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Analysis

A Lesson for Obama on Reaching Out to the Federal Workforce

First President Bush Held Session Days After Inauguration

By MAX STIER
Special to the Washington Post

There has been much talk about President-elect Barack Obama looking to Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt for inspiration and insight on building his administration and charting his first 100 days in office.

But some of the most helpful guidance available could come from an overlooked source — George H.W. Bush.

Just days after his inauguration 20 years ago, the first President Bush gathered hundreds of the government's senior career executives at DAR Constitution Hall to praise their dedication, extol public service and ask for their help in governing.

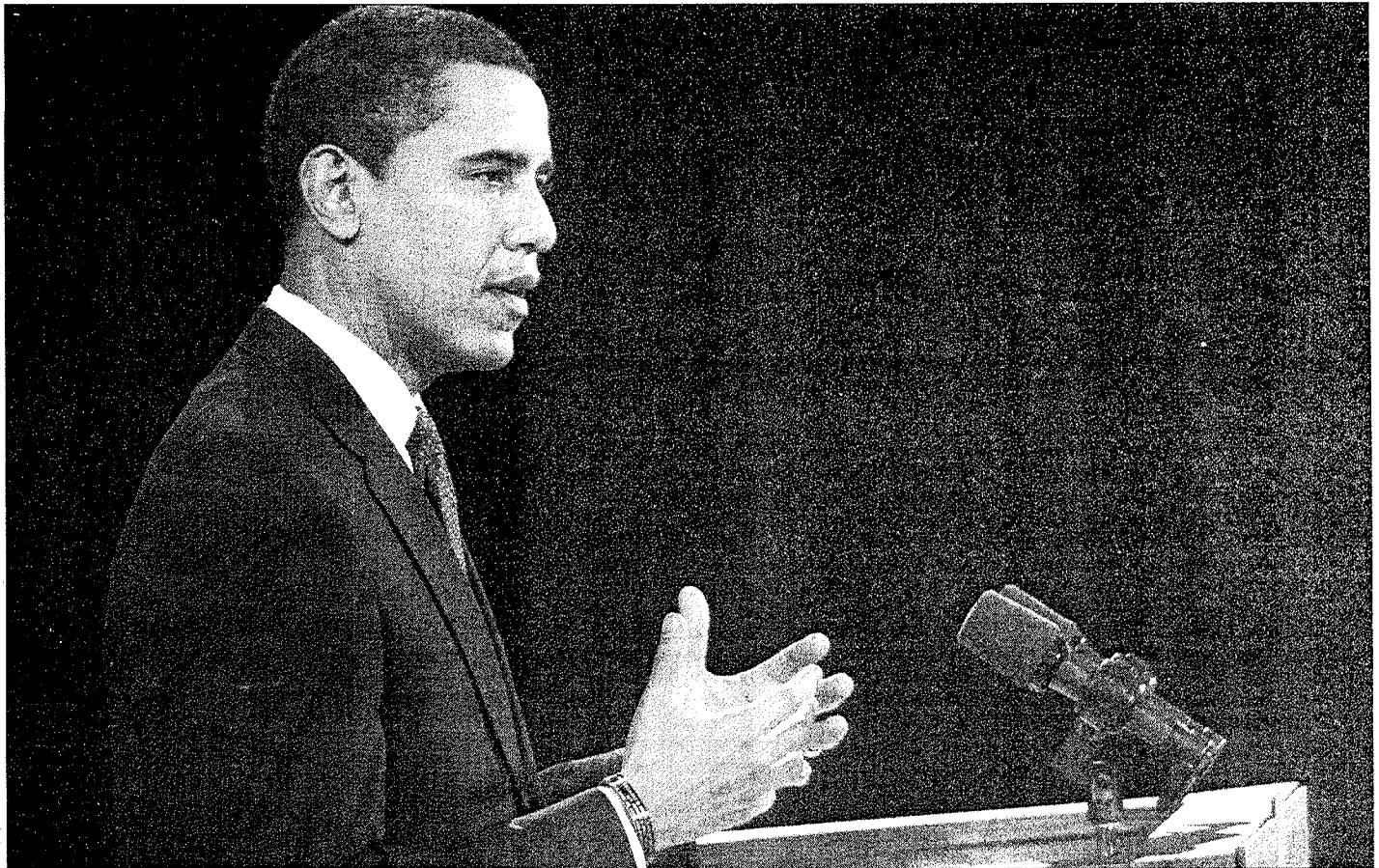
"I'm coming to you as president and offering my hand in partnership. I'm asking you to join me as full members of our team. I promise to lead and to listen, and I promise to serve beside you as we work together to carry out the will of the American people," Bush said. "Our principles are clear: that government service is a noble calling and a public trust."

Obama has signaled his own strong commitment to fostering public service — to "make government cool again." As he begins his presidency, it would be smart for him to follow George H.W. Bush's example, personally meeting with senior civil service executives to explain his priorities, set expectations, and let them know their expertise and hard work will be needed to meet the many daunting challenges ahead.

Such a simple, yet profoundly important, gesture would create new energy and enthusiasm and provide a reservoir of goodwill among a government workforce that has often been demoralized by being portrayed as the problem instead of part of the solution.

Why does it matter? In the end, "personal is policy." Obama's agenda may initially be tied to action by Congress, but it will be implemented by the federal workforce, and the ultimate success of his administration will rest with the capacity of the government to perform.

If the senior managers and the entire career workforce can be motivated and given a stake in the process, the new administration will find that its major goals and even minor policy initiatives will be easier to achieve.



BY DOUGLAS LOTT - BLOOMBERG

Barack Obama did not bad-mouth civil servants during his campaign, and so he brings a measure of goodwill to his dealings with the people who will ultimately carry out his policies.

Obama is well positioned to energize the civilian workforce. Many administrations have taken office after having run against Washington and the federal bureaucracy. This has carried over into mistrust and skepticism once they are in power, with newly minted political appointees often ignoring the knowledge and abilities of seasoned government managers and sending a message that they are not valued or trusted.

Obama resisted the temptation to score cheap political points at the expense of civil servants, and now is his opportunity to reap the benefits.

After the initial speech, what exactly does Obama need to do? First, follow up aggres-

sively and consistently. The new president's effort to engage the federal workforce must be an ongoing process that is reinforced on a regular basis by the Cabinet secretaries and top political appointees.

Second, the president and his appointees must reach out well beyond the Beltway. Eight-five percent of the federal workforce lives and works outside of Washington, and these frontline employees must be made to feel part of the team effort.

Third, stick with what's working. Political appointees have frequently sought to reinvent the wheel by setting up new command and control systems that bypass career federal managers or discard substantive work

already in the pipeline. It has become standard operating procedure for every president to propose his own, new and improved government reform plan, but little ever gets fixed, because it's also common practice to wipe out even the good work that has been done.

Next, reach out to unions. One of the biggest obstacles to human capital reforms over the past eight years was the chilly relationship between the Bush administration and federal unions. The new administration should work in partnership with labor leaders.

To be clear, having an engaged workforce won't guarantee a successful tenure, but not

having one will result in certain failure.

It's not a question of needing either smart policies or a well-managed workforce. You need both. So while Obama should continue to review the achievements of our greatest presidents, he shouldn't ignore the one-termers.

Applying this simple early lesson from George H.W. Bush could go a long way toward determining Obama's chances of any FDR-esque accomplishments.

Max Stier is president and chief executive of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service, an organization that works to revitalize the federal government.