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The Republican War on Competence

Posted by [Jeff Shesol](#)

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John F. Kennedy is not the only Massachusetts Democrat with an anniversary worth marking this fall. Nor is November 22nd the only occasion for sombre reflection, for rueful meditation on what might have been. You might have missed this amid the endless rerunning of the Zapruder reel, but it was twenty-five years ago this September that Governor Michael Dukakis, on a campaign visit to Sterling Heights, Michigan, strapped on a helmet, climbed into an Abrams tank, and effectively ceded the Presidential election to Vice-President George Bush.

As Josh King, a former Dukakis advance man, recently recalled in [Politico Magazine](#), the photo-op-gone-predictably-awry was a case of the Governor “pretending to be something he wasn’t.” But the larger problem for Dukakis was being something he actually was: a technocrat. No less damaging than the tank photo was Dukakis’s bloodless pronouncement at the 1988 Democratic National Convention that “this election isn’t about ideology; it’s about competence.” The G.O.P. made merciless hay of this. “Competence,” Bush said in his acceptance speech a few weeks later, “is a narrow ideal. Competence makes the trains run on time but doesn’t know where they’re going.” More commonly it is fascists (namely, Mussolini), not technocrats, who are said to make trains run on time, but nonetheless: advantage, Bush. And soon, election, Bush.

Competence, indeed, is a narrow ideal. It does not send [a thrill up one’s leg](#), and we will never write country music about it. That said, we Americans do like our trains to run on time—just as we like our Web pages to load quickly and our hold time on toll-free calls to be brief. If we are forgiving of sin, we are intolerant of incompetence. One of the unkindest cuts President Obama has received in recent weeks was the finding in yesterday’s [Washington Post-ABC poll](#) that a majority of Americans, fifty-six per cent, think he’s not “a good manager.”

It’s easy to forget how central that quality was to Obama’s appeal in 2008. The placards said “hope,” but Obama’s equanimity—especially in contrast to the bumbling George W. Bush Administration and the flailing, flipped-out campaign of John McCain and Sarah Palin—said “competence.” At long last, twenty years after the Dukakis debacle, the C-word itself could again be uttered in polite company: in the final days of the campaign, [Obama pledged](#) “a better government—a more competent government.” Newspaper endorsements picked up this line. “For all the excitement of his ... candidacy,” the Los Angeles [Times](#) observed, “Obama has offered more competence than drama.” The [Financial Times](#) wrote that “the steady competence of the Obama operation commands respect.”

For Obama, the focus on good, effective governance predated his campaign. It was on his mind from his first months on Capitol Hill, despite the fact that, as a freshman senator, he had little line authority over anything beyond the dress code of his staff. I met with him around this time, in the fall of 2005, to solicit his views on a policy agenda for a new think tank. Hurricane Katrina, Obama said, had raised doubts that the government could act effectively—a matter of special concern for progressives, he added, because progressives, unlike conservatives, actually want government to do something other than recede.

“Unlike the Republican agenda,” Bill Galston, of the Brookings Institution, recently [told Politico](#), “the Democratic agenda does not work unless people have a certain level of trust in the competence of the government to act on their behalf.” And when the President of the United States has to stand in the briefing room, [apologize](#) for “fumbling” the rollout of the most significant piece of reform legislation in nearly half a century, promise “patches” to his “glitches,” and ruminate about the “systematic problem” of federal “information technology procurement,” that level of trust, chronically thin, simply dissolves.

The efficacy of government, now the lonely responsibility of Democrats, used to be the province of both parties. (So did liberalism, for that matter, but good luck selling that one outside the faculty lounge.) The Progressive movement of the early twentieth century, with its enthusiasm for “scientific” administration and the emerging field of business management, influenced the approach of Theodore Roosevelt as well as Woodrow Wilson. William H. Taft, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt all sought to reorganize the executive branch to better manage the administrative state. In 1936, 1940, and again in 1944, F.D.R. faced Republican challengers who pledged not to repeal or roll back the New Deal, but to be better stewards of it—to run it more proficiently, more economically, with greater flexibility in its operation. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the first Republican President since Hoover, took precisely that position toward the welfare state, to the mounting fury of his party’s conservative wing.

Over time, the Republican abhorrence of government per se eclipsed the Republican interest in efficiency in government. It is hard to maintain, with a straight face, a promise to run a tight ship when you’ve been boring holes in its hull. Republican negligence gave centrist Democrats like Bill Clinton an opportunity to reclaim the mantle of sound management after the failures of the Great Society. Clinton [pledged](#) a government that was “more active, more effective, [and] less expensive,” and launched an ambitious effort to “reinvent government”—which may be best remembered not by the amount of red tape it cut but by [the image of Vice-President Al Gore](#) in safety goggles, smashing a glass ashtray with a hammer on the “Late Show with David Letterman” to demonstrate the foolishness of certain governmental regulations.

But, as Obama is finding, it’s hard for one party to make government work when the other party is determined to make government fail. Yes, the healthcare.gov debacle is manifestly “on us,” as Obama had to concede last week. But it happened in the face of a relentless campaign by the G.O.P. to do everything possible to prevent the law from taking effect, or from working if it did. Congressional oversight, particularly as [practiced by Representative Darrell Issa](#), is just another theatre in the war on efficacy. On occasion, we hear of Republican reforms to the Affordable Care Act, but these are offered in the spirit of the vandal who blithely assures you that your car

will run better with two wheels rather than four, so would you please hold his jacket while he removes your rear axle.

If there is any ambiguity left to the G.O.P. reform agenda, let it be put to rest by Michael F. Cannon, the director of health-policy studies at the Cato Institute and a former Republican Hill staffer: “The only way to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse in a governmental activity,” [he testified](#) before a House subcommittee in 2011, “is to eliminate that activity.” When you see virtually every governmental function, a priori, as wasteful, fraudulent, and abusive, from disaster relief to early-childhood education, the only way to save the village, to paraphrase a U.S. military officer in Vietnam, is to destroy it. This, one fears, they can do quite competently.

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