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Press Release — July 22, 2002

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Miller Center Releases Historical Study to Inform Homeland Security Debate: "Making Democracy Work: A Brief History of Federal Executive Reorganization"

Charlottesville, VA — July 22, 2002 As Congress considers momentous action to restructure the federal government, the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs has released the first recent study actually reviewing executive reorganization throughout the twentieth century. Thirteen of the century's seventeen presidents have been involved in comprehensive peacetime reorganizations, and at least three – Wilson, Roosevelt and Truman – in wartime efforts. That record should be better understood by those preparing to write its next chapter. Authored by Brian Balogh, Joanna Grisinger, and Philip Zelikow, and informed by scholarly contributions from nine other historians and political scientists, the report suggests some conclusions that may usefully inform the current debate:

1. The underlying constitutional structure of our government creates serious barriers to major executive reorganization.

For this and other reasons, reorganizations set the structure for a process of change that will last for years, if not for decades, as officials try to implement the vision for what the new agency should do.

2. Executive reorganization is often done in the name of managerial efficiency. By that standard, the short-term costs of reorganization are severe.

Every newly organized agency or department faces growing pains and often stumbles at the outset. A popular historical analogy for the current reorganization is the National Security Act of 1947, yet that act accomplished little improvement in defense management. Optimists, though, might take heart at the words of the EPA's first administrator, William Ruckelshaus, recalling EPA's difficult first years (the Miller Center report includes case studies on the establishment of both EPA and the Department of Education). A key factor in his favor, Ruckelshaus recalled, was that "everybody thought they were attached to a cause larger than themselves."

3. Putting claims about managerial efficiency to one side, advocates of reform also try to tilt the way agencies weight their priorities, by changing their departmental environment.

The argument about reorganization thus turns into an argument about which missions of those agencies should be deemed most important. Amid current debates of this kind (about the Coast Guard for instance), the Miller Center study shows a historical pattern of such arguments.

4. Another argument advocates of reorganization can make, aside from managerial efficiency, is that reorganization might create new capacities for government action that do not really exist in the current structures at all.

EPA is one past example of this; others range from the Social Security Administration, to CIA and the Air Force (creating capacities for overhead reconnaissance of the entire world), to NASA., just to name a few.

5. If new capacities are desired-if the government is trying to perform new activities or build new systems-the historical record shows that the process of building these new capacities is likely to be very difficult. Leaders will have to decide whether the desired gains in government capacity are really worth the high short-term price, including a price in performance, they may have to pay.

In other words, to really build the capacities to do new things, the administration and Congress will have to affirm the real importance they attach to homeland security, in choice after choice and vote after vote, for months and years to come.

6. Adapting the committee structure in Congress to reflect executive branch reorganization is crucial to the success of executive reform.

The historical record has many examples of reorganizations that were enacted but then fail to gain traction because congressional oversight and appropriation responsibilities were left unchanged. (FEMA itself suffered from this problem at its inception, reporting to twenty different committees.)

7. Implementation of executive reorganization can also disrupt relationships with state and local governments. Noting this historical tendency, it may be possible to address those relationships seriously and structurally at the start.

(This was another lesson from EPA's early problems.) In this respect, inclusion of the Federal Emergency Management Administration may be useful to the new Department, creating a possible foundation over the long haul to connect national objectives with state and local efforts, building on established networks of cooperation.

The report was produced by the Miller Center of Public Affairs, a nonpartisan research center at the University of Virginia that studies the national and international policies of the United States, with a special focus on American presidents and the presidency. This working paper was funded by the Markle Foundation, as part of its efforts to align government structures and rules with the more information-intensive approach needed to counteract new security threats.

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