

WAA 117534

U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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STATEMENT OF
MILTON J. SOCOLAR
ACTING COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
ON
S.10, A BILL TO ESTABLISH A COMMISSION
ON MORE EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

We are pleased to be here today to present our views on S.10, a bill to establish a Commission on More Effective Government, with the declared objective of improving the quality of government in the United States and of restoring public confidence in government at all levels. Our Office shares this objective as we review and analyze the operations and results of nearly every Federal agency and program with a view towards promoting greater economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability in public expenditures.

We believe a commission like the one proposed in S.10 is needed, and have felt so for some time. Since 1977, we have repeatedly stated our support for the establishment of such a commission.

IS A COMMISSION NECESSARY?

Every institution needs periodically to renew its sense of purpose and reassess its performance. This is a time of serious reexamination of the purposes and priorities of government which we believe should be complemented by a thorough review of its administrative practices. A broadly based, independent commission could serve as a catalyst for this effort. It could help focus public attention, discussion, analysis, and support on the steps needed to improve our ability to administer the Government, and to restore public confidence in government at all levels.

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There have been few times as opportune as the present for taking stock of the limitations and capabilities of our governmental institutions and processes and for carefully considering how our government can be made more capable of carrying out the missions assigned to it. A commission, such as that proposed in S.10, could provide an important forum for examining and debating these issues.

It has been about 25 years since the last Hoover Commission met to assess the administration, role, and effectiveness of the Federal government. During that time we have witnessed enormous change in the size, scope, and complexity of government at all levels in the United States.

The sheer complexity of our current governmental system raises a set of issues concerning the accountability of its component parts and our ability to administer it. These issues include:

- understanding and reconciling the responsibilities, capabilities, limitations, and interrelationships of the different levels of government;
- understanding and managing the network of interrelationships among the three branches of the Federal Government;
- assuring that the electorate and its political leaders can guide, influence, control, and hold accountable-- indeed, govern--the administrative structure and processes of our government; and
- finding appropriate means for assuring, on a continuing basis, that the administrative structure of government performs its assigned duties with maximum efficiency.

We believe it is necessary to deal with these issues in order to assure that the administration of our governmental system can adapt to the challenges of the 1980s and beyond. There are a variety of steps that can be taken to make the administration of government more adaptable, responsive, and accountable. Changes in spending priorities and in the tax structure can be made through the existing budget process as seems to be happening. Reforms of the grant, regulatory, and congressional oversight processes; improvements in budget concepts and procedures; efforts to combat fraud and abuse; and the Presidential task force on Federalism are but some of the other steps underway or proposed by Congress and the new Administration. But while these steps are important, they cannot address the issues concerning our ability to administer the government in the comprehensive and profound way the proposed commission would make possible.

A broad-based, bipartisan commission is needed to address these issues by examining our administrative system as a whole, to place the many incremental reforms in a coherent perspective, and

to provide a forum for addressing future needs for improved efficiency and effectiveness in governmental administration. We need to assess the administrative roles and relationships among the three branches of government in the execution of national policy and to examine Federal responsibilities and relationships to State and local governments. Such a commission would help to educate the public and focus attention on alternative steps that should be taken.

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE COMMISSION

How can we assure a meaningful result? Too many commissions are created whose conclusions and recommendations are ignored, resulting in a waste of time and money. This is always a risk. However, the risk can be reduced by providing a focus for the commission's work, structuring a workable commission, and providing for action on the results of the commission's work.

Focus of the commission

We think the commission should adopt the guiding principle of concentrating on the processes of administration, and the structure, efficiency and effectiveness of public management and service delivery mechanisms rather than on the substantive merits of specific policies and programs. Commission efforts to address substantive policy could cause its recommendations to appear partisan in nature and seriously undermine its credibility.

This does not mean that the commission must focus only on minutiae. For example, we suggest that the commission examine how the administrative structure, organization, and processes at the Federal level can be improved to assure that Federal officials have the opportunity and the administrative and analytic support they need to achieve the following objectives.

- We need to be able to think, debate, and act with a much longer period of time in mind, recognizing that the full implications of policies adopted will often not be felt for several years or even decades;
- Officials need to focus their attention along broad policy lines and on groups of interrelated programs to reduce the possibility of counter-productive conflicts and needless duplication among programs;
- We need to analyze more completely the contemplated effect of policy changes before they are made (as provided, for example, in Senate Rule 27.6, which requires regulatory and paperwork impact statements) so that foreseeable problems are identified, addressed, and, to the extent possible, prevented;
- Administrators should have the authority and resources required to meet the goals and expectations formulated by policymakers. Goals and expectations should not be set

in excess of available resources or the degree of authority granted;

--Firm agendas for policy and program oversight need to be established;

--Policy officials should have clear and valid statements from administrators on the performance of the programs and activities for which they are accountable; and

--We need an administrative structure to facilitate prompt action to make changes when needed.

The commission could serve as a study group, a sounding board for executive or legislative proposals, a public education mechanism, and a catalyst for change. Each of these roles would be appropriate, but the commission should not duplicate studies that have already been performed by us and others such as the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, other recent Presidential and congressional commissions, the Ash Council, and Carter reorganization studies, etc. Nor should the commission be made a vehicle for postponing action on reforms being considered by Congress or the President.

Since many studies have been done in many of the areas the commission would address, including extensive work by the General Accounting Office, we believe the Commission should first gain an understanding of this work and develop an overall perspective necessary for pulling these studies together. It should then fill in the gaps, develop a set of recommended changes, develop an implementation strategy, and communicate the results of its work to public policy officials and the public.

Structuring a workable commission

Two changes to specific operating provisions of S.10 can be made to improve the structure and operation of the commission.

First, the commission should be smaller than the eighteen members now provided for in section 4 of the bill. Studies of past commissions have concluded that smaller commissions are more effective. They meet more often, work harder, resolve their differences more constructively and produce a report more quickly than large commissions. The two Hoover commissions had twelve members each. If there is strong concern that a smaller commission could not adequately represent the diversity of viewpoints, we would suggest that, instead of opting for a larger commission, you make more explicit the use of public advisory panels (as currently provided for in Section 7) for this purpose.

Second, the bill as now drafted will unnecessarily limit the selection of members of the commission. Section 4(a) would preclude the appointment of members of the judicial branch, legislative branch support agencies, and State and local governments. Section 4(b) requires six members of the commission not be affiliated with any political party. This would preclude individuals who are merely registered but not active in a party. We think it would be preferable to require that these six members not hold an official position in a political party.

Providing for action on the commission's work

We would now like to address the issue of implementation of the commission's work. Of utmost importance is the need for a close working relationship between the commission and those whose responsibility it will be to implement its recommendations. Requiring periodic interim reports by the chairman of the commission to the congressional leadership and the President could encourage such working relationships. The commission also must strive to obtain public involvement so its proposals will be understood by the general public. This could be done through public task forces and hearings around the country.

While the focus of the commission should be left broad, there should be some accountability. As one of its first activities, for example, the commission might be required to establish an agenda against which its performance could be measured and to report this agenda to the Congress and the President. And the commission's recommendations should be specific and translatable into direct action.

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In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, we endorse the concept of a Commission. The General Accounting Office has a long standing interest in issues of governmental organization, effective public management and the appropriate mechanisms for service delivery. We would expect to work closely with the commission, if established, and to follow-up and report to the Congress on the implementation of its recommendations.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present our views on S. 10. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON D.C. 20548

B-197793

February 10, 1982

The Honorable Jack Brooks
Chairman, Committee on Government
Operations
U.S. House of Representatives

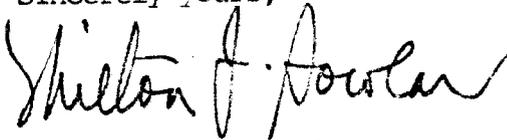
Dear Mr. Chairman:

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on S. 10, an act to establish a Commission on More Effective Government, which was passed by the Senate on December 7, 1981. We believe that a commission like the one proposed in S. 10 is needed, and have supported the establishment of such a commission for some time.

On April 28, 1981, we testified before the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs on an earlier version of this proposed legislation. A copy of our prepared statement is enclosed. Subsequent to our testimony, a number of changes along the lines suggested in our testimony were made to and are reflected in the Senate passed version of S.10. As stated in our testimony we support favorable action on this proposed legislation.

Please let us know if we can be of further assistance to you during your consideration of S.10.

Sincerely yours,

for 
Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosure