

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On government's compelling need for:

Managerial Competence

Nearly two decades ago, Don Feder, a syndicated columnist, suggested that "we should be eternally grateful that government is stupid and bungling." Indeed, Feder remarked: "I want a government that's disorganized, lethargic, and low-performing." A year later, Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, echoed these thoughts: "We shouldn't want a proficient public sector."

Not that everyone shared this desire for government to be completely bungling. For example, Terry Culler, a former associate director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, argued that the federal government "should be content to hire competent people, [but] not the best and most talented people." Culler emphasized that he was "not calling for government employee mediocrity, but for government employee sufficiency."

Of course, such suggestions that government ought to be low-performing or merely sufficient did not originate in the 1980s. In his first annual message to Congress, President Andrew Jackson declared: "The duties of all public officers are, or admit to being made, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance."

Like Culler, Jackson thought that almost anyone could do a *government* job. Besides,

Jackson wanted the freedom to appoint his political supporters to government posts; thus he sought to ensure that the lack of proven managerial competence would not be an automatic disqualification.



I wonder how this certitude by the hero of the Battle of New Orleans is judged today by the (former) residents of that city?

In 1927, the people who lived in New Orleans and elsewhere along the Mississippi River were most grateful for some competence in government performance. As John M. Barry of Tulane University records in his book *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927*, when the rains came, the rivers rose, and levees were breeched, President Calvin Coolidge did nothing. Only after the governors of six states (Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Oklahoma) specifically requested that he appoint Herbert Hoover as federal coordinator for rescue, relief, and recovery, did Coolidge give his secretary of commerce the assignment.

For such a massive management task, Hoover was an ideal choice. During World War I, without any governmental authorization, he had organized an international relief effort for ten million starving Belgians, even convincing the warring nations to let the food through. After the United States entered the war, President Woodrow Wilson gave Hoover the task of

mobilizing American citizens to conserve food—and to do so voluntarily. Then, with the end of war, the president gave him a new job: managing the American Relief Administration (ARA) to provide food for 300 million people across Europe. And when this governmental program ended, Hoover, seeing the continuing need to feed the continent's children, created the ARA European Children's Fund—what today we would call an NGO.

Little wonder that, in 1927, when American citizens wanted the federal government to bring some order to the flood-relief chaos, their elected representatives did not just ask the president to put someone in charge. They explicitly asked the president to put Herbert Hoover in charge.

Hoover—who was called both “the Great Engineer” and “the Great Humanitarian”—did the job with managerial competence, tireless persuasion, and political savvy (plus not a little self promotion). From his base in Memphis, he coordinated the work of the Departments of War, Treasury, and Agriculture, of state governments along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, and of the American Red Cross. He enlisted the help of five different railroads to give refugees free transportation and to reduce their rates for emergency supplies. He went on national radio to raise funds for the Red Cross.

Hoover and his management team organized crews to reenforce the failing levees along the river. At the same time, preparing for more breaks in the levees, he helped the Red Cross establish over 150 refugee camps providing field personnel with detailed guidelines for everything from tents to latrines. Then, when a levee did break, he had thousands of trucks and boats ready to swoop in for the evacuation. One estimate placed the number of people rescued at 330,000. The Red Cross housed over 300,000 people in its refugee camps and provided food and clothing to another 300,000 plus.

Hoover “listened, set policy, delegated, and organized,” reports Barry in *Rising Tide*. He “streamlined things,” and “red tape disappeared.”

Decades before such phrases as “virtual organizations,” “tri-sector partnerships,” and “network governance” came into vogue, Hoover employed these concepts and made them work.

Hoover combined the moral imperative created by a natural and thus human disaster with an understanding of how to get things done quickly and efficiently to save lives and help rebuild families. He gave the country the sense that someone was in charge—that someone competent was in charge—and that whatever was needed to be done was, in fact, being done.

In 1927, when the Mississippi flooded, Hoover combined the moral imperative created by a natural and thus human disaster with an ability to get things done quickly and efficiently to save lives and help rebuild families.

When the depression hit, President Hoover was unable to cope. He simply could not figure out how to engineer a broken economy back to health. But during the previous decade, when the nation needed someone to organize government agencies, private businesses, and civil society to get an essential job done, it called on Herbert Hoover.

Today, at all levels of government, we could use a little more—in many cases a lot more—Hooverian managerial competence. **B**

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