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**Donald P. Moynihan**
University of Wisconsin–Madison
**Alasdair S. Roberts**
Suffolk University Law School

Spotlight on Key Challenges Confronting Twenty-First-Century Public Administration

# The Triumph of Loyalty over Competence: The Bush Administration and the Exhaustion of the Politicized Presidency

*The most important administrative aspect of the George W. Bush presidency was not its formal management reform agenda, but its attempt to extend the politicized presidency. Efforts to assert tighter political control of the federal bureaucracy, revived during the Ronald Reagan administration, were pursued to an extreme under Bush. Loyalty triumphed over competence in selection, and political goals displaced rationality in decision making. However, the strategy of politicization undermined the Bush administration's own policy goals as well as its broader agenda to restore the strength of the institutional presidency. This apparent failure of strategy signals the urgent necessity for a fundamental reconsideration of the politicized presidency.*

**Donald P. Moynihan** is associate director of the La Follette School of Public Affairs and a Romnes Fellow at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research examines public management issues such as performance, homeland security, citizen participation, election administration, and employee behavior. He is the author of *The Dynamics of Performance Management: Constructing Information* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), which won the award for best book from the Public and Nonprofit Section of the Academy of Management in 2009.
**E-mail**: dmoynihan@lafollette.wisc.edu

**Alasdair S. Roberts** is the author of *The Logic of Discipline: Global Capitalism and the Architecture of Government* (Oxford University Press, 2010), *The Collapse of Fortress Bush: The Crisis of Authority in American Government* (New York University Press, 2008), and *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). He is the Jerome L. Rappaport Professor of Law and Public Policy at Suffolk University Law School, a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, and an honorary senior research fellow of the School of Public Policy, University College London.
**E-mail**: alasdair.roberts@gmail.com

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George W. Bush was heralded as the United States' first "MBA President," and at the time of his inauguration was expected to lead an administration that placed heavy emphasis on the promotion of good management within the vast federal bureaucracy (Pfiffner 2007). Bush, a CNN anchor said in January 2001, would "usher in a new, more corporate era of management" (CNNfn 2001). "President Bush will find his MBA skills invaluable," the president of the Graduate Management Admission Council predicted. "I do not anticipate there will be any fuzzy math in this administration" (Business Wire 2000). The Bush family's "dynastic politics are bottomed less on an ideology than on an assumption of superior management," said a feature article in the *New York Times Magazine.* "If someone has to run things, it should probably be a Bush … [Bush] says that good management … makes good politics" (Bennet 2001).

Indeed, a case can be made that the Bush administration *did* pursue a strategy aimed at overhauling management practices within federal government. In August 2001, the Office of Management and Budget outlined a "bold strategy for improving management and performance of the federal government," including detailed proposals for reform of government-wide management laws (Executive Office of the President 2001, 1). In its first year, the administration also sent two major reform bills to Congress—the Managerial Flexibility Act and the Freedom to Manage Act. It adopted a scorecard to measure the management capabilities of federal agencies, and developed a sophisticated tool for assessing the effectiveness of federal programs (Breul 2007; Dull 2006). Events also compelled the administration to undertake two of the most complex reorganizations of governmental functions in decades—the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and the restructuring of the federal intelligence community.

> … the Bush administration's formal reform agenda … [encompassed] a combination of proposed changes to laws, regulations, and policies that were presented explicitly as measures to improve management within the executive branch.…there was a coherent second management agenda, whose goals and main elements were rarely made explicit, and which rarely involved formal-legal changes. Though it has attracted considerably less scholarly attention … this second agenda was more important in deciding the fate of the Bush administration.

Together, these policies constituted the Bush administration's formal reform agenda—that is, a combination of proposed changes to laws, regulations, and policies that were presented explicitly as measures to improve management within the executive branch. Perhaps because this reform agenda was explicit, and also aimed at easily observed changes to laws and policies, it garnered a considerable amount of attention from scholars in public administration (e.g., Brook and

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King 2007; Gilmour and Lewis 2006; Moynihan 2008; Thompson 2006).[1] Much of this work fits within a broader scholarship on administrative reform, pioneered by scholars such as Arnold (1995) and March and Olsen (1983). This work critiques a tradition within public administration of examining formal reform efforts by using only administrative criteria. Formal reforms occur in a political context: they may be motivated by a desire to communicate values to the electorate, used to exercise control over bureaucracy, and often fail when they run afoul of political realities. For example, Dull (2006) examines how Bush administration invested a great deal of effort in creating the Program Assessment Rating Tool, which provided a credible and transparent mechanism to shape policy in ways that were consistent with the administration's priorities.

But attention to formal reforms can lead public administration scholars to overlook other forms of administrative change that are more difficult to examine, but perhaps more consequential (Suleiman 2003, 192–93). In the case of the Bush administration, there was a coherent second management agenda, whose goals and main elements were rarely made explicit, and that rarely involved formal-legal changes. Though it has attracted considerably less scholarly attention, in part because political actors were circumspect in advertising it, this second agenda was more important in deciding the fate of the Bush administration. "[T]he most salient events of the George W. Bush years were basically administrative in nature," says Rudalevige (2009, 11), but they were not part of the formal reform agenda—rather, they were failures that arose from the second agenda: "the management of Hurricane Katrina and postwar Iraq to the alleged politicization of the Justice Department and lack of regulatory heft in the financial sector."

This second management agenda was also concerned with the performance of the federal bureaucracy. It flowed from a perception that the federal bureaucracy was indifferent or hostile to presidential goals because of the professional and ideological biases of career employees. And so an attempt was made to tighten political control over the bureaucracy—by expanding the number of political appointees; by giving more weight to loyalty than to merit in hiring decisions; by transferring untrustworthy bureaucrats out of key positions, or pressuring them to resign; by excluding career officials from decision making; and by centralizing authority over key policy decisions in the White House. These are the management techniques of a politicized presidency (Durant 1987; Moe 1985; Pfiffner 1985).

This second agenda was not invented by the Bush administration; arguments for tighter political control of the federal bureaucracy were made under Richard M. Nixon and Ronald Reagan. However, the Bush administration pushed the doctrine of politicization more aggressively than its predecessors, allowing it to be corrupted for purposes that had little to do with the accomplishment of administration priorities. During the Bush era, politicization was defined by the routine triumph of loyalty over competence in selection, and the displacement of basic decision rationality by political goals in decision making. In the end, this second agenda proved self-defeating: rather than enhancing presidential control over the bureaucracy, politicization actually corroded control, undermined the institution of the presidency, and weakened the political standing of President Bush. As a result, the end of the Bush administration may mark a reconsideration of the recent experiment with politicization as a means of executive control.

## The Case for Politicization

Enthusiasm for politicization as a method of executive control is hardly new within the U.S. federal government. The first president to articulate a broad suspicion of the federal bureaucracy was Andrew Jackson, who in 1829 announced a policy of "rotation in office" to "destroy the idea of property now so generally connected with official station" (White 1954). Populist distrust of the federal civil service, and consequential enthusiasm for politicization, also persisted within the conservative wing of the Republican Party throughout the twentieth century. It was evident, for example, in McCarthyite attacks on the Eastern elite, which was believed to dominate the federal bureaucracy in the early years of the postwar era (Fried 1997).

Nevertheless, advocates of executive control fought a rearguard action against progressive reformers for most of the twentieth century. The trend in reform was to entrench the value that Kaufman called "neutral competence"—that is, the capacity of government officials to do the work of government expertly, with no regard for party loyalties. "The quest for neutral competence," Kaufman said in 1956, "has never waned" (Kaufman 1956, 1060–61).

But the tables began to turn during the Nixon administration. President Nixon became increasingly distrustful of the federal bureaucracy. After the 1972 election, he began a concerted effort to tighten control over political appointees and to use those appointees, in turn, to control the career bureaucracy. The premise, Nixon's personnel chief said in an internal memorandum, was that "you cannot achieve management, policy or program control unless you have established political control." This was the beginning of a coherent, modernized theory of politicized control—but it was still tinged with illegitimacy, particularly after Nixon's resignation in August 1974 (Aberbach 1991, 4–6).

A body of scholarship produced in the late 1960s and 1970s gave a sheen of academic credibility to this roughly articulated distrust of career bureaucracy. Conservative scholars argued that bureaucrats in the national government should be regarded in the same terms as entrepreneurs in the private sector: as self-interested actors, mainly interested in maximizing their salary and benefits, budgets, and authority. Unless forcefully checked, these scholars argued, bureaucrats would build administrative empires and resist uncomfortable changes in policy. "Budget-maximizing" bureaucrats were considered one of the main causes of overgrown and ineffectual federal government (Niskanen 1968; Tullock 1965). It followed from this that firm measures by political executives to check bureaucratic impulses were justified.

A later literature on presidential scholarship further articulated the case for politicization. Executive leaders were deemed the only actors capable of overcoming a fragmented political process, and they had extraordinary expectations to live up to. One resource that could enhance their effectiveness was more active control of the bureaucracy (Knott and Miller 1987; Moe 1985; Nathan 1983). This viewpoint downplayed the negative potential outcomes of politicization to the public service generally, the insitution of the presidency, the

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rule of law, and public sector performance. Indeed, a more politicized administration was argued to be more effective than one served by an empahsis on neutral competence. More recent research shows that such sharp distinctions between competence and responsiveness are inconsistent with much of twentieth-century presidential history (Dickinson and Rudalevidge 2005, 2007). For example, the Harry S. Truman administration, often regarded as the high point of nuetral competence, was very responsive to the wishes of the president. But this responsiveness was married with competence, fostered by career input, continuity, and protection of the institution of the presidency (Dickinson and Rudalevidge 2005). Later presidents, less trusting of government, were likely to pursue responsiveness in different ways, and more likely to conflict with competence.

The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked the advent of a fully articulated doctrine of politicization. Conservative think tanks helped propagate the new management philosophy. It was predicated on the proposition that the federal system was deeply resistant to change—that it was, as M. Stanton Evans said, “a permanent, self-enclosed system that operates on its own terms, toward its own ends, according to its own laws” (Hart 1990, 104). The career bureaucracy, a Heritage Foundation report warned the incoming administration, “will lobby vigorously against … significant policy change” (Warshaw 1995, 250). The prescription was to appoint “certified conservatives” whose allegiance to the president was beyond dispute and who were prepared to apply a firm hand to their agencies (Weko 1995, 96). “Career staff will supply information,” a Heritage Foundation report advised, “but they should never become involved in the formulation of agenda-related policy objectives” (Pfiffner 1987, 59).

The Reagan administration took this advice to heart. *New York Times* editorialist Howell Raines said that its approach to appointments evinced “a revolution of attitudes” about proper qualifications: loyalty and determination to rein in bureaucracy were now the paramount concerns (Raines 1981; see also Nathan 1983, 74; Weko 1995, 90). “Personnel is policy,” a senior Reagan White House official later said (Hart 1990, 104). As concern for the “ideological commitment” of appointees grew, so, too, did the number of appointments—by 20 percent during Reagan era. Staffing within the Executive Office of the President grew by a similar proportion, despite the administration’s “small government” rhetoric (Michaels 1995, 273; Pfiffner 1987, 58; Warshaw 1995, 250). Terry Moe suggests that the Reagan administration’s approach did “much more than continue a historical trend.” The administration built a new model of executive control, premised on politicization and centralization, that was “coherent, well integrated, and eminently workable.” Future presidents, Moe predicted, would “build upon the Reagan example” (1985, 271). Twelve years later, this is precisely what the administration of newly elected President George W. Bush was encouraged to do. The Heritage Foundation again warned the new administration that the federal bureaucracy remained a permanent government “jealously guarding paychecks, pocketbooks, and power” (Moffit 2001). A 2001 Heritage Foundation report worried that the delay in resolving the 2000 election might tempt the president to name fewer political appointees and rely more heavily on career servants. This, the report said, “would be a profound mistake … Political appointees, personally loyal to the President and fully committed to his policy agenda, are essential to his success.” The selection of appointees should be “based on loyalty first and expertise second, and that the whole governmental apparatus must be managed from this perspective” (Moffit 2001). Such appointees should take responsibility for management decisions rather than delegate them to the bureaucracy, and would need greater authority to control bureaucrats, who enjoy a “workplace culture of entitlement.”

The Heritage Foundation worried needlessly. The Bush administration quickly demonstrated its commitment to the strategy of politicized control refined by the Reagan administration. It, too, increased the number of political appointees—especially Schedule C appointees, the number of which grew by 33 percent between 2001 and 2005 (U.S. House 2006). The White House also took extraordinary steps to ensure loyalty, directly interviewing candidates and providing cabinet officials with short lists of acceptable appointees (Warshaw 2006). One appointee said that the White House seemed determined to cultivate a “Cult of Bush”: “This group is all about loyalty, and the definition of loyalty extends to policy-making, politics, and to the execution of policy” (Drew 2006). At the same time, the White House centralized authority over key policy decisions, in an effort to counter the “centrifugal forces” inherent in the Washington bureaucracy (Mayer 2004, 624). While centralization and politicization are generally presented as distinct presidential strategies (Dull 2006; Weko 1995), the Bush administration blurred the line between the two (Rudalevige 2009). Open dissent on key policies was not tolerated (Auletta 2004). This gave rise to an environment in which substantive policy discussions were rare, and were routinely trumped by political considerations (Pfiffner 2007; Rosen 2007). White House officials briefed political appointees from across government regularly on election strategies and the needs of vulnerable Republican constituencies, in some cases in apparent violation of federal law (Higham and O’Harrow 2007). Determining the extent to which the law was violated has proved difficult: the Office of Special Counsel tasked with investigating the possible violations was itself headed by an appointee who was under investigation for politicizing his agency (Lewis 2007).

The control losses usually associated with a strategy of politicization are an understandable result of the decision to bring “outsiders” into government. Outsiders may have “ideological commitment,” but they also may lack substantive knowledge about the organization and the history of federal policies and structures.

## The Costs of Politicization

All control systems are imperfect, and bring their own costs. The artistry in management consists of designing control systems that allow the achievement of objectives while keeping “control losses” to a minimum (Merchant and Van der Stede 2007, 11). The control losses usually associated with a strategy of politicization are an understandable result of the decision to bring “outsiders” into government. Outsiders may have “ideological commitment,” but they also may lack substantive knowledge about the organization and the history of federal policies and structures. Inexperience is not an argument against appointment; however, it creates a risk that, in

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a carefully executed strategy of politicization, would be anticipated and managed. The danger, which we will argue was realized during the George W. Bush administration, is that the risk ceases to be acknowledged. This was evident in many of the administration's early political appointments.

Politicization in selection is sometimes examined in terms of the number of political appointees (Lewis 2008), but just focusing on the numbers tells us little about the intensity of political loyalty of appointees, their competence, or their behavior. The Bush White House often preferred appointees who were young and inexperienced, and lacked backgrounds in the policy areas for which they became responsible, but had strong financial or familial connections to the Republican Party or had worked on election campaigns (U.S. House 2006, 9). While their expertise was questionable, their loyalty was not. Such appointees have traditionally been given limited responsibility (Lewis 2008, 29), but this was not the case in Bush administration.

The inattention to the risks of politicization likely arose because politicization had slipped from strategy to dogma. During the Reagan era, the case for political control was still based on an instrumental logic; for example, the deployment of carefully screened appointees was important to advance "the policy agenda of a conservative administration" (Pfiffner 1985, 352). So long as politicization was considered to be valuable for instrumental reasons, it would be reasonable to expect that a line would be drawn when the risk of failure as a result of inexperience or incompetence grew unacceptably large. Over time, however, the strategy of politicization was transformed into dogma—that is, it was applied for its own sake, and without regard to potential risks.

The damage to competence was perhaps best typified by Michael Brown, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), who resigned after the dismal response to Hurricane Katrina. Brown and other senior appointees in FEMA lacked emergency management expertise, but had significant political campaign experience. FEMA career staff perceived that the appointees were concerned about the politics of emergency management at the expense of agency capacity, with one testifying, "[T]hat's what killed us … in the senior ranks of FEMA there was nobody that even knew FEMA's history, much less understood the profession and the dynamics and the roles and responsibilities of the states and local governments" (U.S. Senate 2006, 14–15).

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, an additional political controversy underscored the tension between political control and competence. A number of U.S. attorneys were forced to resign by the Department of Justice. In the words of a senior Justice Department appointee, Kyle Sampson, the need for "loyal Bushies" appeared to be a primary factor. Sampson, a classmate of Vice President Dick Cheney's daughter, had become chief of staff for Attorney General Alberto Gonzales by his mid-thirties. Sampson and another young lawyer, Monica Goodling, were given far-reaching autonomy in personnel decisions, despite the fact that each lacked significant prosecutorial experience. Goodling was a graduate of an evangelical law school who parlayed a position as an opposition researcher for the Republican National Committee into a senior post at the Justice Department.

Definitive evidence on the reasons for the firings, and the role of White House, has been limited by Bush administration's decision to claim executive privilege in order to block congressional investigations. Some of the U.S. attorneys fired had resisted pressure to limit the investigation of private industry (Goldstein and Johnson 2007), were viewed as insufficiently aggressive in pursuing investigations of Democratic officials for possible voter fraud, or had investigated Republican officials (Smith 2007). A statistical analysis of investigations of party officials by U.S. state attorneys between 2001 and 2006 shows that Democratic officials were seven times more likely to be investigated as Republican officials (Shields and Cragan 2007). In testimony before the Senate, Attorney General Gonzales could not point to clear standards for the firings, even as he insisted that the removal process had involved the "consensus judgment of the senior leadership." Almost all of the attorneys fired had strong and well-documented performance records, but Gonzales denied that they had been dismissed for political reasons, and perversely characterized investigations into the matter as "attacking the career professionals."

One longtime Justice Department bureaucrat argued that Gonzales had politicized the department to an unprecedented degree, enabled by young aides "whose inexperience in the processes of government was surpassed only by their evident disdain for it" (Mauro 2007). While U.S. state attorneys were traditionally regarded as positions above partisan intrigue, they were still political positions. But the investigation into the process of their firing revealed that political loyalty criteria were also applied to Justice Department career positions, contrary to civil service law. Goodling, testifying before Congress under the shield of immunity, acknowledged that she had "crossed the line" by seeking information about applicants for career positions that would reveal partisan political leanings, such as scanning résumés for campaign work or membership in partisan groups, or asking interviewees questions about their political beliefs (Eggen and Kane 2007; Lipton 2007).

The Bush administration … modified rules about hiring practices for career positions that provided greater political input in selection.

The Bush administration also modified rules on hiring practices for career positions that provided greater political input in selection. An executive order issued in 2003 provided greater political appointee control over the Justice Department's Honors Program. The program sought to hire promising young lawyers for fast-track federal careers. An investigation found that highly qualified liberal candidates were much more likely to be screened out than those with conservative or neutral backgrounds (DOJ 2008). Two of the three appointees who screened candidates were judged to have violated federal law by using political criteria. One of them, Esther McDonald, was hired by Goodling and was selecting candidates after having graduated law school just three years before. She wrote in an e-mail that she had voted against candidates who used "leftist commentary and buzz words" such as "environmental justice," "social justice," and "making policy" in their application essays. She disapproved of candidates who had worked for liberal organizations and conducted Internet searches to find further evidence of their political leanings.

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After changes to hiring practices for the Honors Program, fewer of the new lawyers in the Civil Rights Division had civil rights experience, and the average ranking of the law schools of the candidates selected declined (Savage 2006; Zegart 2006). Hiring practices were also revised in the Civil Rights Division in 2002, giving a greater role for political appointees. While this did not result in more politicized hiring in much of the division, an investigation found that one political appointee, Bradley Schlozman, had violated federal law when he "considered political and ideological affiliations in hiring career attorneys and in other personnel actions affecting career attorneys" (DOJ 2009, 64). Schlozman minimized the importance of prior civil rights experience, screened out candidates with liberal leanings, overruled career staff objections that some candidates were simply not qualified, and used political considerations in the assignment of cases and performance awards. In e-mail comments, Schlozman repeatedly referred to conservative applicants as "real Americans" who were "on the team." As for existing employees, he said, "My tentative plans are to gerrymander all of those crazy libs right out of the section." Some senior lawyers who had spent their careers in civil rights were improperly reassigned to other areas, while others simply resigned (DOJ 2009; Zegart 2006). Supervisors had sufficient information to be aware of what was happening, but took no steps to curb Schlozman's actions (DOJ 2009, 50).

After 2004, hiring practices in the selection of immigration judges were also changed. Again, these are career positions legally exempt from partisan criteria. After these changes, about one-third of new hires had clear ties to the Republican Party, while half of new appointees lacked any immigration law experience (Goldstein and Eggen 2007). In her testimony before Congress, Goodling acknowledged that immigration judges were among those positions subject to a partisan litmus test (Eggen and Kane 2007).

Similarly politicized processes of selection occurred among the officials who were sent to rebuild Iraq, with disastrous results. In some ways, Iraq provides a test for the success of the politicized presidency. It was a policy issue that President Bush clearly cared about. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that it was not treated with deliberate neglect or seen as a "turkey farm" where incompetent appointees could be safely stashed away. And given that the Coalitional Provisional Authority (CPA) was not governed by civil service laws, the White House could hire exactly the type of people it wanted. The administration certainly chose loyalists, but these hires were frequently young, inexperienced, and unrealistic. Qualified experts with basic language skills and regional or reconstruction expertise were blocked or replaced. The CPA failed to achieve the modest goals it set for itself (Chandrasekaran 2006, 288). Perhaps more than any other reason, this failure to reconstruct the state fostered the postinvasion instability.

Recruitment to the CPA was often based on some combination of personal contacts with high-level officials and/or demonstrated political loyalty to the Republican Party. Chandrasekaran describes the process:

> A well-connected Republican made a call on behalf of a friend or trusted colleague. Others were personally recruited by President Bush. The White House also wanted a new team to replace Garner's staff [the predecessor to CPA head Paul Bremer], which was viewed as suspect because it had been drawn from the State Department and other federal agencies without any screening for political loyalties. The rest of the CPA staff was assembled with the same attention to allegiance. The gatekeeper was James O'Beirne, the White House liaison at the Pentagon. He took charge of personnel recruitment, dispatching queries for resumes to the offices of Republican congressmen, conservative think thanks and GOP activists. "The criterion for sending people over there was that they had to have the right political credentials," said Frederick Smith, who served as the deputy director of the CPA's Washington Office. (2006, 91)

Staffers were asked whether they had voted for George Bush, or where they stood on abortion policies. Those whose allegiance to the president was uncertain were not selected. When Bremer asked for a list of aides, O'Beirne provided one made up of applicants to the conservative Heritage Foundation. Some of these aides, who lacked any experience in financial management, were put in charge of Iraq's $13 billion budget. The person put in charge of reestablishing Iraq's stock market was a 24-year-old with a background in real estate.

Selection practices were often marked by the personal involvement of senior political officials in order to elevate preferred candidates or to block the selection of candidates whose loyalty was questionable. This was especially true of State Department officials. Thomas Warrick, a State Department official who directed the Future of Iraq planning process, was removed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, reportedly on the orders of Vice President Cheney. Frederick M. Burkle, Jr., was initially put in charge of health care for the CPA. He had a medical degree and a master's degree in public health, had worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development, had taught courses on disaster response, and had experience in Iraq and Somalia. He was replaced, he was told, because the White House wanted a loyalist. His replacement, James K. Haveman, lacked a medical degree, and the majority of his overseas experience had been as director of International Aid, a faith-based relief organization that provided relief and promoted Christianity. He had worked for the former governor of Michigan, who had recommended him to Paul Wolfowitz in the Department of Defense. At a time when Iraqi hospitals were in severe disrepair and Iraqis lacked basic medications, Haveman's signature initiatives included an antismoking campaign and a program to limit access to prescription medicines, privatize services, and add user fees (Chandrasekaran 2006).

## The Assault on Rationality

In a sense, the policy of control by politicization constituted a direct challenge to the *possibility* of competence, if, as Kaufman (1956) suggests, competence implied the possibility of making key policy or management decisions according to "objective standards" embodied in expert knowledge. Such competence is therefore underpinned by what Bertelli and Lynn identify as one of the basic criteria for responsible administration: rationality, by which they mean "habitual resort to reason to ensure transparent justifications for managerial action" (2003, 262). Frederickson notes that "from the beginning of the field, rationality has been central to public administration" (1996, 266).

Proponents of politicization essentially challenged the proposition that objective standards exist (Kaufman 1956, 1060). This challenge

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is most persuasive at the highest levels of policy formulation and general management, and least persuasive in those areas where scientific knowledge is most highly developed. Historically, relatively fewer political appointees have been placed in agencies that demand technical and professional knowledge (Lewis 2008).

If the Bush administration's strategy of politicization was limited to matters of high policy and management, it might have been more defensible. But it was not. The strategy also extended to the suppression or manipulation of scientific knowledge produced by federal agencies (Lambright 2008). Sometimes this consisted of attempts to regulate media access to government scientists and to deter scientists from speaking publicly about their work. For example, a NASA expert on climate change was censored by a political appointee who warned of "dire consequences" if he spoke to reporters (U.S. House 2007). Sometimes, appointees (including White House staff) went further, altering the actual content of scientific knowledge as presented by federal agencies.

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These assaults on the most highly specialized components of the federal bureaucracy were often undertaken on behalf of constituencies whose support was critical to the conservative movement, such as industry lobbies or the Religious Right (Mooney 2005). But these attempts at manipulation of scientific knowledge often proved both ineffective and counterproductive, largely because they were easily detected by external constituencies, and because they transgressed the widely accepted belief that the norms of competence and rationality should be respected at least within these specialized parts of the federal bureaucracy.

White House involvement in Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) statements on climate change illustrates the effort to manage science. In one, case the White House Council on Environmental Quality edited a chapter on climate change to such a degree that EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman decided to eliminate it. The same office vetoed the section of another report that dealt with the effects of climate change on air quality, and made at least 181 changes to the *Strategic Plan for the Climate Change Science Program,* the administration's guide for federal research (U.S. House 2007). The substance of these edits was to downplay evidence on climate change and the role of human activity in contributing to it, and to suggest that there was no consensus on the science, in some cases referring to a discredited industry-funded paper.

In other cases, EPA decisions ignored the advice of its staff, cost–benefit analyses, and empirical evidence in order to weaken clean air regulation (Specter 2006). EPA staff were also pressured not to make findings that protected endangered species (Mooney 2005). The deputy assistant of the interior for fish and wildlife and parks, Julie MacDonald, altered and ordered the altering of findings made by staff scientists.

The White House also ignored expert advice if it conflicted with the goals of social conservatives. One such goal has been to eliminate policies that are argued to condone sexual activity, especially among young people. The administration opposed vaccinating young women against the human papillomavirus, the most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States, and the primary cause of cervical cancer (Specter 2006). The Food and Drug Administration also denied permission to provide Plan B (the morning-after pill) as an over-the-counter medicine. In doing so, appointees took the unprecedented step of contradicting the advice of both the career staff that normally make such decisions and their scientific advisory committee. Despite little evidence of success, the administration provided significant resources for abstinence education in the United States. It also pushed abstinence in anti-AIDS funding for Africa at the expense of condom distribution. The official formerly in charge of anti-AIDS programs described the policy as "outrageous and stupid. From a public health point of view, it's irresponsible … None of this thinking is encumbered by facts. We're talking ideology" (Kohn 2005).

A Bush administration surgeon general, Richard Carmona, testified that his public pronouncements on emergency contraception and sex education, and a host of other policies such as stem cell research, had been modified or censored by the White House. Reports on global health issues, prisoner health care, and secondhand smoke were blocked when they failed to align with the political goals of the White House (Harris 2007). Dr. Carmona said that on numerous health issues, policy positions were established without reference to scientific considerations.

In some cases, the distortion of scientific evidence seemed unnecessary. In refusing to pursue a needle exchange program, the Bush administration followed the precedent of the Bill Clinton administration. But while the Clinton administration had acknowledged that its policy decision was at odds with the science, the Bush administration argued that evidence suggested that such programs were ineffective. On closer inspection, the researchers whose work was quoted either did not oppose needle exchange programs or supported it. The only exception was a non-peer-reviewed work by a social conservative group (*Washington Post* 2005).

Corporate interests also had a disproportionate impact on decisions. This preference for private entities was strengthened by the fact that Bush appointees had often come directly from working with the industry they were charged with regulating. For example, the chief counsel of the Food and Drug Administration, Dan Troy, had devoted his career to suing the agency to limit its regulatory reach. Philip Cooney, the White House official who edited EPA reports to undermine claims of global warming, had spent 15 years at the American Petroleum Institute, where he focused on directing government climate change policy to be consistent with the industry's strategic interest (U.S. House 2007, 17). When he resigned from the Bush administration in 2005, he was hired by ExxonMobil. President Bush strengthened the hand of such appointees by requiring each regulatory agency to have an office, headed by political appointee, who would review the costs and benefits of proposed rules.

Favoritism toward corporate interests was perhaps predictable in regulatory agencies, but also occurred in more surprising places, such as Iraq. Pfiffner (2007) has noted many of the failures in Iraq,

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including an unwillingness to restore civil order after the invasion, the disbanding of the armed forces, and the broad de-Baathification of the bureaucracy. These fateful decisions were taken with little consultation and were at odds with expert advice. One additional factor that contributed to the failure of the CPA was a quixotic pursuit of free market institutions even as Iraq was falling apart. When asked to identify his top priority shortly after he arrived in Iraq, Paul Bremer pointed to economic reform, including privatizing state entities and helping to "wean people from the idea the state supports everything" (Chandrasekaran 2006, 61). The CPA eliminated tariffs on foreign goods and cut taxes, reducing the top rate from 45 percent to 15 percent.

Such reforms were probably illegal under the Hague Convention, which requires occupying powers to respect the laws of the occupied country. They were also unrealistic, displacing attention from more pressing problems. This was illustrated when the CPA tried to reduce gas subsidies, food rations, and farm subsidies and replace them with cash payments through debit cards. The plan was shelved when the military objected because it lacked the resources to manage food riots. Privatization stalled because the national industries were in such bad shape that they could not attract private investors without major initial investments.

The pursuit of market reforms not only ignored the major difficulties facing Iraq, but made them worse. Many Iraqis had lost their jobs after the invasion, and estimates of unemployment were as high as 40 percent (Chandrasekaran 2006, 116). Job creation programs were not outlined—there would be no direct efforts by the CPA to foster employment. Instead, supply-side approaches were employed, on the assumption that privatization, reduced subsidies, low taxes, and business-friendly laws would lead to prosperity. Despite the unemployment, low security, a power vacuum, and increasing skepticism toward the government, the CPA argued that the reach of the state should be reduced. This created a vacuum of authority, encouraging the rise of armed militias that offered social services and a form of security.

## The Exhaustion of an Idea

By the end of its second term, the Bush administration was in disarray. The president's foreign and economic policies had been largely discredited, and his political standing had collapsed. The doctrine of control by politicization, a potent idea since the Nixon years, became associated with a failed presidency.

This management strategy has been criticized on a number of grounds. It is not clear that bureaucrats are as untrustworthy and disloyal as the politicized presidency supposed. Even if bureaucrats are more liberal than the political masters they serve, the limited empirical evidence suggests that bureaucrats recognize the legitimate constitutional authority of elected officials, and they are willing to relegate individual preferences (Golden 2000; Wood and Waterman 1994). This norm of obedience is most likely to collapse if political appointees treat bureaucrats with overt hostility and distrust, dismantle programs that enjoy broad public support, or behave in violation of the law (Golden 2000; O'Leary 2006; Wood and Waterman 1994).

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The politicized presidency failed the Bush administration in two main ways. First, politicization undermined the capacity of the president to implement policy priorities. Some previous work has made this point about the Reagan years (Durant 1987). But the central role of politicization in large-scale and very public policy failures such as the response to Katrina and the occupation of Iraq is unprecedented in recent presidential history. These high-profile failures may have been ones that lodged in the collective memory of the public, but there is evidence that they were not exceptional—programs led by political appointees under the Bush administration were evaluated as performing less well relative to those run by career managers (Lewis 2008).

Unlike during the Reagan era, these politicized policy failures, in turn, exerted a significant electoral price. Over the course of the Bush years, Republicans went from controlling Congress and the presidency to a repudiation that saw them lose control of each. It could be argued that the failure of this politicization doctrine was more damaging to the Bush administration, and the 2008 McCain presidential campaign, than the financial crisis. While the public may never care directly about management issues, they do pay attention when there is evidence of corruption, as in the Justice Department firings, and especially when big policies publicly fail. Both Hurricane Katrina and Iraq significantly undercut political support for the president and his party. The financial crisis might be dismissed as an unanticipated shock, but as this paper has shown, these earlier disasters were easily connected to the managerial strategies of the administration. Well before the financial crisis worsened in the fall of 2008, the administration was in disrepute. As early as May 2006, a Gallup Poll reported that President Bush's job approval was "down to a record-low level for his administration … public support for his handling of a variety of issues is washing out, along with perceptions of his leadership qualities" (Saad 2006). A 2006 poll found that the term most frequently associated with the president was "incompetent" (Pew Research Center 2006). By the 2008 election, only 25 percent of respondents approved of Bush's performance, the lowest in the Gallup Poll's history (Gallup 2009).

But the Bush administration failed in another way. The president and his key advisors professed an interest in rebuilding the presidency as an institution (Mayer 2008). Vice President Cheney saw that in the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam, "the presidency was weakened, that there were congressional efforts to rein in and to place limits on presidential authority" (Walsh 2006, 48). In many respects, the president failed in rebuilding the institution of the presidency: the controversies over mismanagement and the corruption of scientific decision making left the presidency in its poorest condition in years. By 2007,

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public confidence in the presidency as an institution was at its lowest point since Gallup began measurement in 1992 (Newport 2007). The politicized presidency not only weakened the institution of the presidency by eroding its legitimacy, but also failed to institutionalize many of the new powers it sought, and invited other political institutions to more closely police its activities (Roberts 2008).

Damage was done to the executive branch in other ways. Another cost of politicization is manifested in fewer opportunities to influence policy and declining morale and among the career bureaucracy, making it harder to recruit and retain highly skilled employees (Lewis 2008). A 2007 survey found that employee satisfaction and engagement had declined in 20 out of 30 agencies in the preceding three years (Partnership for Public Service 2007). The decline in morale is sharpest where politicization has been most intense (Leonnig 2008). This decline in morale is occurring just as federal agencies are seeking to improve recruitment and retention in response to the retirement of the baby boom generation from the federal workforce.

Presidents, Terry Moe has argued, "politicize and centralize because it is advantageous for them to do so. They will stop when their incentives change" (1994, 19). But the political incentives for politicization are not neatly calibrated or precise. They are wrapped up in broad ideas about how the bureaucracy operates, and how the public responds. It has become conventional wisdom that the negative effects of politicization tend to be long term, and the benefits immediate (Lewis 2008; Weko 1995), fostering an incentive to politicize. But this idea ignores the lesson that incompetence, especially as the state takes on difficult tasks or undergoes significant change, can have dramatic political costs. Presidents from an earlier era understood this idea (Dickinson and Rudalevige 2005, 2007), but it has been forgotten in an era when bureaucracy bashing has become a political fetish. "Good management still equals good politics," say Dickinson and Rudalevige (2007, 20), but they point out that having an admirable formal management agenda matters little if the actual management of major events is incompetent. In recognizing the need to balance political control and competence, Knott and Miller conclude that "an institution is justificed by its outcomes, rather than the other way around" (1987, 274). The Bush administration came to a point where competency was undermined in key areas in a way that not just weakened executive leadership, but also exerted a political cost.

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Given these failures, one unintended legacy of the Bush administration may be a fundamental reconsideration of political control. But by the end of 2008, the idea that control could be enhanced through politicization appeared to have exhausted itself, and the costs of efforts to exert such control have become more apparent. This makes possible the resurgence of other ideas about the best way of exercising presidential leadership. In its early days, the Barack Obama administration appeared to make a determined effort to avoid shows of excessive partisanship. The most obvious signal of its attitude was the president-elect's decision to retain a Bush appointee, Robert Gates, as secretary of defense. The appointment of a Nobel Prize winner as secretary of energy also symbolized a renewed emphasis on science in the White House.

Of course, we should be wary about inferring too much from the early days of an administration. In 2001, after all, we thought that President Bush would be the "MBA President." Moreover, the conditions that prompted enthusiasm for the politicized presidency three decades ago are still with us today. The federal bureaucracy is not significantly smaller, and the pressure on presidents to deliver on their expansive promises is arguably more intense. In addition, some of the constitutional prerogatives claimed by President Bush, such as signing statements, remain in place and could be reactivated by a president who sees the benefit of doing so, or is empowered by another crisis akin to 9/11 (Pfiffner 2009). Politicization may be on the wane—or it might just be in remission, as we remind ourselves about the weaknesses of other approaches to presidential control.

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## Notes

1. A content analysis of *Public Administration Review* suggests that President Bush's use of politicization has received relatively little attention relative to the other most recent two-term presidents. Over the course of their eight-year terms, we see a similar number of publications on Bush (10) as we do on Reagan (12), but far fewer than on Clinton (27). Given that the Bush administration modeled its pattern of political control on that of the Reagan administration, we might expect to see equivalent attention to this strategy in published work. However, while all of the articles published on Reagan during his term examined this issue, only half of the articles on Bush did. In large part, this may be because the Bush administration also pursued a better articulated formal management agenda than the Reagan administration. Further details of the analysis are available from the authors.

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