
Reflections on New Public Management-Style Reform in U.S. National Administration and Public Trust in Government, 1993-2003

David H. Rosenbloom, American University

Susanne J. Piotrowski, Rutgers University-Newark

Abstract: A concerted effort to introduce thoroughgoing reforms into U.S. national administration began in September 1993, when the Clinton-Gore administration issued the first report of the National Performance Review (NPR). The continuing reform effort, which is generally called "reinventing government" in the United States, shares many characteristics with the broader global New Public Management (NPM) movement and is often treated as part of it. The American NPM-style reform program was augmented by congressional attempts to make national agencies more performance-oriented. President George W. Bush, who took office in January 2001, continued to advance several NPM goals, though with some important differences. There is no parallel period of such fundamental, comprehensive, and concentrated administrative reform in American history. The reform agenda has been coherent and consistent enough to allow reflection on its efficacy in terms of its own objectives. These were: 1) making government work better and cost less and 2) building citizens' trust in it. We made two conclusions within this paper. First, the record of the NPM's achievement of greater cost-effectiveness is ambiguous, disputing the Clinton-Gore administration's central claims; the public as a whole perceives no reduction in the waste of its tax dollars. Second, the NPM fell far short of building significantly greater trust in government.

A concerted effort to introduce thoroughgoing reforms into U.S. national administration began in September 1993, when the Clinton-Gore administration issued the first report of the National Performance Review (NPR). The continuing reform effort, which is generally called "reinventing government" in the United States, shares many characteristics with the broader global New Public Management (NPM) movement and is often treated as part of it.¹ The American NPM-style reform program was augmented by congressional attempts to make national agencies more performance-oriented. President George W. Bush, who took office in January 2001, continued to advance several NPM goals, though with some important differences. There is no parallel period of such fundamental, comprehensive, and concentrated administrative reform in American history. The reform agenda has been coherent and consistent enough to allow reflection on its efficacy in terms of its own objectives. These were: 1) making government work better and cost less and 2) building citizens' trust in it.

NPM Objectives in the U.S. National Government

The immediate objective of adopting NPM reforms was to promote far greater cost-effectiveness in national administration—to create a government that "works better and costs less" in the Clinton-Gore administration's slogan. It was claimed that the reforms would save \$108 billion over five years, primarily by downsizing federal agencies (Gore, 1993, p. iii). The broader objective bore directly on improving

constitutional democracy by generating greater public trust in government through better administrative performance. At the time, public trust levels were considered dangerously low. Seventy-three percent of the public believed that the federal government created more problems that it solved (American Enterprise Institute 2003, 9). According to Gore, the average American believed that the national government wasted 48 cents of every tax dollar collected, and only 20% of the public trusted it "to do the right thing most of the time" (Gore, 1993, p. 1).²

The initial NPM thrust was to improve "the way government does business" (Gore, 1993, iv). Beginning in 1995, more attention was devoted to determining what the government should do. Programs were targets for termination, devolution to the state and local governments, or privatization if they were not inherently governmental or amenable to NPM reforms. The reforms would be successful when "there are fewer federal agencies and programs, when there are fewer decisions being made by the federal government that can best be made elsewhere, when customers of the federal government see substantial improvements in services, and when Americans increase their level of trust in the federal government" (NPR, 1995, p. 1).

The NPM's performance orientation was bolstered by a major, largely separate congressional initiative, the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. The act, alternatively known as GPRA (mostly by Democrats) and the "Results Act" (by Republicans), requires federal agencies to engage in strategic planning

and annual performance measurement. It favors defining agency goals in terms of specific objectives and prefers quantitative performance measures. The act, which was phased in over several years, looks toward enabling Congress to base its annual budgeting decisions on agency performance reports.

Strategies

The Clinton-Gore administration was pragmatic in its application of NPM strategies. It was sometimes dogmatic in advancing NPM measures, but rarely, if ever, ideological. Its main strategies for achieving cost-effectiveness and building trust were:

- Cutting unnecessary spending
- Serving customers
- Empowering employees
- Helping communities solve their own problems
- Fostering excellence
- Creating a clear sense of mission
- Steering more and rowing less
- Delegating authority and responsibility
- Replacing regulations with incentives
- Developing budgets based on outcomes
- Exposing federal operations to competition
- Searching for market rather than administrative solutions
- Measuring success in terms of customer satisfaction (Gore 1993, p. 7).

Decentralization and deregulation of federal administration were fundamental to implementing these strategies. The Clinton-Gore NPM reforms took place at the agency and sub-agency levels. The administration did not try to centralize presidential control of the executive branch through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). It sought to flatten hierarchies within the agencies by drastically reducing the number and layers of managers and supervisors. Hierarchical authority would also be diminished by establishing labor-management partnerships to enhance workers' participation in decisions regarding working conditions. Partnering was similarly encouraged between regulatory administrators and regulated entities, with an emphasis placed on self-regulation. Agencies developed their own customer service standards. The administration called on agencies to be entrepreneurial in exploring ways of providing better service to the public.

The Bush administration also strongly supports cost-effectiveness, performance and customer-oriented administration, and building greater public trust in government. However, it departs from standard NPM principles in favoring highly centralized executive controls on agencies. Bush relies heavily on the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to promote better agency performance and to monitor agencies' rulemaking activities. OMB's budget makers evaluate the agencies' funding requests in terms of their

administrative performance. The objective is to separate "programs that work from programs that don't," find out "which programs are producing a good return on investment," and determine "What do Americans get for their money?" (Peters, 2002) The administration anticipates being the first to make centralized budget decisions based on administrative performance.

OMB's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) is responsible for reviewing a good deal of agency rulemaking and administrators' collection of information through forms and other devices. It is concerned with the quality of regulatory rules, duplication, and coordination among agencies. John Graham, Bush's OIRA director from 2001 to March 2006, was committed to approving only those rules that were cost-beneficial, based on sound science, and had a clear justification (Nakashima, 2002).

OMB is also playing a key role in Bush's managerial agenda. The administration attached an "Executive Branch Management Scorecard" to its 2003 proposed budget. The scorecard rates agencies on the following dimensions of central concern to the administration: human capital management, competitive sourcing, financial management, electronic government, and performance budgeting (Shoop, 2002). The government's central personnel agency, OPM, is becoming more active in overseeing and evaluating agencies' human resources management (Saldarini, 2002).

In addition to these important measures placing the agencies under tighter executive direction and control, the Bush administration has promoted very substantial human resource management (HRM) reforms. For the most part, these are contained in the Homeland Security Act of 2002. The act has two main sets of HRM provisions. Some apply only to the Department of Homeland Security, which the act established. Others apply government wide. Bush insists that political appointees and top-level career managers need greater freedom to manage federal employees. The Department of Homeland Security, which many believe provides a template for reforms throughout the executive branch, was exempt from the general civil service laws and regulations for discipline, dismissal, work assignment, promotion, performance appraisal, pay, and collective bargaining. Government-wide reforms include more managerial flexibility in hiring and buying out employees, compensating executives, and paying for employees' higher education. The act also requires each department and agency to appoint a chief human capital officer to supervise, coordinate, and proactively plan HRM activities.

Accomplishments and Shortcomings: Working Better and Costing Less

Many of the administrative reforms from 1993 to 2003 were based on assumptions about downsizing, outsourcing, market dynamics, motivation, customer focus, and performance measurement. The NPM has

been more an article of faith and politics than the application of empirically-based science or proven technique, at least in U.S. national administration. The Clinton-Gore administration's downsizing was politically driven by the need to show that the president and vice president were not old-style tax and spend liberals, but rather "new Democrats" who could make government a highly cost-effective tool for promoting social equity, economic growth, environmental protection, and other liberal objectives. The Bush administration is adamant in its belief that the private sector almost always outperforms public agencies and, therefore, that as much of the government as possible should be outsourced or privatized. As decades of failed reforms have demonstrated, politics and faith are often poor substitutes for public administrative knowledge and understanding based on experience, observation, and social science (Caiden, 1991; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). It is not surprising that, to date, the NPM reforms have a mixed record of performance in terms of cost-effectiveness.

Assessing the Clinton-Gore reforms is problematic because decentralization and deregulation made it very difficult to track implementation. Much of the administration's reporting was self-congratulatory (e.g., Gore, 1995). The initial Clinton-Gore call for NPM reforms in 1993 contained 384 recommendations for implementation through 1,203 action items (U.S. General Accounting Office 1996, 1). In 1995, the administration claimed that 380 action items had been implemented (32%). This was disputed by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) in 1996, which found only 294 (24%) to have been completed (U.S. GAO 1996, 5). A subsequent GAO study in 2000 found that of 72 NPR recommendations in 10 agencies, 33 (46%) had been completely implemented and another 30 (42%) had been partially implemented. No action had been taken on 9 items (12%) (U.S. GAO 2000, 10).

In 1999, on the sixth anniversary of the Clinton-Gore administration's initial effort to install NPM reforms, Gore pointed to the following successes:

- Reduction of the full-time federal civilian workforce by 350,000
- Savings of nearly \$137 billion
- The elimination of 16,000 pages from the Code of Federal Regulations and 640,000 pages of internal agency regulations (Littman, 1999, p. 7).³

Gore also contended that:

We've changed the culture of government. By running the government more like a business—focusing on outcomes rather than process, listening to employees, and putting a premium on customer service—we're working to create an environment where federal employees think differently about their jobs and who their customers are. The impact reinvention has had on the government has also

helped more Americans connect with their government and helped restore their trust in government (Littman, 1999, p. 7).

Critics counter these claims by pointing out that as the number of federal employees shrank, the number of people employed on federal contracts grew substantially (Light, 1999). The claimed cost savings included those associated with activities that were only peripheral to the NPM reforms, such as military base closings (Kettl 2000, p. 21). Bush charged that "The General Accounting Office looked into some of these claims of big savings. Of those reviewed by the GAO, two-thirds had no evidence to back them up" (Bush, 2000). The reduction of pages does not necessarily equate to changed administrative processes. For instance, anecdotal information suggests that many agency field offices continued to rely on the notoriously detailed 10,000-page *Federal Personnel Manual* well after it was ceremoniously discarded in 1994.

Perhaps the most serious charge is that Gore vastly overestimated the culture change. A survey of federal employees in 2000 found that only 36% rated Clinton-Gore NPM reforms favorably, though some aspects of it, such as customer service fared much better (71% favorable rating) (Kauffman, 2000). Another survey, in 2001, found that more federal employees thought the NPM reforms made their jobs harder (49%) than easier (42%) (Light, 2001, p. 9).

Despite continuing disputes over the NPM reforms, the clearest cases of success and failure can be readily identified. On the success side, customer service is at the top. In 2001 the federal government slightly outscored the private sector in the standard American Customer Satisfaction Index. Overall, national administrative agencies scored a 71.0, up from 68.6 in 2000, while the private sector received 70.5 on the 100 point scale. The range for federal agencies was 35 to 93, with several scoring in the 90s or high 80s (Peckenpaugh, 2001, pp. 3-6).

Other successes have been in financial management, performance monitoring, improving information technology, and streamlining procurement. Federal accounting has improved considerably, if slowly. In 2001, 50% of upper-level federal employees with at least 10 years' experience thought that reforms had improved financial management, while 67% believed they had reduced waste, fraud, and abuse (Light, 2001, p. 10). The same year, only 6 of the 24 agencies covered by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 failed to receive a "clean opinion" (Peckenpaugh, 2002). The Government Performance and Results Act appears to be generating performance plans that may be usefully linked to budgets (Ballard 2002a; 2002b; see also Light, 2001, p. 10). Reforms have yielded better information technology according to 88% of the upper-level employees (Light, 2001, p. 10). Fifty-four percent thought NPM reforms "very or somewhat" successfully

streamlined government procurement (Light, 2001, p. 10).

Less tangibly, though potentially of great importance, there is strong political agreement on how the government should operate. Al Gore could have been speaking when Bush explained, "My policies and my vision of government reform are guided by three principles: government should be citizen-centered, results-oriented, and wherever possible, market-based" (Bush, 2000). The Clinton-Gore and Bush administrations differ over decentralization versus centralization and employees' rights, but not with respect to overall visions of what national public administration should be.

Turning to failures, perhaps the greatest shortcomings have been in the area of human resources. The Clinton-Gore administration radically decentralized and deregulated HRM on the assumption that inflexibility was the cause of innumerable problems. However, HRM continues to be problematic. By 2000, the federal employees gave negative ratings to the hiring process, labor-management cooperation, merit-based rewards, and handling of poor performers (Kauffman, 2000). As previously noted, the Bush administration has targeted HRM for major reforms through the Homeland Security Act and OPM. At present, Bush is seeking legislation to free the Department of Defense from many government-wide personnel regulations in dealing with its more than 700,000 civilian employees.

Accomplishments and Shortcomings: Public Trust

As globalization promotes the diffusion of NPM and other reforms, it is increasingly clear that reformers should take political institutions, values, and cultures into account when designing and implementing change (Caiden, 1991; Kettl, 2000; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). Reform is more than a technocratic or business endeavor; it affects governmental institutional arrangements, capacity to formulate public policy, and, of particular interest to American reformers, relationships between citizens and their government. Administrative cost-effectiveness, emphasis on performance, and customer orientation could be ends in themselves. However, they were introduced in U.S. federal administration and developed as a means to a larger end—that of building public trust in government. Gore contended that adequate administrative performance was a prerequisite to gaining public trust: "How can people trust government to do big things if we can't do little things like answer the telephone promptly and politely?" (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000, p. 174). However, the NPR also had an impact on two fundamental aspects of government that are often considered essential to public trust in democracies: administrative transparency, and better access and input to government processes (e.g., see Justice William Douglas' dissent in *United States v. Richardson* [418 U.S. 166] 1974).

The most prominent, related NPR initiative for transparency was FirstGov.gov, "the official U.S. gateway to all government information" (FirstGov.gov 2003). FirstGov.gov has links to federal, state, and local government information which are organized for citizens, businesses, nonprofits, federal employees, and other governments. It also serves to point interested parties to Regulations.gov, a website that bills itself as a "one stop site to comment on federal regulations" (Regulations.gov, 2003). While this site was developed with a customer-friendly focus it also proactively disseminates select government information.

In contrast to its focus on access and input into government process and rulemaking, the NPR devoted little attention directly to administrative transparency. Yet, transparency is clearly related to the goal of building citizen trust. Transparency promotes accountability, which fosters trust. In the U.S. context, secrecy almost always breeds mistrust. The lack of direct concern with transparency raised the prospect of unintended consequences—NPM reforms might actually undercut governmental openness. This possibility is illustrated by analyzing the NPR's impact on implementation of the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which indicates that some NPM initiatives encouraged transparency while others diminished it.

Improving Customer Service

FOIA, enacted in 1966, is a major tool individuals can use to obtain documents from the federal government. Users of FOIA are seen by many agencies as customers. As part of the customer focus initiative, agencies improved their communication with FOIA users by writing form letters in more straightforward language, including their phone numbers in them, and revising individual agency FOIA websites to explain how to file a request. Since FOIA implementation is decentralized and handled differently by each agency, the impact of customer service initiatives, like other NPR initiatives, varied by agency. While NPR generally did not seek to improve administrative transparency, the application of customer service initiatives to FOIA implementation did work toward a more transparent government (see Piotrowski, 2003, chap. 4).

Performance Management

Unlike the NPR customer service initiatives, performance management initiatives, as prescribed by NPR, may have a deleterious effect on governmental transparency. For instance, a comprehensive analysis of 24 federal agencies' annual performance plans for 2000 or 2001 found that 17 paid no attention whatsoever to freedom of information. This was true even though all the agencies are required to comply with certain time limits and other provisions of the Freedom of Information Act (Piotrowski and Rosenbloom, 2002). Only four agencies included quantitative performance measures in their plans, and for one of these, the National Archives and Records Administration, freedom

of information is a mission-based concern. Three other agencies mention freedom of information, but list no concrete performance goals associated with it. Because performance plans are linked to congressional oversight and agency budgets, failure to address freedom of information is likely to divert attention and funding from it. This is no small matter in terms of public trust and democracy. In 1946, the United Nations General Assembly resolved that "freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone for all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated" (Zifcak, 1998, p. 944).

Outsourcing

Performance management was not the only NPR initiative with mixed results regarding transparency. The NPR emphasis on reduced costs, downsizing government, and faith in market mechanisms led to increased outsourcing and reliance on contractors. The relationship between government contractors and FOIA implementation is varied. One aspect of this relationship concerns the documents the contractors produce and hold. The majority of documents most federal contractors produce while working for the national government are not subject to mandatory release through FOIA or any other mechanism. It is possible that many functions once performed by federal agencies and covered by FOIA are now handled by contractors whose documents are unavailable to the public. For instance, e-mails of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration pertaining to the disintegration of the space shuttle Columbia were available under FOIA, but those of the private contractors, who do the overwhelming amount of launch work, were not. It is hard to see how this lack of "sunshine" on contractors can improve trust in government.

Many of the NPR initiatives have had staying power with the Bush administration. These management initiatives, now under the Bush administration's leadership, have affected transparency in largely the same way. The Bush administration is working to make the executive branch less transparent, however.

Bush and Transparency

The Bush administration has intentionally reduced transparency in the name of executive flexibility and national security. In October 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft notified federal departments and agencies that the Department of Justice would be more inclined to defend their decisions to withhold information than was the case under the Clinton-Gore administration. He also instructed agencies to remove information from their web sites that might be of potential use to terrorists, such as data on chemical processes and infrastructure (Piotrowski, 2003, pp. 146-147; 155-157). In November 2001, Bush's Executive Order 13233 reversed several disclosure features of the Presidential Records Act of 1978. Vice President Richard Cheney adamantly refused to release documents regarding

energy policy that many believe are covered by FOIA and a related statute, the Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972 (Milbank 2002a, A1; Skrzyucki 2002, E6).

When asked why President Bush refused to release some information to Congress, then Press Secretary Ari Fleischer replied, "Is it because we have something to hide? No. It's because it's the best way to have a healthy discussion inside an administration. And that serves the President" (Simendinger, 2002, p. 7). In time, Fleischer's essential claims—you can trust us and transparency will only interfere with our decision-making—is likely to be a very hard sell to the American media and public.

Trust Levels

If NPM reforms contributed to greater trust in government, their impact was marginal. In July 2001, 29% of the public "trusted the government in Washington to do what is right just about always or most of the time" (Light, 2001, p. 12). This was up between 6 to 10 percentage points from 1993 when the Clinton-Gore administration began NPM reforms. The increase is significant, but only partly attributable to the NPM. Moreover, although any improvement is welcome, compared to the trust levels in the 60-70% range in the 1950s and 1960s, trust remained troublingly low (American Enterprise Institute, 2002, p. 11). The great outpouring of patriotism and support for the government in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks raised the trust level to 64% (American Enterprise Institute, 2002, p. 13). However, by July 2003, trust in government had declined to 36% (American Enterprise Institute, 2002, p. 13).

Conclusion: The Public's Perception: Neither Cost-Effective nor Trustworthy

The foregoing consideration of NPM cost-effectiveness and its goal of building trust in government raises the following question: Did inattention to transparency by the Clinton-Gore administration and hostility toward it by the Bush administration undercut gains in trust generated by NPM cost-effectiveness? The unequivocal answer is "no." On average, the public was unaware of any overall cost-effectiveness the NPM may have generated. In April 2002, when asked "out of every dollar the federal government collects in taxes, how many cents do you think are wasted?" Americans' collective answer was 47 cents—almost exactly where it stood in August 1993, just before the NPM was introduced (American Enterprise Institute, 2003, p. 21). If cost-effectiveness improved, it went unnoticed by the average American. Even more damaging to the assumptions of the NPM reformers, an individual's positive perception of government performance is only weakly associated with greater trust. In 1997 the regression coefficient was .321, which declined to .224 in 2002 (Mackenzie and Labiner, 2002, p. 6 [Table 8]).

The following conclusions are evident. First, the record with regard to the NPM's achievement of

greater cost-effectiveness is ambiguous. The Clinton-Gore administration's central claims were disputed. The public as a whole perceives no reduction in the waste of its tax dollars. Second, the NPM fell far short of building significantly greater trust in government. In retrospect, perhaps, that result was to be expected. The NPM focused on managerial processes and values. It was relatively inattentive to the broader governmental concern of transparency. In practice, its initiatives had a mixed impact on implementation of the national government's key transparency statute, FOIA. If transparency is related to trust, as observers have long contended,⁴ then administrative reformers hoping to build trust in government will have to make it part of their overall mission.

Notes

*Unless otherwise noted, all references to Bush and the Bush administration are to that of President George W. Bush, not his father, President George H. W. Bush.

¹ It is to be expected that individual nations will adapt the core NPM ideas to their own political, economic, and social systems. The U.S. is especially distinctive in its constitutional separation of powers and federalism. Kettl (2000, 1,5) includes the U.S. along with the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and several other nations as participants in "a global reform movement in public management" and "the global public management movement" (emphasis added). Kaboolian (1998) considers reforms in the U.S. to be an instantiation of the NPM. Pollitt and Bouckear (2000) also place the NPM label on U.S. reforms (see especially pp. 31, 32, 59-61, 137-138, 140, 174, 179). For instance, they write, "Certain regimes look as though they are much more open to the 'performance-driven', market-favouring ideas of the NPM than others: particularly the 'Anglo-Saxon' countries, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA" (60-61). According to Hood (1991) and Hughes (1998), the NPM's main tenets are: (1) administrative units should be managed by professional managers who are sufficiently empowered to be held accountable for their performance; (2) administrative goals should be clear and measurable; (3) emphasis should be placed on outputs or outcomes rather than procedures; (4) competition should be used to promote cost-effectiveness; (5) private sector approaches to personnel and organizational flexibility should be followed by public agencies; and (6) direct and compliance costs should be reduced. Kettl (2000, pp. 1-2) lists "six core characteristics" of the "global reform movement in public management": (1) productivity, (2) marketization, (3) service orientation, (4) decentralization, (5) capacity to devise and track policy, and (6) accountability for results. As discussed *infra*,

U.S. reforms from 1993 to 2003 substantially embrace these tenets and characteristics.

² According to the American Enterprise Institute (2003: 12), 23% of the public trusted the government in Washington to do what is right "about always" (3%) or "most of the time" (20%) in March 1993. In November 1993, the corresponding figures were 1% and 18%.

³ Morley Winograd, director of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government when it closed in January 2001, claimed 426,200 positions were cut, of which 78,000 were managerial. He did not claim additional page reductions in rules, though he said 31,000 pages of "legalese" had been converted into plain English. He also claimed that 2000 "obsolete field offices" had been closed and 250 "useless agencies" had been eliminated. The latter figure must include very small agencies, units within agencies, and, perhaps, advisory committees. A typical official organizational chart of the U.S. government shows a total of only about 95 departments, agencies, boards, commissions, and other organizations (Winograd, 2001).

⁴ James Madison, the fourth president of the U.S. (1809-1817), a major participant drafting the U.S. Constitution, and the main author of its Bill of Rights, noted famously, "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives" (Madison, 1999, p. 790).

Authors

David H. Rosenbloom is distinguished professor of public administration in the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington, D.C. His scholarship focuses on public administration and democracy. He has guest lectured at several Chinese Universities, including Renmin, Northwest (Xi Bei Da Xue), Lanzhou, and Fudan and has a longstanding affiliation with City University of Hong Kong. In 2001, he received the American Political Science Association's John Gaus Award for a Lifetime of Exemplary Scholarship in the Joint Tradition of Political Science and Public Administration.

Suzanne J. Piotrowski is assistant professor in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers University-Newark. She is a member of the board of directors of the New Jersey Foundation for Open Government. Dr. Piotrowski is also on the Sunshine Advisory Board for the Citizen Access Project at the Brechner Center for Freedom of Information, University of Florida. Her research focuses on non-mission-based values in public administration, including administrative

transparency and ethics. Her book *Governmental Transparency in the Path of Administrative Reform* was published by the State of University of New York Press in April 2007.

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