

Agents of Adhocracy: Management Consultants and the Reorganization of the Executive Branch, 1947-1949

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In 1947, partly to embarrass the incumbent Democratic President Harry S. Truman, the Republican-controlled Congress created the Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of Government and charged it with making the Federal Government more efficient. Truman responded to this openly partisan maneuver with remarkable political savvy – he immediately appointed former President Herbert Hoover, the last Republican President, to head the task force [35, p. 516]. During the twenty years since Hoover's Presidency, non-military Federal employment had risen from approximately half a million to over two million personnel, annual Federal expenditures had increased from \$3.6 billion to over \$42 billion, and the number of Federal administrative units had increased from less than 500 to over 1800 [27, pp. 1-2]. By any measure, Herbert Hoover's attempt to reorganize the postwar Federal Government was a Herculean task.

Guided by his conception of the "associative state" and his training as an engineer, Hoover responded to the challenge by bringing "business methods" to bear on the organization of the Executive Branch: Hoover created 23 separate task forces, led by dozens of different business executives who were, in turn, supported by outside management consulting firms. The Hoover Commission's task forces surveyed everything from the management of the Office of the President to the organizational structure of the Post Office. The Commission's recommendations, including a unified Department of Defense, centralized Federal purchasing through the newly created General Services Administration, and the position of White House Chief of Staff are at the foundation of the modern American Executive Branch [32, pp. 128-129].

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To translate management ideas developed for large business organizations to fit the needs of the Executive Branch, the Hoover Commission contracted fifteen of its thirty-four policy studies to research and consulting firms [4, p. 133]. The Hoover Commission represented the first high-profile use of management consulting firms by the Federal Government, and the potential for favorable publicity from the assignment was not lost on the management consulting firms. Each of the firms, in varying degrees, gained prestige and future clients from its work for the Hoover Commission.

In this paper, I will describe the work that two firms, Cresap, McCormick & Paget and Robert Heller & Associates, did for the Hoover Commission during the Truman administration and the organizational ideas that these two consulting firms transferred from business to government through their work. I argue that the Hoover Commission's reorganization of the Executive Branch was the start of the Federal Government's reliance on management consulting firms to solve organizational problems without permanently adding Federal employees – an ongoing policy that political scientist Francis Rourke has labeled “adhococracy” [41]. Fifty years after Congress created the Hoover Commission, Federal organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation now routinely contract ongoing projects to management consulting firms [20]. The Hoover Commission was also the beginning of management consulting firms' reliance on assignments from the public sector, not just the private sector. One of the largest consulting firms in the world, Booz-Allen & Hamilton, recently relocated its corporate headquarters to the Washington area specifically so that it could be near its largest client, the Federal Government. If, as political scientists argue, the Federal Government has increasingly favored impermanent organizational structures over long-term bureaucracy, then management consultants have acted as the stable institutional conduits for the transfer of organizational knowledge between the public and private sectors even as they have supplanted long-term organizational structures.

Staffing the Hoover Commission

The Hoover Commission was only one in a long series of commissions dating back to the 1880s created by Congress to streamline the administration of the Executive Branch [32, pp. 123-124]. In 1936, a decade before the Hoover Commission, Congress created the Committee on Administrative Management, known as the Brownlow Commission, to reduce the number of administrative agencies and improve efficiency in Roosevelt's administration [39, p. 3]. But Congressional restrictions on Roosevelt's ability to restructure the executive branch, and public fears that the changes would promote excessive Presidential power, hampered the Brownlow Commission's attempt to restructure the government [18, pp. 86-87; 42, pp. 318-319]. In contrast, when Congress established the Hoover Commission in 1947, both President Truman and ex-President Herbert Hoover emphasized the Commission's bipartisan leadership and down-

played any association with earlier reorganizations in order to mobilize popular support for the new commission's recommendations.

Hoover's most dramatic innovation was not improved public relations, but his insistence that administrative experts drawn from the private sector staff the new commission. Like his reorganization of the Commerce Department more than twenty-five years earlier, the former President saw the Hoover Commission not only as a way to "reduce wasteful overlap and unwise expenditures," but also as a means to promote his vision of an "associative state" in which business and government would voluntarily collaborate to solve technocratic problems [21, p. 121]. Instead of former government officials, the bulk of the three hundred task force members Hoover selected were business executives. Active corporate executives, however, could not reorganize the Federal administration without staff assistance so, instead of using Federal employees, Hoover agreed to hire outside management consulting firms to produce the initial studies and make preliminary recommendations to the Commissioners. Hoover saw management consultants as the natural translators between the organizational needs of the Commission and the business experience that he considered crucial to making government more responsive.

While management consultants were still less common than professional accountants, lawyers, or engineers, by 1946 management consulting firms were becoming increasingly accepted by the business community. The number of management consulting firms serving corporate customers grew, on average, 15% annually in the 1930s to number nearly 400 firms by 1940. The number of firms continued to advance at nearly 10% per year in the 1940s [5, Table 2]. Yet, the Federal Government's extensive use of management consulting firms only began during the Second World War when, under the strain of the rapidly growing wartime administration, the government brought in consultants from Booz-Allen & Hamilton to reorganize both the Army and the Navy [23, pp. 72-74; 7, pp. 22-23, 37-38]. Of course, the military was not the only government bureaucracy under pressure during the war – Robert Heller spearheaded the reorganization of Congress, and Tom Kearney, a senior partner in James O. McKinsey & Co. and the subsequent founder of A.T. Kearney & Co., reorganized the War Production Board after serving as its Regional Director in Chicago [46, p. 1; 34]. By the mid-1940s, Hoover Commission members could comfortably debate the relative merits of different management consultants even as they remained hesitant about the professional qualifications of many consulting firms.

The members of the Hoover Commission agreed that management consultants were the most cost effective way to prepare the task force reports. Although Hoover and the other Commissioners initially worried about the high fees charged by the leading management consulting firms, Clarence Brown, a Republican Congressman from Ohio, pointed out that in comparison with the five million dollars Congress had budgeted for the reorganization of the War Department, the Commission's \$750,000 budget was modest [7, p. 14]. Relieved, and perhaps encouraged, the Commissioners tried to use management

consulting firms whenever they could to eliminate the need for additional Federal personnel and to lighten the load for the task force members. As Commissioner George Mead, owner of the Mead Corporation, explained his initial selection of Robert Heller & Associates to reorganize the Post Office: "I approached [the problem] from a business standpoint" [7, p. 8]. Hoover agreed with Mead's analogy and quickly agreed to hire Robert Heller & Associates; as the Stanford-trained engineer replied: "The Post Office is a commercial business – is it not a fact? – and it needs that type of investigation, rather than the type of investigation that we can get..." [7, p. 10]. When George Mead concluded that Robert Heller & Associates was the only firm in the country capable of reorganizing the Post Office, Mead based his decision not only on their work for U.S. Steel, RCA, and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, but also on the firm's strong reputation on Capital Hill following Heller's work for Congress in 1945 [7, pp. 8-10].

Like George Mead's selection of Robert Heller & Associates, the Hoover Commission chose Cresap, McCormick & Paget because the management consulting firm had previously served both the Federal Government and private industry. Both Mark Cresap and Richard Paget worked for the management consulting firm of Booz-Allen & Hamilton before they resigned to join the military during WWII. Cresap served as a colonel in charge of Administrative Management for the Commanding General of the Army Service Forces, while Paget became Management Engineer of the Navy under the direct supervision of the Secretary of the Navy. When the three formed their partnership, they announced their intention to serve "government officials" along with more traditional business clients [1, p. 23]. By February 1947, only one year after forming their partnership, Cresap, McCormick & Paget was a rapidly growing management consulting firm with six young consultants on staff and Champion Paper, Smith Barney, United Air Lines, and Ford Motor Company among its first-year clients [11]. Yet, it was not Cresap, McCormick & Paget's rising reputation in the business world that brought them to the attention of the Hoover Commission but their previous work for the military. When committee members began debating the merits of different management consulting firms, they remembered the partners' earlier positions in the military; the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, recalled that they were "good men" [7, p. 38]. Little more than a month later, the head of the task force on personnel met with Richard Paget to negotiate the firm's contract with the Hoover Commission [31].

Reorganizing the Post Office

Like the many attempts to reorganize the Executive Branch that preceded the Hoover Commission, Robert Heller & Associates' reorganization of the Post Office was not without precedent. As early as 1908, the Penrose-Overstreet Commission recommended that the Federal Government decentralize the Post Office by breaking it down into regional administrative units. Yet, in 1948, the Post Office was still so centralized that Postal administrators supervised all of the 42,000 local postmasters in the U.S. directly from their Washington

headquarters [19, pp. 191-193]. Not only was the nineteenth-century patronage system that saddled the Post Office with over twenty-thousand political appointees still in existence, but managerial continuity between executive appointees remained a long-standing problem [36, p. 168]. Although Congress created the Post Office as a self-supporting, independent agency, by 1947 the yearly deficit had reached nearly 20% of its \$1.3 billion in revenues, an annual shortfall of \$263 million [9, p. 1]. Prevented by Congress from increasing postal rates, and controlled by an inefficient, centralized bureaucracy, the Post Office was pictured in newspaper editorials and cartoons as a lumbering dinosaur of “antiquated business methods” in the modern managerial age [43].

Consultants at Robert Heller & Associates agreed with this widespread perception that the Postal Service, although generally efficient in the physical distribution of the mail, was poorly managed as a business. At the root of the problem, the consultants argued, was a tension between the tendency of Congress to use postal subsidies and jobs to curry political favor and the expectation that the Executive Branch should efficiently manage “one of the largest business operations in the world” [9, p. 1]. The consultants believed, however, that this dilemma could be solved, in their words, “by adapting to Government use the principles of organization and operation found in large commercial and industrial enterprises” [9, p. 36]. By embracing modern business methods of decentralization, cost accounting, and personnel administration, the Post Office could be both managerially “responsible to the executive branch and adequately accountable to the legislative” [9, p. 36]. The first step in reforming the Post Office, the consultants agreed, would be to reestablish the Post Office as a revolving fund agency – instead of depending on annual Congressional appropriations – whose administration and operation would more closely approximate a business than a Federal Department.

Second only in importance to amending the Post Office charter, Robert Heller & Associates recommended that the Post Office decentralize its administration. As the consultants put it: “the need for decentralized, close-at-hand direction of operations in this gigantic, country-wide business enterprise is apparent to anyone who has studied the operation in the field” [9, p. 40]. Of course, decentralization was a well-known means to govern large, national bureaucracies. Big businesses like Sears, Standard Oil, and A&P developed the decentralized administrative form in the 1920s and 1930s to manage their national, multi-product companies [6, p. 2]. By the 1940s and 1950s, management consulting firms like Booz-Allen & Hamilton, Robert Heller & Associates, and Cresap, McCormick & Paget were the primary disseminators of the multidivisional form to public and private organizations as different as the U.S. Army, Westinghouse, and the University of California.

The decentralization of the Post Office into fifteen regions, Robert Heller & Associates argued, would allow regional directors to better administer field activities, coordinate the postal service between interdependent geographical districts, and rapidly disseminate improved managerial practices [9, p. 39]. It would also allow the Congress to assign, in the consultants’ words, “the

Postmaster General responsibility only for matters of a departmental and public policy nature thus relieving him of day-to-day operating duties” [9, p. 40]. Robert Heller & Associates hoped to install in the postal service the same decentralized line and staff system regularly used by the largest industrial companies in the 1940s.

While the management consultants at Robert Heller & Associates had convinced corporate executives of the wisdom of decentralization, politicians turned out to be a more difficult audience. Unlike business, where the chain of command descends directly from the CEO, neither Herbert Hoover, as head of the Hoover Commission, nor President Truman, as head of the Executive Branch, could enact Robert Heller & Associates’ proposals without Congressional approval. And, unfortunately for the consultants’ plan, the acting U.S. Postmaster General actively opposed decentralization arguing that the Post Office was “the most efficient...service in the world” [38, p. 86]. Legislators were loath to create a new administrative structure for the postal service that the Postmaster General would not support. Although the legislators passed the other eight changes proposed by the Hoover Commission, Congress decided not to enact its most important proposal: they did not decentralize the U.S. Post Office [45, p. 57].

Rethinking Federal Personnel Management

The report by the task force on Federal personnel management, in contrast to the Commission’s work for the Post Office, was not the exclusive work of a single management consulting firm. Hoover selected John Stevenson, President of the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company, to lead a sixteen-member task force that included such prominent figures as Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, Vannevar Bush of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, and David Lilienthal of the Atomic Energy Commission, in addition to five top corporate executives [26, pp. 45-46]. Like the head of the Post Office task force, however, John Stevenson made it clear that he could not “make a large part of his time available” so, instead, he hired Cresap, McCormick & Paget to create the agenda for the task force and to draft the initial report [31, 1948].

Like the Post Office, commission members saw the study of Federal personnel as one of the Hoover Commission’s most important subjects. As Hoover Commission member George Aiken, a Republican Senator from Vermont, put it: “this study of personnel management can be about the hottest and most valuable work...” of the commission [7, p. 22]. In the late 1940s, with the rapid upsurge in civilian wages, the Federal Government was losing many of its most talented employees to private industry. By 1948, Federal turnover had reached 3% per month or nearly half a million workers per year [8, p. 7]. Surveys conducted by Cresap, McCormick & Paget underscored the Federal Government’s difficulty in attracting new employees – only one quarter of all college students were interested in a career in government, and the most talented students were convinced that the Civil Service offered lower salaries and less

opportunity for advancement than private industry [8, p. 7]. From the outset of the study, task force members believed that their most important challenge was, in the words of Stevenson's assistant, "attracting qualified supervisory and top level personnel into the government" [31]. The solution that the consultants from Cresap, McCormick & Paget offered was simple – increase the speed of recruitment, make Federal salaries competitive with industry, and decentralize the Federal hiring process [12].

The decision to decentralize Federal hiring was no more radical than decentralizing the Postal Service – in Cresap, McCormick & Paget's initial meeting with John Stevenson, the consultants were told that "there is some indication that Mr. Hoover is likewise interested in decentralization of personnel administration" [31]. Indeed, the consultants began to see decentralization as a central tenet of the Hoover Commission itself. As Cresap, McCormick & Paget's preliminary report concluded:

Speed of procurement in the government necessitates a high degree of decentralization. This is borne out by the experience of World War II and is the keynote of the program of modernization now being developed by the Commission [13].

The management consultants at Cresap, McCormick & Paget saw decentralization not only as a common solution to administrative problems in the Federal Government but as a systematic answer to the Hoover Commission's inquiries. Not surprisingly, the final report of the Hoover Commission recommended that personnel administration be reorganized to create a decentralized administration under the centralized control of the Civil Service Commission [10, p. 132].

Unlike the Postal Service, Truman could decentralize personnel administration by Presidential decree so there were no delays while the administration disputed with Congress over proposed legislation [45, p. 32]. By October 1950, Truman and the Congress had enacted all but one of the Hoover Commission's twenty-nine recommendations for improving Federal personnel management [45, p. 41]. Within a year of the commission's report, the Executive Branch was benefiting from Cresap, McCormick & Paget's proposals for higher salaries, speedier hiring, and decentralized Federal employment.

Gilt by Association

In his memoirs, Dean Acheson tells the story of overtaking Herbert Hoover while walking home in New York shortly after the Hoover Commission had disbanded. "Mr. President," Acheson called out from behind, "it would greatly improve my financial and social standing if I might be seen walking with you." "Anything I can do," Hoover replied, "short of a loan" [2, p. 243].

Although their fees from the Hoover Commission were not insubstantial – the commission spent \$146,000 on Robert Heller & Associates' study of the Post Office and nearly \$100,000 on Cresap, McCormick & Paget's survey of personnel management – the management consulting firms gained more from the

prestige of the assignments than from the revenues they earned [25, 33]. Aware of how much publicity he received while reorganizing Congress in 1945, Robert Heller initially volunteered his firm's services for free to the Hoover Commission even though the commissioners quickly declined his offer [7, p. 10].

In August of 1948, soon after Robert Heller & Associates had submitted the final draft of its report on the Post Office, Robert Heller wrote to Herbert Hoover to ask for a signed photograph to display in his new offices in Cleveland [22]. Within a year, the Secretary of Defense considered hiring Robert Heller & Associates to organize the newly formed Defense Department even while the management consulting firm was restructuring Time Magazine's circulation department, based in part on their work for the Post Office [28, 40]. Following his reorganization of Congress, executives and politicians perceived Robert Heller & Associates as the "best talent in America" [7, p. 10]. Robert Heller & Associates used its association with the Hoover Commission to keep up the consulting firm's reputation during the rapid expansion of other rival management consulting firms in the 1950s.

Although Cresap, McCormick & Paget counted the Pennsylvania Railroad, Georgia-Pacific, Revlon, and Filene's among its clients by 1949, it was through its work for the Hoover Commission that Cresap, McCormick & Paget gained a national reputation [14]. In 1950, only one year after the commission had disbanded, Cresap, McCormick & Paget published a summary of the Commission Report which they mailed to leading politicians and executives in order to capitalize on their work for the Hoover Commission [15, 16]. Of course, with so many executives serving on the commission, Cresap, McCormick & Paget did not have to travel far to find work. In 1950, Cresap, McCormick & Paget worked for the Pure Oil Company whose Chairman, Rawleigh Warner, also served on the Hoover Commission Task Force on Federal Personnel Management [17; 8, p. 45]. By the late-1950s, partly because of their work for the Hoover Commission, corporate executives considered Cresap, McCormick & Paget as prestigious a management consulting firm as its main rivals: McKinsey & Co. and Booz-Allen & Hamilton. Cresap, McCormick & Paget's work for the Hoover Commission served as a marketing tool through the end of the 1950s as the firm emphasized the caliber of its work for corporate, government, and non-profit institutions.

Conclusion

The pattern that both Robert Heller & Associates and Cresap, McCormick & Paget set for the Federal use of management consultants continued immediately after the Hoover Commission dissolved in 1949. In 1950, Truman allocated one million dollars for management consulting studies following recommendations made by the Hoover Commission. The Federal Field Service, covering nearly 90% of all civilian employees, hired Fry & Associates to reorganize its executive administration, the Coast Guard hired Cresap, McCormick & Paget to rethink its personnel management, and the Veterans'

Administration hired Booz-Allen & Hamilton to restructure its organization based on recommendations from Trundle Engineering Co.'s initial survey [37, pp. 56-58]. Of course, Truman was not the only President who used management consultants. Immediately after his election in 1952, Eisenhower called in McKinsey & Co. to advise him on possible political appointees for the executive branch while the consulting firm was planning the organization of the White House Staff [29, 30]. By the late 1950s, when McKinsey & Co. worked for NASA and Booz-Allen & Hamilton developed PERT for the Navy's Polaris missile program, management consultants had become the accepted organizational experts to the Federal Government. In the 1950s and 1960s, government officials increasingly turned to management consulting firms to solve their administrative problems, using temporary adhocracies to reform their long-term organizational structures [41, p. 135].

Harry Truman later remembered the Hoover Commission as one of the great triumphs of his presidential administration [44]. Perhaps he was right, since political scholars often trace the origins of the modern administrative state to the reforms instituted by the Hoover Commission [3, p. 70]. If so, the pattern that the Hoover Commission adopted owes a considerable debt to their extensive use of consulting firms. Herbert Hoover used institutionalized consulting firms to unite his conception of the "associative state" with the administrative power of a strong Executive Branch. Management consulting firms like Robert Heller & Associates and Cresap, McCormick & Paget, in turn, promoted their vision of a decentralized, corporate bureaucracy in the Federal government by acting as the institutional agents of adhocracy.

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