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REAGAN AND THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH: HINTS OF AN ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGY

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Indications from the first year of the Reagan administration suggest that reports of the demise of the "administrative presidency" may be, if not exaggerated, at least premature. While heavy media coverage has focused attention on the new president's legislative strategy, there have been other, less visible hints in the first year that the new administration is also developing an administrative strategy for impressing the president's political philosophy on the federal government.

The scent of this has been a little bit harder to pick up than in previous administrations. In part, that is because the emerging Reagan administrative strategy seems different in some important ways from the approaches employed by the most recent incumbents. More reliance has been placed on the leverage inherent in the budget and in personnel selection, less on broad structural realignments or management panaceas. This strategy--if it is that--has also been hard to detect because it has come without fanfare. No grand pronouncements have emitted from the White House about program planning or zero base budgets, about super cabinets or management by objectives. The Reagan approach to management seems to have evolved operationally, without any apparent grand design. Hence its faintness to the naked eye.

The preliminary evidence from 1981 points to the following as critical elements in this administration's efforts to direct the executive branch.

Budget cuts. The cuts in the 1981 and 1982 budgets have provided both incentive and excuse for the administration to eliminate programs it opposed and to fire, transfer, or downgrade career civil servants who lacked enthusiasm for Reagan policy initiatives. Though enacted in the name of fiscal economy and often without specific managerial purpose, these budget cuts have provided the administration with a set of surprisingly useful management opportunities. As

Senator Henry Jackson recently pointed out, the budget cuts have given "the new managers in this administration a tool for changing policies that previous administrators didn't have."

Micro-level reorganizations. Unlike most of its immediate predecessors, the Reagan administration has squandered little staff time or political capital planning a major overhaul of the executive branch. (Contrast this with the amount of energy the Carter administration invested in macro-reorganization in 1977). Even the president's proposed eliminations of the Energy and Education Departments have been left to linger on the back burner until the administration was geared up to bring them forward. But at the operating levels of the government, especially among those bureaus and offices that oversee spending for social services, that regulate business, or that fund "non-essential research, reorganization has been a fact of life. Some programs have been transferred to less friendly jurisdictions, others have been squeezed to the vanishing point by budget and personnel cuts, still others have been (or are being) systematically dismantled by the Reagan appointees who head them.

Non-enforcement. The administration quickly discovered that its opponents could do little to force its hand if it chose to be less than vigorous in enforcing laws and regulations with which it disagreed. It has felt free, therefore, to back away from aggressive enforcement in many areas: consumer product safety, overcharging by oil companies, affirmative action, occupational safety and health, and environmental pollution, to name just a few. Simply put, the administration has tried to gain whatever administrative advantage it could from the discretion afforded it by existing rules, statutes, and court decisions. Characteristic of this was the attitude of William Bradford Reynolds, the head of the civil rights division of the Justice Department. When told by a meeting of his staff attorneys that his non-enforcement policies were going to make him a general without an army, he responded: "If that happens, so be it. I'll get another army."

Personnel. The central component to the Reagan approach to administration in the first year was the effort to staff the new administration with people who fully shared the president's political philosophy and who were committed to the aggressive translation of that philosophy into public policy. In no previous administration has the White House worked so hard to dominate the selection of presidential appointees, to protect the president's personnel choices from the intense political pressures that often interfere with the appointment of presidential loyalists.

This was a costly effort in terms of time lost and political egos bruised. But it was done because the senior White House staff believed that a president can have real influence on policy choices in the executive branch only when his political philosophy is fully represented every time an important decision is made. And since the president cannot participate personally in every important decision, the best surrogate for his participation is the presence of appointees who share his instincts and political passions. On the evidence of its first year in office, this administration appears to have been uncommonly successful in finding and appointing political executives who fit that description.

It may be a bit premature to label all of this an "administrative strategy." Perhaps the evidence really only signifies the coincidence of some isolated and unrelated administrative tactics. The reality ought to become more apparent in the year ahead as the administration settles into its own patterns of operation and as the imminence of the mid-term elections increases congressional resistance to White House policy initiatives. When the legislative process becomes a less fruitful path to the president's policy goals--as no doubt it will--we should expect to see heavier reliance on an administrative strategy. That shift in emphasis ought to provide us a clearer sense of the dimensions, the coherence, and the utility of that strategy.

PRESIDENTIAL PERSONNEL POLICY

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The major dilemma of presidential personnel policy is how to mold together an administration loyal to the president and his interests and at the same time possessing the managerial experience and substantive skills necessary to manage the departments and agencies of the executive branch. In other words, the problem is how to keep in dynamic balance the centripetal forces of the White House and the centrifugal forces from the bureaucracies. Compounding this difficult task is the paradox that the president does not have full control of his own appointment process (Mackenzie, 1981b). But the personnel function must be performed well, because political appointees are the glue that holds together every presidential administration and the dynamic force that provides direction for the executive branch. The appointed positions that the president has to form his administration include: the White House staff, the cabinet, the subcabinet, non-career SES, and Schedule C (not to mention thousands of appointments in the military, independent regulatory agencies, and honorary commissions and committees).

The president himself must participate in choosing much of the White House staff, who have to be compatible with him and his working style. They must also be able to play the delicate role of surrogate for the president in dealing with the executive branch. Despite the arguments for cabinet government (Hess), the president needs some people who can deal with issues that cross departmental boundaries, who will view issues from a presidential perspective, and who will guard the president's political interests (Patterson). John Ehrlichman has observed that presidents begin their administrations with strong cabinets and weak White House staffs and end them with strong staffs and weak cabinets (APSA Meetings, 1981; also, Ehrlichman Ch. 7).

