

The Washington Post

Five myths about federal workers

By Max Stier

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Federal workers are America's new favorite target. Last week, President Obama proposed freezing their pay for two years. "Getting this deficit under control is going to require some broad sacrifices," he said, "and that sacrifice must be shared by the employees of the federal government." Meanwhile, the president's bipartisan deficit commission endorsed a three-year pay freeze and a 200,000-person reduction of the federal workforce.

But are federal workers really the problem behind the struggling economy and the bloated budget? To answer, let's first dispense with some widespread misunderstandings about our federal workforce.

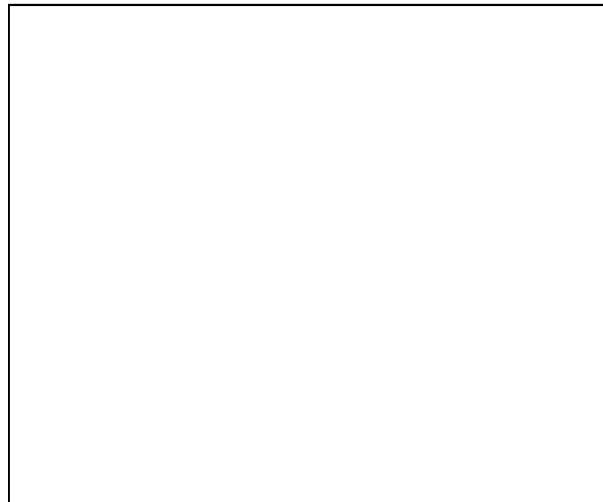
The notion that federal workers consistently earn higher salaries than comparable private-sector workers has become an accepted truth. Conservative think tanks, including the Cato Institute, make much of data that does not offer fair comparisons of similar public-sector and private-sector jobs or account for how experience and education affect pay. A pediatrician with a small practice in Des Moines and a doctor at the National Institutes of Health who is leading a team of 50 researchers trying to cure cancer both provide health care, for example, but we

shouldn't expect that they be paid the same.

Though some critics question their accuracy, government analyses show that federal employees make on average 24 percent less than their private-sector counterparts. The Congressional Research Service reported in 2009 that private industry pays higher salaries than the government for PhD-level employees in computer science, information science, mathematics, statistics, biological sciences, environmental life sciences, chemistry, economics, and civil, architectural, electrical and computer engineering. In addition, the average private-sector salary in 2010 for a recent college graduate was \$48,661. Entry-level federal workers start at \$34,075, or \$42,209 for candidates with superior academic achievement.

On the other hand, some federal blue-collar

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and clerical workers are paid more than those in the private sector. The ongoing debate about federal pay, however, does not address the root problem: The government does not have a pay system flexible enough to recruit the best talent and pay in accordance with the market.

Not including the U.S. Postal Service, the federal government employs 2.1 million people. The workforce is now slightly smaller than it was in 1967, at the height of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, and today there are 100 million more Americans to serve.

Even during the Reagan administration, when small government was a political mantra, there were still between 2.1 and 2.2 million federal workers. In fact, there was an increase of about 95,000 federal employees between 1981 and 1989.

In the 1990s, Bill Clinton reduced the workforce by nearly 350,000 to 1.8 million. Under George W. Bush, the federal workforce grew predominantly because of post-9/11 homeland security demands and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, two out of three federal civilian employees work for the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Veterans Affairs or Justice. The vast majority of government hiring since 2003 has been in these four departments.

In the 2009 fiscal year, 11,275 federal

employees were fired for poor performance or misconduct. In addition, a survey of federal managers by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board suggests that besides those who are formally terminated, there are a sizable number of employees who voluntarily leave after they are counseled that their performance is unacceptable.

Still, the myth persists that incompetent federal workers cannot be fired. Unfortunately, even federal managers buy into it, often believing that there is little they can do to deal with a poorly performing subordinate. The primary causes of this misunderstanding are that managers do not feel supported by top leadership and do not have clear performance expectations for their employees. Though the process is complex, there are rules in place across government allowing for the dismissal of workers not passing muster - and they should be used.

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The vast majority of federal workers hold white-collar professional, administrative and technical jobs, and aren't just college dropouts archiving triplicates of your tax return. Approximately 20 percent of federal workers have a master's degree, professional degree or doctorate, vs. 13 percent in the private sector. Fifty-one percent of federal employees have at least a college degree, compared with 35 percent in the private sector.

Remarkably, more than 50 current or former federal employees have received Nobel Prizes. In fact, about one in four American Nobel laureates have been federal workers. Their contributions have included the eradication of polio, the mapping of the human genome and the harnessing of atomic energy. Federal employees protect our food and drug supplies, manage airline traffic, foil terrorist attacks, care for our wounded veterans, and make sure the elderly and those with disabilities get their Medicare and Social Security benefits. This is hardly paper-pushing.

Clearly, hard choices are needed to restore our nation's fiscal health. But across-the-board pay and hiring freezes avoid tough strategic decisions. The real question is not what can we cut, but how can we best save money.

History has taught us that arbitrary, broad

hiring and pay freezes don't return significant cost savings. When the Clinton administration cut government jobs, overall federal spending still increased. Reagan's 1981 hiring freeze fell apart when routine exemptions were granted to fill urgent demands, such as for VA doctors or military support personnel.

How much will the government save by cutting 10 percent of the federal workforce - about 200,000 employees - as recommended by the president's deficit commission? If the work of federal employees is simply contracted to the private sector, the savings could be minimal or the move could even cost us more. If government employees are not replaced and their salaries are returned to the Treasury, the government would save at most \$20 billion annually, or roughly 0.5 percent of total budget outlays.

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Bottom line: We cannot come close to balancing the budget simply by cutting federal staffers or their salaries.

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