

Bloomberg

What a Waste Trying to Root Out Government Waste: Caroline Baum

By Caroline Baum - Mar 8, 2011

Bloomberg Opinion

Everyone who wants to eliminate waste, fraud and abuse in government, raise your hand.

Lots of hands. Good.

Next question: If everyone is in favor of streamlining the federal bureaucracy, why are we still creating committees and ordering up reports instead of talking about the problem in the past tense?

Here's the quick answer: All those overlapping government programs have oversight committees looking after them and constituencies behind them; constituencies with money and votes.

That's why I wouldn't get too excited about the latest 345- page report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Opportunities to Reduce Potential Duplication in Government Programs, Save Tax Dollars, and Enhance Revenue."

The March 1 [GAO report](#) may be the first pursuant to a new statutory requirement, but it is hardly the first to identify unnecessary duplication in federal programs. Every section contains references to recommendations "GAO made in 1994" or in prior reports. Surely Congress's watchdog has better things to do than hear itself make the same case year after year.

History offers little reason for optimism that waste, once identified, will be eliminated. No fewer than 13 presidents, starting with [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and his 1905 "Keep Commission," have taken up the gauntlet of rooting out [government waste](#).

History of Commissions

[Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) had his Brownlow Committee. The Hoover Commission had two incarnations, the first under [Harry Truman](#) and the second during [Dwight D. Eisenhower's](#) administration. [Ronald Reagan](#) appointed the Grace Commission to eliminate inefficiency. And [Bill Clinton](#) tried to reinvent government with his National Performance Review.

While the thrust may have [shifted](#) over the years from expanding executive authority to shrinking the

size of government, according to [Peri E. Arnold](#), professor of political science at University of [Notre Dame](#), the outcomes have been equally mediocre. A century after TR first tried to centralize administrative procedures and with the public fully on board, we are still looking for the Holy Grail.

In its latest report, the GAO identified 82 distinct programs to help improve teacher quality; 80 programs to provide transportation for low-income and disabled persons; 100 programs, each with separate funding streams, for road and rail safety; and 20 different agencies with 56 programs on financial literacy -- all at a time when “the government is on the verge of bankruptcy,” says Tom Schatz, president of Citizens Against Government Waste, a private, non-partisan group.

Libertarian View

No, you can't make this stuff up.

Libertarians view the crusade to eliminate waste, like the focus on earmarks, as a distraction.

“Earmarks and waste appeal to the average citizen,” says Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) in Washington. The real issue is “the fundamental nature of these programs and whether the government should be involved in them in the first place,” he says.

No wonder we focus on waste, fraud and abuse. Determining the proper role for the federal government is too important to be left to legislators. It's much easier to focus on the [\\$100 billion](#) that could be saved annually from greater efficiency, according to Senator [Tom Coburn](#), Republican of [Oklahoma](#), who offered an amendment last year that made the GAO report a statutory requirement.

Entrenched Constituencies

The hurdle to eliminating government programs, or even some of the redundancy, is Congress as well as you and me. For every redundant or overlapping program, there's a [congressional subcommittee](#) with oversight responsibility. None of them want to lose power and control.

“It's about more than the achievement of the goal of the program,” Schatz says. “No one wants to be the first to give up control.”

Then there are the recipients of government largesse, who favor duplication in programs, especially if it results in duplicate dollars received. The public speaks with its votes and its dollars. The programs live on. Reagan was right when he said the nearest thing to eternal life we will ever see on this earth is a government program.

Yet the effort, real or feigned, to cut out government waste continues. Last year, President [Barack Obama](#) signed the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act to do what the law's name

implies. In 2009, paying benefits to dead folks and reimbursing providers for fraudulent medical claims came to a record \$110 billion.

Cato's DeHaven wishes the government would cease and desist in its efforts to make government more efficient.

"I don't want these programs to be efficient," he says. "I want them not to perform and citizens to wonder why they are sending tax money to [Washington](#) for such terrible service."

Now there's a new angle -- and just one more reason streamlining government remains an unfulfilled wish and far- flung promise.

[Caroline Baum](#), author of "Just What I Said," is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are her own.)

To contact the writer of this column: Caroline Baum in [New York](#) at cabaum@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this column: James Greiff at jgreiff@bloomberg.net

©2011 BLOOMBERG L.P. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.