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America Needs Its Best in the Public's Service Perspective

Many of the really big crises that our nation now faces, and will face in the future, require government intervention to solve the problems at hand. As creative and important as our private sector is, we will need the best from our men and women in both sectors, public and private. We want excellence from both government and industry when there are major threats to our way of life, such as the war against terrorism, worldwide financial calamity, and threats to our energy supply. No one under these circumstances prays for mediocrity. No one wants a public service populated by people who show up but do not possess what is needed to succeed. When the chips are down, no one would argue that an investment in recruiting, educating, training, and retaining the best men and women in the public's service is a bad idea or a poor use of our country's resources.

The public's business is always important. However, there are times and situations when it is even more important than before, not unlike an excellent athletic team on which the players are talented, well educated in the rules of the game or sport, and very well trained. They practice hard and they practice often. If you don't practice, your skills get rusty, and you begin to lose the edge in your play. Even the most talented require education and training on a regular basis. Peyton Manning arrives early at the stadium to study and become educated; he is typically among the last players to leave the practice field at the end of the day.

Therefore, if we really wish to understand and desire excellence, we only have to look as far as athletics, where we see individuals who sometimes are faced with what appear to be insurmountable challenges, but through their talents, skills, and preparations, they are victorious. Likewise, we in the public's service must continue to populate our ranks with the most talented individuals and make sure that their education and training continues beyond the day when they receive their diploma or degree. Just as it is in the

private sector, professional development in the public sector is a continuous process.

Structurally, what can we do as a nation to attract and retain our best men and women to the public's service? How can we acquire, retain, and maintain excellence in the public's service?

We must be bold about our need to educate and train people, especially for the leadership roles that they play in the public's service. We must be willing to speak clearly and often about why excellence is needed and desired, not just by those who serve but also by those who rely on the capacities and talents of public servants.

In the late 1960s, Frank Sherwood became the first director of the Federal Executive Institute. In my opinion, this was an ingenious idea for responding to the education and training needs of the senior executives in the career civil service. It was a bold step for its time and created a meaningful response to a need for a mechanism to bring the leadership together and carve out avenues for collaboration within and across various agencies, as well as within and across federal, state, and local governments.

What our country is facing today certainly will require that we place our best men and women in the critical positions of leading the planning and executing of a turnaround in the financial crisis with which we are faced. If you asked President Barack Obama, I am confident that he would not portray his first three years in office as smooth sailing and full speed ahead. Rather, he might begin his response by referencing the global financial crisis, which already was in progress as he was being sworn into office.

Yes, the world is in the process of trying to navigate extraordinarily rough financial waters, now and for the foreseeable future. Our response as a nation and the response of the world depend on the capacities and talents of those men and women called on to

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create and execute strategies that bring us all safely through this monumental challenge. We have created the necessary legislative framework by passing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010, both of which were signed by President Obama. However, the success of these important changes is bound up in the skills and abilities of those engaged in the planning and execution.

Sherwood understood that by ensuring excellence among the career executive public service, you could then create the instrument necessary to replicate excellence at each level below the senior executives who today populate the Senior Executive

Service. Many of these individuals are among the best in their fields of endeavor. However, like athletes, they require opportunities to hone their skills, examine their strategies, and test various approaches and solutions to the problems that they and the country face. I would argue that much of this may be accomplished by creating bridges and networks for collaboration within and among agencies and departments of government at the federal, state, and local levels.

Today, we have the Service to America Medals that are presented annually by the Partnership for Public Service. Samuel I. Heyman, founder of the partnership, understood what Frank Sherwood understood: America needs its best, and you start with the leadership.