

Can Government Be Reinvented?

"Reinventing Public Administration" by James Q. Wilson, in *PS: Political Science & Politics* (Dec. 1994), American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

"Reinventing" the executive branch of the federal government so that it "works better and costs less," as Vice President Al Gore's National Performance Review is supposed to do, is a very laudable goal, says political scientist Wilson, of



A skeptic's view of the Gore initiative to reorganize government.

the University of California, Los Angeles. Impractical, too, without getting rid of big government.

The Gore report, issued in 1993, would not do that. Although the vice president and his review staff regard the government's reliance on "large, top-down, centralized bureaucracies" as its "root problem," their solution is to make government more "entrepreneurial." They would retain almost all government programs and agencies, but "empower" government workers and "put customers first."

That is much easier said than done, Wilson observes. "The kind of sweeping cultural changes that are possible in some corporations are not possible in government agencies, precisely because they *are* government agencies. They are agencies invested with awesome powers of compulsion—to tax, regulate, inspect, arrest—and attractive powers of reward—to subsidize, purchase, and protect." And they are typically immune from competition. "To make them accountable, we enshroud them in a maze of laws, regulations, and court rulings; to keep

them responsive, we expose them to access by endless reporters, lawyers, committees, and investigators. The result, inevitably, is a culture of risk aversion that cannot readily be altered."

To truly empower government workers, they would have to be allowed—by interest groups, the news media, and congressional watchdogs—to make honest mistakes that get some people upset. "When a culture of forbearance and forgiveness descends on Washington," Wilson says, "please alert the FBI at once, for it will be evidence that somebody has kidnapped or anesthetized the entire legislative and judicial branches of government."

The prospects for putting "customers" first seem equally dim. "A 19-year-old high school dropout working at McDonald's will be prompt and courteous if the alternative is being fired," Wilson notes. The franchise manager will labor to see that employees measure up, if that means more money in his or her pockets. "But those conditions do not exist in the Postal Service or the IRS or the Social Security Administration. As a result, gains in customer satisfaction will have to be achieved

largely by means of exhortation." They are not likely to be large.

"When we and our elected representatives authorize the government to perform a task that once was performed in the private sector or not at all," Wilson says, "we are declaring, in effect, that we value some goal more highly than customer satisfaction or employee empowerment." The only way to really "reinvent" big government, he suspects, would be to dismantle it.

Toward a Passionate House

"A Madisonian Compromise" by James R. Stoner, Jr., in *Policy Review* (Winter 1995), The Heritage Foundation, 214 Massachusetts Ave. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002-4999.

Conservatives seem to be of two minds about term limits, especially now that the Republicans have taken command of Congress. Enthusiasts argue that limiting lawmakers' terms would end