



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on April 12, 2017

Trump's Hiring Freeze Moves From Hatchet to Scalpel

When Mick Mulvaney, President Trump's director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), [announced on Tuesday](#) the lifting of the president's hiring freeze effective Wednesday, he used medical terminology: "What we're doing is replacing the across-the-board hiring freeze [the hatchet] and replacing it with a smarter plan, a more strategic plan, a more surgical plan [the scalpel]."



In his first full day in office, newly inaugurated President Trump announced a 90-day hiring freeze that applied to all executive branch agencies, to be followed by a plan from each of those agencies as to how they will be reformed to run more efficiently. Since his OMB director wasn't confirmed until nearly a month later, that "reform recommendation" timeline has been pushed back to June for initial drafts and September for final recommendations.

The new timeline also fits with President Trump's budget recommendations that include the elimination of at least 60 executive branch agencies and programs, along with severe cuts to others such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The EPA is expected to lose 20 percent or more of its personnel — about 3,200 positions — under Trump's budget while other agencies such as Homeland Security, Veteran Affairs, and the Pentagon would be allowed to ramp up their hiring.

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Mulvaney made the point clear on Tuesday: "The government hiring freeze will end with the release of this guidance. That does not mean that the agencies will be free to hire willy-nilly. Certain agencies will end up hiring more people."

Some of the agencies already feeling the pinch of Trump's hiring freeze include the Bureau of Prisons, where about one out of 10 positions (approximately 4,300) are vacant, forcing some medical personnel to work overtime and spreading correctional officers more thinly over inmates. Veterans Affairs, already suffering high turnover, has seen its backlog of veterans' claims top 100,000 for the first time in a year as the hiring freeze took effect. And threats loom at the Social Security Administration that beneficiaries' checks will be delayed unless it is allowed to hire replacements for staffers who have left since the first of the year.

Mulvaney and Trump are expecting those executive branch agencies to reform themselves so that they require less manpower to perform their core functions while eliminating or cutting back on various redundancies that have crept in over the years. As just one obvious example, those executive branch agencies now operate more than 40 separate job training programs which could be combined and simplified to be run vastly more efficiently and at lower cost.

Mulvaney, reflecting the optimism of the Trump administration, added: "This [refocus from hatchet to scalpel] is a big part of draining the swamp. What [we're] talking about doing is restructuring Washington, D.C. and that is how [we] drain the swamp.... This is a centerpiece of [the president's] campaign and a centerpiece of his administration."



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For a rough measure of just how effective previous administrations making similar promises have been, one need only look at federal workforce tables available at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). At the start of the Reagan administration in 1981, the total federal workforce, including the executive branch, the legislative branch, and uniformed military personnel, was just under five million. By the end of 1988, the last year of that administration, the total federal workforce was 5.3 million, an increase of 300,000. Similar promises were made by President George W. Bush, who entered office in January of 2001 with a federal workforce of 4.1 million. Upon his exit in January 2009, the federal workforce was 4.2 million — an increase of 100,000.

Interestingly, under President Bill Clinton, not perceived as a proponent of cutting government, the federal workforce shrank from 4.9 million in 1993 to 4.1 million when he left office in 2001.

Perhaps moving from hatchet to scalpel will have more of the desired effect: eliminating agencies, severely cutting others such as the EPA, combining efforts, and reducing redundancies that will accomplish some draining of that swamp that Trump has made his “centerpiece.”

At present, however, the scoreboard shows the swamp firmly in the lead.

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