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Unaccountable Government in Washington, D.C.

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In the nearly seven years since the 2009 subway crash that killed nine people, the Washington, D.C., Metro transit system has spent more than \$4.5 billion on a capital-improvements project designed to increase safety. The Metro system's proposed five-year Capital Improvement Program envisions \$6 to \$8 billion in additional funding. But despite the expenditures so far, last week it was announced that safety had deteriorated so much that large parts of the system might have to be shut down for up to six months to make repairs. And, while many Americans might be thrilled at the prospect of Congress and federal bureaucrats unable to get to work, we might also be wondering where those billions went.

When there is a foul-up this big — you may quite naturally be thinking — people are held responsible. Heads must have rolled.

Well, not exactly. As Metro board member Corbett Price recently lamented, a few low-level employees were disciplined for safety lapses, but “the management gets a pass.” In fact, the people directly responsible for overseeing the waste and safety lapses were generally allowed to retire, with their generous pensions intact.

Okay, but even if the people responsible weren't punished, at least the system won't see another dime of taxpayer money until it gets its act together, right? Don't count on it. Metro is seeking as much as \$1 billion per year for capital investments and repairs that should have been made with the first \$4.5 billion. Whoever said “Failure is its own reward” probably didn't have this in mind.

Does anyone think that failures of this magnitude would be tolerated in the private sector? Well, maybe they would in an environment of government bailouts and cronyism, but not in a free market. Markets reward success, and they also punish failure. Government? Not so much.

Consider just a few examples from recent years. Remember the VA? After officials were found discovered to have falsified records in at least 110 facilities nationwide to cover up delays in care, exactly three employees lost their jobs. And the VA itself was rewarded with \$10 billion in additional funding. I could go on: We have seen the IRS putting roadblocks in the way of conservative groups seeking tax-exempt status; the succession of Secret Service lapses and scandals; data breaches at OMB; and the catastrophic failure of HealthCare.gov. And don't think this lack of accountability is purely a phenomenon of the Obama administration. How many officials lost their jobs as a result of the intelligence failures that led to our debacle in Iraq? Or consider the tragedy with the water supply in Flint, Mich.; there was clearly failure stretching from the governor's office to the EPA. Who is being held responsible?

And the problem is not just one-time failures or scandals. Our schools do a worse and worse job of educating our children, even as we steadily increase education spending. More than \$22 trillion in anti-poverty spending has failed to reduce poverty, and so Washington seeks yet more money to continue the fight. Social Security and Medicare are going broke at their current levels of spending, while Democrats call for expanding the programs.

And if we are hoping for this trend to change, we shouldn't be looking to either the Democratic or the Republican front-runner for the presidential nomination. Clinton? Accountability? One can't use those two words in the same sentence without breaking down in paroxysms of laughter. From Whitewater to Benghazi, Hillary Clinton's life has been an exercise in avoiding responsibility. Perhaps worse, she is a wholly owned subsidiary of the public employees' unions.

What about Donald Trump? One might think that a Washington outsider and a businessman would bring a new measure of accountability to the federal government. But his refusal even to reprimand his campaign manager for grabbing a reporter is just the latest example of a lack of accountability in the Trump campaign. Trump has made a fetish out of never admitting to a mistake. Nor does he hold his employees responsible for their actions. And, no, firing someone on *The Apprentice* doesn't count.

Ultimately, though, the answer is not about changing the names of those in charge. Yes, better management can help. But a lack of accountability is built into the DNA of big government. Government bureaucracies, programs, and, indeed, much of government itself exist for their own sake — they work for their own benefit, not to serve their constituents. That makes the cycle of failure, excuse, and demand for more money inevitable.

We should keep that in mind the next time a politician promises to get rid of waste, fraud, and abuse — i.e., to make government more efficient. He might as well promise to make pigs fly.

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