

Book Review

Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America's Lost Commitment to Competence by Donald F. Kettl

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Kettl, D. F. (2016). *Escaping jurassic government: How to recover America's lost commitment to competence*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press. \$25.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0815-72801-6.

Critiques of bureaucracy and bureaucrats are not new, and many of them are not constructive. Indeed, the terms have often been used as unflattering epithets indicative of American's long-standing distrust of government. So popular is the pastime of bureaucrat bashing, it has been described as political theater (Karl 1987). Underlying the negative perceptions of bureaucracy are often unexamined assumptions about efficiency and effectiveness.

One of the most popular interventions to address perceived deficiencies in bureaucratic functioning in recent decades has been the reinvention movement. Beginning with exhortations by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) to transform public management through market-based processes and "steering rather than rowing," the reinvention movement gained worldwide attention. In the United States, Vice President Al Gore led a reinvention-based effort to change the way federal agencies were managed. Beginning as the National Performance Review and later titled the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, the Clinton Administration released the group's first report, *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less* in late 1993 (Gore 1993). Consistent with Osborne and Gaebler's recommendations, the report recast the role of citizens into customers and suggested ways that government agencies could manage better with fewer resources by adopting market-based practices.

While many academics failed to embrace reinvention as a serious public management concept, others did. Observing the adoption of reinvention principles in Western democracies throughout the world, scholars who took reinvention seriously developed its academic face, the New Public Management. As with the original reinvention movement, the New Public Management relied on market-based principles and the concept of citizen as customer (Kettl 2000).

Fast forward to 2017 and the Trump Administration: Calls to reform government agencies and make public management more business-like are being made with new vigor. This vigor has already resulted in the creation of a new White House Office of American Innovation. Only time will tell what kind of impact will be generated by the current administration's bid to change the federal bureaucracy.

Into the often-heated atmosphere of dissatisfaction with American bureaucracy enters long-time public management scholar Donald Kettl with *Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America's Lost Commitment to Competence*, a cogent plea for government to adapt or die. He warns that, without adaptation through the return of bi-partisan commitment to competence, democratic government itself will be as extinct as the dinosaurs.

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In making the case for renewed commitment to competence, Kettl describes the basic paradox that exists between harsh views of government and demands for government action. Despite repeated calls for a smaller federal government, when people want government help, they not only want it, they want it immediately. He provides numerous examples throughout the book, ranging from federal forest fire fighting to collaboration among federal, state, and local governments working to solve the mystery of food-borne illnesses quickly so that widespread health problems will be avoided. The examples bring into sharp focus the need for competence in managing the public's business.

Competence and the Progressive Era

Kettl begins by describing the Progressive Era (1890s through 1920s) and its reform efforts. Reformers from both Republican and Democratic parties successfully advocated for more professionalized management of government, moving away from the patronage system epitomized by the corrupt Tamany Hall in New York City. While members of both parties may have disagreed over what government should do, they agreed that whatever was done should be done in a competent and professional manner. The bipartisan, Progressive commitment to competence made it possible for the United States to successfully weather economic challenges such as the Great Depression and emerge as a world leader in World War II.

The bipartisan compact gradually began to unravel, as Republicans and Democrats increasingly differed with regard to the size and role of government. Confidence in the Progressives' reform strategy and a professionalized civil service and executive budgeting dissipated over time. As policies came to increasingly rely on non-governmental actors for implementation, bureaucratic boundaries blurred. Government by proxy has made it far more difficult to retain accountability, leading to growing distrust in government. By the twenty-first century, Americans were (and are) plagued by highly polarized political parties and gridlock. Kettl makes the case that American government is in need of a re-boot to become Government 2.0.

Kettl's Six Basic Truths

Kettl introduces what he terms "six basic truths," asserting that they "must become self-evident and provide the backbone for genuine leadership" (pp. 15-17). These truths guide the book's focus and are:

1. government cannot shrink (much);
2. government does hard things (compared with the private sector), and it is not going to stop;
3. government does much of what it does by interweaving its work with the nongovernmental world, so the government's footprint will only increase;
4. the combination of these truths makes it harder for government to deliver;
5. starving the beast only undermines performance; and,
6. the failure to perform is bad policy, bad politics, and bad democracy;

Government's Size Can't Change Much

Americans have long debated the appropriate size of government. In contrast with common perceptions that Republicans favor smaller government, however, growth has come under both Republican and Democratic leadership. For instance, while Truman created the Department of

Defense, Eisenhower created the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Johnson added the Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development. While Nixon intended to reduce the number of departments, he ultimately failed, although he did remove the Post Office from the cabinet. Carter created the Departments of Education and Energy, and Reagan raised the Veterans Administration to cabinet status. George W. Bush created the Department of Homeland Security.

Much of what constrains the ability to reduce the size of government is demographic. For instance, the graying of America driven by the aging baby boomer generation makes it difficult for conservatives to reduce the size of government. At the same time, the number and complexity of citizen's demands on government is increasing. We expect our government to protect us from threats ranging from Ebola to terrorism. Thus, while the mix of services provided by government may change over time, its overall size will not. Indeed, the size of government as a share of GDP has changed little over the last 50 years.

Government Does Hard Things

Escaping Jurassic Government is filled with examples of just how difficult the work of government is. The author describes how public health workers at all levels of U.S. government traced a 2008 “attack of the killer tomatoes” – when tomatoes were seemingly causing severe stomach distress across America – to a single jalapeno at a food-processing plant in McAllen, Texas.

In another example, Kettl describes the frustration that can result from reliance on private-sector partners in times of crisis. When wildfires started in the area of Bastrop, Texas, in 2011, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Tex.) demanded that the U.S. Forest Service deploy a DC-10 firefighting plane. Once it arrived in Texas, the plane sat on the runway for 48 hours. The catch was that the DC-10 was not owned by the U.S. government but rather by a private contractor whose crews had logged so many hours that they had to rest for safety reasons before flying again. Other planes (P-3 Orion tankers) also sat idly by while the wildfires burned because the planes were owned by another private company that had not yet completed the required safety training. Further complicating the situation was the fact that 99.9% of the land for which the congressman was demanding assistance was outside the purview of the U.S. Forest Service. Ultimately, the U.S. Forest Service helped because they were asked by the Texas Forest Service. Addressing this public emergency eventually involved federal, state, and local government, as well as private-sector contractors, amply demonstrating the complexity of government action and responsibility.

Other “hard things” we expect of our government include ensuring bridge safety, safe drinking water, airport screening, and investor protection – which is just a sample of what we expect from our government every day. Managing complex government responsibilities with networks that often include different levels of government and nongovernmental actors translates into a profound need to recruit and retain the right people to work in government.

Despite the need for a skilled civil service, investment in the civil service has declined since the 1980s. There are some interesting paradoxes in civil service trends, too. For instance, Ronald Reagan ran for president on a platform that included reducing the size of the federal bureaucracy, but it actually grew by 4% during his administration owing to the growth in defense spending, which created a need for more civil servants to manage those contracts. Clinton reduced the size of the federal workforce by more than 350,000, but it grew again under George W. Bush in part because of the federalization of airport screening workers after 9/11.

One of the things that *did* change in the federal workforce as a result of Reagan's approach to government was its composition. Since the 1980s, the federal civil service has moved away from blue-collar employees through privatization but increased its white-collar numbers due to the need for more contract managers throughout government.

Interweaving

In tales of government fraud, waste, and mismanagement, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that much of what government does comes about through interwoven processes involving various levels of government and nongovernment organizations. Kettl highlights the need to understand that three important threads run through these stories.

First, any government problem is much more visible than problems in the private sector. Citizens expect transparency of government, including public meetings, open records, and access to emails. In contrast, the private sector expects (and often gets) the precise opposite.

Second, well-run private-sector organizations have strategies for how much waste they will accept. Sometimes these strategies are about maintaining quality. For instance, McDonald's will throw away any unused fries after seven minutes because, after that, they no longer taste like McDonald's fries. Sometimes private-sector waste occurs as a result of a mistake: The glass covers for several floors' light fixtures for the World Trade Center were thrown out when it was built in the 1970s because they did not fit. Because the private sector is far less transparent than the public sector, it is simply impossible to compare waste or mismanagement between the two sectors.

Third – and perhaps most important – is that government will do things that the private sector cannot or will not do. The complexity of the issues government addresses through public policies and programs makes effective management more difficult. Americans often take for granted the work of the Social Security Administration, which issues more than 59 million checks each month with an error rate so low it barely registers. Highway fatality rates have dropped significantly over the last three decades due to government work at all levels, including that of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Fire deaths also have greatly declined due to the work of local firefighters and stronger building codes.

Combined Truths

Given that government not only does hard things but also increasingly does them through proxies, it is much more difficult to deliver what is expected by citizens. Conservatives favor government-by-proxy, e.g., increasing reliance on third-party actors for policy implementation, because it provides a mechanism through which government can continue to address public demands without increasing the size of government. Liberals favor providing services through third-party actors as a way of expanding government's reach without increasing the size of government.

These combined truths mean that the civil service itself has changed to one with more contract management specialists. This translates into a move away from a civil service with a large proportion of lower-paid government employees to a cadre of well-educated professionals overseeing billions of dollars' in work delegated to third-party actors each year. The move away

from direct government provision of services means that it is more difficult to achieve the accountability on which trust in government rests.

Starving the Beast Undermines Performance

Conservative efforts to “starve the beast” began with the Reagan Administration and are predicated on denying public agencies the financial resources required to carry out their mission. This effort to indirectly reduce the size of government by constraining or eliminating the capacity of agencies to get work done has not had the effect desired by those who wish for smaller government. Instead, it has eroded public trust in government by reinforcing public perceptions about the ability of government to get the job done.

This strategy is another departure from the Progressive Era bipartisan commitment to competence. Instead of policy action based on debate of *what* government does, the emphasis is on the *how*. Efforts to starve the beast do not lead to less government action but rather undermine government effectiveness.

Failure to Perform: Bad Policy, Bad Politics, and Bad Democracy

Kettl tells us that undermining government’s ability to perform does not benefit anyone. He provides examples from recent presidential administrations to bring the point home. Federal efforts during the George W. Bush Administration in addressing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina will long serve as an example of government failure. Another failure of recent memory, the Obamacare website rollout, provides more evidence that government competence is a key factor in public trust.

While failures to fulfill citizen expectations for government performance can spell political disaster for elected officials – for instance, George W. Bush’s approval ratings never recovered from Katrina – the more important issue is that public trust in government may be irretrievably eroded if the commitment to competence is not restored. By limiting government’s ability to adapt in an ever-changing social, political, and economic environment, the move away from bipartisan commitment to competence threatens democracy itself. In Kettl’s view, this puts democracy on the same road to extinction as the Jurassic dinosaurs.

Recovering Lost Commitment

The answer to the challenge of Jurassic government, Kettl tells us, is in recovering America’s lost commitment to bipartisan competence in public management. Using Federalist No. 70 as a touchstone, the author quotes Hamilton: “a government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be, in practice, a bad government.” Further, Kettl states, “Making policy decisions but undermining the ability of them is, quite simply, dishonest government” (p. 177).

The biggest challenges of governance require adapting government institutions and processes to new problems, without cutting ties with a nation’s values. In the case of American democracy, this means improving the government’s ability to perform in response to citizens’ expectations without excessive constraint of basic freedoms.

Conclusion

Kettl closes by citing three lessons. First, government adaptation has already begun to take place through efforts to manage roles and responsibilities interwoven with third-party actors by effective use of evidence and data. Second, there is no need to simply take it on faith that necessary adaptation is taking place. Skilled leaders inside and outside government have already demonstrated how to make the interwoven activities of governmental and non-governmental organizations work. Third, successful government is possible. This will require government leaders with the instinct to lead, i.e., leaders who will build a strong public service and strong information systems to manage an increasingly interwoven public sphere.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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