



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on August 27, 2013

Obama Behavior Team to “Nudge” U.S. Toward Government Goals

In an effort to “nudge” Americans to support bigger and more intrusive government while changing behavior to suit the whims of the political class in Washington, D.C., the Obama administration is following the lead of U.K. authorities by building what the White House refers to as a “Behavioral Insights Team.” According to an [official document](#) about the scheme aimed at recruiting personnel, the controversial team will be charged with prodding the U.S. population to think and behave in ways that officials deem best on everything from “[sustainability](#)” to health and education.



Critics from across the political spectrum have slammed the controversial program, dubbed the “nudge squad,” as yet another example of extreme federal overreach. Over a dozen federal agencies and departments, however, are already working on “behavioral insights projects,” documents show. Among them: the Department of Labor, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, Veterans Administration, Department of Treasury, Social Security Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

“The federal government is currently creating a new team that will help build federal capacity to experiment with these approaches and to scale behavioral interventions that have been rigorously evaluated, using, where possible, randomized controlled trials,” explains a document entitled “[Research to Results: Strengthening Federal Capacity for Behavioral Insights](#)” obtained and posted online by Fox News. “A growing body of evidence suggests that insights from the social and behavioral sciences can be used to help design public policies that work better, cost less, and help people to achieve their goals.”

While the Obama administration’s four- to five-person “behavioral” team is reportedly in its early stages — news about the federal scheme first surfaced late last month — British authorities already have a similar plot in operation. The White House and U.K. officials apparently found it to be a useful tool in promoting government policies and shaping public opinion. The various “nudge” efforts launched by the British government and cited by supporters of Obama’s plan include [promoting condom use in Africa](#), [getting subjects to pay their taxes on time](#), [encouraging “sustainability.”](#) and more.

“The practice of using behavioral insights to inform policy has seen success overseas,” the [document](#) continues, urging experts from government and academia to apply. “In 2010, UK Prime Minister David Cameron commissioned the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), which through a process of rapid, iterative experimentation (“Test, Learn, Adapt”), has successfully identified and tested *interventions that will further advance priorities of the British government....*” (Emphasis added.)

On its [website](#), the British government’s “nudge unit” explains the scheme in more detail, saying that it



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“applies insights from academic research in behavioural economics and psychology to public policy and services.” According to the unit, it works with “almost every government department,” as well as local authorities, so-called non-governmental organizations, and even foreign governments in “developing proposals and testing them empirically across the full spectrum of government policy.”

Among its responsibilities, the site continues, is “encouraging and supporting people to make better choices for themselves.” Of course, the statement assumes that government knows best — an assertion that has historically proven disastrous and tragic on more than a few occasions. Proponents of the behavior-modification schemes argue that “nudging” is better than outright forcing, again implying that individuals must submit to the dictates of government one way or the other for their “own good.”

The deeply controversial model to change public behavior draws on the work of radical statist and former Obama “Regulatory Czar” [Cass Sunstein](#), co-author of “Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness.” The infamous figure with fringe views, who styles himself a “legal scholar,” came under intense fire for a variety of extremist ideas; pushing the notion that animals should have legal standing in the courts, for example. He also advocated a plan to have taxpayer-funded shills engage in “cognitive infiltration” of groups authorities disagree with, and even proposed a government “ban” on “conspiracy theorizing.”

Leading the Obama “nudge team,” meanwhile, is Rhodes Scholar Maya Shankar, a senior policy advisor at the White House Office of Science & Technology Policy who studied “cognitive science” at Yale. That controversial office, of course, is led by yet another radical statist, [John Holdren](#). Among other controversies, Holdren authored the 1977 book *Ecoscience* touting everything from forced abortions and mandatory population control to the drugging of public water supplies. “Indeed, it has been concluded that compulsory population-control laws, even including laws requiring compulsory abortion, could be sustained under the existing Constitution if the population crisis became sufficiently severe to endanger the society,” Holdren wrote, hiding behind a passive voice.

Considering the wild notions advanced by the architects and operators of Obama’s behavior-modification outfit, it is hardly surprising that critics are lashing out at the scheme even as the [establishment promotes it](#). The administration has been quiet about the plan so far, refusing to offer comments or explain further. For the last month, though, opponents have been variously [blasting](#) and [ridiculing the plan](#) as Orwellian, offensive, outrageous, dangerous, communistic, insane, and everything in between.

Popular liberty-minded pundit Andrew Napolitano, a former judge who respects the Constitution, slammed the scheme as “Mike Bloomberg on steroids,” referring to the nanny state-promoting mayor of New York City. “The federal government which can’t deliver the mail has no right trying to tell us how to live,” Napolitano said during a TV interview, adding that the federal government should not be wasting taxpayer money telling Americans what to do. “The minute we let the federal government begin to operate outside the confines of the Constitution is when the Constitution becomes meaningless.”

Utah State University economist Michael Thomas, meanwhile, [told](#) Fox News that he was “very skeptical” of a team promoting so-called “nudge” policies. “Ultimately, nudging ... assumes a small group of people in government know better about choices than the individuals making them,” he said, pointing out that the government sometimes promotes the wrong thing. “Trans-fats were considered better than saturated and unsaturated fats in the past. Now we know this is an error.”

The Obama administration and the British government are hardly alone in seeking to modify public



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behavior and beliefs to suit authorities. According to *Time*, the U.K. “nudge unit” is already [“serving as an example” or inspiration](#) to governments in Canada, France, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore. The United Nations, meanwhile, explained in a document on “sustainability” that it was [seeking](#) to “contribute to behavioral changes in production, consumption, and lifestyles.” Scientists around the world are also working on ways to [modify behavior and even values](#).

Of course, the latest White House plot to influence public thought and behavior by government “experts” is hardly happening in a vacuum. As part of the effort to “fundamentally transform” America, the Obama administration has been fiendishly pushing for federal [control over K-12 education](#) as well as [colleges and universities](#) — essentially targeting the minds of the youth, and therefore, the future of the country. The [unprecedented collection of personal data on students](#) and Americans in general is crucial to the plans, too.

While some analysts predict the “Behavioral Insights Team” will eventually fall flat after squandering more taxpayer money, others are expecting government-run behavior modification programs to become the new norm. Either way, though, the pattern is clear: Even individual thoughts and beliefs are now firmly in government bureaucrats’ crosshairs. Without concerted action by the American people, the social-engineering schemes will undoubtedly continue accelerating.

Photo of President Barack Obama: AP Images

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