



Why Eliminating Government Agencies Is A Lot Easier Said Than Done

Tamara Keith

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President Trump's budget blueprint calls for eliminating dozens of government programs and zeroing out funding for 19 independent agencies. And that may only be a preview of things to come as the Trump administration seeks to reorganize the executive branch.

On Monday, Trump signed the "Presidential Executive Order on a Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch," which calls for the director of the Office of Management and Budget to consult with agency heads and within a year develop a plan for improving government efficiency.

In the language of the executive order, that plan "shall include, as appropriate, recommendations to eliminate unnecessary agencies, components of agencies, and agency programs, and to merge functions."

This order has some speculating it may be part of top Trump adviser Steve Bannon's mission to deconstruct the administrative state. Though, Trump is hardly the first president to call for streamlining the government.

Obama

In June 2011, former President Obama signed an executive order titled: "Delivering an Efficient, Effective, and Accountable Government."

That's phrasing Trump echoed as he signed his own order earlier this week. "This executive order is another major step toward making the federal government efficient, effective and accountable to the people," Trump said as cameras clicked away.

Clinton

In March of 1993, former President Bill Clinton announced what became the "National Partnership for Reinventing Government."

"Our goal is to make the entire federal government both less expensive and more efficient, and to change the culture of our national bureaucracy away from complacency and entitlement toward initiative and empowerment," Clinton said. "We intend to redesign, to reinvent, to reinvigorate the entire National Government."

From Roosevelt and Taft to Truman, Eisenhower and Reagan

American presidents have been launching commissions and issuing orders to reduce redundancy in government for more than a century. The libertarian-leaning CATO Institute economist Chris Edwards has a rundown of past efforts on the website he runs, downsizinggovernment.org:

"President Theodore Roosevelt appointed the Keep Commission in 1905 to improve federal management. In a message to Congress, Roosevelt said, 'There is every reason why our executive government machinery should be at least as well-planned, economical, and efficient as the best machinery of the great business organizations, which at present is not the case.' The president was expressing Progressive-era optimism in government, but, as we have seen, such optimism is misguided.

President William Howard Taft appointed a Committee on Economy and Efficiency in 1910. Then there was President Franklin Roosevelt's Brownlow Commission in the 1930s, President Harry Truman's and President Dwight Eisenhower's Hoover Commissions in the 1940s and 1950s, President Ronald Reagan's Grace Commission in the 1980s...."

Reagan came in promising to eliminate two Cabinet departments: education and energy.

"Both Secretaries are wholly in accord with this," Reagan said in a September 1981 speech. "Some of the activities in both of these departments will, of course, be continued either independently or in other areas of government. There's only one way to shrink the size and cost of big government, and that is by eliminating agencies that are not needed and are getting in the way of a solution."

Reagan started with the Department of Energy. The plan was announced in late 1981. Most of the agency's operations would move into the Department of Commerce. The energy secretary was telling reporters he planned to spend his summer fishing in South Carolina on the assumption that after a couple months of congressional wrangling the department would be gone and he'd be out of a job.

But come summer, the Energy Department was still around — as it is now, some 35 years later. The obstacle: Congress.

A New York Times article from 1982 described what happened:

"The main obstacle appears to be the strong opposition of key members of the House and Senate and the lack of interest by most other lawmakers in spending much effort on behalf of a measure that seems to have little political appeal and which would do virtually nothing to reduce the budget."

It's easier to create than to eliminate.

A long and complicated process

As the Trump administration begins its "reorganization" effort, CATO's Edwards, has seen this movie before. He created his downsizing government website when Obama in 2011 promised a government that is more competent and efficient.

"Which I hope the new director of budget for President Trump takes a look at in putting his plan together," Edwards said.

Trump's executive order spells out a multi-part process. First, agency heads have 180 days to send the budget director a plan to reorganize their agency, "if appropriate, in order to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of that agency."

Then the budget director has another 180 days to send the president a plan for reorganizing the government, taking into account whether some functions would be better left to the private sector, whether agency functions are redundant and whether costs are justified by the public benefits. The cost of shutting down or merging agencies and programs is also supposed to be taken into account as well as the effect on staff.

And when all of that is done, a year from now, Trump won't be able to implement the plan on his own.

"You usually need congressional approval, particularly for massive government reorganization, because laws exist that authorize agencies to exist or for agencies to conduct certain activities, and so in order to change that the president can't do that unilaterally," explained John Hudak, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "He needs Congress to go along with him."

And, as Reagan learned, that's far from a sure thing.

Potentially easier with one-party control, but...

One advantage Trump has that Reagan didn't is his party controls both the House and the Senate.

But recent history indicates, when it comes to eliminating agencies, it may not be that big of an advantage. In 1995, the GOP took control of Congress, and promised to eliminate multiple agencies: commerce, education, energy and housing and urban development.

Freshman congressman Sam Brownback of Kansas (now governor of Kansas) led the charge.

They started with the Department of Commerce.

"It involved 11 committees," said Kristine Simmons, vice president for government affairs at the Partnership for Public Service, who was a Capitol Hill staffer at the time.

It took months, but the bill made it through all those committees and passed the House. Simmons said it stalled in the Senate, where an Alaska Republican who chaired a critical committee objected to what it would mean for his state.

"So you have individual members that take particular interest in specific components and any one of those could prove a stumbling block," Simmons said.

After all the time and energy invested in the failed effort to eliminate the Department of Commerce, the GOP-controlled Congress never did go back to its hit list of other agencies.

Every agency, program and function has a constituency and a member of Congress who represents them. And virtually nothing goes without a fight.

A question of political capital

A year from now, when Trump is presented with a plan for reorganizing the government, perhaps even eliminating whole agencies, a major question will be how much political capital the president has to spare, Edwards said. And that will likely depend on whether Congress has passed the health care bill and his yet-to-be-unveiled tax-cut plan.

"If they have, and Trump's plate is sort of more open," Edwards said, "he may really put the effort in to make some of these cuts happen."

By then it will be spring in an election year (the 2018 midterms) and some in Congress will be facing primary challenges. Will reorganizing the government or slashing programs be how they want to spend their time?

Despite the built-in obstacles, everyone interviewed for this story saw potential in Trump's executive order, if handled well.

"This is a real opportunity for the president to change the face of what the United States government looks like and what it does," said Hudak, the Brookings fellow who studies government organization and presidential power.

But the key, he said, is focusing on efficiency rather than getting caught up in ideology.

"There's definitely redundancy in the federal government and any effort to go in and try to make it more efficient is a good thing," Hudak said, "so long as the purpose of that is truly to make the government efficient and not simply to cut agencies and activities that you disagree with ideologically."

Trump's executive order calls for public input as plans for cuts are developed. And once any proposal goes to congress, those concerned will no doubt weigh in with lawmakers too.