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Trump's 'lean' federal workforce larger than Obama's despite vows to cut

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President Trump took office with a vision of slashing the federal workforce. Instead, he's about to send it to levels never seen before.

In budget documents released Monday, the administration predicted it would employ the equivalent of nearly 1.5 million workers at civilian agencies next year, shattering all previous records.

While those numbers are artificially high because of the 2020 census, which will add some 60,000 new temporary workers, it's still much higher than President Barack Obama in 2010, the year of the last census.

Mr. Obama's numbers that year were also inflated by his stimulus package, which pumped hundreds of billions of dollars into the economy to try to lift it from the Wall Street crash and 2008 recession.

Mr. Trump has no such economic pressures, and the private-sector job market is roaring — making the growth of federal jobs all the more striking for a president who took office with a hiring freeze and told agency chiefs to look for places to cut.

It's a sobering reality for the president, who just three days into his tenure issued a memo ordering a hiring freeze "across the board." Three months later he lifted the freeze, though his budget office ordered agencies to keep looking for ways to "achieve near-term workforce cuts."

A senior administration official said Monday they have accomplished that in areas where they could, while seeing increases of personnel in other places where Mr. Trump sees the need for strength.

"President Trump is keeping his promise to build a strong military and prioritize national security, take care of our veterans, and the need to have a modern and efficient federal government that better serves the American people," the official said.

The new workforce projections were released as part of Mr. Trump's full 2020 budget plan, putting meat on the bones of the framework the president sent to Congress last week.

Waste-watchers said the president is facing tough headwinds in trying to meet his promise of a "lean" workforce.

"Right-sizing the sprawling bureaucratic state is one of the toughest tasks in Washington," said Curtis Kalin, director of communications at Citizens Against Government Waste.

“President Trump has made laudable efforts to trim the federal bureaucracy through attrition, but comprehensive reform has been painfully slow and fraught with political challenges.”

He said one option is to pursue ways to make it easier to fire employees for wrongdoing or poor performance.

That’s what Congress and Mr. Trump did at the Department of Veterans Affairs, after a scandal that saw veterans die while stuck on wait lists for appointments at VA clinics.

Yet the firing authority has done little to dent hiring.

Instead, the VA will grow to 394,000 employees in 2020, up more than 40,000 in just three years and nearly 110,000 more than a decade ago, the White House projects.

That’s despite the overall number of veterans declining, from 23 million in 2007 to 20 million in 2017. By 2037 the number will be just 13 million.

The increase is happening at a time when the government has made private care a more attractive option, allowing some veterans to skip VA clinics altogether.

“Why are the number of VA employees under the Trump administration rising when the VA itself projects that the number of veterans in the nation is falling?” said Chris Edwards, director of tax policy at the Cato Institute and editor of DownsizingGovernment.org.

Also surging is the area of homeland security, which is up 29,000 people compared to 2010, and 135,000 compared to 2000.

While the Department of Homeland Security itself wasn’t created until 2003 — and with it the Transportation Security Administration — some components existed before, such as the Border Patrol, Secret Service and Federal Emergency Management Agency.

As threats have increased, the department continues to add new roles, and with it personnel.

On the other side of the ledger are the Treasury, Agriculture and Interior departments, which are projected to be down a combined 45,000 workers over the last decade.

The numbers are for “full time equivalent” employees, known as FTEs in Washington-speak. That means the total number is higher when the numbers are translated into part-time and other non-traditional workers.

The administration says FTEs are an “imperfect” measure that doesn’t discriminate between an intern and a senior manager.

An administration official also said they have found it makes more sense in some instances to hire federal workers rather than have contractors or uniformed personnel do jobs.

That’s particularly true at the Defense Department, where the civilian workforce will rise to 758,000 in 2020, up from 726,000 when Mr. Trump took office.

Combined with the 1.5 million workers in civilian agencies, that leaves a total executive branch civilian workforce of 2.2 million, not counting the U.S. Postal Service.

Analysts say the number of workers isn’t the only yardstick for measuring attempts to rein in the costs of the workforce.

Mr. Edwards said Mr. Trump has made strides in trying to curtail cost-of-living adjustments for federal pensions and increasing employees' payroll contributions for buy-in.

But those will take approval from Congress, which was wary of Mr. Trump's call to tame the civilian bureaucracy even when it was controlled by Republicans.

Congress last month approved a 1.9 percent pay increase for civilians, almost as much as the 2.6 percent raise for military personnel.