



# People On People On People

THE CONTINUED THICKENING  
OF GOVERNMENT

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Paul C. Light



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## PREFACE

PAUL C. LIGHT, the Paulette Goddard Professor of Public Service at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service, is an extraordinary scholar of American government. Throughout his career, his research has provided a great deal of insight into the structure and operations of the federal government. In this short and accessible paper, he drives home the simple message that our government is made up of people. Its effectiveness, therefore, depends on the people working in government. To operate as effectively as Americans deserve, government needs to have the right people in the right positions at the right point in time.

This idea may be disarmingly simple, but achieving such a reality has proved to be a formidable challenge for both the legislative and executive branches of our government. Light's research into efforts to address this need is as sobering as it is interesting. Every presidential administration since 1960 has wanted to leave our government in better condition—more efficient and more effective. And yet, we approach the end of 2017 with a government that has evolved to have “more layers of leaders and leaders in layers,” as Light puts it, than ever before.

We live in a time of great need for a government that can respond to complex threats and rapid changes. We need a federal government ready and able to act in the interests of its citizens. Light's research enables us to understand better how our government has grown over time and pushes us to consider how the structure and staffing of our federal agencies impact their ability to respond.

THOMAS W. ROSS

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THE PAST HALF-CENTURY HAS WITNESSED a slow but steady thickening of the federal bureaucracy as Congress and presidents have added layer upon layer of political and career management to the hierarchy. Whereas John F. Kennedy entered office in 1961 in charge of seven cabinet departments, Donald Trump entered in 2017 in charge of fifteen. Whereas Kennedy's cabinet departments had seventeen appointee layers to fill, Trump's departments had seventy-one. Finally, whereas Kennedy's layers had 451 political or career occupants, Trump's had 3,265.<sup>1</sup>

### **Counting Layers and Leaders**

This thickening starts at the very top of government with the steady expansion in the number of titles at the top of the five compartments headed by full-time appointees listed in the federal government's Executive Schedule: (I) secretaries, (II) deputy secretaries, (III) undersecretaries, (IV) assistant secretaries, and (V) administrators. Some of these positions are subject to Senate confirmation, while others are selected by the president as non-confirmed appointees or advanced upward into the five compartments as senior career executives.

The evidence of increased thickening comes from my inventories of the number of layers (titles) and leaders (titleholders) collected every six years between 1960 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> The directories contain the titles, names, addresses, and phone numbers of all appointees who serve in the federal government's departments and agencies, but my inventories focus exclusively on the layers and leaders of the five leadership compartments in the fifteen cabinet departments.

These inventories include only those titles with a direct link to the Senate-confirmed appointees with an executive schedule title such as chief of staff to the secretary, associate deputy secretary, principal deputy undersecretary, deputy assistant secretary, and assistant deputy administrator.

According to these inventories, the federal hierarchy grew with few interruptions between 1960 and 2016. The thickening occurred in every department, regardless of mission or budget. Table 1 shows the inventory of titles open for occupancy in March 2016, while Table 2 shows the numbers of titles and occupants from 1960 to 2016.

Some of the titles may challenge credulity, but the March 2016 federal phone book included tongue twisters such as the associate principal deputy assistant secretary for regulatory and policy affairs at energy; associate assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement at education; principal deputy associate attorney general and principal

**TABLE I: Layers of Leaders, 2016**

I					
1	Secretary	2	Chief of staff to the secretary	3	Deputy chief of staff to the secretary
II					
4	Deputy secretary (or FBI director, FEMA administrator, etc.)	7	Deputy chief of staff	10	Deputy associate deputy secretary
5	Deputy secretary with portfolio	8	Principal associate deputy secretary	11	Assistant deputy secretary
6	Chief of staff to the deputy secretary	9	Associate deputy secretary	12	Associate assistant deputy secretary
III					
13	Undersecretary	18	Chief of staff to the deputy undersecretary	23	Deputy assistant deputy undersecretary
14	Chief of staff to the undersecretary	19	Principal associate deputy undersecretary	24	Associate undersecretary
15	Deputy chief of staff to the undersecretary	20	Associate deputy undersecretary	25	Assistant undersecretary
16	Principal deputy undersecretary	21	Principal assistant deputy undersecretary		
17	Deputy undersecretary	22	Assistant deputy undersecretary		
IV					
26	Assistant secretary (or inspector general, general counsel, etc.)	34	Deputy to the deputy assistant secretary	42	Chief of staff to the associate assistant secretary
27	Chief of staff to the assistant secretary	35	Associate deputy assistant secretary	43	Deputy associate assistant secretary
28	Deputy chief of staff to the assistant secretary	36	Deputy associate deputy assistant secretary	44	Principal assistant assistant secretary
29	Principal deputy assistant secretary	37	Chief of staff to the associate deputy assistant secretary	45	Assistant assistant secretary
30	Associate principal deputy assistant secretary	38	Deputy associate assistant secretary	46	Chief of staff to the assistant assistant secretary
31	Deputy assistant secretary	39	Assistant deputy assistant secretary	47	Deputy assistant assistant secretary
32	Chief of staff to the deputy assistant secretary	40	Principal associate assistant secretary		
33	Principal deputy to the deputy assistant secretary	41	Associate assistant secretary		
V					
48	Administrator	56	Assistant deputy administrator	64	Deputy executive associate administrator
49	Chief of staff to the administrator	57	Deputy assistant deputy administrator	65	Deputy associate administrator
50	Assistant chief of staff to the administrator	58	Principal assistant deputy administrator	66	Senior associate deputy administrator
51	Principal deputy administrator	59	Associate assistant deputy administrator	67	Assistant administrator
52	Deputy administrator	60	Senior associate administrator	68	Chief of staff to the assistant administrator
53	Chief of staff to the deputy administrator	61	Associate administrator	69	Deputy assistant administrator
54	Associate deputy administrator	62	Chief of staff to the associate administrator	70	Associate assistant administrator
55	Deputy associate deputy administrator	63	Deputy chief of staff to the associate administrator	71	Associate deputy assistant administrator

deputy assistant attorney general at Justice; and associate deputy assistant secretaries for logistics and supply chain management, human resource systems and analytics, and acquisition and logistics at Veterans Affairs. Past patterns suggest that these relatively new titles will spread to other departments as lower-level officers move up to match titles with their peers.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 shows the increased number of layers and leaders over time. The number of layers of leaders increased 318 percent between 1960 and 2016, while the number of leaders per layer rose 624 percent. There are no federal phone books dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, but it is safe to say that the federal government never had more layers of leaders or more leaders per layer than it did on January 20, 2017.

**TABLE 2a: Leaders per Layer, 1960–2016**

NUMBER OF LAYERS OF LEADERS			NUMBER OF LEADERS IN LAYERS		
1960	2016	INCREASE	1960	2016	INCREASE
<b>17</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>318%</b>	<b>451</b>	<b>3,265</b>	<b>624%</b>

**TABLE 2b: Leaders per Layer, 1960–2016**

	LAYERS OF LEADERS						LEADERS IN LAYERS					
	1960	1992	1998	2004	2010	2016	1960	1992	1998	2004	2010	2016
TOTAL	17	33	51	64	61	71	451	2,409	2,385	2,592	3,123	3,265
ABSOLUTE INCREASE	—	16	18	13	-3	10	—	1,958	-24	207	531	142
PERCENT INCREASE	—	94%	55%	26%	-5%	16%	—	434%	-1%	9%	21%	3%

Presidential candidates rarely miss a chance to criticize big government and, once elected, often establish reform SWAT teams to create a government as good as its people (Jimmy Carter), launch a war on waste (Ronald Reagan), create a government that works better and costs less (Bill Clinton), force federal employees to compete against contract employees for work (George W. Bush), or drag the bureaucracy into the 21st century (Barack Obama). But they always end their terms having created layers at the top of government or adding positions per layer. As noted shortly, Trump is unlikely to be the exception.

Reagan promised to abolish two of the fourteen departments he inherited but left office with fifteen; George W. Bush shaved three layers between 2004 and 2010 but had a net increase of seven; and as much as Obama complained about the duplication and overlap across gov-

ernment in his 2011 State of the Union address, he left office with more layers of leaders and leaders in layers.<sup>4</sup>

### **Distance and Distortion**

Even though the total number of leaders is often described as being an insignificant fraction of total federal employment, it creates a significant percentage of the layers between the top and bottom of federal departments and agencies.<sup>5</sup> In 2002, for example, nurses at veterans' hospitals reported upward through nine formal layers of command, including five at the Department of Veterans Affairs headquarters in Washington. Air traffic controllers reported upward through twelve, including six at the Federal Aviation Administration headquarters in Washington.<sup>6</sup>

The number of layers includes more than presidential appointees and their title extenders, however. When the informal layers composed of gatekeepers such as chiefs of staff are factored into the chain of command, veterans' hospital nurses, air traffic controllers, and park rangers report upward through nineteen layers, including nine in Washington.

The chain of command becomes even more unwieldy when policy or budget decisions are passed down and back up within each compartment for review and sign-off before moving down to the next relevant compartment. When this complication is factored into the chain of command, veterans' hospital nurses are receiving their policy guidance and budgets through forty-three policy and sixty-three budget sign-offs, including regional offices, districts, hospitals, and nurse supervisors.

### **Further Details**

The number of layers and leaders is not even across the federal government. All departments thicken over time, but they do so at different rates depending in part on mission and budget. According to theories of what sociologists call "institutional isomorphism," all organizations buffeted by the same economic, political, and social pressures will structure themselves to look alike.<sup>7</sup> This instinct to look like the competition is common in many industries. Thus, even though some departments and agencies will be shorter and lighter than others at times, all things being equal, they will become more similar over time.

This theory is well illustrated in the movement of federal government departments and agencies toward common structures:

1. The federal hierarchy has grown taller and wider over time as Congress, the presi-

dent, and departments invented or extended titles. Of the seventy-one titles open for occupancy somewhere across the cabinet, twenty existed in seven departments in 2016, while another thirteen were in at least four departments.

2. History strongly suggests that the new layers will spread as departments copy and compete to adopt perceived best practices—the first chief of staff to a cabinet secretary was created in 1981, spread to another ten departments by 1992, and could be found in the final four by 2016. Chiefs of staff account for thirteen of the seventy-one layers listed in Table 1. It seems presidential appointees are nobodies if they do not have a chief of staff, while chiefs of staff are nobodies if they do not have a deputy chief of staff.
3. Departments vary significantly in height. The Defense Department had the tallest federal hierarchy in 2016, with thirty-seven layers. It was followed by Agriculture with thirty-one; Homeland Security with thirty; Education, Energy, Interior, and Treasury with twenty-eight each; Health and Human Services with twenty-seven; Transportation with twenty-six; Commerce with twenty-five; Justice with twenty-four; Labor and Veterans Affairs with twenty-one each; State with 16; and Housing and Urban Development with 15.
4. Departments also vary significantly in width. The Defense Department had the largest number of senior officers in 2016 at 405. It was followed by Agriculture with 364; Health and Human Services with 340; Justice with 296; Homeland Security with 287; Treasury with 236; State with 214; Transportation with 204; Commerce with 191; Interior with 177; Energy with 175; Housing and Urban Development with 145; Education with 115; Veterans Affairs with 112; and Labor with 102. The fifteen departments varied somewhat in the rate of increase over time, since the federal personnel process is almost perfectly designed to move employees ever upward until they hit a ceiling that can be broken only when layers are added. Bound by the same system, all departments widen over time, but some have the funding and mission to widen more than others.
5. The number of layers fell during the Clinton administration because of Vice President Al Gore’s targeted cuts on high-level management layers, while the number of leaders fell during the budget battles during the Obama administration. The reductions were small and short-lived, however, partly because promotions have long been used to evade pay freezes.

Departments generally recover the layers and leaders they lose through radical reorganizations such as the creation of the Homeland Security department in 2003. Even though the Justice, Transportation, and Treasury departments all lost units as part of the 22-agency merger, their hierarchies quickly recovered the loss. Adding the Homeland Security Department to the combined total, the four departments had 602 leaders in 1998, dropped to 583 one year after losing the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (Justice), U.S. Customs Service (Treasury), Secret Service (Treasury), and Transportation Security Administration (Transportation), but moved up to 697 with Homeland Security fully operational in 2010, and hit 736 in 2016.

### **People on People**

Trump seemed to recognize the potential costs of this thickening when he told *Fox & Friends* in early March 2017 that he did not want to fill many of the 600 high-level posts still open for occupancy:

*Well, a lot of those jobs, I don't want to appoint, because they're unnecessary to have. You know we have so many people in government, even me, I look at some of the jobs and it's people over people over people. ... There are hundreds and hundreds of jobs that are totally unnecessary jobs.*<sup>8</sup>

Trump may have been right to question the need for so many jobs but was wrong to conclude that all the positions were unnecessary or could be eliminated at will. Some of them were created by statute; others were established through the federal government's highly formalized classification system, and still others came about by department memoranda.

Most important, those positions were hardwired into a bureaucratic process that links the top of the federal government to the bottom. With all fifteen cabinet secretaries confirmed by May 1, the Trump administration was not so much headless as neckless.<sup>9</sup>

At that point, the Trump administration was far behind other administrations in nominating its most senior officers but was filling up faster at the subcabinet level than most observers believed possible. Most of the new cabinet secretaries had already appointed their chiefs of staff, while the White House had appointed coterie overseers for the cabinet secretaries and their chiefs of staff. This process of title assignment was well underway when ProPublica published a list of the first 400 White House appointees.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, many overseers selected by the White House do not have the requisite experience to monitor their assigned agencies or track their targets. A large number of the 400

appointees were former campaign aides and members of the administration's transition "landing teams" clearly rewarded more for that service than for their knowledge.

The variation in status among these 400 political appointees is clear in the pay grades. The chiefs of staff and senior White House advisers on ProPublica's list were appointed at the top of the salary schedule as political members of the Senior Executive Service, while the rest appear to be personal and confidential assistants at the middle of the schedule or even temporary appointees at the very bottom of their departments and agencies.

Based on the pay grades, most of the 400 will eventually receive one of the lesser titles listed in Table 1. This does not mean they will be irrelevant, but it does suggest that they will not be particularly effective overseers and "commissars," as one Defense Department official described the White House loyalist sent to keep watch on the Pentagon.<sup>11</sup>

Trump is not the first president to salt the cabinet ranks with loyalists. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama did it, too, and they could always find an appointment for a friend. However, most presidents eventually decide that the best way to control the cabinet is to ignore it or appoint policy czars to eclipse it. Assuming Trump believes the cabinet is worth spying on, he may yet again be displaying his naïveté about governing.<sup>12</sup> His loyalists are easy to identify and are not well linked to the White House itself. They report to lower-level White House staff working in the Old Executive Office Building, which Vice President Walter Mondale once likened to being in Baltimore.

Nevertheless, with so many Senate-confirmed appointees stuck in the nomination or confirmation process, and so much pressure to tamp down spending and regulation, the Trump administration's watchful eye makes sense. It also makes the administration look faster than it is—he may be moving at a snail's pace on his subcabinet, but he has been surprisingly quick in putting people on people on people to keep the cabinet in line.

### **Options for Delaying**

Trump's decision to simply ignore jobs that he perceives as unnecessary will reduce his control of government. Moreover, it will decimate the governing links between the top of his departments and bottom of his agencies. The less he knows about what is happening in government, the more likely he is to be at the helm of highly visible breakdowns such as the veterans waiting list scandal and continued problems at the Secret Service.

If Trump is truly serious about eliminating unnecessary leadership posts, he should evaluate every title open for occupancy. If he finds layers and leaders who obscure the chain

of command and dilute accountability, he should eliminate the positions. Even if layers and leaders were critical to a federal mission, the position should be tested for potential reorganization when the current occupant leaves. No position should be exempt unless listed in statute, and even those posts could be challenged through the budget process.

Trump may believe that vacancies are just as effective as targeted downsizing, but Gore and his team of reinventors knew better. Targeting is the key to effectiveness. Most experts agree that the federal leadership hierarchy is now much too tall, wide, and isolating, but the flattening must be done with care, not through benign or deliberate neglect.

At least for now, neglect has weakened the president's ability to stop the recent cascade of federal breakdowns and undermined his ability to send directions to and collect information from the bottom of his organization. He would never leave key positions open for long in his own business and should not do so in government.

## ABOUT THE ALLIANCE

THE VOLCKER ALLIANCE was launched in 2013 by former Federal Reserve Board chairman Paul A. Volcker to address the challenge of effective execution of public policies and to help rebuild public trust in government. The nonpartisan Alliance works toward that broad objective by partnering with other organizations—academic, business, governmental, and public interest—to strengthen professional education for public service, conduct needed research on government performance, and improve the efficiency and accountability of governmental organization at the federal, state, and local levels.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PAUL C. LIGHT is Paulette Goddard Professor of Public Service at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service and special adviser to the chairman at the Volcker Alliance. He joined NYU after serving as vice president and director of governmental studies at the Brookings Institution. He also designed new initiatives for civic engagement as the director of the public policy program at the Pew Charitable Trusts, educated future public servants as professor and associate dean of the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, strengthened public management as a senior adviser to Sen. John Glenn and the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, and oversaw the research agenda at the National Academy of Public Administration.

Professor Light was also a special consultant to the 1988 National Commission on the Public Service, which was chaired by former Federal Reserve Board chairman Paul A. Volcker, and has advised Mr. Volcker on public service issues ever since. He is a frequent commentator on public service, has testified on public service issues before Congress three dozen times over the past two decades, and is the author of twenty-six books, four of which have won book awards. Professor Light is an internationally recognized expert on government reform, social innovation, and American national government.

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## ENDNOTES

1. These counts are based on coding of the *Federal Yellow Book* phonebooks, published quarterly by Leadership Directories Inc. Further information is available at <https://www.leadershipdirectories.com/Products/LeadershipinPrint/Government/FederalYellowBook>. Before the mid-1990s, the *Federal Yellow Book* was published only in print.
2. The *Federal Yellow Book* is published quarterly by Leadership Directories Inc. and is also available online. Further information is available at <https://www.leadershipdirectories.com/Products/LeadershipinPrint/Government/FederalYellowBook>. Before the mid-1990s, the *Federal Yellow Book* was published only in print.
3. For the classic statement on the role of isomorphism in organizational structure, see Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *American Sociological Review*, 48, no. 2 (1983).
4. For the story of the elevation of the Veterans Administration to cabinet status as the Department of Veterans Affairs during Ronald Reagan’s term, see Paul C. Light, *Forging Legislation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).
5. Paul C. Light, *Thickening Government: Federal Hierarchy and the Diffusion of Accountability* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).
6. *Ibid.*, 82–85.
7. Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields,” *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, eds. DiMaggio and Powell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 60–79, quoted at 63–64, 67.
8. For the transcript of the interview, see Chris Cillizza, “Donald Trump’s A+/C+ Presidency,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2017.
9. I used this phrase in an NPR interview with Brian Naylor on March 6, 2017. See Brian Naylor, “Trump Has Many Jobs Unfilled; Is He ‘Deconstructing the Administrative State?’” NPR, March 6, 2017.
10. Al Shaw, Justin Elliott, and Derek Kravitz, “Here Are More than 400 Officials Trump Has Quietly Deployed Across the Government,” *Pro-Publica*, March 8, 2017, updated August 31, 2017, <https://projects.propublica.org/graphics/beachhead>.
11. Lisa Rein and Juliet Eilperin, “White House Installs Political Aides at Cabinet Agencies to Be Trump’s Eyes and Ears,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2017.
12. For a history of cabinet frustrations, see Glenn Thrush, “Locked in the Cabinet,” *Politico Magazine*, November 2013.

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