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## **A dangerous experiment in civil service reform**

**By JOSEPH DASSARO**

In his quest to protect the nation through the creation of the Homeland Security Department, President Bush uncompromisingly argued the necessity for managerial flexibility and personnel reform in the new department, even threatening to veto legislation if it did not contain the requested personnel flexibilities. In fact, the president, a large number of Republicans and a smaller number of Democrats forcefully argued the direct link between broad managerial flexibility and the ability of the department to protect the nation. The administration's national security argument was ultimately accepted by Congress and incorporated in Homeland Security legislation, and continues to be the subject of much anxiety. It now appears the argument made by the administration was nothing more than a Trojan horse.

The president, through the Office of Management and Budget, recently announced the inclusion of personnel reforms similar to those undertaken at Homeland Security and the Defense Department in the 2006 budget request. The White House intends to apply the untested and untried personnel reforms governmentwide, on the premise it would be unfair to leave other agencies without similar flexibilities. Remarkably, the reforms have not yet been implemented at Homeland Security or Defense, making their results unknown. At agencies where some components of the reforms have been implemented, quantifiable data indicates failure. In some instances, such as in implementing mandatory removal offenses at IRS, analysts have testified before Congress that reforms actually resulted in less managerial flexibility and that they believe the proposals contained in Homeland Security personnel reform are even more "draconian." A reasonable person is compelled to consider that the president was deceptive regarding the need for managerial flexibility, riding on the emotional coattails of 9/11, to implement a broad management agenda in the federal sector. This is a reasonable conclusion in light of his rush to expand these untested flexibilities governmentwide.

Thus far, the personnel reforms at both Defense and Homeland Security amount to nothing more than academic exercises similar to war games; it looks good on paper, but who knows what will really happen when boots hit the ground? Simply stated, there are no quantifiable data to measure the effectiveness of personnel reforms. At best, we have results from piecemeal implementation — and those results are discouraging to say the least. However, there is anecdotal data that suggest the 2-year-old Homeland Security Department is under immense strain and heading toward catastrophic failure. Agencies with the department are out of money. The number of Border Patrol agents hired this year will not come close to replacing current attrition levels. Even the department's own inspector general found inept officials, widespread program mismanagement, lavish nonsecurity spending and large security lapses. From budget constraints adversely affecting pay levels under pay-for-performance plans, to outlandish attempts to force overreaching nondisclosure agreements on employees in an effort to shield the agency from public scrutiny, this agency is not too far from imploding.

The president is treading dangerous ground as he continues to push the most effective government work force in the world against the wall in what appears to be no more than an academic exercise. Even federal employees who were die-hard supporters of the president are questioning their own loyalty as they see their agencies and collective bargaining rights collapsing. The real danger in this continued assault is the distinct possibility that the work force as a whole may revolt. Reactions from poor morale and working conditions could manifest in greater turnover, higher absenteeism, workplace violence, decreased productivity and lower quality of services; you get what you pay for.

Any prudent person understands that government must first measure the effectiveness and consequences of new and untested reforms before mandating them on a large, irreversible scale. To do otherwise places the quality and continuity of vital government services at unnecessary risk. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Chairwoman Susan Collins, R-Maine, clearly recognized this when she remarked, “The personnel systems at DoD and DHS are experiments in creating flexible personnel systems. . . . I think it is prudent to see how these systems fare before deciding whether to expand the reforms to other federal agencies.” More simply stated, the government work force is too valuable to be used as a petri dish.

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