Twitter Thread by Loren DeJonge Schulman



Loren DeJonge Schulman
@LorenRaeDeJ

Hey, Happy New Year's Eve, I want to talk about the federal workforce 1/

Let's say in theory that a prominent retired military leader recently suggested that you could "pink slip 50% of the [defense civilian] workforce = 4x gain in productivity."

This is in no way unique, and is totally acceptable political rhetoric by public leaders.

Bashing the federal workforce as lazy, slow, pointless, non-responsive, intransigent, or even subversive is common, even successful, political commentary on a bipartisan basis.

There are many interesting things about this to me, but I'll start with an aside: do you imagine that a congressman could remark, to applause, that we should remove half the soldiers in the Army in order to experience a massive increase in military readiness? Probably not.

But back to your basic bureaucrat. I'm fascinated by understanding the origin of America's derision for the average federal worker. Because to start, it doesn't match with federal worker's view of themselves.

Ninety percent of the federal workforce believes the work they do is important. 95% are willing to go the extra mile to meet their mission, beyond their required hours or responsibilities--a far higher work ethic than is found in the private sector (via FEVS data)

But sure, that's their self impression. The greatest sin of the government worker is a fundamental element of American public life: that government is silent and insivible--the "submerged state" is the preferable state of relationship between Americans and their government.

By consequence, most Americans are not aware of the services government provides, even those serves they receive in direct transaction from the US government. That's on purpose, and it has a range of consequences for democratic accountability, government innovation, and mission.

This dynamic is true even within government. Policy and program execution make up much of government activity, but are widely expected to be frictionless and costless, both by political appointees arriving new on the scene, members of Congress, and even experienced feds.

And yet, by many measures, the size of government--the programs and cost as % of GDP--has grown significantly, while the size of the government workforce has been fairly steady, stuck in an inflexible civil service system that came out of the post Civil War period.

The general picture of government bureaucracy is one of bloat and waste, and the typical policy prescription for government is to cut it down its size. See, for example, the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

I worked there from 2006-2015, and in that period, there have been 2 SecDef led initiatives to cut and consolidate OSD staff, 1 presidential hiring freeze, and at least 3 congressionally mandated staffing cuts, all building on one another.

In that period, the same staff was also charged with overseeing the transition from GWOT to great power competition, three major acquisition reform initiatives, the sequestration process, an increasingly toxic civ-mil relationship, major personnel initiatives (women in combat),

(I could go on), all the while being unable to hire the new skills and talent they needed to address these challenges. Remarkably, Congress took notice that policy and oversight were suffering and reversed course, creating new hiring flexibilities to remedy their past constraints

Some of America similarly took notice that their government was ill-equipped to grapple with a challenge that only government, unfortunately, is capable of managing, in our present COVID-19 health crisis.

Is this due to their inherent laziness, lack of skill, purposefully inertia, diligence in creating busy-work vs. mission? Well, you might assume so, based on, again, totally acceptable political rhetoric.

Or, it is due to lack of investment, inflexible personnel systems,

purposeful silencing, elevation of the military vs. civilian oversight, promotion of the narrative of private sector genius vs. public reliability, derision....

I'm sure it's some of both. And I'd like to understand more.

Anyway, I could talk about this all day (and fortunately, I get paid to!) I'll close with these points: government needs a lot of work. A lot of reform. A lot of empowerment. And a lot of new talent and ideas. No argument there!

But it also needs a lot more transparency, storytelling, and recognition of its value. some of that's on government. Some of that's on us. If you want to get started, check out these amazing public servants:

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