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The first U.S. chief operating officer?

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The politically minded are busy hypothesizing about whom President Obama will choose to permanently replace Rahm Emanuel. Many Americans might consider the White House chief of staff among the most important jobs in Washington. But the chief of staff has very little statutory power over a federal enterprise that employs more than 4 million people, purchases more than half a trillion dollars each year in goods and services, and occupies more than 1 billion square feet of office space.

Instead, the president is left to manage these responsibilities through innumerable departments and agencies. Given the sheer size and cost of this enterprise, the federal government should borrow a page from the corporate world. The country's chief executive officer needs a chief operating officer to run the day-to-day government, to cut through budget battles, political fiefdoms, parochialism and inertia to assist the president in keeping this country moving. Let the president's chief of staff manage the White House — an enormous responsibility in itself. We need a chief operating officer to manage everything else.

While a COO must understand how policy and politics influence decision making in Washington, he should leave the politics to the chief of staff and others in the White House and undertake the hard role of running the business of government. Far from reflecting poorly on this president or his chief of staff, this suggestion is about the efficacy of the office itself. This innovation would modernize the institution of the presidency

and enhance the ability of this president and his successors to govern.

Several recent examples of government action and inaction underscore the need for a COO. Few would dispute that the Federal Emergency Management Agency failed to perform during the Hurricane Katrina tragedy and that the Minerals Management Service fell far short of its mission leading up to the Deepwater Horizon crisis this year. The COO would be responsible for ensuring that such situations do not happen again.

On the other hand, driving the president's political agenda, protecting his interests and managing crises such as the fallout from Bob Woodward's recent book are examples of undertakings for the president's chief of staff rather than a COO.

The COO's duties would lie in execution of government policy, including ensuring that the government is well managed and that it addresses key national priorities as one entity and not as hundreds of separate agencies operating in silos.

What are qualifications for this position? The COO should have significant business experience as well as sensitivity to the mechanics of government. That experience would serve him or her well in managing the government's vast moving parts. Bringing an accomplished business person into the Obama administration would have the added benefit of providing private-side perspective and experience.

The choice of the first COO will be critical for the future of the office, much as the selection of the first president shaped that office for our nation. Fortunately, an ideal candidate comes to mind: New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg.

He is a man of well-documented business savvy who has also exhibited an ability to apply private-sector know-how to a diverse government enterprise. He has experience with public budgets and managing private-sector payrolls. His political status as an independent makes him uniquely nonpartisan in an age of vicious factions.

President Obama has the authority to create the position of COO within the executive branch, but he should consult with Republican and Democratic congressional leaders and ask their support for legislation to create a statutory position that would remain after he left office, much like that of the chairman of the Federal Reserve or the secretary of the Treasury. This move would call on lawmakers to put aside partisan concerns for the health of the federal government.

The issue, however, is larger than the federal government itself. Improving the operating efficiency of our government is vital to our national security and prosperity and would contribute to Americans' confidence in our democracy. The creation of a government COO and the appointment of Bloomberg, or a similarly qualified candidate, would be an effective act of governing, likely to be popular with the people, and a worthy legacy of the Obama administration and Congress.

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