A close-up, profile view of a person's face, showing the eye, nose, and mouth. The person has light-colored hair and is looking towards the right. The image is partially cut off by a vertical white line on the left side.

A Love-Hate Relationship

The federal workforce has responded positively to a president who often bashes the bureaucracy

By SHAWN ZELLER



TO SAY THAT FEDERAL WORKERS were unenthusiastic about President Donald Trump on the day of his election, 25 months ago, would be an understatement.

The civil service, one of the last bastions of the unionized, has a deep stake in government's growth. Trump had threatened, in his campaign, to shrink much of it, and he'd done so with quintessential attacks characterizing government workers as disloyal and the bureaucracy as grossly inefficient.

A poll taken after the election by the Government Business Council and Government Executive magazine found that more than a quarter of federal employees planned to leave or were contemplating it.

What followed seemed to forebode a government cataclysm. Top diplomats quit, blasting Trump on the way out. An EPA executive warned that Trump's proposed budget cuts would cost thousands of jobs. Rank incompetence in the White House personnel office left Trump struggling to fill political posts. And articles in prominent publications warned of dire consequences in a battle pitting "Trump vs. the 'Deep State,'" as *The New Yorker* put it in a piece from May of this year that quoted Nancy McEldowney, a former career ambassador and director of the State Department's training institute, who described a "hostile takeover and occupation" of the government by Trump and his team.

But a funny thing happened on the way to Armageddon:

Not only did the government go on, but longtime federal executives have come to embrace much in Trump's plans, which offer relief from civil service hiring and compensation rules, and capitalize on technological advancements to improve management.

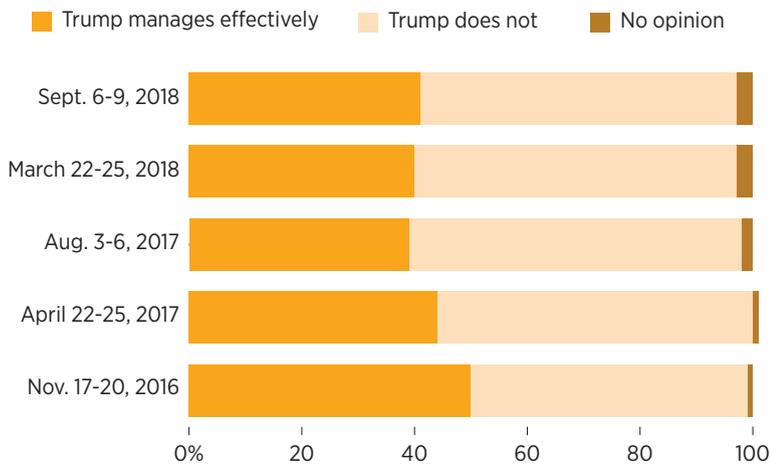
Although the 1,500 career senior executives Trump lost in 2017 is higher than the 1,100 who departed during Obama's first year, it probably had little to do with the president's policies, says Bill Valdez, president of the Senior Executives Association, which represents top civil servants.

It's a problem at the start of any new administration, he says. "The career executives are smart enough to know that there is a political dimension that is not within their control and doesn't have a substantive impact on their work," says Valdez.

John M. Kamensky, who was deputy director of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government during President Bill Clinton's administration and is now a senior fellow at the IBM Center for the Business

Presidential Effectiveness

A CNN poll regularly asked respondents whether President Trump can manage government effectively.



Source: CNN

of Government, says he's optimistic about Trump's attention to government management: "They are painting a very positive, forward-looking picture," he says.

There is no evidence that civil servants, as a whole, are departing in droves either, despite higher turnover at some agencies. In fact, the number of non-military personnel working for the government is about the same as when Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, left office. The most recent figure, as of March 2018, was 2,075,006, compared to 2,093,868 in December 2016. While agencies disfavored by Trump, such as the EPA and State Department, have lost workers — 6 and 9 percent, respectively — others, like the Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs departments, have hired more.

The government's minuscule "quit rate," which captures those who aren't retiring but are leaving for other jobs or for none at all, remains the envy of the private sector and an indication that government's pay and benefits remain competitive, at least in most fields. It was less than 2 percent in fiscal 2018.

It may seem hard to believe, given the Government Executive polling, but the White House Office of Personnel Management says federal workers are happier in their jobs than ever before, based on a governmentwide survey released in October. It said the Global Satisfaction Index — a measure the office has taken since 2014 that

factors in government workers' answers to questions related to their happiness on the job — now stands at 64, up from 61, the highest it reached during Obama's presidency.

Private organizations that tabulate similar measures have also found that the civil service has settled in. The Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit that seeks to promote government service, released its annual survey on the "Best Places to Work in the Federal Government" last December with an encouraging note: Its measure of "employee engagement," which tracks the satisfaction and commitment of federal workers and

"It puts the career senior executive in an uncomfortable position when there's an absence of political direction. You are just treading water. You can't develop new programs or move programs forward."

— BILL VALDEZ,
SENIOR EXECUTIVES
ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT

their willingness to put in the extra effort to get better results, rose in 2017 by 2.1 points, the largest one-year jump since the survey was created in 2003, and was the highest score since 2011.

Valdez believes the departures among senior workers may be the leading edge of a retirement wave that government human resources officers have predicted, often in apocalyptic terms, for the better part of the past two decades. Senior executives are, on average, older than rank-and-file workers and, therefore, more likely to be eligible to start collecting their pensions.

If senior executives were leaving in frustration, Valdez says it was less about Trump's policies than his slowness in filling top political jobs, putting more work on career civil service executives. "It puts the career senior executive in an uncomfortable position when there's an absence of political direction," he says. "You are just treading water. You can't develop new programs or move programs forward."

Reservations about Trump's policies aside, Valdez says senior executives see a lot to like in Trump's plans for modernizing the civil service, as laid out by the Office of Personnel Management in March. Those plans aim to capitalize on advancements in data processing and artificial intelligence to manage for results, an explicit goal of presidents since Clinton signed the Government Performance and Results Act and tasked his vice president, Al Gore, with "reinventing government."

Trump wants to better position the civil service to take advantage of "big data" by making it easier to hire people with the skills to analyze the numbers and by retraining the existing workforce to shift from collecting and processing data to making sense of it.

The president has also proposed changes in upgrading information technology systems and streamlining hiring and pay rules that can be made administratively, without a gridlocked Congress' assent.

More Achievable Goals?

Trump's plans are, in some ways, less ambitious than those of his most recent Republican predecessor. George W. Bush convinced Congress to allow him to remake the government's decades-old personnel sys-



Courtesy, fedsmith.com, courtesy.opm.gov

THREE TRIES: Trump's first two picks for OPM director — Nesterczuk, left, and Pon, center — didn't pan out. Weichert is now acting director.

tem, which rewards longevity, in favor of one that would allow managers to set pay raises based on performance.

Trump's more-modest ambitions may be more achievable than Bush's proposals, which got tied up in legal battles with federal employee unions. The Democratic Congress that took over in 2007 repealed the authorities and Bush ended up with little to show for his efforts.

While the Trump plan starts with modernizing the government's approach to data, it then moves on to smaller goals, such as improving citizens' experience in dealing with the government to better managing contracts and grants.

"The details are very strong and very interesting and in many ways essential to moving government forward," says Donald Kettl, an expert on government management at the University of Texas at Austin, of the Trump management agenda.

Kettl has helped the National Academy of Public Administration, a nonpartisan body of management gurus, put out two reports in recent months called "No

Time to Wait: Building a Public Service for the 21st Century."

They recommend that the federal government increase flexibility in its hiring processes, permitting agencies to hire workers for their skills rather than to fill specific positions.

In theory, that will help managers move

workers to where they are most needed within agencies and between them. And it will benefit workers, since it's thought that the upcoming generation is less interested in the traditional, safe, 30- or 40-year government career than in an enriching experience that lets them learn on the job.

Even when it can't offer salaries competitive with the private sector, that flexibility creates better chances for the government to compete for top talent, the academy concluded.

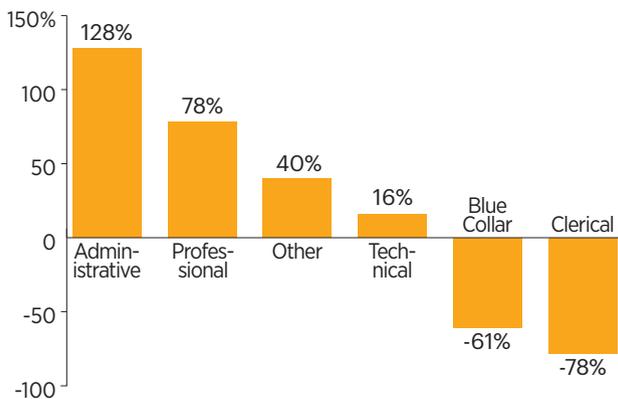
Teresa W. Gerton, the academy's president, a former Obama Labor Department official and longtime Defense Department career executive, says that Trump "is on the right path."

She notes the administration's move in October to exempt more positions, ranging from cybersecurity engineers to economists, from the government's laborious hiring procedures as a good first step toward making the government competitive with top private-sector employers.

Not only can agencies now hire for these jobs more quickly, they can also pay some new hires more. Trump is for the first time

Change in Federal Employment by Occupational Category from 1973 to 2014

While the overall federal workforce increased 2 percent in the last 40 years, the tyes of jobs have fluctuated.



Source: Donald F. Kettl, *Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America's Lost Commitment to Competence*; Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016



using a 1990 law that allows managers to depart from the 1949 General Schedule governing most federal salaries and offer more pay when necessary to recruit talent. It means some new workers may earn as much as \$153,800, and more if they live in high-cost areas.

Dated System

There's widespread agreement that the General Schedule, with its series of 15 grades and 10 steps in each, is out of touch with the times. It was created when most government workers were clerks processing paperwork, and the average worker was a relatively low-paid Grade 6.

As the nature of government work has evolved and most government workers are highly educated white-collar professionals, the average grade has risen to 10. A Grade 10 employee in Washington this year earns between \$61,926 and \$80,505, depending on how long they've worked in the government.

Employees move up the steps based on how long they're in the job and then top out, absent promotion to a new grade level. A separate pay schedule, for senior executives, has salary levels as high as \$189,600.

Bush hoped to upend the system agency by agency, winning approval from Congress in the 2002 law (PL 107-296) creating the Homeland Security Department to place its workers in a new pay system that would give managers wider latitude to set starting salaries and move workers up more quickly based on performance.

The following year, in the defense authorization law (PL 108-136), Congress gave the Pentagon similar power. With its more than 700,000 workers, the shift at the Defense Department, along with Homeland Security, would have put about half of the civil service outside the General Schedule.

But Bush's failure to implement the changes has prompted a rethinking among government management experts about how best to move forward.

Kamensky, the former Clinton official, says the sheer range of government employment argues against broad, one-size-fits-all systems, and for giving discretion to agencies. "There is a stunning array of jobs," he says. "We are talking about brain surgeons and trash collectors and air traffic controllers."

In lower-skilled areas, it's thought that

government pay and benefits are highly competitive, but in highly technical fields, no one thinks the government can compete now with the Googles and Apples of the world.

Although Kamensky says he prefers a more strategic approach to overhauling government pay systems than Trump's piecemeal one, he's on board with other changes.

Kamensky applauds the administration's effort to collect survey data from front-line workers and its work to carry forward Obama's initiative to streamline the selection process for new members of the Senior Executive Service and to encourage their rotation among agencies.

When Congress created the Senior Executive Service in the last major civil service law in 1978, it intended it to be a cadre of broadly skilled managers capable of moving between agencies, not the mostly stagnant force it became.

And Kamensky says federal workers should appreciate the creation in June of new "Gears of Government Awards" to recognize individuals and teams for their "exceptional delivery of key outcomes for the American people."

There's a lot to like there for managers, says Kamensky: "The key thing is steady, forward progress in a lot of dimensions."

Scarce Public Notice

Trump's efforts to overhaul civil service protocols have flown under the radar because he's grabbed so many headlines for his decisions on stingy annual pay raises for government workers — he's proposed no cost-of-living increase for 2019 — and for his attacks on federal employee unions.

The unions, never a fan of Trump or any Republican presidential candidate in modern times, have responded in kind.

Both sides can claim victories. In one of his first major civil service actions, Trump signed legislation (PL 115-41) in June 2017 giving Veterans Affairs Department managers power to fire more quickly employees deemed to be poor performers or guilty of wrongdoing.

The new law also bars top VA executives from appealing their firings to the Merit Systems Protection Board, an independent agency charged with hearing such appeals, and limits to six months the

amount of time other VA workers can pursue appeals. In addition, fired workers no longer get paid while their cases are under appeal. The law also gave the VA secretary more discretion in selecting his or her top civil service deputies.

The union for VA workers blasted it. The law “ensures that no employee ever gets a fair shake on any proposed adverse action,” J. David Cox Sr., national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, told the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee before the law’s enactment.

Cox added that he saw the VA law as a stalking horse for a governmentwide change in firing procedures: “Whatever lack of public confidence in government exists today will be magnified a hundredfold if all civil servants become de facto political appointees, serving at the whim of supervisors,” he said.

Cox’s concern was valid, so far as Trump’s intention to expand the authority went. The president followed up with a May 2018 executive order that sought to reduce the period of time federal managers across the government must give problem employees to improve their performance before firing them, from as long as four months to 30 days.

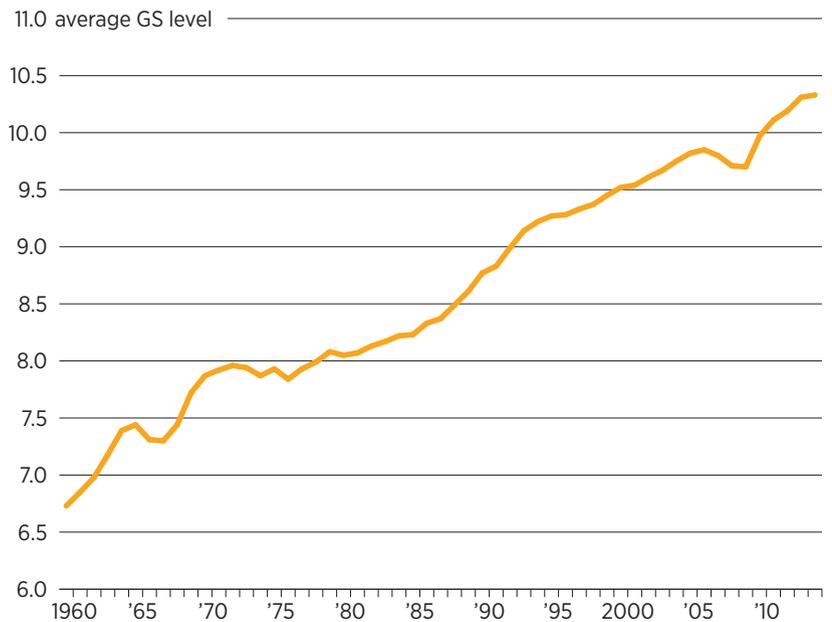
Trump has also hampered the efforts of disciplined employees to appeal their cases by dragging his feet in nominating members to the Merit Systems Protection Board, which has been without a quorum for his entire presidency. The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee deadlocked on one Trump pick for the board on Nov. 28 and delayed a vote on two others.

But the VA law, spurred by a 2014 scandal at a veterans’ hospital in Phoenix where veterans died waiting for appointments, was not controversial in Congress. The Senate passed it on a voice vote. The House vote was 368-55 with Democrats voting more than 2-1 in favor, along with all but one Republican.

Even the civil service sides with Trump, at least judging by a Government Business Council/Government Executive poll in June that found 51 percent of federal workers support an easier process for firing poor performers or those guilty of wrongdoing. By contrast, less than a quarter opposed a change in firing procedures, with another quarter unsure.

Pay Grades on the Rise

More federal jobs today require high levels of education and white collar professional skills than in the post-World War II era when most civil servants worked as clerks or in blue collar jobs.



Source: Donald F. Kettl, *Escaping Jurassic Government: How to Recover America’s Lost Commitment to Competence*; Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2016

Union Threats

Still, union objections pose a major threat to Trump’s management agenda. In August, for example, a coalition of unions convinced Washington federal District Court Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to throw out the new firing procedures, on the grounds that they violated congressional intent.

Jackson also tossed another Trump order that would have limited the amount of time union leaders can spend working on union business while also collecting their government paychecks.

That order, unconnected in any substantive way with Trump’s management agenda, could end up undermining it by reinforcing the unions’ appeals to Democrats in Congress to curtail Trump’s plans. And the unions have an ally in Virginia Democrat Gerald E. Connolly, the incoming chairman of the House Subcommittee on Government Operations that oversees civil service rules.

He cites the Trump order on unions’ use of “official time,” along with Trump’s budget proposals to freeze federal pay and reduce retirement benefits as examples of a

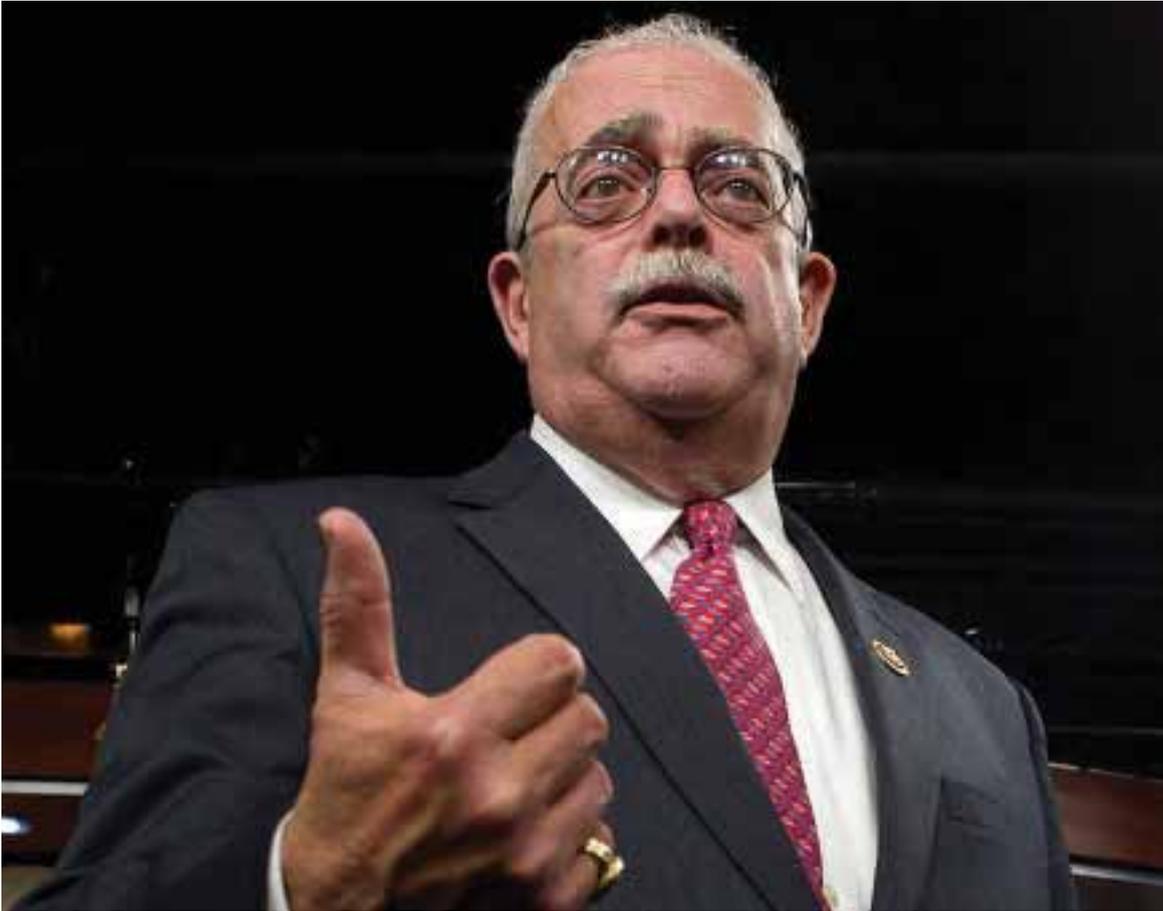
“full-blown assault by the Republicans on federal employees.”

That, Connolly says, calls into question all of Trump’s proposals to overhaul government work: “Their agenda is tainted from the beginning.”

Kettl sees both sides. “From the point of view of the unions, the administration wants to downsize the workforce. That’s understandable given some of the things in agencies’ strategic plans,” he says. On the other hand, “The administration believes the unions are more interested in protecting federal jobs regardless of the mission. That’s understandable, too.”

Trump hasn’t helped his cause — infighting and disorganization have plagued his management of the bureaucracy as much as they have his policymaking.

Trump struggled to find someone to run the White House Office of Personnel Management, the agency that traditionally oversees efforts to revamp civil service rules. His first pick, George Nesterchuk, withdrew in August 2017 after unions raised objections. Nesterchuk had alienated them when he helped design the Bush



CQ Roll Call file photo

RANK-AND-FILE MAN: Connolly, whose northern Virginia district includes many federal workers, is a key defender of their unions in Congress.

administration's personnel overhaul at the Pentagon.

It took another seven months for Congress to confirm Trump's second pick, Jeff Pon, previously an executive with the professional society for human resources directors.

But Trump forced Pon to step down in October after he protested the president's plans to dismantle the Office of Personnel Management, which is known as OPM, and shift its core functions to the White House's Office of Management and Budget.

Trump's reorganization plan there hasn't gone over well with government management experts. Nesterczuk, for one, says it's a mistake to ask an agency principally charged with overseeing finances, OMB, to take on oversight of personnel. "Burying the policy aspects of OPM at OMB is nonsense," he says, adding that it would be better for Trump to focus on making OPM more effective in advising agency human resources officers.

In the meantime, though, Trump has effectively brought OPM under OMB control

by naming Margaret Weichert to assume Pon's duties on an acting basis while continuing in her role as deputy director for management at OMB.

Trump's difficulty in managing the government's personnel office is reflective of his broader problem in finding people to serve in top political posts. According to a Washington Post/Partnership for Public Service tracker, the Senate has only confirmed 378 people to fill 704 key political positions, with another 199 awaiting confirmation and 129 posts still without a nominee.

That lackluster pace, combined with the higher level of turnover among career senior executives in Trump's first year, is worrisome to Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service.

He's teamed with the Senior Executives Association on a "Joint Policy Agenda" that aims to strengthen the relationship between career executives and political appointees. It would do that by reducing the number of political appointees and mandating new training so they aren't under the "misimpression that they can bring a team

in to control everything without having to listen to and engage the career workforce," Stier says.

That attitude isn't unique to Trump's appointees, but is particularly acute in corners of his administration, says Stier.

In the 2017 version of the partnership's study, "employee engagement" had dropped at agencies where Trump has criticized career workers the most: the Justice and State departments and the intelligence agencies.

A new edition of the "Best Places to Work" survey, which the partnership will release in December, will show how OPM's data presenting a happily engaged workforce can mislead. In some agencies, "We have numbers that are quite a bit lower than a good benchmark," Stier says.

On the one hand, Stier counts himself among the management experts pleased with Trump's plans, but on the other he warns that making plans is only the first step in improving government's performance: "The real challenge is less the ideas than getting it done." ■