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Article 1.
The Washington Post

Why the people in power are increasingly powerless

Moises Naim

March 3, 2013-- In 2009, during his first address before a joint session of Congress, President Obama championed a budget that would serve as a blueprint for the country's future through ambitious investments in energy,

health care and education. “This is America,” the new president proclaimed. “We don’t do what’s easy.”

Four years later, even easy seems impossible. “Let’s agree right here, right now, to keep the people’s government open, pay our bills on time and always uphold the full faith and credit of the United States of America,” Obama pleaded during his State of the Union address.

By having to exhort Congress to execute even the most basic functions of government, Obama — fresh off the “fiscal cliff” fight and facing yet another showdown with lawmakers over massive automatic spending cuts — revealed just how limited the powers of the highest office in the land have become.

Washington hardly has a monopoly on political paralysis. The Syrian uprising will reach its second anniversary on March 15, reminding us that the international community has failed to take action that could stem the bloodshed. Italy’s election stalemate has driven the country into yet another bout of political and economic uncertainty. And the latest round of [redacted]. climate talks has brought the world no closer to tackling global warming.

The world over, power no longer buys as much as it used to. In fact, power is eroding: It is easier to get, but harder to use and far easier to lose. A businessman can become chief executive, only to discover that a start-up is upending the business models in his industry. A politician can become prime minister, only to discover that she is tied down by myriad minority parties that can veto her initiatives. A general can become military chief, only to discover that the mighty weapons and advanced technology at his disposal are ineffective in the face of homemade explosives and suicide bombers. And a cardinal can become pope this month, only to discover that new preachers in Africa and Latin America are pilfering his flock.

“One of my biggest shocks was the discovery that all the imposing government palaces and other trappings of government were in fact empty places,” Joschka Fischer, one of Germany’s most popular politicians and a former vice chancellor and foreign minister, told me. “The imperial architecture of governmental palaces masks how limited the power of those who work there really is.”

Why is power increasingly fleeting?

First, there is more competition for it. The number of sovereign states has nearly quadrupled since the 1940s, from 51 to 193, and they contend not

just with one another but also with agencies such as the International Monetary Fund — and hedge funds, and international drug cartels — as well as with transnational activist groups such as the Sierra Club and Amnesty International.

In 2011, when the Arab Spring exploded, autocrats ruled 22countries, down from 89in 1977, highlighting how difficult it is these days to amass absolute power. And within countries, power is more dispersed. In 2012, only four of the world's 34 wealthiest democracies had a president or a prime minister whose party also had a majority in parliament. Right now, those weakened heads of state include, among many others, Britain's David Cameron, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and the next leader of Italy. In non-democratic countries that allow political parties — such as Jordan and Burma — the clout of minority parties is growing. Autocrats who in the past had little trouble crushing dissenting voices now have to tolerate them or, in some cases, succumb to them.

Power is crumbling in the world's battlefields and boardrooms as well. A 2001 study by political scientist Ivan Arreguin-Toft found that in the asymmetric wars that broke out between 1800 and 1849, the weaker side (in terms of armaments and troops) achieved its strategic goals in only 12 percent of cases. But in the wars of that kind between 1950 and 1998, the supposedly weaker side prevailed 55 percent of the time. Military might is no longer what it used to be.

Neither is corporate power. Remember when what was good for General Motors was good for America, or when IBM reigned supreme in the world of computers? In 1980, a U.S. company ranked among the largest 20 percent in its industry had only a 1-in-10 chance of falling out of that tier over the next five years. Two decades later, that chance grew to 1 in 4. According to management consultant John Challenger, the tenure of the average American chief executive has dropped from about 10 years in the 1990s to about 51 / 2 years more recently. Last year, Forbes emphasized that "churn" was the main characteristic of its latest list of the world's billionaires, with almost as many members losing wealth (441) as gaining it (460).

Clearly, the presidents of the United States and China and the chief executives of JPMorgan Chase and Shell Oil still wield immense power; it's just a lot less than their predecessors had. In the past, presidents and

chief executives not only faced fewer challengers and competitors, they also had fewer constraints on how they deployed power — constraints that today are as varied as global financial markets, a more politically aware and demanding population, and the 24-hour glare of media scrutiny. As a result, power players now often pay a steeper and more immediate price for their mistakes.

The 2010 BP oil spill, for example, far eclipsed the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster not only in terms of financial and environmental costs but also in terms of the impact on the company's brand and equity. One analysis found that Exxon shares lost 3.9 percent of their value in the first two weeks after the accident, while BP shares lost 13.1 percent in the seven trading sessions after the Deepwater Horizon spill, indicating that "the market reaction in BP shares has been far more swift and severe," in part as "a function of the dramatically accelerated flow of information in the market."

Political leaders, meanwhile, are finding their war powers constrained by constituents who are less tolerant of military casualties, as we saw during France's precipitous troop withdrawal from the Afghan war in November after a series of deadly insurgent attacks.

It's not just the supposed "democratizing" and "empowering" force of the Internet that is eroding power. New information technologies are tools — important ones for sure — but to have impact, tools need users, and users need direction and motivation. Facebook, Twitter and text messages were fundamental in empowering the Arab Spring protesters. But the circumstances that motivated them to take to the streets were local and personal conditions: unemployment and the rising, unmet expectations of a fast-growing, better-educated middle class. Moreover, the same technologies that have empowered citizens have created new avenues for state surveillance and repression, helping Iran, for example, identify and imprison participants in its stillborn Green Revolution.

Nor is the decay of power related to the supposed decline of America and rise of China — one of the most useless and distracting debates of our time. When the Taliban is able to deny the world's mightiest military a victory, when Somali pirates with rickety boats and AK-47s thumb their noses at the most modern multinational fleet ever assembled, when European leaders fail to stem the economic crisis that started in Greece's minuscule economy and when the world is incapable of agreeing on how to

curb carbon emissions, it becomes clear that something is happening to global power that transcends any zero-sum, Sino-American rivalry.

The biggest challenges to traditional power have come from transformations in the basics of life — how we live, where, for how long and how well. These changes can be encapsulated in three simultaneous revolutions: the More, Mobility and Mentality revolutions.

The More Revolution. The 21st century has more of everything, from people to literacy to products on the market to political parties. The global middle class is expanding, and by 2050, the world's population will be four times larger than it was 100 years earlier. According to the World Bank, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty plunged over the past decade, the first time that has happened since statistics on global poverty became available, and since 2006, 28formerly "low-income countries" have joined the ranks of "middle-income" ones.

An impatient and better-informed middle class that wants progress faster than governments can deliver, and whose intolerance for corruption has transformed it into a potent force, is the engine driving many of this decade's political changes in the developing world. India's expanding middle class, for instance, helped catapult the largely unknown anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare to fame by flocking to him in 2011 after he launched a hunger strike.

The Mobility Revolution. Not only are there more people today with higher standards of living, but they are also moving more than at any other time — and that makes them harder to control. The United Nations estimates that there are 214 million migrants across the globe living somewhere other than their country of origin, an increase of 37 percent in the past two decades. Ethnic, religious and professional diasporas are changing the distribution of power within and among populations. An interesting case: In 2007, a Nigerian-born man was elected in Portlaoise, Ireland, a commuter town west of Dublin, as that country's first black mayor.

The Mentality Revolution. An ever-consuming and ever-moving population — with access to more resources and information than ever before — has also undergone a massive cognitive and emotional transformation. The World Values Survey, for instance, has identified an increasing global consensus regarding the importance of individual

freedoms and gender equality, as well as popular intolerance for authoritarianism. Dissatisfaction with political systems and government institutions is also a growing and global phenomenon.

Together, these three revolutions are eroding the barriers that have shielded the powerful from challengers. The More Revolution helps the challengers overwhelm the barriers, the Mobility Revolution helps them circumvent them, and the Mentality Revolution helps them undermine them.

Should we embrace this decline of traditional power? In some ways, yes — it has given us freer societies, more elections and options for voters, new ways of becoming politically active, more investment and trade, and more choices for consumers.

But the decay of power also poses dangers to our wallets, families and lives. It explains why the U.S. economy is at the mercy of self-inflicted crises in Washington. It explains why European nations struggle to act together in the face of crippling economic problems, despite spending decades developing institutions geared toward collective action. It explains why fragile states that have difficulty delivering basic services are proliferating. It explains why the world is paralyzed in the effort to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

Given the end of power as we know it, our traditional checks and balances — originally meant to constrain excessive power — are now threatening to choke what little power is left. As Peter Orszag, Obama's former budget chief,has observed, "Radical as it sounds, we need to counter the gridlock of our political institutions by making them a bit less democratic."

Size no longer means strength. Bureaucracy no longer means control. And titles no longer mean authority. And if the future of power lies in disruption and interference, not management and consolidation, can we expect to ever know stability again?

Moises Naim, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, is the former editor in chief of Foreign Policy magazine. He is the author of "The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be," from which this essay is adapted.

Article 2.

Foreign Policy

How Obama Can Have His Way on National Security

Elliott Abrams

March/April 2013 -- "A visitor once came to the White House and presented an idea to President Kennedy," Charles Frankel recounts in his classic memoir, High on Foggy Bottom. "The President was enthusiastic. 'That's a first-rate idea,' he said. 'Now we must see whether we can get the government to accept it.'"

Every president, regardless of party or ideology, struggles to push his agenda through America's unwieldy -- and increasingly massive -- national security bureaucracy. "To govern is to choose," the old saying goes, but to govern is also to manage, demand, cajole, impose, and wheedle your way to control of "the government." Choosing is the easy part.

I spent eight years at the State Department in President Ronald Reagan's administration and nearly the same length of time in George W. Bush's White House, working in the National Security Council (NSC). In both places, I saw many instances of smooth presidential control, but also many where bureaucratic decisions went against the president's core beliefs. The earliest example for me came in 1982, when Chinese tennis star Hu Na defected to the United States -- and the State Department's China desk immediately took a strong position against granting her political asylum. This idea from "the government" was passed on by the Reaganites at the State Department to the president, who of course rejected it. She was given political asylum.

Bush's second term offers perhaps the best recent case study of a president trapped by a bureaucracy. By 2007, the United States was clearly losing the war in Iraq, but the president simply could not get "the government" -- in this case, his own top generals -- to give him any real options that could reverse the tide. Bush would eventually defeat the bureaucracy by going around the military hierarchy entirely: He and a handful of top aides in the

White House put together a bold counterinsurgency plan he then imposed on the Pentagon. It became known as the "surge."

But Bush is hardly alone. Every president must confront powerful rivals for control of the foreign-policy agenda, and the 11 rules presented here are intended to offer a blueprint for how to do so.

Don't underestimate the gravity of this problem. Bureaucracies can be amazingly resistant to outside control. Max Weber detailed their power as far back as 18th-century Prussia: "All the scornful decrees of Frederick the Great concerning the 'abolition of serfdom' were derailed," the German sociologist wrote. "[T]he official mechanism simply ignored them as the occasional ideas of a dilettante." And Frederick the Great was both a charismatic authoritarian leader and an organizational genius. The task is even more difficult for America's elected presidents, who get eight years at best to make their mark on the world. If President Barack Obama fails to master the bureaucracy during his second term, he too will find his agenda thwarted by his natural antagonists in the foreign-policy establishment.

1. Let your principals really fight it out -- and send you their actual recommendations, not a fake consensus.

President Dwight Eisenhower's governing style relied on consensus. He ordered his staff members to confer and then present him with their shared recommendations on foreign-policy issues. Maybe it worked for the former Supreme Allied Commander, but it won't work for anyone else. If you don't even know when your top advisors are arguing, how will you be able to settle their disputes?

After Eisenhower left office, President John F. Kennedy saw the error of the demand for consensus and reversed it, ending the practice of having all agencies sign off on "agreed recommendations" that were then presented to him for ratification. He hoped instead to be offered "alternative courses of action which would allow real Presidential choice among them," as [redacted]. Destler describes in Presidents, Bureaucrats and Foreign Policy.

In the Bush years, the 2007 discovery of a secret Syrian nuclear reactor provided a prime example of why decisions -- and arguments -- should be preserved for the president. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates favored a diplomatic approach: Take this to the United Nations. Vice President Dick Cheney argued that the United States should bomb the reactor. My view was that Israel should bomb it.

Scenarios for all options were carefully developed and argued out in front of the president, who then opted for the diplomatic path. I thought that was the wrong decision, but it was certainly the right process -- and the right person got to decide. (Well, almost: The Israelis thought the United Nations was hopeless, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert quickly told Bush that if we wouldn't bomb the reactor, they would. They did, and it worked.)
But too often, Reagan and Bush relied excessively on consensus recommendations from their staff that often obscured precisely this kind of cabinet disagreement. I well recall Bush's top White House aides interrupting arguments in the Situation Room to say, "We can't go to the president like this. Let's keep trying until we reach agreement." Agreement, of course, most often means that two or three clear choices become one homogenized policy mess.
Why is this point so important? Because the most difficult decisions are not technical but political and deserve presidential attention: How much risk shall we accept? What burdens are the American people prepared to bear? How will Congress react, and how much do we care about the views and interests of other world leaders?
Dean Acheson, President Harry Truman's last secretary of state, explained the need to bring decisions all the way up to the president: Staff, Acheson wrote in his great memoir, Grapes from Thorns, is indispensable for collecting information and implementing decisions, but should not be permitted to substitute for executive decision-making. "This can happen in a number of ways, but the most insidious, because it seems so highly efficient, is the 'agreed' staff paper sent up for 'action,' a euphemism for 'approval,'" Acheson wrote. "[A] chief who wants to perform his function of knowing the issues … and of deciding, needs, where there is any doubt at all, not agreed papers, but disagreed papers."
Acheson was right. A president should demand to know what his top officials are arguing about. "Disagreed papers" are a key to presidential control.
2. Don't let your cabinet secretaries put career officials in top positions.
In most cases, Reagan's secretary of state, George Shultz, made political appointees his assistant secretaries -- for good reason. As he wrote in his memoir, "In the end, it is the president's foreign policy, so key people who help him shape it and carry it out -- including in the State Department --

should be on his political wavelength." He stuck carefully to the line that important decisions must reflect the president's views, and in Shultz's opinion, the most energetic and successful enforcers were unlikely to be bureaucrats.

There's a reason for that. For most career bureaucrats, the most important reference points are other career officials; they are bureaucratic loyalists rather than presidential loyalists. A cabinet or subcabinet official can be very lonely surrounded by career officials and needs the moral, intellectual, and political sustenance of other political appointees around him or her. If he or she is left out in the wilderness, the outcome is predictable: going native.

This is inevitable. "Making the bureaucracy accountable to the president in any comprehensive or enduring way is impossible," wrote the late James Q. Wilson in his classic work Bureaucracy. "[M]aking it alert to his preferences is possible in those cases where presidents put loyal and competent subordinates in charge of making decisions."

It's not that all career officials are disloyal, though some are. I recall an assistant secretary under Secretary of State Colin Powell, a career Foreign Service officer who in 2004 made very clear her hope that Democratic nominee John Kerry would win the presidential election and rid the country of the fools in the White House. The more common problem, however, in the vast U.S. national security establishment is that career military, intelligence, and diplomatic officials come to see American foreign policy as, in the words of historian Arthur Schlesinger, "their institutional, if not their personal, property, to be solicitously protected against interference from the White House and other misguided amateurs."

No one has ever explained the problem better than Truman, who defied the unanimous demand of his top State Department appointees that he not recognize the new state of Israel in 1948. Secretary of State George Marshall famously told Truman that, in view of his decision to defy those recommendations, Marshall could never vote for him again. Truman reflected on the incident in his memoir Years of Trial and Hope, noting that career bureaucrats see themselves as "the men who really make policy" and "look upon the elected officials as just temporary occupants."

That was a notion Truman was keen to dispel, and he worked mightily to do so. "The civil servant, the general or admiral, the foreign service officer

has no authority to make policy," he wrote. "They act only as servants of the government, and therefore they must remain in line with the government policy that is established by those who have been chosen by the people to set that policy."

It is impossible to carry out presidential policies without appointees who owe their jobs and loyalties to the president, not to their own service's personnel system. This is about more than personal prejudices or ambitions. It is also about having a genuine understanding of the president's worldview. And who better than the president's personal picks?

3. Treat cabinet officers as friends, but understand they are also enemies.

Members of the cabinet are sent out to live among the natives, who surround them all day long. Any president should try to maintain close contact with his cabinet, holding occasional (if useless) cabinet meetings, inviting them and their spouses to glamorous state dinners, and having lunch with them one-on-one once in a while.

Inevitably, however, they have very different perspectives from those of the president or White House staff. They will be focused on their own careers: Some will be worried about a future Senate seat or gubernatorial race; most will worry about their reputations with the media. All will seek the loyalty of their own subordinates in their agency. These factors will push them away from total loyalty to the White House.

To promote fidelity, the president should encourage thoughts of promotion within the administration or of vast White House assistance in a future career. He should also be aware that each cabinet member sees him and the White House staff as rivals for power, influence, and reputation and will seek to pin blame for errors and failures on the West Wing.

This phenomenon depends less on who is president than you might think. Every president, at least since Kennedy, has trusted his White House staff more than his cabinet. President Richard Nixon had Henry Kissinger run foreign policy as his national security advisor and virtually neuter Secretary of State William Rogers. Many people in the Bush White House saw Powell's team at the State Department as a major problem -- and vice versa. Obama's White House team and Secretary Hillary Clinton's State Department team were enemies during the fight for the Democratic Party's 2008 presidential nomination, and they still saw each other as rivals once in power. This shouldn't be surprising. White House staffers are devoted to

the man in the Oval Office, identify his interests with their own, and have no other task but advancing his interests and policies.

The selection of cabinet officers reflects a wider variety of influences. "Some are appointed to reward campaign workers, others to find places for defeated members of Congress, still others to satisfy the demands of interest groups," Wilson wrote. "Sometimes the agency head is picked because he or she is thought to be an expert on the subject, but many times the president has no real idea of the content or policy implications of this expertise."

The president must understand that the members of his cabinet are, if not natural enemies, unreliable allies. The system will work fine so long as the president remembers this.

4. Establish a shadow government of presidential loyalists.

The formal org chart of every administration is nearly identical, and it is of course an indispensable description of how the affairs of government are conducted. It is important to know, for example, that the NSC senior director for Asia connects to the assistant secretary of state for East Asia, the national intelligence officer for Asia, and so on. But it's not enough to understand how government really works.

Every administration needs an alternative nervous system of loyalists who look to the president and his staff for guidance. Many will come from the campaign or Capitol Hill. These appointees should think of themselves as colonial officials dealing with natives who will appear at various times compliant, enthusiastic, or rebellious -- they should be rewarded or punished, empowered or removed, in the never-ending daily struggle for power.

Loyalists are a critical source of inside information on the activities of their departments, including private remarks and views of key officials. Some such individuals should be put in personnel positions in the departments to help promote other loyalists and thwart individuals who deeply disagree with the president's policies; some should be the president's point men with Congress; still others should be in the White House liaison positions that every agency maintains. Many, however, must be in decision-making jobs in the bureaucracy -- as assistant secretaries and deputy assistant secretaries handling the heart of the agency's work -- if they are to have the knowledge and influence to enhance White House control.

Such special networks are nothing new. One informal group of dovish officials, for example, worked hard to end U.S. efforts in the Vietnam War. As Destler describes it, critics of escalation built a web of war skeptics in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and also found allies in the office of the undersecretary of state and the White House. When President Lyndon B. Johnson balked at tempering the war effort, Destler writes, Defense Secretary Clark Clifford "widened the field of battle by encouraging the President to call together the 'Senior Advisory Group on Vietnam,' thereby bringing McGeorge Bundy, Dean Acheson, Douglas Dillon, and Cyrus Vance into the coalition urging the President to change policy." This was certainly not a group found on the organizational charts of any agency. But it is often how the most important business of government gets done, and if a president does not work hard to establish networks of his own, they will likely be established to undermine him.

Such networks are not only critical to decision-making but to the gathering of information, without which decisions cannot be made. This problem is not unique to the United States, as Winston Churchill's biographer, Martin Gilbert, explained two decades ago. Churchill, who was in 1939 and 1940 sympathetic to the movement of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine, was thwarted by a hostile bureaucracy. It was not a civil servant who ultimately let Churchill know that British ships were intercepting Jewish refugees, but his own son, Randolph.

Other U.S. presidents likewise have relied on their families. In 1991, President George H.W. Bush asked George W. to study his White House team. When the son reported that his father's chief of staff, John Sununu, was a problem, the president decided to fire the guy, but had young George, then a private citizen, do it. In his memoir, Decision Points, W. laconically describes it as "an awkward conversation."

During his own White House tenure, the younger Bush had his vice president, Cheney, reach outside government to bring in retired Gen. Jack Keane for a reliable independent view of the situation in Iraq. When Keane would report in, Bush would come down the back hallway of the West Wing to the vice president's office and join the session -- so the president's formal schedule recorded no meeting with Keane, an event that, had the bureaucracy known about it, would have set off major alarm bells.

5. Recruit your staff to your (real) team,and shower them with the perks of office.

The workload of the White House staff is inhumane, so maintaining morale must be a constant concern. Public matters, such as a media consensus that the president will not be reelected, or private ones, such as pressure from an irate spouse, can evolve into serious problems.

No easy solutions exist, but team spirit can be boosted in a few simple ways. For staff members, nothing can substitute for meetings with the president and other high officials. As Niccolò Machiavelli advised in The Prince, a leader "ought to entertain the people with festivals and spectacles at convenient seasons of the year."

These perks matter: invitations to state dinners for the official and his or her spouse, to events at Blair House or other private gatherings, and to public events the president is attending. Ceremonies to which parents and other family members can be invited are also valuable; they constitute a form of psychic income to substitute for the income lost while working for the government. "[T]o keep his servant honest the prince ought to study him, honoring him, enriching him, doing him kindnesses," Machiavelli wrote.

Direct contact with the president is also an essential element of power and influence for White House staff and loyalist officials throughout the bureaucracy. It is critical for White House aides to be able to say, "The president said," and "No, no, the president thinks" on the right occasions. As Acheson explained in his memoir, witnessing presidential decision-making firsthand "meets a fundamental, almost primitive, need of the staff."

Hearing the president himself make a decision also short-circuits staff attempts to subvert or sabotage policies. As Acheson put it, learning about decisions secondhand sows doubts within officialdom: "Did [a policy] have that authority behind it which demanded obedience, or would a plot or a protest, a discreet leak by 'unimpeachable' sources to the press or to the Hill -- if that is not tautological -- upset it?" he wrote. "In a city where, since the Gettysburg Address, few public men have written their own utterances, one should not underestimate the importance of the chief's announcing, explaining, and, on occasion, discussing his decisions in the presence of his staff."

The most valuable and scarcest commodity in Washington is the president's time, but some of it must be used to "jolly up" staffers and maintain their morale. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley made sure that Bush met with the entire senior NSC team periodically, and he tried to bring junior NSC staff members to the Oval Office or to lunches with foreign heads of government. It paid off not only in morale, but in the irreplaceable ability to start a rebuttal of unwelcome bureaucratic proposals with: "The president said to me last week.…"

6. Meet the foreign-policy bureaucracy early on, and say you love them.

Every bureaucracy will look askance at a new president, perceiving him as a threat to its preeminence. Frankel, in his account of his time as an assistant secretary of state in Johnson's administration, wrote that his supposed underlings "have minds of their own, professional pride and an esprit de corps." If a new boss is going to get anything done, Frankel concluded, "He is going to have to make his way into the network of loyalties that already exists or to turn these loyalties in his direction." Accomplishing that task should be high on any president's to-do list, and it starts with making career officials feel important and highly valued. He should visit the State Department, the CIA, and the Pentagon early in his term and speak to sizable audiences of career officials, reassuring them that he understands their critical, irreplaceable role. He should promise to rely on their advice and expertise, and point out how many career officials he has recently promoted (assuming there are any).

This is flattery and misdirection, but it will have some value. At the least, failing to make such statements will be poorly received and might give rise to greater suspicion and disloyalty. If there are tangible things to say or do -- asking Congress for a greater budget or better retirement plans on behalf of said agency, for example -- this will also go over well, and if Congress refuses, the gesture is cost-free.

Sure, the president may not mean it when he tells the men and women of "the government" that they are wonderful. But his job is to get things done, and that requires stroking some egos. Sincere or not, the gesture will be appreciated.

7. Make sure that loyalists are the key players in dealing with Congress.

Over the years, career officials at every agency will establish close relations with Hill staffers and key members of Congress. This makes

sense: These are the men and women who determine their budgets, have the power to investigate them, and can block the road to high positions requiring confirmation. These relationships last not just years but decades -- and they threaten presidential power.

The only effective way to observe, influence, and sometimes interfere with these relationships is to ensure that the legislative liaison offices in the various departments and agencies are manned by loyalists who report to the central White House Office of Legislative Affairs.

These figures must be conditioned to see that White House office, not offices and officials in their own building, as their central connection in life. This will require a system of rewards and punishments, as well as constant contact through daily phone calls and frequent meetings. They must see that they are members of the president's legislative team who happen to be stationed at the State or Defense department, rather than State or Defense department officials who happen to be handling the Hill.

The State Department's legislative bureau has for decades been regarded as weak, and one reason is that career diplomats often staff it. In addition to disliking the work and not being very good at it, those officers often have very little idea how to protect a president's priorities. Why should they? How can they be expected to know the members of Congress and understand the political processes on the Hill? They may have been in China during the last election and may well be in Jordan for the next, and their focus is less on the chief executive than on the needs of their colleagues and superiors within the State Department.

Just think for a moment about the investigation into the attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, which resulted in the death of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. As State Department legislative liaisons conferred with Capitol Hill and prepared Clinton's testimony, were they thinking about advancing the Obama White House's best interests, or about protecting Clinton -- and their own friends of many years who may have been affected by the attack?

Relations with Congress are too important to be ignored by top officials -- and far too important to be left to career agency officials who will protect their agencies more than the president.

8. Fire all White House holdovers -- and do it fast.

The Bush administration's experience was decidedly mixed when it came to holdovers. Rand Beers was a career civil servant who was held over from President Bill Clinton's years as an assistant secretary of state and then brought over to the White House as an NSC senior director in 2002. In 2003, he resigned and immediately joined the Kerry campaign as the candidate's national security advisor. Richard Clarke was held over from the Clinton team as the top NSC counterterrorism official, but after resigning in 2003, he repeatedly attacked the president and other former colleagues. On the other hand, many of Condi Rice's top staffers at the NSC were career people who served with such loyalty and distinction that she took them with her to the State Department.

Those exceptions aside, the NSC staff does change, and it should -- what is the point of elections if the same people hold the same important jobs? White House staff must be responsive to the new president they serve, not some platonic ideal of the presidency. Career people won't be likely to share all the president's views, and if they have not gotten their new jobs from him, they will also be unlikely to feel a deep sense of loyalty to him. These people need to go, and fast. This isn't only a partisan issue: When George H.W. Bush replaced Reagan, there was nearly as broad a changing of the guard as there would have been had Michael Dukakis won -- and rightly so. Putting aside serious issues like fatigue and burnout, the new president wanted people who understood and were loyal to him, not to his predecessor.

When putting his team in place, the president should aim to do it in one fell swoop, at the beginning of his term, rather than let holdovers linger. Once again, Machiavelli understood why this is so. "[I]n seizing a state, the usurper ought to examine closely into all those injuries which it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them daily," he wrote. "[T]hus by not unsettling men he will be able to reassure them, and win them to himself by benefits."

Former diplomat Richard Haass takes a more nuanced view, arguing that keeping some holdovers around can augment a new administration's institutional memory. My experience, however, suggests that very few if any people should be kept. The decisions of any one staffer will rebound around the bureaucracy and the international arena; thus a president must pick his team with the utmost care. "You make only one decision --

whether to hire or keep an individual," Haass explained in The Bureaucratic Entrepreneur. "[O]nce on board, that person will make thousands of decisions that will affect your reputation, impact, and effectiveness."

Think of it this way: When staff members are holdovers, the new president did not even choose them at all. What kind of impression will that make on the rest of the bureaucracy? And how can such holdovers really understand the thoughts, goals, and desires of the new president as well as they understood those of the previous incumbent, who did them the honor of selecting them for higher office? Continuity and experience are important, but the career services at the cabinet agencies, not the White House team, can supply them.

9. Get your appointees to stick around, because getting your way takes time.

While career officials in financial or regulatory agencies sometimes leave for high-paying jobs, bureaucrats in the national security arena typically stay for decades. Such officials have seen many administrations come and go, and they know the rules and tricks of their trade.

Political appointees may not need 20 years to tame their bureaucracy, but they do need more than one or two. These staffers often do not even get started until halfway through a new administration's first year, due to the confirmation process. Those who leave their positions in the second year of an administration have contributed little, and their short tenure makes all problems of presidential control of the bureaucracy far worse. A vacancy in top posts is always a real problem, as it leaves the bureaucracy "alone" for many months without any direct control by a presidential appointee confirmed by the Senate. During the entire Benghazi crisis and ensuing investigations, the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs had a political vacuum at the top -- something that cannot have helped the bureau, the secretary of state, or the White House.

Those who stay for their third and fourth years, and into a president's second term, will be far more effective. Many projects take time to shepherd through government; still others must wait until the time is ripe for trying to push them through. What's more, the appointee who stays for years will acquire some bureaucratic allies and a better sense of who his or her (and the president's) enemies are.

As a president becomes a lame duck, the power of his appointees will also wane. Their authority, however, will still be greater if they have come to dominate and fully understand the bureaucracy. Nothing is gained -- and much is lost -- if the most loyal presidential appointees are short-timers.

10. Don't hire senior staff without successful federal experience.*

Although this rule excludes enormous amounts of talent, it also excludes people who will not know how to get the job done. Truth be told, expertise about a subject is not as important as knowing how to manage the bureaucracy on behalf of the president, and academic politics does not prepare one for controlling Foggy Bottom, the Pentagon, or Langley. Big business may provide training in handling big bureaucracies, but not in doing so with blogs, television networks, and newspapers watching one's every move, including one's (previously) private life. The only way to be sure an applicant can do the job is evidence that he or she has already done it, or something very close to it.

In his memoir, Shultz tells the story of Jerry Van Gorkom, a very sharp and successful businessman whom he invited to try his hand in the wilds of Washington. The experiment soon went awry. "I look over a problem and decide what to do," Van Gorkom told him. "No sooner have I sent out an instruction than it's overridden by the White House or leaked to the press, or a call comes in from some congressional staffer irately challenging what we're doing. In business, when we decided to do something, we did it. In government nothing ever gets settled."

Van Gorkom did not last a year before returning to the private sector. Many others have suffered his fate. No particular prior experience -- not business, or academia, or think tanks, or law -- suggests that an individual will master the bureaucratic politics of Washington. The only way to know someone can do it is knowing that he or she has done it before.

This suggests another responsibility for any administration: It must bring in, at lower levels in the agencies and the White House, young men and women who are political loyalists. In the next round, when the next administration of the same party is elected, these staffers will not only be ready and willing, but truly able, to serve the president in managing the bureaucracy.

*(except Henry Kissinger)

11. Realize that control of the bureaucracy does not come from issuing orders, but from the daily grind.

Truman once famously bemoaned what he imagined would be the fate of the recently elected Eisenhower: "He'll sit here, and he'll say, 'Do this! Do that!' And nothing will happen. Poor Ike -- it won't be a bit like the Army." Truman knew the U.S. government well. Maintaining presidential power requires the daily exercise of it, as well as a constant monitoring of the bureaucracy. This is best conducted by loyal officials assigned to the bureaucracy, for too much is going on in the national security agencies every day for any White House to keep track.

Often, the best asset can be career officials themselves -- if they can be brought around. They know the bureaucracy best: how to make their fellow officials act, how to prevent action, and where decision-making power is located. Moreover, they are experts, having dealt with the key issues for years or decades, and they know the key figures in other governments and rival U.S. bureaucracies. Winning their loyalty and assistance is therefore critical -- treating them all like enemies is as foolish as assuming they are all allies.

But keeping them on the team can be a struggle. One day during Bush's second term, I mentioned to a career diplomat at a Situation Room meeting that the president's speech the night before had at least settled several policy questions we'd long been debating. "What do you mean?" he replied. "Policy is not made by speeches. Policy is made by the interagency process." Oh boy, I thought, this guy is going to need watching.

There is no solution, only the daily grind. The president's loyalists must go to work every day, at the level of office director or deputy assistant secretary, and endeavor to make the decisions the president would if he were there. Policy guidance is fine, indeed essential, but it is not sufficient. Day after day, someone must review the cables, talking points, and memos of conversations, ensuring that the activities of America's vast national security bureaucracy remain in line with what the president wants. Senior officials must give orders, or at least send signals, about how individual decisions should be made, or bureaucrats will resolve them according to their agency's bureaucratic interests -- or their own personal views. Eternal vigilance is the price of presidential control.

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Article 3.
The Guardian

We are fighting for all Palestinians

Samer Issawi

3 March 2013 -- My story is no different from that of many other Palestinian young people who were born and have lived their whole lives under Israeli occupation. At 17, I was arrested for the first time, and jailed for two years. I was arrested again in my early 20s, at the height of the second intifada in Ramallah, during an Israeli invasion of numerous cities in the West Bank – what Israel called Operation Defensive Shield. I was sentenced to 30 years in prison on charges relating to my resistance to the occupation. I am not the first member of my family to be jailed on my people's long march towards freedom. My grandfather, a founding member of the PLO, was sentenced to death by the British Mandate authorities, whose laws are used by Israel to this day to oppress my people; he escaped hours before he was due to be executed. My brother, Fadi, was killed in 1994, aged just 16, by Israeli forces during a demonstration in the West Bank following the Ibrahimi mosque massacre in Hebron. Medhat, another brother, has served 19 years in prison. My other brothers, Firas, Ra'afat and Shadi were each imprisoned for five to 11 years. My sister, Shireen, has been arrested numerous times and has served a year in prison. My brother's home has been destroyed. My mother's water and electricity have been cut off. My family, along with the people of my beloved city Jerusalem, are continuously harassed and attacked, but they continue to defend Palestinian rights and prisoners. After almost 10 years in prison, I was released in the Egypt-sponsored deal between Israel and Hamas to release the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. However, on 7 July 2012, I was arrested again near Hizma, an area within the municipality

of Jerusalem, on charges of violating the terms of my release (that I should not leave Jerusalem). Others who were released as part of that deal were also arrested, some with no declared reason. Accordingly, I began a hunger strike on 1 August to protest against my illegal imprisonment and Israel's violation of the agreement.

My health has deteriorated greatly, but I will continue my hunger strike until victory or martyrdom. This is my last remaining stone to throw at the tyrants and jailers in the face of the racist occupation that humiliates our people. I draw my strength from all the free people in the world who want an end to the Israeli occupation. My weak heartbeat endures thanks to this solidarity and support; my weak voice gains its strength from voices that are louder, and can penetrate the prison walls. My battle is not just for my own freedom. My fellow hunger strikers, Ayman, Tarik and Ja'afar, and I are fighting a battle for all Palestinians against the Israeli occupation and its prisons. What I endure is little compared to the sacrifice of Palestinians in Gaza, where thousands have died or been injured as a result of brutal Israeli attacks and an unprecedented and inhuman siege. However, more support is needed. Israel could not continue its oppression without the support of western governments. These governments, particularly the British, which has a historic responsibility for the tragedy of my people, should impose sanctions on the Israeli regime until it ends the occupation, recognises Palestinian rights, and frees all Palestinian political prisoners.

Do not worry if my heart stops. I am still alive now and even after death, because Jerusalem runs through my veins. If I die, it is a victory; if we are liberated, it is a victory, because either way I have refused to surrender to the Israeli occupation, its tyranny and arrogance.

Article 4.

Foreign Policy

A survey: more than 70 experts on today's global conflicts

John Arquilla

March/April 2013 -- Writing amid the early tensions of the Cold War, J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the fathers of nuclear weapons, asserted in 1956 that "the world cannot endure half-darkness and half-light." Yet endure it did for another three decades -- catastrophe was averted at the end of the Cold War. Today we are in the early stages of a "cool war" era, a time of conflict between nations and networks. Some networks harness the darkness of terrorism; others mobilize civil society to overthrow dictators. All the while, nations keep wary watch over each other, for this is an age replete with threat, an era when older weapons of mass destruction coexist with newer ones capable of mass disruption. Oppenheimer's imagery of the deadly interplay between dark and light forces still applies.

Will the world find its way through current and coming perils as it has before? And what role can the United States play in mastering them? The 71 participants in the third annual Foreign Policy Survey on the future of war (myself included) make clear that the task ahead is going to be complex, confusing, and rife with hard-to-control elements. The survey's list of the most serious threats to U.S. national security speaks clearly to this problem, with experts pinpointing economic crisis and regional instability as the top two dangers. This is not the Cold War, with one overarching enemy to be "contained" wherever the need might arise. This is a world afire with more than two dozen serious armed conflicts -- and many areas not yet ablaze but at great risk of catching fire. It is a world that lies far, far beyond containment.

To the extent that American foreign policy and security strategy can affect global events, survey respondents suggest that the current U.S. approach may not be addressing the most urgent problems. For example, the individual countries of greatest concern to half of the respondents are Pakistan and Iran, yet U.S. President Barack Obama seeks a "pivot" to the Pacific that clearly puts China in the cross-hairs. Respondents do not concur with the administration's priorities; roughly half of them view the "pivot" negatively, whether because it's overemphasized or poorly implemented.

Besides, as recent events have shown, it's clear the United States is in no position to take its eye off the Middle East. More than two years after the beginning of the Arab Spring in the Maghreb and Middle East, opinion is almost evenly divided between those who see the countries affected by the

movement as threats to the United States and those who observe something more benign, perhaps even beneficial. A similar split arises in assessing the conflict in Syria. Asked to describe the U.S. response to the two-year-old civil war in a single word, survey participants came up with more than 40 different ones -- about half critical and the other half positive or neutral. When it comes to what is perhaps America's strongest ally in the region, about 50 percent of the experts assert that the American relationship with Israel now hurts U.S. national security more than it helps.

These divided opinions about the arc of unrest that stretches from North Africa through the broader Middle East are real warning flares for U.S. foreign policy, particularly with regard to the need to keep an eye on al Qaeda. Nearly two-thirds of respondents think the terrorist network is categorically weakening, but I believe the ground truth suggests just the opposite. The American-aided toppling of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi, along with support for the rebellion in Syria, has opened new fronts for al Qaeda. U.S. troops have left Iraq; al Qaeda is back there too, trying to foment civil war. The fact that the U.S. regime-change strategy in Libya and Syria coincides with the preferences of the world's premier terrorist network should give us all pause.

Al Qaeda's continued influence also calls into question Obama's handling of the U.S. withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, in favor of a "lighter" American footprint abroad. In the FP Survey, Afghanistan's long-running problems are clearly attributed more heavily to the Afghans, with half of the 71 respondents naming weak governance, corruption, and ethnic and religious divisions as the biggest obstacles to stability. (About a third of respondents blame Pakistan.) Yet there is also a strong belief among the experts that ginning up the whole nation-building enterprise was the biggest mistake the United States made in Afghanistan. Perhaps the implication is that something less grand is called for -- and may allow for ultimate success. Three-quarters of respondents think the United States should continue with its plan to withdraw combat forces by 2014 -- if not get them out sooner. Yet nearly three-fourths want the U.S. military to stay on indefinitely, and two-thirds want NATO to do so but primarily in small numbers and in training, advisory, and counterterrorism roles.

The foreign-policy debates apparent in the survey's many divided opinions are a sign of larger questions about internal U.S. political dysfunction.

Indeed, respondents listed the United States itself as the fourth most threatening country to American security, whether because of the country's penchant for overreaching or the parlous state of its finances. It seems that an enduring division persists between Americans who want to lead the world and those who prefer not to go abroad in search of monsters. The intensity of this division can spark hyperpartisanship in Washington, the renewal of which several respondents listed as the most significant lesson from the September 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya.

Opinions about drone warfare come into play here as well. These unmanned devices seem to offer a middle ground in the debate, allowing intervention but at low cost and risk, yet there is sharp, confusing division here too. Forty-one experts think attacking suspected terrorists with drones is legal, while 25 think America's use of drones is illegal or at least possibly so. But by a 57 to 43 percent margin they also see drones as overused by the Obama administration.

The FP Survey also speaks to important issues where I have some skin in the game. Twenty years ago, my colleague David Ronfeldt and I said that cyberwar was coming, but respondents, by a margin of 57 to 43 percent, believe that these warnings have been overstated. Yet these same experts say that cyber is the top area where they think the U.S. Defense Department should devote more resources. The only reasonable explanation is that even those who think the threat has not yet matured see value in preparing for cyberwar now. As to whether the world is becoming less violent, Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker's argument that the world today is more peaceful than ever before has gotten more traction, by a margin of 63 to 37 percent, than my oft-expressed concerns about the rising number of wars and the increasing targeting of innocents.

Despite their generally divided views on the world's great threats -- new and old, to the American homeland and abroad -- the experts, on a hopeful note, showed convincing, broad agreement on three policies that, if pursued, could see peace restored to Afghanistan, the strain on the American economy eased, and the world made less nuclear. Three-quarters of respondents want the United States to pursue active negotiations with the Taliban. A plurality of about 40 percent wants the U.S. defense budget cut by more than $500 billion over the next decade. And two-thirds of the

experts want the U.S. nuclear arsenal cut by at least 40 percent from the current inventory of more than 5,000 warheads. Good news, and all doable without imperiling the republic -- if America's politicians can ever agree on how to get there.

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Article 5.

The Economist

India's Muslims: Growing, and neglected

Mar 2nd 2013 -- Agra -- It Tells you something hopeful perhaps that, for all the horror unleashed when two bombs laid by presumed militant Islamists ripped through a crowd in Hyderabad on February 21st, India's public response has been muted. The blasts killed 16 and injured 117. Both the method of the attack (bombs in metal tiffin boxes strapped to bicycles) and its location (near a Hindu temple) point to a home-grown Islamic group, the Indian Mujahideen.

Apart from a brief debate about policing and about the competence of the home minister, Indians responded phlegmatically. Terror is not novel, and bombings have grown less frequent and bloody of late. Muslims broadly, including politicians in Hyderabad, were quick to call the latest violence an assault on all Indians; Hindu politicians echoed them. Two days later, in the goat-filled lanes of Taj Ganj, a Muslim quarter in Agra, south of Delhi, the capital, descendants of workers who built the Taj Mahal cheerily said India's faiths rub along fine. There was no reason to change now.

The moderation is encouraging, especially in the context of a steady rise in India's Muslim numbers. An official analysis of data by religion from the 2011 census is not yet out. Any delay might be deliberate: to avoid a fuss ahead of general elections, due next year. Higher fertility rates among Muslims might be seen as politically sensitive. Private studies guess that

India has about 177m Muslims, comprising 14.6% of the total population. It marks a rise of nearly 40m, or a percentage point, on a decade before. Higher fertility will ensure the upward trend continues. Overall, India's fertility rate is falling, but among Muslims it is dropping most slowly. Old habits persist. Few Muslim women work outside the home. Contraception is not much used.

Crucially, fertility tends to fall only as poverty drops. Muslims are poorer than average and are heavily present in the big, poor, northern states. According to a study by the Pew Research Centre, India will probably have 236m Muslims in two decades' time, on a par with Indonesia (which has the world's biggest Muslim population). That is a lot, but is still under a fifth of India's total population. In certain states, however, change is more dramatic. In Assam, in the north-east, Muslims now make up a third of the population, a sharp rise in the past two decades (though immigration accounts for some of it).

Where population change is fast, instability may follow. Last year 77 people were killed and 400,000 were displaced in Assam, amid clashes between Muslim settlers and Bodo tribal groups who feel their land is under threat. Still, growing populations alone did not provoke the violence in Assam. Shifting political loyalties were also a factor.

Elsewhere, resentment among Muslims may grow if not enough is done to redress their economic backwardness. No serious official effort has been made to assess the lot of India's Muslims since the publication in 2006 of a study ordered by the prime minister, Manmohan Singh. Called the Sachar report, it broadly showed Muslims to be stuck at the bottom of almost every economic or social heap. Though heavily urban, Muslims had a particularly low share of public (or any formal) jobs, school and university places, and seats in politics. They earned less than other groups, were more excluded from banks and other finance, spent fewer years in school and had lower literacy rates. Pitifully few entered the army or the police force.

Seven years and an economic boom later, are Muslims better off? Wajahat Habibullah, who heads the National Commission for Minorities in Delhi, sees only faint reasons for cheer. Muslims in India outperform their neighbours in Pakistan on some social indicators, such as having lower fertility rates and infant mortality, and higher literacy and life expectancy.

He also sees a strong yearning among Muslims for education, including for girls, that was absent before. That matters, especially learning English, which can offer a path to better jobs at a time when employment is fading in the traditional Muslim crafts of weaving, leather and metal working, and small-scale manufacturing. The slums of east Delhi, with many Muslims, are now home to some excellent new schools for boys and girls.

Yet much else is discouraging. A new study by an American think-tank, the US-India Policy Institute, assessing progress since the Sachar report, bluntly concludes that Muslims have "not shown any measurable improvement". Even in education, Muslims' gains are typically more modest than other groups'.

Too many official efforts to direct help, for example by spending more on schools in Muslim districts, also fail. Funds get stolen or diverted to non-Muslim recipients, Mr Habibullah says. Just as telling, far more is done to tackle rural poverty, with job-creation schemes, subsidies for farmers, and prices set above market levels for much farm produce. Muslims, predominantly in the cities, suffer relative neglect.

Things could yet change, through politics. The ruling Congress Party has traditionally relied on the votes of villagers, as well as on the unwavering support of Muslims, to flourish at elections. But if India's biggest party takes Muslims for granted, they will leave in search of other parties where they can have political clout. In Uttar Pradesh the ruling Samajwadi Party has peeled away Muslim votes. Elsewhere, as in Hyderabad, Muslims now fall in behind parties which appeal explicitly to their interests. Better political organisation may, in time, bring economic reward.

Article 6.

The Financial Times

A taste for mutually assured destruction

Edward Luce

March 3, 2013 -- When Congress and the White House started the sequestration clock in August 2011, people called it the nuclear option, since it would never be allowed to happen. Anything would be better than the indiscriminate spending cuts it would trigger. "It was done to be sort of like, in Dr. Strangelove, the bomb that goes off," said Ben Bernanke,

chairman of the US Federal Reserve. On Friday it went off and the Dow closed 35 points higher. Some nuclear option. What would the stock markets do if Congress agreed?

Alas, the question is hypothetical. The logic of the sequestration was that Republicans would be hit by blind cuts to the Pentagon budget – something it was thought inconceivable they would tolerate. And Democrats would get yet more reductions in their civilian spending priorities. The point was to ensure it was worse than the alternatives. But both sides have concluded it is better. Whoever first proposed this cunning sequestration, partisan loathing has only got worse.

Given the depths of antipathy – not least between President Barack Obama and John Boehner, the Republican House Speaker – perhaps only a real nuclear option would work. Failure to legislate would trigger a simultaneous nuclear launch on San Francisco, cultural capital of the Democrats, and Salt Lake City, a Republican bastion. Should that fail, it would be followed by multiple strikes on red and blue states alike until the public became so angry Washington had to act.

In the event, the $85bn sequestration looks likely only to entrench the partisanship it was supposed to circumvent. Mr Obama's ultimate goal is to win back control of the House of Representatives in the 2014 midterm elections, which would give him two years to make a dash for history. With Congress back in full Democratic control he could tackle global warming, enact genuine gun control and achieve other currently unreachable goals. In American football terms, Mr Obama is playing for the fourth quarter.

The sequestration offers him a no-lose political proposition. In recent days Republicans toyed with giving the president discretion over how the cuts were administered – a scalpel rather than a meat cleaver. He dismissed such talk. Democrats believe the sequestration sets them up for a rolling public relations coup.

Either the Republicans will cave in and agree to get rid of special tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans, which would cement Mr Obama's headline tax victory in early January, or they will stick to their guns and prove once and for all that they hate government more than they love their country. The latter looks more likely.

Every delayed flight, every vaccination a child fails to get and every closed public park will reveal Republican callousness. As the cuts deepen – from

April onwards, since the law requires 30 days notice to federal employees – the public will further appreciate how much they rely on government. Aircraft may not fall out of the sky but long security queues will raise everyone's mercury.

The Republicans have drawn the opposite conclusions. Their goal is to ensure Mr Obama's agenda is stalled for the next four years, which would be greatly assisted if they could regain control of the Senate in 2014. Sequestration will help push their case. Every time Mr Obama points to furloughed meat-factory inspectors or growing gaps in US-Mexico border security, Republicans will accuse him of manipulating the cuts for effect. History says the president's party loses midterm elections even when the economy is strong – Republicans retained control of Congress in 1998 during the height of Bill Clinton's internet boom.

Today's economy is a pallid imitation of the 1990s. Sequestration will shave roughly half a percentage point off growth in 2013, thus ensuring unemployment will probably still be hovering at about 8 per cent at the start of 2014.

But in practice, Republicans are betting most Americans will wonder what the fuss is about. The sequestration amounts to just 2.4 per cent of the federal budget. If Washington cannot handle a cut this small, it is surely beyond repair. "Despite a relentlessly hysterical campaign from President Obama claiming the sequester would end American civilisation as we know it, the sun still rose this morning," said Tim Phillips, head of a leading Tea Party group, in an email to supporters on Saturday.

It is hard to see what in the next few weeks will persuade the parties that compromise is a better option. Until a few days ago, most observers believed the sequestration would be allowed to continue only until March 27, when Congress must approve resolutions to prevent a total shutdown of government. It is now clear the timing is back to front. The effects of the sequestration will not be widely felt by the public until at least April or May. That means Congress will only come under pressure to address the countdown to the next big trigger in July or August, when the US is set to hit its sovereign debt ceiling (a more realistic nuclear metaphor).

Such is Washington's fissile outlook. Even budget experts are uncertain how the sequestration will take effect – the law is riddled with complexity. That makes it hard to anticipate the exact political twists and turns. But the

grand political narrative is heading in an all-too predictable direction. Washington's deep-seated tolerance for dysfunction now extends to mutually assured destruction. And all that Wall Street can do is shrug.