

REFORM REVISITED: ADVANCING EFFICIENCY THROUGH HISTORICAL INSIGHT

What have previous reform efforts taught us?

Looking at earlier initiatives for guidance and lessons learned, this analysis aims to inform the current focus on efficiency and effectiveness in the federal government.

CORE INSIGHTS

RELY ON DATA

Data matters and it is essential that accurate and reliable data illustrate the impact of reform efforts in a way that is accurate and directly informs the reform activities.

FOCUS ON THE RIGHT BENCHMARKS

The private sector can serve as effective models in the appropriate scenarios. Know when to apply lessons learned from other sectors and when to focus on the unique requirements of the federal government.

EMBRACE COLLABORATION

Large-scale reform will only enjoy sustained success with coordination across Agencies, Branches, and Parties. This includes not only within the federal government, but also with key delivery partners like state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and, where appropriate, the private sector.

EMBED AN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Efforts to increase effectiveness and efficiency require public awareness and support. Strategies for making this happen need to be developed with goals of accountability that span beyond ideological divides.

ESTABLISH ACCOUNTABILITY

Create reform efforts that have mechanisms to enact change. Efforts to effect change require legislative levers or other statutory mechanisms to evolve policy goals to operational reality.

The National Academy of Public Administration is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan organization established in 1967 and chartered by Congress in 1984. It provides expert advice to government leaders in building more effective, efficient, accountable, and transparent organizations. To carry out this mission, the Academy draws on the knowledge and experience of its over 1,000 Fellows—including former cabinet officers, Members of Congress, governors, mayors, and state legislators, as well as prominent scholars, career public administrators, and nonprofit and business executives. The Academy helps public institutions address their most critical governance and management challenges through in-depth studies and analyses, advisory services and technical assistance, congressional testimony, forums and conferences, and online stakeholder engagement. For more information on the National Academy of Public Administration, its fellowship, publications, and working groups, visit us at www.napawash.org.

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What have previous reform efforts taught us?

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When analyzing efforts at improving government efficiency, reducing waste, and gaining broader operational efficiency, several historical initiatives offer valuable lessons and points of comparison for today's push to streamline the federal government and strengthen accountability. The outcomes and impact of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) activities in the first six months of the Trump Administration remain uncertain and will likely be scrutinized and debated for decades to come. Tangible savings and performance metrics will lag, and agreement on the efficacy of the actions will be difficult to obtain. However, the past four decades provide a rich landscape of reform efforts—both successful and cautionary—that can help shape more effective strategies moving forward.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

This analysis explores three landmark federal reform efforts:

1. Grace Commission
2. National Partnership for Reinventing Government
3. National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform

Together, these examples uncover enduring lessons and strategic insights. The analysis of these key activities yielded common themes and synthesized principles that are highly relevant as DOGE continues its pursuit of efficiency, cost savings, and demonstrable outcomes. By examining what worked, what did not, and why, this review offers a foundation for shaping more effective and accountable reform efforts today.

GRACE COMMISSION

1982-1984

MISSION & VISION

To identify and eliminate waste, inefficiency, and mismanagement in the federal government and to improve government efficiency by applying private-sector management practices to federal operations and reduce the federal budget deficit without raising taxes.

LEADERSHIP

Chairman: J. Peter Grace, CEO of W.R. Grace and Company.

The Commission included over 150 top executives and business leaders from the private sector.

ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

Commissioned by President Ronald Reagan via Executive Order 12369, the Grace Commission provided the Commission with access to federal agency data and personnel but emphasized that the group was independent and privately funded.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Final Report Delivered:

January 12, 1984. Issued over 2,000 recommendations to Congress.

Comprehensive Audit:

Conducted one of the most detailed private-sector-style reviews of federal government operations.

Reported Cost Savings:

Estimated over \$424 billion in potential savings over three years if all recommendations were implemented.

Public Awareness:

Elevated national attention on government inefficiency, fraud, and waste.

Private Sector Engagement:

Demonstrated a model for integrating private-sector expertise into public-sector reform efforts.

CRITICISMS & CHALLENGES

Unrealistic Savings Estimates:

Critics argued the projected savings were overly optimistic or based on flawed assumptions.

Lack of Accountability:

Since the Commission was independent and privately funded, there was little oversight or formal mechanism to implement or follow up on its recommendations.

Political Motivations:

Some viewed the effort as ideological, pushing a small-government agenda aligned with Reaganomics.

Low Implementation Rate:

Very few of the recommendations were ever enacted; the savings were mostly not realized.

Limited Institutional Impact:

Despite its thorough reports, the Commission failed to bring about lasting structural reforms in federal agencies.

Resistance from Bureaucracy:

Agencies were reluctant to change based on recommendations from an outside group.



NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP FOR REINVENTING GOVERNMENT

1993-2001

MISSION & VISION

To create a government that "works better, costs less, and gets results Americans care about."

ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

The executive branch coordinated efforts across federal agencies to streamline operations, reduce bureaucracy, and improve service delivery.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the White House staff worked closely with NPR to develop performance agreements between agency heads and the President.

LEADERSHIP

President Clinton appointed Vice President Al Gore to lead the National Performance Review (NPR) initiative.

Key leaders included Bob Stone, the original project director (1993–1998); Deputy Director John Kamensky*; Elaine Kamarck*, a senior advisor who helped shape strategy; Morley Winograd, who directed the effort from 1997 to 2001; and David Osborne*, author of the 1993 report outlining the reinvention agenda.

*Academy Fellow

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Streamlined the Federal Workforce:

Reduced the federal workforce by approximately 426,000 positions, the largest government workforce reduction in U.S. history at the time.

Reduced Internal Bureaucracy and Red Tape:

NPR cut thousands of pages of internal agency rules, regulations, and procedural requirements.

Set Service Expectations Government-Wide:

Required federal agencies to publish Customer Service Standards, setting expectations for responsiveness and service quality. Over 100 agencies issued such standards.

Expanded the use of performance measures:

Formalized public accountability through the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA).

Emphasized Technology and E-Government:

Promoted early e-government reforms, including online forms, websites, and digital service delivery (e.g., IRS e-filing).

CRITICISMS & CHALLENGES

Possible Overstated Savings:

GAO found that many savings estimates could not be substantiated or were overstated due to double counting and reporting errors. Additionally, some experts argued that NPR's reforms were superficial, focusing on minor adjustments rather than addressing systemic issues within the federal bureaucracy.

Focus on Private-Sector Models May Not Fit Public-Sector Needs:

NPR heavily borrowed from business practices—such as customer service standards and performance metrics—but critics noted that these tools were not always appropriate for government, which operates under different values, goals, and constraints. Applying corporate models sometimes clashed with the public interest mission and legal obligations of government agencies.

Neglect of Political and Institutional Realities:

Some scholars argued that NPR did not sufficiently account for the political environment in which public servants operate. The initiative downplayed Congress's role, the impact of entrenched bureaucratic systems, and the complexity of inter-agency coordination. As a result, many reforms failed to gain traction or fizzled after the Clinton administration.

Limited Congressional Involvement:

NPR was primarily an executive branch initiative with minimal congressional involvement. This limited its ability to implement structural reforms requiring legislative backing.



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY AND REFORM

2010

MISSION AND VISION

To identify policies to improve the medium-term fiscal outlook and achieve long-term sustainability, specifically recommending ways to balance the budget—excluding interest payments—by 2015.

ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

President Obama established the Commission via executive order, setting its objectives and appointing its members, but thereafter maintained a degree of separation from the Commission's proceedings.

LEADERSHIP

The Simpson-Bowles Commission, established by President Barack Obama in 2010 to address the nation's fiscal challenges. The commission comprised 18 members: six appointed by the President (including the two co-chairs), and 12 appointed by congressional leaders—three each by the Democratic and Republican leaders of both the House and Senate.

Co-chaired by former Republican Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming and Democrat Erskine Bowles, a former White House Chief of Staff under President Bill Clinton.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Encouraged Long-Term Fiscal Sustainability:

The commission emphasized the importance of addressing long-term fiscal challenges, particularly the rising costs of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.

Influenced Budgetary Decisions:

While Congress did not adopt the full plan, elements of its recommendations influenced subsequent budget negotiations, including sequestration and discretionary spending caps.

Promoted Bipartisan Dialogue:

The commission demonstrated that Democrats and Republicans could work together on fiscal issues, although the final recommendations were not enacted.

Highlighted Tax Reform Needs:

It advocated for simplifying the tax code, eliminating loopholes, and lowering rates.

CRITICISMS & CHALLENGES

Failure to Achieve Required Votes:

The Commission's recommendations were not formally adopted, as they fell short of the required 14 out of 18 affirmative votes, receiving only 11.

Partisan Policy Divisions:

Many criticisms stemmed from partisan divides over budget and tax policy.

Lack of Congressional Action:

Despite some public support, Congress never acted on the plan.

Did Not Influence Long-Term Fiscal Policy:

While it shaped some of the discourse around deficit reduction, the Simpson-Bowles plan did not lead to any significant long-term fiscal reforms and budget debates in the following years largely ignored its recommendations.



DOGE 2.0: SEIZING THE MOMENT FOR SMARTER GOVERNMENT

Signed on January 20, 2025, President Trump's Executive Order 14158, established the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to spearhead a time-limited federal modernization initiative. The order rebranded the U.S. Digital Service (USDS) as the U.S. DOGE Service and placed it within the Executive Office of the President, directing it to implement the President's DOGE Agenda over an 18-month period. Unless extended, the DOGE Service, led by the USDS Administrator who reports to the White House Chief of Staff, is set to sunset on July 4, 2026. Each executive agency designated a DOGE Team Lead to work with the DOGE Service and drive modernization efforts aligned with the agenda. The initiative intended to focus on upgrading federal IT systems, improving software platforms, streamlining workflows, and coordinating efforts across agencies to enhance government efficiency.

DOGE IN PROGRESS: EARLY STEPS TOWARD GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY

Maintains a Public-Facing Website and Engages Through Social Media:

DOGE operates a basic website and periodically updates its social media accounts to share selected information on inefficiencies and cost-saving ideas. While intended to promote transparency, public engagement appears limited, and the impact of these efforts is unclear.

Leverages Technology and AI to Audit and Analyze Operations:

DOGE has begun experimenting with data analytics and AI tools to review agency operations. Although these technologies show potential, their current use remains exploratory.

Provides Real-Time Data on Government Spending and Operations:

The department is using dashboards to display spending and performance data, but the accuracy, usability, and adoption of these tools vary across agencies.

Deploys Staff to Agencies and Conducts Internal Reviews:

DOGE has placed a limited number of staff within select agencies to conduct internal reviews. The scope of these assessments varies, and the extent to which their recommendations are implemented remains uncertain.

Issues Recommendations for Personnel Removal and Agency Elimination:

DOGE has made recommendations and taken actions concerning personnel and overlapping agencies, though follow-through has been inconsistent.

RECALIBRATING DOGE: STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE GOVERNMENT REFORM

To strengthen and sustain DOGE, there are key opportunities to improve its approach by grounding efforts in lessons from past reform initiatives:

- Ensuring that all proposed changes are backed by clear legal authority and, where necessary, congressional approval will help avoid delays and legal challenges.
- Aligning DOGE's stated intentions with its actions—and clearly defining goals and measures of success—will enhance credibility and accountability.
- Ascertaining cultural context, fiscal realities, and both the short- and long-term implications of reform efforts must be considered when evaluating recommendations, especially those that affect service delivery.
- Establishing strong communication and trust between political appointees and career staff is essential for building momentum and ensuring alignment on how best to implement Administration priorities.

Above all, DOGE should adopt a realistic view of its capabilities, pace of progress, and impact, balancing ambition with achievable outcomes.

Gathering recommendations from expert organizations like the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) would provide DOGE with valuable institutional knowledge, nonpartisan analysis, and proven frameworks for effective government reform. Leveraging NAPA's deep experience in public management and organizational change would help DOGE refine its strategies, avoid common pitfalls, and build broader credibility across agencies and stakeholders. Working with and leveraging existing oversight bodies could advance DOGE efforts to combat fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement, and help avoid duplication and overlap.





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As outlined in its Congressional charter, the Academy seeks to advance government practices through studies and projects held to the highest standards of efficiency and excellence. From its founding, the Academy's commitment to good governance drives the organization forward and inspires its work.

CONTACT



Kate Connor
Senior Research Analyst
KConnor@napawash.org



Brenna Isman
Director of Academy Studies
BIsman@napawash.org



James-Christian Blockwood
President and CEO
JCBlockwood@napawash.org

Visit us at www.napawash.org