

I've seen government reform work, but only with experienced civil servants, by J. Brian Atwood, opinion contributor – *The Hill*, 01/18/25 10:00 AM ET. The views expressed by contributors are their own and not the view of *The Hill*

We are about to embark on a historic effort to reform the government to bend it to the will of a president. This isn't the first effort at reform, but this may be the first time its purpose is to enhance presidential power at the expense of career professionals.

The president-elect has vowed to revive “Schedule F,” an executive order that will enable him to eliminate tens of thousands of career civil servants and replace them with loyal political appointees. His motive is decidedly not to improve the functions of government.

Government agencies are in constant need of renewal and reform. The German philosopher Max Weber advocated for functioning societal institutions, but he warned of the dangers of bureaucracies becoming “Iron Cages,” stultified and incapable of efficiently delivering services.

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 created a nonpartisan service of experts whose purpose was to serve the American people and the Constitution. Their hiring was to be based on merit alone. That act was strengthened under President George H. W. Bush in 1973, and Jimmy Carter in 1978 when the Office of Personnel Management was created.

The Hatch Act of 1939 prohibits civil servants from engaging in political activities. Yet, we hear MAGA-supporting Republicans constantly referring to the federal civil service as a “deep state” and alleging that it is intent on undermining the next president.

If reform is needed — and it no doubt is — achieving meaningful reform without the cooperation of career professionals is a non-starter.

The Clinton-Gore administration embarked on a “reinventing government” crusade. Its purpose was to make the government more responsive to the needs of ordinary people. The effect was to streamline agency processes, making government more efficient and in many cases eliminating unneeded regulations.

I was the head of one of those agencies, USAID, and I can attest that the reforms we undertook wouldn't have been possible without the cooperation of our superb career staff.

One of our reforms involved reducing the time it took to get a project into the field after it was conceived. It was taking almost two years from the time it was designed to the time it was implemented.

We wanted to know why, so we asked the career professionals to describe every step along the way. We wrote these steps down on a roll of paper that extended over two conference tables. The career people were thoroughly surprised at the unnecessary steps the bureaucracy had created, and they proceeded to eliminate many of them. We reduced the timeline by half.

There were many other reforms in those early years of “reinventing” USAID. Bureaus were merged, missions overseas created strategic objectives based on real needs and results were systematically measured. Vice President Gore gave the agency an award for its efforts. More importantly, the USAID professionals were instrumental in fending off efforts to eliminate the agency.

The lesson here is obvious: Meaningful reform can only happen by working with the career staff. Characterizing them as the enemy will produce nothing but recalcitrance, resistance and a surfeit of whistleblowers.

The administrative state is a reality of modern life. We depend on it for everything from weather to defense to healthcare to foreign aid. It is run by mostly competent and dedicated public servants. Occasionally they need praise, and occasionally they need to look carefully at the systems they have created — to improve them and to eliminate unneeded bureaucratic obstacles.

What they do not need is what the New York Times recently called Trump’s “revelry of wreckage.”

J. Brian Atwood is a senior fellow at Brown University’s Watson School. He was administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development in the Clinton administration.