

# Hercules or Sisyphus as Model for Government Reform?

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The new National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform ("Washington's \$1 Trillion Opportunity," by Paul C. Light, op-ed, May 25) would be off to a good start if its members first read the 1984 Grace Commission Report and the two prior Hoover Commission Reports.

In all cases, these began with a political fanfare and faded into the sunset when presidents and Congresses realized they would have to fire people and actually cut spending in order to carry out the recommendations. There is little reason for the American people to believe this new commission will be any more successful with this president and this Congress.

**C. W. "Bill" Getz**

*Fairfield, Calif.*

These things seem to come and go, with little long-term result. We all remember that Vice President Al Gore was assigned the responsibility during the first Clinton term to "reinvent government." The finished product involved a photo of President Clinton and Vice President Gore on the White House lawn posing with thousands of pages of bound documents that were supposed to make government more efficient and much less costly to the taxpayer. We all know how that turned out.

The fact is that Congress controls the purse strings, and only Congress can rein in spending. The more that this is delegated to outside panels and commissions, the more Congress is able to avoid the responsibility to spend prudently.

Why not try the approach that every family and business in the U.S. uses quite effectively? First, determine the revenue or family income available, and then calculate expenses to match the revenue constraints. This works like a charm.

If Congress could resolve to cap federal spending at an amount realistically calculated not to exceed federal revenue, we could avoid the consequences of unrestrained spending on display on a daily basis in the world-wide media.

It may not be too late to take this route, but we are rapidly approaching the day when we will be out of time to implement it.

**William Stephenson**

*Princeton, N.J.*

One of the more pernicious aspects of government is to tie the salary of managers to the number of people they manage. In other words, you get a pay raise by being less efficient and by bloating your department.

Another is that in contrast to Europeans, we replace and thus weaken the senior management team for every change in administration. By all means have a cabinet secretary set the policy, but let's reinforce the competency of the managers below him or her.

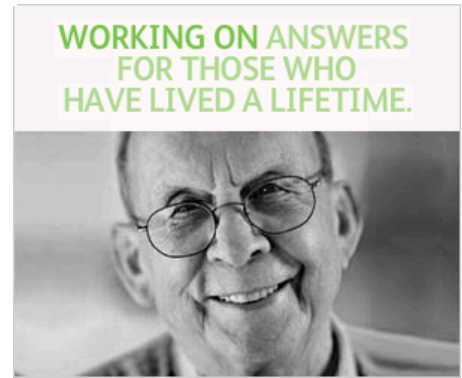
Such frequent change destroys continuity and expertise and fosters corruption.

**Don Hutchinson**

*Sudbury, Mass.*

Paul Light is right that hundreds of billions of dollars could be saved by streamlining the federal bureaucracy.

Mr. Light says that it has been "nearly 60 years since Herbert Hoover led the last streamlining



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effort." Really? What about former Vice President Al Gore's reinventing government effort of the 1990s? That was the "most successful reform in U.S. history," according to John Kamensky, the deputy director of the effort. Mr. Kamensky also said it was the 11th major attempt to overhaul the bureaucracy in the 20th century.

Yet we continue to be vexed with major failures, most recently at the Minerals Management Service. The reality is that the government is far too large to manage properly. Mr. Light's dream of an efficient bureaucracy can only be realized with a far smaller government that sticks to its core responsibilities.

The mythological Sisyphus was condemned for eternity to roll an oversized boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down. To escape from our own hell of malfunctioning government, we need a smaller boulder.

**Tad DeHaven**

*Cato Institute*

*Washington*

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