

rely upon universal social science rules in order to promote efficiency and effectiveness within the public sector; (2) “war on waste,” or a reorganizational approach oriented toward retrenchment aimed at reducing waste and duplication of services; (3) “the watchful eye,” which advocates applying more external and internal oversight mechanisms to provide greater scrutiny and oversight of public officials to prevent abuse and misconduct; (4) “liberation management,” which emphasizes freeing up administrators’ discretionary authority from overly oppressive rules and red tape in order to foster wider internal innovation and change by those in charge. Each one, as Light underscores, conveys a very different view of the goals of government in society; the work of its public employees; the shape, design, and structure of public agencies; as well as the direction of what they do. The author outlines their basic theoretical frameworks, their sources, assumptions, and implications for governmental reorganization today. Much of his insightful essay, however, focuses upon tracking empirically the pace and direction, plus impacts of all four of the reform ideas upon government and argues that “. . . there can be such a thing as too much reform. Hyper-reform can distract Congress and the President from providing needed resources to accomplish the core missions of government and create confusion about which reform to implement. . . . the problem with the federal government today is not too little reform but too much.”

As you read this selection, try to keep the following questions in mind:

Why does Professor Light suggest that there is a problem of “hyper-reform” in government today? What does he mean by that term? What evidence does he marshal to support this conclusion?

How does Light define each of the four prescriptions for government reorganization he identifies? What sources do they derive from? How do they affect modern government?

Can you list the costs and benefits of applying each approach to reorganizing government? Are there any types of reorganization that are “cost free” in your view? Why or why not?

How does reorganization affect the distribution of power within an organization? Thinking back to Norton Long’s concept of administrative power, how do you define it? Why can it be significantly influenced by organizational structure?

Do you agree with Light that the real effects of governmental reorganization in recent years have done little to actually improve governmental performance? In what ways does he justify or support this argument? Are there any alternatives available to change, or at least begin to address, this difficult problem, in your view?

The Tides of Reform Revisited: Patterns in Making Government Work

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Congress and presidents have been reforming government ever since the first federal departments and agencies were created. They have also been applying widely different philosophies of reform to the task.

Indeed, the Constitution contains harbingers of all four “tides,” or philosophies, of administrative reform that populate the federal statute books today. It spoke to the logic of scientific management by creating a single executive with tight day-to-day control over the officers and departments of government. It laid the basis for future wars on waste by requiring an annual accounting of expenditures and revenue while reserving the appropriation power for Congress. It emphasized the need for a watchful eye on government excess through an elegant system of checks and balances. And it invited future efforts to liberate government from excessive regulation by vesting all executive powers in the president.

These four philosophies expressed themselves almost immediately in legislation. Scientific management was at the heart of Alexander Hamilton’s plan for a national bank, not to mention his detailed instructions that every Coast Guard cutter possess 10 muskets, 20 pistols, two chisels, one broadax, and two lanterns (Chernow 2004, 340). The war on waste emerged as the centerpiece of Thomas Jefferson’s 1800 campaign and his subsequent downsizing of government; watchful eye was the core of the First Amendment and its guarantees of free speech, press, assembly, and petition. And liberation management can be seen in Andrew Jackson’s spoils system, which was originally intended to loosen the grip of the old guard through “rotation in office.”

After defining the four philosophies in more detail, this article will track the ebb and flow of recent reform, examine the impact of public distrust and

congressional and presidential engagement on the mix of reform, and explore links between reform and actual government performance, as measured by the perceptions of federal employees in the summer of 2001.

Defining the Four Tides

All government reform is not created equal. Some reforms seek greater efficiency through the application of scientific principles to organization and management, whereas others seek increased economy through attacks on fraud, waste, and abuse. Some seek improved performance through a focus on outcomes and employee engagement, whereas others seek increased fairness through transparency in government and access to information. Although these four approaches are not inherently contradictory—and can even be found side by side in omnibus statutes such as the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act—they emerge from very different readings of government motivations.

These approaches also offer an ideology for every political taste: scientific management for those who prefer tight chains of command and strong presidential leadership; the war on waste for those who favor coordinated retrenchment and what one inspector general once described as “the visible odium of deterrence” (Light 1993); a watchful eye for those who believe that sunshine is the best disinfectant for misbehavior; and liberation management for those who hope to free agencies and their employees from the oppressive rules and oversight embedded in the three other philosophies.

The four reforms also have their iconic statutes: the 1939 Reorganization Act for scientific management, the 1978 Inspector General Act for the war on waste, the 1964 Freedom of Information Act for watchful eye, and the Clinton administration’s 1994

reinventing government package for liberation management. And they have their own administrative mechanisms: tight rules governing behavior for scientific management, auditing and investigating for the war on waste, freedom of information and open meetings for watchful eye, and devolution, team building, and employee empowerment for liberation management. Each conveys a very different view of government and its employees, as well as a very different implementation approach (see Table 13.1).

Thus, scientific management relies on rule-making agencies such as the Office of Management and Budget to develop clear guidelines for efficient administration, whereas liberation management rests on the innovation and commitment of agencies, teams, and individual employees to reap improved performance. In turn, the war on waste relies on centralized oversight and deterrence created by quasi-independent bodies such as the Office of Inspector General, whereas watchful eye relies on decentralized and persistent e-media, interest groups, and ordinary citizens to prevent abuse.

As I argued in *The Tides of Reform: Making Government Work, 1945–1995* (1997), each philosophy plays a role in maintaining the Constitution’s delicate balance between government strength and limits on strength—that is, between a government that is strong enough to protect the nation from foreign and domestic threats yet not so strong that it threatens liberty itself.

However, as this article suggests, there can be such a thing as too much reform. Hyper-reform can distract Congress and the president from providing needed resources to accomplish the core missions of government and create confusion about which reform to implement. To restate the conclusion of my 1997 book, the problem with the federal government today

is not too little reform but too much. There have never been more reform statutes on the books but so much employee concern about having enough resources to do their jobs.

The Pace and Mix of Reform

Just as the administrative philosophies of scientific management, war on waste, watchful eye, and an invitation to liberation management coexist in the Constitution, they also coexist in the federal statute books. There, one can find the remnants of great statutes such as the Civil Service Act of 1883, which touched all four philosophies of reform: scientific management in its focus on job definitions, competitive examination, a fixed appointment ladder, and merit-based hiring; the war on waste in its promise of lower costs and greater efficiency; watchful eye in its creation of a five-member independent commission to monitor the merit system; and even a bit of liberation management in its effort to insulate career public servants from political manipulation (Skowronek 1982).

Tracking Reform

The statute books also contain a long list of recent reforms representing all four philosophies. In 2002, for example, Congress returned to scientific management by merging 22 agencies and more than 170,000 federal employees into a new U.S. Department of Homeland Security that reports directly to the president. In 1998, Congress extended its long-running war on waste under the Federal Activities Inventory Reform Act by requiring agencies to list all programs and activities that are not inherently governmental and, therefore, potential targets for outsourcing and budget cutting. In 2000, Congress gave the public—or more accurately, businesses—a better view of government by requiring the president to develop annual estimates of the costs and benefits of all regulations by agency, program, and major rule. And Congress liberated federal agencies from writing hundreds of reports by enacting the Federal Reports Elimination and Sunset Act in 1995 and further amendments in 1998.

The question is not whether Congress and presidents have adopted eclectic, even contradictory

Table 13.1 The Four Tides of Reform

Implementation Approach	View of Government and Its Employees	
	Trusting	Distrusting
Centralized	Scientific management	War on waste
Decentralized	Liberation management	Watchful eye