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8 **Spotlight on**
9 **Key Challenges**
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The Triumph of Loyalty over Competence: The Bush Administration and the Exhaustion of the Politicized Presidency

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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.

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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1 King 2007; Gilmour and Lewis 2006; Moynihan 2008; Thompson
2 2006).¹ Much of this work fits within a broader scholarship on
3 administrative reform, pioneered by scholars such as Arnold (1995)
4 and March and Olsen (1983). This work critiques a tradition
5 within public administration of examining formal reform efforts
6 by using only administrative criteria. Formal reforms occur in a
7 political context: they may be motivated by a desire to communi-
8 cate values to the electorate, used to exercise control over bureauc-
9 racy, and often fail when they run afoul of political realities. For
10 example, Dull (2006) examines how Bush administration invested
11 a great deal of effort in creating the Program Assessment Rating
12 Tool, which provided a credible and transparent mechanism to
13 shape policy in ways that were consistent with the administration's
14 priorities.

15
16 But attention to formal reforms can lead public administration
17 scholars to overlook other forms of administrative change that are
18 more difficult to examine, but perhaps more consequential (Sulei-
19 man 2003, 192–93). In the case of the Bush administration, there
20 was a coherent second management agenda, whose goals and main
21 elements were rarely made explicit, and that rarely involved formal-
22 legal changes. Though it has attracted considerably less scholarly
23 attention, in part because political actors were circumspect in
24 advertising it, this second agenda was more important in deciding
25 the fate of the Bush administration. “[T]he most salient events of
26 the George W. Bush years were basically administrative in nature,”
27 says Rudalevige (2009, 11), but they were not part of the formal
28 reform agenda—rather, they were failures that arose from the second
29 agenda: “the management of Hurricane Katrina and postwar Iraq
30 to the alleged politicization of the Justice Department and lack of
31 regulatory heft in the financial sector.”

32
33 This second management agenda was also concerned with the
34 performance of the federal bureaucracy. It flowed from a perception
35 that the federal bureaucracy was indifferent or hostile to presidential
36 goals because of the professional and ideological biases of career
37 employees. And so an attempt was made to tighten political control
38 over the bureaucracy—by expanding the number of political ap-
39 pointees; by giving more weight to loyalty than to merit in hiring
40 decisions; by transferring untrustworthy bureaucrats out of key posi-
41 tions, or pressuring them to resign; by excluding career officials from
42 decision making; and by centralizing authority over key policy deci-
43 sions in the White House. These are the management techniques of
44 a politicized presidency (Durant 1987; Moe 1985; Pfiffner 1985).

45
46 This second agenda was not invented by the Bush administration;
47 arguments for tighter political control of the federal bureaucracy
48 were made under Richard M. Nixon and Ronald Reagan. However,
49 the Bush administration pushed the doctrine of politicization more
50 aggressively than its predecessors, allowing it to be corrupted for
51 purposes that had little to do with the accomplishment of admin-
52 istration priorities. During the Bush era, politicization was defined
53 by the routine triumph of loyalty over competence in selection, and
54 the displacement of basic decision rationality by political goals in
55 decision making. In the end, this second agenda proved self-defeat-
56 ing: rather than enhancing presidential control over the bureaucracy,
57 politicization actually corroded control, undermined the institution
58 of the presidency, and weakened the political standing of President
59 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 presi-
dent 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 ac-
tion 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 loy-
alties. “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 ap-
pointees, 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, bureau-
crats would build administrative empires and resist uncomfortable
changes in policy. “Budget-maximizing” bureaucrats were consid-
ered 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 bureau-
cracy (Knott and Miller 1987; Moe 1985; Nathan 1983). This view-
point downplayed the negative potential outcomes of politicization
to the public service generally, the insitution of the presidency, the

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

14
15 The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked the
16 advent of a fully articulated doctrine of politicization. Conservative
17 think tanks helped propagate the new management philosophy.
18 It was predicated on the proposition that the federal system was
19 deeply resistant to change—that it was, as M. Stanton Evans said,
20 “a permanent, self-enclosed system that operates on its own terms,
21 toward its own ends, according to its own laws” (Hart 1990, 104).
22 The career bureaucracy, a Heritage Foundation report warned the
23 incoming administration, “will lobby vigorously against ... significant
24 policy change” (Warshaw 1995, 250). The prescription was to
25 appoint “certified conservatives” whose allegiance to the president
26 was beyond dispute and who were prepared to apply a firm hand to
27 their agencies (Weko 1995, 96). “Career staff will supply information,”
28 a Heritage Foundation report advised, “but they should never
29 become involved in the formulation of agenda-related policy objectives”
30 (Pfiffner 1987, 59).

31
32 The Reagan administration took this advice to heart. *New York*
33 *Times* editorialist Howell Raines said that its approach to appointments
34 evinced “a revolution of attitudes” about proper qualifications: loyalty
35 and determination to rein in bureaucracy were now the paramount
36 concerns (Raines 1981; see also Nathan 1983, 74; Weko 1995, 90).
37 “Personnel is policy,” a senior Reagan White House official later
38 said (Hart 1990, 104). As concern for the “ideological commitment”
39 of appointees grew, so, too, did the number of appointments—by 20
40 percent during Reagan era. Staffing within the Executive Office of
41 the President grew by a similar proportion, despite the administration’s
42 “small government” rhetoric (Michaels 1995, 273; Pfiffner 1987, 58;
43 Warshaw 1995, 250). Terry Moe suggests that the Reagan administration’s
44 approach did “much more than continue a historical trend.” The
45 administration built a new model of executive control, premised on
46 politicization and centralization, that was “coherent, well integrated,
47 and eminently workable.” Future presidents, Moe predicted, would
48 “build upon the Reagan example” (1985, 271). Twelve years later,
49 this is precisely what the administration of newly elected President
50 George W. Bush was encouraged to do. The Heritage Foundation again
51 warned the new administration that the federal bureaucracy remained
52 a permanent government “jealously guarding paychecks, pocketbooks,
53 and power” (Moffit 2001).

60 A 2001 Heritage Foundation report worried that the delay in resolving
61 the 2000 election might tempt the president to name fewer political
62 appointees and rely more heavily on career servants. This, the report
63 said, “would be a profound mistake ... Political appointees, personally
64 loyal to the President and fully committed to his policy agenda, are
65 essential to his success.” The selection of appointees should be
66 “based on loyalty first and expertise second, and that the whole
67 governmental apparatus must be managed from this perspective”
68 (Moffit 2001). Such appointees should take responsibility for
69 management decisions rather than delegate them to the bureaucracy,
70 and would need greater authority to control bureaucrats, who enjoy
71 a “workplace culture of entitlement.”

72
73 The Heritage Foundation worried needlessly. The Bush administration
74 quickly demonstrated its commitment to the strategy of politicized
75 control refined by the Reagan administration. It, too, increased the
76 number of political appointees—especially Schedule C appointees,
77 the number of which grew by 33 percent between 2001 and 2005
78 (U.S. House 2006). The White House also took extraordinary steps
79 to ensure loyalty, directly interviewing candidates and providing
80 cabinet officials with short lists of acceptable appointees (Warshaw
81 2006). One appointee said that the White House seemed determined
82 to cultivate a “Cult of Bush”: “This group is all about loyalty, and
83 the definition of loyalty extends to policy-making, politics, and to
84 the execution of policy” (Drew 2006). At the same time, the White
85 House centralized authority over key policy decisions, in an effort
86 to counter the “centrifugal forces” inherent in the Washington
87 bureaucracy (Mayer 2004, 624). While centralization and politicization
88 are generally presented as distinct presidential strategies (Dull 2006;
89 Weko 1995), the Bush administration blurred the line between the
90 two (Rudalevige 2009). Open dissent on key policies was not
91 tolerated (Auletta 2004). This gave rise to an environment in which
92 substantive policy discussions were rare, and were routinely trumped
93 by political considerations (Pfiffner 2007; Rosen 2007). White
94 House officials briefed political appointees from across government
95 regularly on election strategies and the needs of vulnerable
96 Republican constituencies, in some cases in apparent violation of
97 federal law (Higham and O’Harrow 2007). Determining the extent
98 to which the law was violated has proved difficult: the Office of
99 Special Counsel tasked with investigating the possible violations was
100 itself headed by an appointee who was under investigation for
101 politicizing his agency (Lewis 2007).

102 103 **The Costs of Politicization**

104 All control systems are imperfect, and bring their own costs. The
105 artistry in management consists of designing control systems that
106 allow the achievement of objectives while keeping “control losses” to
107 a minimum (Merchant and Van der Stede 2007, 11). The control
108 losses usually associated with a strategy of politicization are an
109 understandable result of the decision to bring “outsiders” into
110 government. Outsiders may have “ideological commitment,” but they
111 also may lack substantive knowledge about the organization and the
112 history of federal policies and structures. Inexperience is not an
113 argument against appointment; however, it creates a risk that, in
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1 a carefully executed strategy of politicization, would be anticipated
2 and managed. The danger, which we will argue was realized during
3 the George W. Bush administration, is that the risk ceases to be ac-
4 knowledged. This was evident in many of the administration's early
5 political appointments.

6
7 Politicization in selection is sometimes examined in terms of the
8 number of political appointees (Lewis 2008), but just focusing on
9 the numbers tells us little about the intensity of political loyalty of
10 appointees, their competence, or their behavior. The Bush White
11 House often preferred appointees who were young and inexperi-
12 enced, and lacked backgrounds in the policy areas for which they
13 became responsible, but had strong financial or familial connections
14 to the Republican Party or had worked on election campaigns (U.S.
15 House 2006, 9). While their expertise was questionable, their loy-
16 alty was not. Such appointees have traditionally been given limited
17 responsibility (Lewis 2008, 29), but this was not the case in Bush
18 administration.

19
20 The inattention to the risks of politicization likely arose because po-
21 liticization had slipped from strategy to dogma. During the Reagan
22 era, the case for political control was still based on an instrumental
23 logic; for example, the deployment of carefully screened appoin-
24 tees was important to advance "the policy agenda of a conservative
25 administration" (Pfiffner 1985, 352). So long as politicization was
26 considered to be valuable for instrumental reasons, it would be rea-
27 sonable to expect that a line would be drawn when the risk of failure
28 as a result of inexperience or incompetence grew unacceptably large.
29 Over time, however, the strategy of politicization was transformed
30 into dogma—that is, it was applied for its own sake, and without
31 regard to potential risks.

32
33 The damage to competence was perhaps best typified by Michael
34 Brown, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency
35 (FEMA), who resigned after the dismal
36 response to Hurricane Katrina. Brown and
37 other senior appointees in FEMA lacked
38 emergency management expertise, but had
39 significant political campaign experience.
40 FEMA career staff perceived that the ap-
41 pointees were concerned about the politics
42 of emergency management at the expense of
43 agency capacity, with one testifying, "[T]hat's
44 what killed us ... in the senior ranks of FEMA there was nobody
45 that even knew FEMA's history, much less understood the profes-
46 sion and the dynamics and the roles and responsibilities of the states
47 and local governments" (U.S. Senate 2006, 14–15).

48
49 Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, an additional political controversy
50 underscored the tension between political control and competence.
51 A number of U.S. attorneys were forced to resign by the Department
52 of Justice. In the words of a senior Justice Department appointee,
53 Kyle Sampson, the need for "loyal Bushies" appeared to be a primary
54 factor. Sampson, a classmate of Vice President Dick Cheney's daugh-
55 ter, had become chief of staff for Attorney General Alberto Gonzales
56 by his mid-thirties. Sampson and another young lawyer, Monica
57 Goodling, were given far-reaching autonomy in personnel decisions,
58 despite the fact that each lacked significant prosecutorial experience.
59 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.

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63 Definitive evidence on the reasons for the firings, and the role of
64 White House, has been limited by Bush administration's decision to
65 claim executive privilege in order to block congressional investiga-
66 tions. Some of the U.S. attorneys fired had resisted pressure to limit
67 the investigation of private industry (Goldstein and Johnson 2007),
68 were viewed as insufficiently aggressive in pursuing investigations
69 of Democratic officials for possible voter fraud, or had investigated
70 Republican officials (Smith 2007). A statistical analysis of inves-
71 tigation of party officials by U.S. state attorneys between 2001
72 and 2006 shows that Democratic officials were seven times more
73 likely to be investigated as Republican officials (Shields and Cragan
74 2007). In testimony before the Senate, Attorney General Gonzales
75 could not point to clear standards for the firings, even as he insisted
76 that the removal process had involved the "consensus judgment of
77 the senior leadership." Almost all of the attorneys fired had strong
78 and well-documented performance records, but Gonzales denied
79 that they had been dismissed for political reasons, and perversely
80 characterized investigations into the matter as "attacking the career
81 professionals."

82
83 One longtime Justice Department bureaucrat argued that Gonzales
84 had politicized the department to an unprecedented degree, enabled
85 by young aides "whose inexperience in the processes of government
86 was surpassed only by their evident disdain for it" (Mauro 2007).
87 While U.S. state attorneys were traditionally regarded as positions
88 above partisan intrigue, they were still political positions. But the
89 investigation into the process of their firing revealed that politi-
90 cal loyalty criteria were also applied to Justice Department career
91 positions, contrary to civil service law. Goodling, testifying before
92 Congress under the shield of immunity, acknowledged that she
93 had "crossed the line" by seeking information about applicants for
94 career positions that would reveal partisan
95 political leanings, such as scanning résumés
96 for campaign work or membership in partisan
97 groups, or asking interviewees questions about
98 their political beliefs (Eggen and Kane 2007;
99 Lipton 2007).

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

100
101 The Bush administration also modified rules
102 on hiring practices for career positions that
103 provided greater political input in selection. An executive order
104 issued in 2003 provided greater political appointee control over
105 the Justice Department's Honors Program. The program sought
106 to hire promising young lawyers for fast-track federal careers. An
107 investigation found that highly qualified liberal candidates were
108 much more likely to be screened out than those with conservative or
109 neutral backgrounds (DOJ 2008). Two of the three appointees who
110 screened candidates were judged to have violated federal law by us-
111 ing political criteria. One of them, Esther McDonald, was hired by
112 Goodling and was selecting candidates after having graduated law
113 school just three years before. She wrote in an e-mail that she had
114 voted against candidates who used "leftist commentary and buzz
115 words" such as "environmental justice," "social justice," and "making
116 policy" in their application essays. She disapproved of candidates
117 who had worked for liberal organizations and conducted Internet
118 searches to find further evidence of their political leanings.

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

24
25 After 2004, hiring practices in the selection of immigration judges
26 were also changed. Again, these are career positions legally exempt
27 from partisan criteria. After these changes, about one-third of new
28 hires had clear ties to the Republican Party, while half of new ap-
29 pointees lacked any immigration law experience (Goldstein and
30 Eggen 2007). In her testimony before Congress, Goodling acknowl-
31 edged that immigration judges were among those positions subject
32 to a partisan litmus test (Eggen and Kane 2007).

33
34 Similarly politicized processes of selection occurred among the
35 officials who were sent to rebuild Iraq, with disastrous results. In
36 some ways, Iraq provides a test for the success of the politicized
37 presidency. It was a policy issue that President Bush clearly cared
38 about. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that it was not treated
39 with deliberate neglect or seen as a “turkey farm” where incompe-
40 tent appointees could be safely stashed away. And given that the
41 Coalitional Provisional Authority (CPA) was not governed by civil
42 service laws, the White House could hire exactly the type of people
43 it wanted. The administration certainly chose loyalists, but these
44 hires were frequently young, inexperienced, and unrealistic. Quali-
45 fied experts with basic language skills and regional or reconstruction
46 expertise were blocked or replaced. The CPA failed to achieve the
47 modest goals it set for itself (Chandrasekaran 2006, 288). Perhaps
48 more than any other reason, this failure to reconstruct the state
49 fostered the postinvasion instability.

50
51 Recruitment to the CPA was often based on some combination
52 of personal contacts with high-level officials and/or demonstrated
53 political loyalty to the Republican Party. Chandrasekaran describes
54 the process:

55
56 A well-connected Republican made a call on behalf of a friend
57 or trusted colleague. Others were personally recruited by
58 President Bush. The White House also wanted a new team
59 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 agen-
cies 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 tanks 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 Wash-
ington 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 question-
able. 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 Rums-
feld, 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 hos-
pitals 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 respon-
sible 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

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

6
7 If the Bush administration's strategy of politicization was limited to
8 matters of high policy and management, it
9 might have been more defensible. But it was
10 not. The strategy also extended to the suppression or manipulation of scientific knowledge
11 produced by federal agencies (Lambright
12 2008). Sometimes this consisted of attempts to
13 regulate media access to government scientists
14 and to deter scientists from speaking publicly
15 about their work. For example, a NASA expert
16 on climate change was censored by a political
17 appointee who warned of "dire consequences"
18 if he spoke to reporters (U.S. House 2007). Sometimes, appointees
19 (including White House staff) went further, altering the actual content of scientific knowledge as presented by federal agencies.

22
23 These assaults on the most highly specialized components of the
24 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.

33
34 White House involvement in Environmental Protection Agency
35 (EPA) statements on climate change illustrates the effort to manage
36 science. In one, case the White House Council on Environmental
37 Quality edited a chapter on climate change to such a degree that
38 EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman decided to eliminate
39 it. The same office vetoed the section of another report that dealt
40 with the effects of climate change on air quality, and made at least
41 181 changes to the *Strategic Plan for the Climate Change Science
42 Program*, the administration's guide for federal research (U.S. House
43 2007). The substance of these edits was to downplay evidence on
44 climate change and the role of human activity in contributing to it,
45 and to suggest that there was no consensus on the science, in some
46 cases referring to a discredited industry-funded paper.

47
48 In other cases, EPA decisions ignored the advice of its staff, cost-benefit analyses, and empirical evidence in order to weaken clean
49 air regulation (Specter 2006). EPA staff were also pressured not
50 to make findings that protected endangered species (Mooney 2005).
51 The deputy assistant of the interior for fish and wildlife and parks,
52 Julie MacDonald, altered and ordered the altering of findings made
53 by staff scientists.

54
55
56 The White House also ignored expert advice if it conflicted with the
57 goals of social conservatives. One such goal has been to eliminate
58 policies that are argued to condone sexual activity, especially among
59 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

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.

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,

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

13
14 Such reforms were probably illegal under the Hague Convention,
15 which requires occupying powers to respect the laws of the occu-
16 pied country. They were also unrealistic, displacing attention from
17 more pressing problems. This was illustrated when the CPA tried to
18 reduce gas subsidies, food rations, and farm subsidies and replace
19 them with cash payments through debit cards. The plan was shelved
20 when the military objected because it lacked the resources to man-
21 age food riots. Privatization stalled because the national industries
22 were in such bad shape that they could not attract private investors
23 without major initial investments.

24
25 The pursuit of market reforms not only ignored the major difficul-
26 ties facing Iraq, but made them worse. Many Iraqis had lost their
27 jobs after the invasion, and estimates of unemployment were as high
28 as 40 percent (Chandrasekaran 2006, 116). Job creation programs
29 were not outlined—there would be no direct efforts by the CPA to
30 foster employment. Instead, supply-side approaches were employed,
31 on the assumption that privatization, reduced subsidies, low taxes,
32 and business-friendly laws would lead to prosperity. Despite the
33 unemployment, low security, a power vacuum, and increasing
34 skepticism toward the government, the CPA argued that the reach
35 of the state should be reduced. This created a vacuum of authority,
36 encouraging the rise of armed militias that of-
37 fered social services and a form of security.

38 39 **The Exhaustion of an Idea**

40 By the end of its second term, the Bush
41 administration was in disarray. The president’s
42 foreign and economic policies had been large-
43 ly discredited, and his political standing had
44 collapsed. The doctrine of control by politi-
45 cization, a potent idea since the Nixon years,
46 became associated with a failed presidency.

47
48 This management strategy has been criticized
49 on a number of grounds. It is not clear that
50 bureaucrats are as untrustworthy and disloyal
51 as the politicized presidency supposed. Even if
52 bureaucrats are more liberal than the political
53 masters they serve, the limited empirical evi-
54 dence suggests that bureaucrats recognize the
55 legitimate constitutional authority of elected
56 officials, and they are willing to relegate indi-
57 vidual preferences (Golden 2000; Wood and
58 Waterman 1994). This norm of obedience is
59 most likely to collapse if political appointees

60 treat bureaucrats with overt hostility and distrust, dismantle pro-
61 grams that enjoy broad public support, or behave in violation of the
62 law (Golden 2000; O’Leary 2006; Wood and Waterman 1994).
63

64 The politicized presidency failed the Bush administration in two
65 main ways. First, politicization undermined the capacity of the
66 president to implement policy priorities. Some previous work has
67 made this point about the Reagan years (Durant 1987). But the
68 central role of politicization in large-scale and very public policy
69 failures such as the response to Katrina and the occupation of Iraq
70 is unprecedented in recent presidential history. These high-profile
71 failures may have been ones that lodged in the collective memory of
72 the public, but there is evidence that they were not exceptional—
73 programs led by political appointees under the Bush administration
74 were evaluated as performing less well relative to those run by career
75 managers (Lewis 2008).
76

77 Unlike during the Reagan era, these politicized policy failures, in
78 turn, exerted a significant electoral price. Over the course of the
79 Bush years, Republicans went from controlling Congress and the
80 presidency to a repudiation that saw them lose control of each. It
81 could be argued that the failure of this politicization doctrine was
82 more damaging to the Bush administration, and the 2008 Mc-
83 Cain presidential campaign, than the financial crisis. While the
84 public may never care directly about management issues, they do
85 pay attention when there is evidence of corruption, as in the Justice
86 Department firings, and especially when big policies publicly fail.
87 Both Hurricane Katrina and Iraq significantly undercut political
88 support for the president and his party. The financial crisis might be
89 dismissed as an unanticipated shock, but as this paper has shown,
90 these earlier disasters were easily connected to the managerial strate-
91 gies of the administration. Well before the financial crisis worsened
92 in the fall of 2008, the administration was in disrepute. As early as
93 May 2006, a Gallup Poll reported that President Bush’s job approval
94 was “down to a record-low level for his administration ... public

95 support for his handling of a variety of issues
96 is washing out, along with perceptions of his
97 leadership qualities” (Saad 2006). A 2006 poll
98 found that the term most frequently associat-
99 ed with the president was “incompetent” (Pew
100 Research Center 2006). By the 2008 election,
101 only 25 percent of respondents approved of
102 Bush’s performance, the lowest in the Gallup
103 Poll’s history (Gallup 2009).
104

105 But the Bush administration failed in another
106 way. The president and his key advisors pro-
107 fessed an interest in rebuilding the presidency
108 as an institution (Mayer 2008). Vice Presi-
109 dent Cheney saw that in the aftermath of
110 Watergate and Vietnam, “the presidency was
111 weakened, that there were congressional ef-
112 forts to rein in and to place limits on presi-
113 dential authority” (Walsh 2006, 48). In many
114 respects, the president failed in rebuilding the
115 institution of the presidency: the controversies
116 over mismanagement and the corruption of
117 scientific decision making left the presidency
118 in its poorest condition in years. By 2007,

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1 public confidence in the presidency as an institution was at its
2 lowest point since Gallup began measurement in 1992 (Newport
3 2007). The politicized presidency not only weakened the institution
4 of the presidency by eroding its legitimacy, but also failed to institu-
5 tionalize many of the new powers it sought, and invited other politi-
6 cal institutions to more closely police its activities (Roberts 2008).

7
8 Damage was done to the executive branch in other ways. Another
9 cost of politicization is manifested in fewer opportunities to influ-
10 ence policy and declining morale and among the career bureaucracy,
11 making it harder to recruit and retain highly skilled employees (Lewis
12 2008). A 2007 survey found that employee satisfaction and engage-
13 ment had declined in 20 out of 30 agencies in the preceding three
14 years (Partnership for Public Service 2007). The decline in morale is
15 sharpest where politicization has been most intense (Leonnig 2008).
16 This decline in morale is occurring just as federal agencies are seeking
17 to improve recruitment and retention in response to the retirement
18 of the baby boom generation from the federal workforce.

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

43
44 Given these failures, one unintended legacy of the Bush adminis-
45 tration may be a fundamental reconsideration of political control.
46 But by the end of 2008, the idea that control could be enhanced
47 through politicization appeared to have exhausted itself, and the
48 costs of efforts to exert such control have become more apparent.
49 This makes possible the resurgence of other ideas about the best way
50 of exercising presidential leadership. In its early days, the Barack
51 Obama administration appeared to make a determined effort to
52 avoid shows of excessive partisanship. The most obvious signal of its
53 attitude was the president-elect’s decision to retain a Bush appoint-
54 ee, Robert Gates, as secretary of defense. The appointment of a
55 Nobel Prize winner as secretary of energy also symbolized a renewed
56 emphasis on science in the White House.

57
58 Of course, we should be wary about inferring too much from the
59 early days of an administration. In 2001, after all, we thought that

60 President Bush would be the “MBA President.” Moreover, the
61 conditions that prompted enthusiasm for the politicized presidency
62 three decades ago are still with us today. The federal bureaucracy is
63 not significantly smaller, and the pressure on presidents to deliver
64 on their expansive promises is arguably more intense. In addition,
65 some of the constitutional prerogatives claimed by President Bush,
66 such as signing statements, remain in place and could be reactivated
67 by a president who sees the benefit of doing so, or is empowered by
68 another crisis akin to 9/11 (Pfiffner 2009). Politicization may be on
69 the wane—or it might just be in remission, as we remind ourselves
70 about the weaknesses of other approaches to presidential control.

71 72 Acknowledgments

73 Many people offered helpful comments to us as we wrote this paper.
74 We are especially indebted to those who offered feedback during a
75 presentation at the 2008 Midwest Political Science Association,
76 and to those who read the paper, including Larry Lynn, Richard
77 Callahan, as well as three anonymous reviewers from *PAR*.

78 79 Notes

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

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Uncorrected Proofs