

A MASTER EXECUTIVE COMES AND GOES

By William Nicoson

Robert J. O'Neill, Jr., arrived in August 1997 to become Fairfax County Executive, raising high hopes that he could do for Fairfax County what he did for Hampton, Virginia. There he is credited with "reinventing government" during 13 years of service as city manager -- a performance celebrated by expert commentators in *Banishing Bureaucracy* (1997) and winning him the prestigious National Public Service Award in 1996.

Next month O'Neill will leave Fairfax County to become President of the National Academy of Public Administration, of which he was appointed a lifetime fellow in 1997. The nonpartisan, independent Academy chartered by Congress sponsors studies of government operations at all levels but itself exercises no government functions and employs a staff too slim to trim. To escape the political winds of Fairfax County may be a relief for O'Neill, but those close to him wonder whether his executive talents will be wasted.

The Fairfax County staff, 11,000 bureaucrats strong, has been reinvented only in part. O'Neill succeeded in merging the Department of Public Works with the Department of Environmental Services, achieving greater efficiency by consolidating overlapping functions. But his attempt to merge the Department of Recreation with the Park Authority foundered when apprehensive supervisors responded to pressure from citizen activists.

Operating in a competitive labor market, O'Neill championed pay increases based on meritorious performance rather than seniority and, before departing, expects to put in place a system assuring fair performance evaluation for county workers. He has also tackled the contested issue of economic savings from privatizing functions compared to performance in-house. Working with internal and external auditors, he has sought to establish a reliable system for predicting and measuring competing economic outcomes for such decision-making.

As a financial manager, O'Neill has brought the option of internet tax-payments to Fairfax County citizens. He worked to eliminate budgetary mismatching of nonrecurring revenue with recurring expenses, and won establishment of a "rainy-day fund" as a hedge against declining revenue in future years of stagnating economic growth. He pushed successfully for a program providing major incentives to revitalize under-developed acreage and deteriorating structures, largely in the eastern portions of the county most at risk. The compromise among supervisors providing a two-tier program, with major and minor incentives depending on need, was a triumph of statesmanship.

O'Neill was blamed by supervisors for conducting a search for county police chief without adequate consideration of minority candidates. After the search was rerun to the supervisors' specifications, they chose the same candidate recommended by O'Neill.

There may be a lesson in all this for future Fairfax County governance. Let the supervisors set policies. Let the executive execute those policies, including designing and managing his staff, and hiring and firing his employees. If that lesson is learned, Bob O'Neill shall not have come and gone in vain.

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