberate sabotage of presidential goals. Nor should appointees pursue frequent reorganizations to advance policies administratively, as they are highly disruptive to employees, their work product, and their morale (Lewis 2008).

**Lesson 6: Appointees would do well to appreciate the heterogeneity of the career civil service, careerists’ appreciation for the role they play in a democracy, and their responsiveness to solidary, purposive, and self-directed incentives, not just material ones.**

One of the most common mistakes made by political appointees trying to advance presidential agendas administratively is failing to appreciate accurately both the predispositions and the utility of career civil servants in realizing these ends. One of the major assumptions of the administrative presidency is “bureauphobic” in nature: Careerists are viewed as either indifferent or prone to sabotage presidential initiatives they do not like (Durant 1992). What is more, because bureaucrats benefit from information asymmetry (i.e., they know more about what is going on in agencies than the appointees do), keeping bureaucrats out of the policy-formulation loop would best advance presidential agendas (but see Hammond and Knott 1996).

Contrary to the assumptions of bureauphobes, however, prior research has consistently found that careerists are responsive to administrative strategies, at least in terms of their collective outputs (e.g., issuing fewer mine safety violations). In fact, opposition is more likely from political appointees in other agencies, from appointees in the OMB, and from their own agencies’ regional offices. Indeed, while much has been made of President Obama’s “team of rivals” cabinet selections, appointees need to remember that three of Abraham Lincoln’s rivals left his cabinet during his presidency—“one in disgrace (War Secretary Simon Cameron), one in defance (Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase), and one in disgust (Attorney General Edward Bates)” (Pinsker 2008).

Consider, for example, how Wood and Waterman’s (1994) analysis of the number of enforcement decisions made by eight different agencies during the Reagan administration shows how political appointees’ actions (along with other factors) slowed enforcement in line with the president’s deregulation agenda. Yet this study also counsels “bureauphiles” expecting automatic responsiveness from careerists in a spirit of cooperation to be wary; responsiveness was partially a function of skillful appointee manipulation of incentive structures. Likewise, one important comparative case analysis of policy reorientation by Reagan appointees in four agencies (the National Highway Safety Administration, the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, the Food and Nutrition Service in the Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency) suggests that careerists can either “exit” the agency, “voice” concerns and work to revise implementation, or be “loyal” by complying uncritically and without voice with appointee initiatives (Golden 2000). This study also found evidence of all three behaviors, although loyalty (i.e., following presidential agendas) was the default option of careerists in most instances.

Research also suggests, however, that appeals to careerists’ original calling to public service (e.g., a desire to serve others or a desire to improve the lives and safety of Americans) can be an effective motivational approach that appointees too often overlook (e.g., Perry and Hondeghem 2008; Perry and Wise 1990). Here,
the wisdom of Antoine de Saint-Exupery is useful for appointees to internalize: “If you want to build a ship, don’t herd people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.” Appointees thus might abandon the idea of presidential reform as a “master blueprint” (Greiner, as quoted in Thompson 1999, 285) imposed from above, adopting in its place a “natural” (March, as quoted in Thompson 1999, 285) process model of innovation and change that amplifies within broad guidelines the natural reform tendencies found among employees within any large organization (Thompson 1999, 285).

This motivational approach notwithstanding, a key for appointees still seems to be expecting and identifying different motivational bases among career civil servants rather than going in with either bureauphobic or bureauphilic stereotypes (Durant 1992; Golden 2000; Heclo 1977). Importantly, while some prior research suggests careerists’ responsiveness (Wood and Waterman 1994), that research was done during the Reagan years, when careerists were asked to stop doing things (e.g., deregulation) rather than to make things happen. Moreover, Kagan (2001) has chronicled how Clinton appointees used prompt letters to induce additional regulatory action by agencies perceived as largely sympathetic to the president’s more pro-regulatory policy goals.

As a consequence, appointees would do well to think initially in contingent terms. One important early study suggests that identifying allies for coalition building remains imperative across policy initiatives (Heclo 1977). For example, staff, reformers, and employee unions who have been fighting for change in agency operations but losing in the past may be especially willing to advance presidential agendas that move away from the status quo, and appeals to institutionalists (those who worry about the well-being of the agency) may be especially mobilizable when issues are framed in terms of the image and integrity of the agency.

More broadly, researchers have found that appointees are more likely to advance presidential agendas administratively (i.e., to face less resistance from careerists) the less the extent of behavioral change required to advance presidential goals, the more consistent the culture of an agency is with what appointees are asking careerists to do, the more appointees can align reward systems with presidential policy goals, and the less that jobs are available for agency professionals in the private or nonprofit sectors who may dislike the president’s policy agenda (Durant 1992; Golden 2000; Maranto 1993). Prior research also suggests, however, that blind acceptance of all forms of incentive structures is unwise. A recent meta-analysis of 57 studies evaluating performance-related pay in government between 1977 and 2008 found that contingent pay has consistently failed to deliver on its promise—at least as presently designed and implemented (Perry, Engbers, and Jun 2009; but see Risher 2009 for a counterargument). This same study also suggests, however, that performance-based pay is more likely to succeed when appointees develop high levels of trust with employees, establish fairness in the pay-for-performance system, develop clear lines of sight between the rewards and behaviors needed to advance presidential goals, and ensure that appraisals are not perceived as arbitrary. Hence, the importance of thinking contingently and considering motivating through self-directedness and more purposive (mission-related) and solidary (group-identification) strategies.

Lesson 7: Appointees should get beyond “lonely organization” syndrome. Given today’s wicked policy problems, collaborating and partnering successfully among agencies and across sectors are imperatives for policy success. As such, political appointees must think beyond the traditional tools of the administrative presidency. Appointees will need to master a host of “neoadministrative” strategies to advance presidential agendas administratively.

One of the most striking challenges for public appointees in the Obama administration will be figuring out how best to harness for public purposes the dynamism of markets, the passion and commitment of nonprofit organizations and volunteers, and the public-service-oriented expertise of career civil servants at all levels of government.

As table 1 summarizes, a variety of technical considerations are involved in both the areas of contracting and networking (or partnering) with other organizations.
These considerations are rendered even more important, and more likely to become issues later in political appointees’ tenures, for two reasons. First, because of pressures to move quickly, much of the president’s stimulus funding has had to be passed through federal agencies and on to subnational bureaucracies without either critical political appointees in place or without expertise or capacity in the tasks assigned. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has received $1.2 billion to spend on homelessness prevention, a focus it has lacked in the past. Second, with spending deadlines imposed by Congress on several intergovernmental funding projects, prior research suggests that appointees anticipate that agencies faced with “use it or lose it” mandates are likely to push the funding as far, fast, and strategically as they can (Hill and Hupe 2002). In the process, appointees may later be faced with claims of waste, fraud, abuse, and ineffectiveness (witness the Reagan defense buildup in the 1980s and Hurricane Katrina in 2005).

But other broader challenges for appointees also exist, including the aforementioned efforts at developing cross-cutting agency performance measures and team building across agencies in presidential priority areas. The rub for political appointees trying to advance presidential agendas administratively is that networks produce principal–agent relationships that are decidedly at odds with the traditional aims, strategies, and tactics of the administrative presidency. Authority is decentralized within and across agencies and organizations rather than centralized in the hands of political appointees (Durant and Warber 2001). What is more, decentralization is realized by reforming the very structural, budget, personnel, and rulemaking “tools” that the administrative presidency assumes will centralize the power of appointees. In effect, presidents using administrative strategies to advance their policy agendas must have appointees who are capable of learning how to “network in the shadow of hierarchy” (Sharpf 1994).

What are these skills? While some have called these networks a “hollow state” (Milward and Provan 2000), public agencies remain the only partners operating with the sovereign authority of the state. Prior research also suggests that agencies working with networked programs often remain principal sources of funding. Consequently, appointees trying to advance presidential policy agendas administratively have strong bargaining levers with other partners in networks (Agranoff and McGuire 2003). They must, however, develop within their agencies strong bargaining, negotiating, and listening skills to work effectively in contract letting, partnering, and monitoring of nonhierarchical networks of public, private, and nonprofit actors.

A boundaryless agency’s success—as well as a president’s policy accomplishments—depends more on persuasion and arranging cooperative mechanisms than on ordering various actors to perform the “assembly line” of tasks necessary to meet client needs. Thus, advancing presidential interests in networked situations such as these seems to require appointees who know how to build a strong sense of common purpose among network members with diverse goals. Successful appointees also will nurture high expectations among the public, cultivate attentive and demanding relations with members of Congress and other elected officials who share that sense of purpose, and herald their accomplishments in the media. Rather than controlling network actors, success is more likely when appointees view budgets, personnel actions, and decision rules as tools for coaxing cooperation from others, for deregulating operations, and for leveraging agency resources with other organizations to advance presidential purposes.

**Lesson 8: Appointees should beware of one-size-fits-all, results-based approaches for accountability, measures that are not aligned with presidential goals, and the substitution of “ruler-bound” for “rule-bound” agencies. Measurements also should reflect broader values than economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. They should be used strategically, be of utility to managers, and be cross-agency in nature when partnerships are involved.**

Prior research suggests that political appointees can advance presidential agendas effectively within agencies by using measures to track performance. Yet it also offers caveats that political appointees ignore at their peril. One is the opportunity costs of heavily data-oriented accountability systems such as the Program Assessment Rating Tool and the Government Performance Results Act, as there is scant evidence that either gets information to agency managers in a timely and useable format for them to incorporate into the decision-making process (Radin 2006). Some advocate that agency heads, not the OMB, must lead in improving performance (as has been the custom) (NAPA 2008). That agency heads should do this goes without question. Yet the realpolitik of the presidency suggests that the OMB will continue to play a central rather than a supporting role. As long as presidents perceive that they are held accountable for everything that goes wrong, they will not—as the last four decades suggest—abandon their quest to have the OMB be the central player in performance measurement (Hult and Walcott 2004; Lewis 2008; Moe 1989). Consequently, political appointees must get on top of legislative and regulatory requirements regarding federal performance measurement and reporting mandates (NAPA 2008).

Aside from the more technical considerations summarized in the second row of table 1, which can
imperil successful implementation of such systems if not anticipated and corrected by appointees, other broader caveats are worth noting. Starting with values, appointees should avoid a narrow focus on economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. Values such as responsiveness, equity, due process, representativeness, and substantive constitutional rights not only are inherently vital in our democratic republic, but marginalizing them during policy implementation will only mean that appointees risk placing their agencies and the president in legal peril (Rosenbloom 2007). Values aside, political appointees should know that research on results-based measures and performance-based budgeting at all levels of government indicates that they can have both positive and negative effects on advancing presidential agendas administratively. They can enhance opportunities for appointees to monitor how well careerists and their partners are attaining program outputs (e.g., providing day care services for welfare-to-work mothers) and outcomes (e.g., reducing rates of unwanted pregnancies among welfare-to-work mothers). This research also suggests, however, that performance measures of success must be negotiated by appointees with legislative oversight committees, program stakeholders, and agency managers or else they will be resisted or gamed by careerists. Appointees must allow managers to gain “ownership” of the measures—for example, by participating in their development and making them relevant to the decisions they make. Moreover, with networked governance now de rigueur, cross-cutting agency teams should not underestimate the importance of purposive and solidary goals, of involving subordinates in the development of performance measures, and of meeting regularly to assess progress toward presidential priorities (NAPA 2008).

Given all this, political appointees trying to advance and implement presidential agendas administratively should devise performance measures with several critical aims in mind. First, they should stress how results-based programs can afford feedback for improvement and for defending and advancing budgets (Moynihan 2008). This more positive spin should be accompanied by a focus that emphasizes getting this information to managers in a useable format and in a timely enough fashion to inform decision making. Too often, these measures are presented and used purely as accountability mechanisms in a “gotcha” or control-based way that helps inspire defensiveness, at best, and gaming of the numbers by risk-averse careerists, at worst. Stressing the use of measures for the professional development of careerists, employing program learning, and making a difference in the lives of people affected by programs also can tap into the self-directive and public service (i.e., purposive) motivators.

Political appointees also should approach performance measures as a means for building and nurturing supporting coalitions for presidential policy goals both inside and outside their organization. Recent research documents how appointees should expect greater goal ambiguity when policy problems are more complex, salient, involve regulation, and have heterogeneous stakeholders and constituents (Rainey and Chun 2005). This means multiple and varying signals sent by various stakeholders. Thus, appointees should determine what measures matter most to the White House, careerists, congressional oversight committee members, and partners in networks in which they are involved. For example, stakeholders in Congress and in the Executive Office of the President may be more interested in responsiveness or representativeness measures, while partners may be more interested in tracking outcomes. In the process of sharing data that different stakeholders value, the latter may gain a greater stake in advancing presidential agendas.

Political appointees also should be sure that their zest for outcomes assessment does not ignore “critical business process” assessment as they try to advance presidential agendas administratively. Lost too often in the rush toward performance metrics is consideration of the linkage between existing agency processes and policy outcomes. Masked by ignoring this linkage is what works, what does not, by whose hand, and remedied in what ways. In turn, actors in the implementation “assembly line” should be evaluated on two factors: first, on the results they collaboratively produce with others and, second, on their individual contributions to critical processes linked to results that advance presidential agendas (Durant 1999).

Finally, policy scholars have wisely and widely understood that policy implementation is about “learning what to prefer” (Wildavsky 1987). No one gets policies correct the first time, so meaningful adaptation is needed. Consequently, political appointees must ensure that their desire to advance presidential agendas by using either process- or outcomes-based performance measures does not replace “rule-bound” agencies with “ruler-bound” programs. In the latter, performance measures can freeze existing processes and desired outcomes in place as careerists strive to meet them, marginalizing alternative means and processes for attaining agency goals.

“There’s No Such Thing as a Given Problem”: Putting Administrative Strategies in Discursive and Democratic Perspective

It is not a bad thing that presidents and their appointees do not automatically get their way; that tensions exist among and within the branches of government that must be engaged and mastered by appointees; and that history, context, and contingencies can both
limit and afford opportunities. What it means, though, is that the best appointees can do is adroitly create a policy bias in favor of their president’s agenda. They do this best by thinking contingently and normatively rather than ideologically about the political, bureaucratic, and policy realpolitik outlined in this article.

Lesson 9: Appointees should not take policy problems as “givens.” Rather, they should understand that problems are socially constructed, that various “claims makers” will compete to define them, and that whoever’s definition prevails wins the implementation game. In doing so, they should also attend to coproducing those solutions with career civil servants and to anticipating how the tools they use affect citizen trust in government. Students of agenda setting have long realized that the way in which issues are defined can determine both the victors in policy debates and the approaches taken to solving public problems. This is the case because issue definition determines the constellation of forces paying attention to the policy fight, and the audience paying attention determines the outcome because of the balance of forces vying to advance their interests (Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Thus, appointees trying to advance presidential policy agendas must not let the issues they are trying to advance be defined in ways that create coalitions inside and outside their agencies that will hinder implementation. Prior research suggests that political appointees need to be alert to, and take advantage of (if not create their own), “shocks” to the system. These can be framed in ways capable of advancing a president’s agenda administratively within their agencies (e.g., financial crises, natural disasters, and system failures). Moreover, they also must be alert to issue-framing opportunities other than focusing events. As Baumgartner and Jones argue, “political issues and public policy debates are constantly redefined and changed through the operations of two related forces: boundary effects, where events in one area of politics affect related areas, and the rise and fall of component parts of a complex issue on the public agenda” (1993, 51). These are windows of opportunities that appointees must look for, frame to their advantage, and neglect at the peril of unsuccessfully implementing a president’s policy agenda using administrative strategies.

Lesson 10: Remember that appointees affect perceptions of citizen efficacy and trust in government through the policy implementation tools they choose to use. At the same time, political appointees should be clear about the impact on social capital building of the tools they select to address policy problems. Scholars increasingly have identified how policy, policy tools, and policy implementation can affect levels of civic engagement and perceptions of government (see Ingram, Schneider, and deLeon 2007 for an excellent summary of this literature). Policy choices affect politics, both creating new interest groups and increasing and decreasing the relative power of those that exist. They also marginalize citizens because of the opaqueness and complexity of the implementation structures they create, as well as the levels of legal or technical expertise that citizens need to participate effectively in them (Pierson 1994). Moreover, as Mettler (2005) documents, when citizens see direct links (or “traceability”) between government action and the betterment of their life chances (as did recipients of the GI Bill), they tend to value government more highly. In contrast, complex, indirect, and market-based tools of government such as tax subsidies and third-party government obfuscate those links, making it seem that government is “receding” from the things that matter in citizens’ lives. Elected officials wishing to avoid accountability for unpopular choices often prefer complex implementation structures that mask traceability. But in the process, citizens’ support for government solutions to societal problems wanes, as does their concern about supporting capacity building in public agencies. This, in turn, makes government agencies less able to meet the responsibilities they have (e.g., protecting food supplies and responding to Hurricane Katrina) (see Durant forthcoming). At a minimum, appointees should be sensitive to these negative “affective” qualities and ameliorate them when possible.

Conclusion: A Compass for Dirty-Minded “Principled Agents” Nietzsche once observed that too much “historical sense” hinders optimism and thoughts of possibilities (quoted in Wood 2008, 72). But as the preceding suggests, forgetfulness of lessons drawn from the history of administrative strategies can be detrimental to advancing presidential agendas administratively. It also suggests how historical tendencies can be ameliorated to an extent by “dirty-minded” political appointees who understand the nature of the American political system and who adapt strategically, tactically, and normatively to it.

The preceding, of course, has assumed that such a “dirty-minded” compass will rest in the hands of principled appointees of the new president. Too often in history, however, unprincipled hands have wielded the tools of the administrative presidency for their own
or their president’s misguided aims, aggrandizement, or even malice. Consequently, the same dirty-minded perspective offered in this article can aid, abet, and advance their unprincipled aims as well as their more noble ones. Thus, new appointees to the Obama administration would do well to appreciate that their ultimate charge, and the legacy they leave, is not to themselves or to a given president but to the presidency, the nation, and the Constitution.

Political appointees are privileged to do what so many others will never do: They are helping “to run a constitution” (Rohr 1986) with elected principals and the career bureaucrats that Bertelli and Lynn (2006) so aptly call “Madison’s Managers.” Their first allegiance should be to preserving the republic that Benjamin Franklin proclaimed ours to keep or squander. Stewardship that is faithful to the Constitution, the republic, and its citizens should be their aim, dirty-minded realism their compass, and the public-interest-oriented expertise of career managers their talisman. By nothing less significant should they judge themselves; by nothing more important will history judge them.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank William West, Robert Tobias, Robert Maranto, David Rosenbloom, and Elizabeth Graffy for their suggestions and comments on an earlier version of this article. Special thanks as well to William G. Resh of American University for his research assistance on parts of this article and to Jennifer Durant for her technical assistance in its production. Errors of omission or commission are the author’s alone.

References


Copyright of Public Administration Review is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.