

Low-Profile Jobs That Will Stay That Way, if Obama Is Prudent

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With his focus on a global economic crisis and a new war in the Middle East, the last thing [Barack Obama](#) needs early in his presidency is the distraction of a federal agency meltdown. But Obama must be mindful of a harsh truth of the office: that slip-ups in the most mundane of government responsibilities can prove calamitous for an unsuspecting administration.

And there is plenty of precedent for concern. The Bush administration is still criticized for its failure to react fast enough to [Hurricane Katrina](#) and spent much of the past eight years taking fire for shortcomings or failures at a host of agencies: the counterfeit Heparin that slipped through the [Food and Drug Administration](#), the poisoned tomatoes and peppers that entered the food supply below the radar at the [Food Safety and Inspection Service](#), the aircraft groundings that followed the relaxation of inspection standards at the [Federal Aviation Administration](#), and, worst of all, negligent care for veterans at military hospitals.

These meltdowns reflect a persistent disinvestment in the capacity of the federal government to execute the laws. Decades of benign and deliberate neglect have left the government without enough resources to do its job well, starting on the front lines where basic services are delivered.

The challenge is not to inventory the past failures, but to anticipate future problems that might capture the news cycle and knock the Obama administration off stride. As part of this exercise, here are 10 sub-Cabinet jobs responsible for agencies with checkered performance records that may yet put the Obama team in the cross hairs for failing to repair the federal bureaucracy.

1. Undersecretary of agriculture for food safety. This post is listed in the Council for Excellence in Government's Prune Book as one of the toughest jobs in government. Responsibilities include tracking produce, meat, poultry and liquid egg products and investigating specific problems. Recent meltdowns involved *E. coli* in hamburgers.
2. Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, [Department of Health and Human Services](#). Listed in the Prune Book. Responsible for the \$550 billion [Medicare](#) and [Medicaid](#) programs, including potential health-care reform. There has been

progress in reducing error rates in these programs, but pressure for managing state cutbacks in Medicaid funding is growing.

3. Undersecretary of defense for acquisitions, technology and logistics. Responsible for acquisition of a new generation of military equipment and protection of the defense industrial base. Recent meltdowns included numerous cost overruns due to design of new weapons systems.

4. Assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. Responsible for the military health system. Recent meltdown involved negligent medical care for Iraq war soldiers. Firings of key personnel may have resolved the problems, but gaps in response to delayed health problems persist.

5. Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Department of Health and Human Services. Responsible for protecting the food and drug supply, monitoring of new drugs and devices, oversight of clinical research, and possibly regulation of tobacco products. Recent meltdowns included contamination of counterfeit drugs imported from China and lack of coordination with the Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service.

6. Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, [Department of Homeland Security](#). Listed in the Prune Book. Responsible for national response to natural and human-made disasters, including mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Biggest meltdown was slow and inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina. Rebuilding [FEMA](#) may require restoration of its pre-2003 status as an independent agency.

7. Undersecretary of energy for nuclear security. Listed in the Prune Book. Responsible for oversight of nuclear weapons laboratories, the nuclear stockpile, safe transportation of weapons and disposal of aging weapons. Recent mishaps included breakdowns in nuclear security at weapons laboratories.

8. Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, Treasury Department. Listed in the Prune Book. Responsible for tax collection, oversight of charitable agencies, collection of back taxes owed and the \$8 billion technology modernization program. Recent meltdowns included problems with privatized debt collection and continued cost overruns on the modernization effort.

9. Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. Listed in the Prune Book. Major responsibilities include oversight and management of the \$2.2 trillion Social Security and disability programs. Recent problems included delays in disability reviews and growing concerns about the impact of flat wage growth on benefit payments.

10. Undersecretary of veterans affairs for benefits. Listed in the Prune Book. Responsible for resolving disability claims of wounded veterans and survivors and implementation of education programs under the Montgomery GI Bill of Rights, including recent

amendments. Delays in the disability review process have declined but still last four to six months. Recent meltdowns included document shredding that apparently occurred in overworked claims offices.

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