## ADVICE+DISSENT: Viewpoint Across the Divide

By Paul R. Lawrence and Mark A. Abramson    *Government Executive*    August 1, 2008

*Government's next leaders must strike a balance between
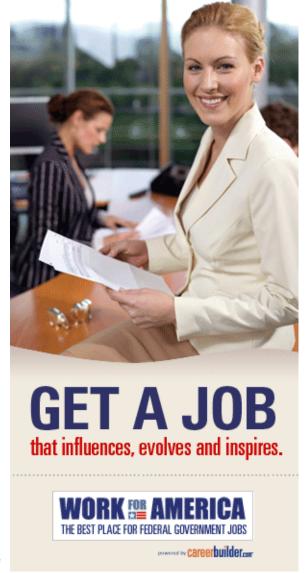civil servants and federal contractors.*

Washington, we have a problem.

The attitude of institutional Washington (Congress, the
media, watchdog organizations and others) about two key
components of government - civil servants and contractors -
ranges from ambivalence to outright hostility.

In the case of civil servants, the conventional wisdom is that
there are too many of them, they are overpaid, and they do
not consistently deliver high-quality services. In the case of
contractors, the thinking is that they make too much money,
some are downright corrupt and many fail to deliver the
results promised on projects.

There is mounting criticism that there are too many
government contractors and that the services they perform
should be returned to civil servants. In March, former
comptroller general David M. Walker said about the Defense
Department, "There is a need to focus greater attention on
what type of functions should be contracted out and which
ones should not." Another March report from the Government
Accountability Office concluded, "A major concern is the risk
of loss of government control over and accountability for
mission-related policy and program decisions."

But government employees haven't had a stellar track
record. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Federal
Emergency Management Agency was blamed for its lack of
preparedness and inadequate response. Numerous instances
of poor contract management by federal agencies have been
cited, ranging from the collapse of the FBI's Virtual Case File
project to the Census Bureau's problems with developing
handheld computers for data collection. The State
Department received considerable negative publicity in 2007
when it was unable to issue passports in a timely manner.

The new administration must sort out the appropriate balance
between civil servants and government contractors. Meeting
this challenge raises tough questions:

- Civil service. Will the next administration commit to recruiting the best and brightest to improve the
  prestige of federal service? Will there be reforms in pay, benefits, and development and training
  opportunities to make government a more attractive employer? If the pendulum has swung too far toward

the use of contractors, how many federal employees is it prepared to add? The number of executive branch employees (excluding 747,000 U.S. Postal Service workers) stands at 1.89 million. Is the next administration willing to exceed 2 million so government can perform more services currently provided by contractors?

- Contractors. Government will continue to rely on contractors. Contract support offers greater flexibility to fulfill immediate and unexpected needs. Will the next administration be willing to devote more time and energy to make contracts work better? This will require hiring more acquisition specialists, training government program managers in managing contractors, and sharing knowledge about effective contract management practices among agencies.
- Blended workforce. Operating a blended workforce presents many challenges. Will the new administration train civil servants and contractors so they can work together effectively? Will it develop rules of engagement that better define the relationship between these employees?

The next administration must deal with these issues straight on to assess the problem, improvise and test options, and determine what needs to be done. Only then will government services - and attitudes about the employees who deliver them - improve.

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