



Sam Rayburn Carpenters Needed  
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Sam Rayburn served nearly a half-century as a Congressman, and still holds the record for the longest tenure as Speaker of the House. So he knew a thing or two about government. One of his aphorisms speaks powerfully to our age:

“Any jackass can kick a barn down, but it takes a carpenter to build one.”

Despite the symbology of American political parties, the current federal regime is one of jackasses (in so many ways). It is smashing things, whether it be USAID, NIH, NSF, the State Department, and most recently, the Department of Education (all assisted by a comically corrupt Supreme Court). That is part of the plan: destroy the institutions of governance so that even if Democrats return to power, they will confront a smoking shell of a government. To use another analogy, it resembles the apocryphal story of the Romans sowing salt in the destroyed city of Carthage to ensure that nothing would ever grow there again.

So we now have a robust scholarly and policy agenda: how can we quickly erect effective governmental institutions?

We usually assume that institutions must develop over time, that you can't just get something to work quickly. And that assumption makes a lot of intuitive sense. Political

scientist Samuel P. Huntington, in his classic work *Political Order in Changing Societies*, defined “institutions” as “stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior.” Well, then by definition you can’t quickly create an institution because it won’t be stable or recurring.

But perhaps our assumptions are wrong. There are examples of institutions being created quickly, even if they initially fell flat on their faces.

The one that comes to mind for me most readily is Obamacare. Initially, as we all recall, it was a disaster, with the healthcare.gov site crashing. But [within a few months, it had stabilized, and the exchanges enrolled 10 million people.](#)

Environmental legal scholars might also consider the EPA, which of course at the beginning was simply an executive reorganization with no statutory authorization. Within three years, however, EPA issued the first regulations to phase out lead in gasoline – perhaps the most significant clean air advance in US history to that point.

It is time for environmental scholars and practitioners to start compiling examples of successful quick standups of government institutions, and seek to draw lessons from them. (I don’t think military organizations count: war time exigencies are not good analogies). When have strong and effective regulatory programs emerged within 1-2 years? I actually suspect technology might have some purchase here: Russ Vought and the rest are trying to smash agencies by firing people, hoping that they will move away. But Zoom and other technologies might allow for collaboration and institutional stand-ups no matter where people are.

We should most definitely look outside the United States. Effectively, the country is under a form of occupation from forces dedicated to destroying the government. That is not an experience that the United States has had throughout its history, but other nations have. And we must learn from them. Washington DC: Meet Vichy.

It’s a long road back that must be traveled in a short time. We might as well start now.