

## GUEST OBSERVER

By Steven L. Katz and Jonathan D. Breul

### GAO Requires A Multitalented New Leader

*First of two parts*  
**W**ANTED: CEO for independent agency in legislative branch. Reports to 535 bosses. Manages annual budget of more than \$500 million. Leads workforce of 3,000+ employees engaged in audits, evaluations and investigations of government activity worldwide. Must be nominated by the president of the United States and confirmed by U.S. Senate, and then hold the president, his administration and the executive branch accountable. Term of office is 15 years.

What would you do if you were the comptroller general of the United States and head of the Government Accountability Office? How would you focus the GAO's authority, budget, professional staffers and their deep knowledge about subjects across government? What would the targets be for oversight, audits, evaluations and investigations? How would you describe your approach to working with Congress?

Since last October, a statutorily bipartisan Congressional Comptroller General Commission has been considering the answers to such questions, as well posing its own formal questions to applicants seeking the top job at the GAO. This followed the Feb. 15, 2008, resignation of former Comptroller General David Walker.

The commission's work is expected to wrap up this summer when it completes the interviews of applicants and, according to statute, transmits to President Barack Obama a nonbinding list of at least three potential nominees. Although past is not always prologue, this same process led to the presidential nominations of Walker, who was nominated by President Bill Clinton, and former Comptroller General Charles Bowsher, who was nominated by President Ronald Reagan.

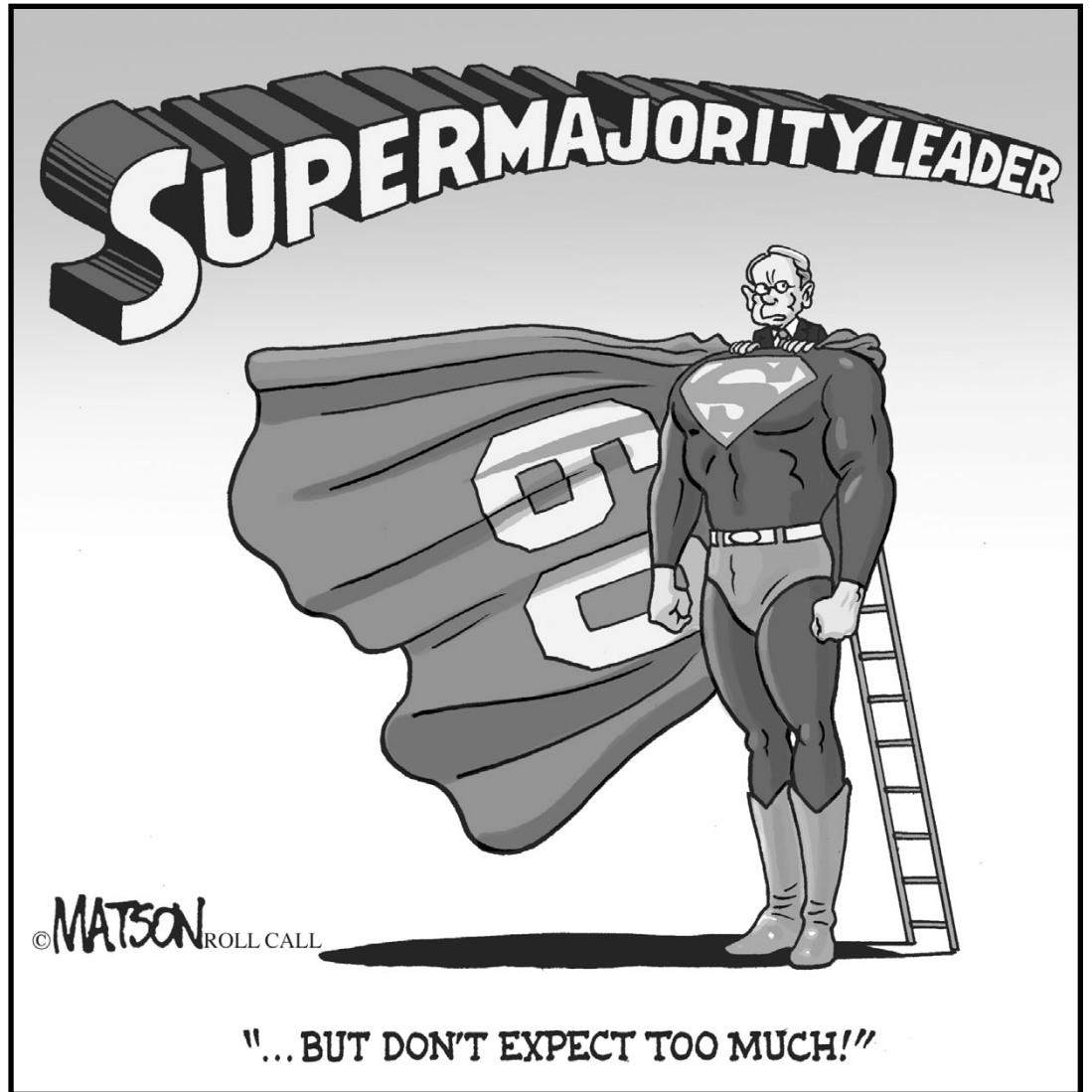
In the process of nominating a

new head of the GAO, there is a copybook clarity that belies a significantly more complex task for the commission in identifying a well-qualified candidate. In part, this is attributable to the fact that Congress is an institution, but it is not an organization. The elected officials that comprise the commission are unique in their elected and political leadership positions — but still not unique in the same way as the comptroller general position. In this role, they are most similar to a board of directors responsible for selecting a new CEO — yet there is not a human resources department or executive search firm in the wings waiting to lend support.

Such a search could prove daunting for even the most skilled executive search professionals. While the comptroller general must be someone who possesses CEO qualities, has performed previous "heavy lifts" at the top of organizations and possesses strengths that derive from management or related industry experiences, being comptroller general is not typical of CEO positions in the private or public sectors.

It is also unique in the federal government, yet it is insufficient to use one-sentence search criteria written in government parlance even though it is accurate and must be met by the nominee: A nonpartisan professional, manager and leader who is schooled, trained and experienced in the realms of the fiscal, management and wide-ranging programmatic responsibilities of the federal government and will support the Congress in fulfilling its constitutional checks-and-balances responsibility.

That is because the job of the next comptroller general of the United States will be significantly affected by the dynamic nature of American politics, the rapidly expanding roles of the United States government and events on a national and global scale. In the 17 months since the comptroller general position became vacant, the United States and the world have faced a devastating financial crisis, the United States has elected a new president, and the very government that the GAO must oversee and hold accountable is



more deeply involved in the business of economic stabilization and recovery than ever before in history. And all this while the United States continues to fight wars in several countries and protect the nation in an uncertain world.

The job of being comptroller general and head of the GAO has grown exponentially and in parallel complexity with the leadership demands faced by Congress, the president and the head of every executive branch agency. When complex and pressing domestic and global issues are on these leaders' desks, then these are also on the desk of the comptroller general. The GAO has auditors and evaluators not only in agencies such as the Department of Interior and even the Department of Defense, but it has teams working as a result of requests from Congress in the most dangerous hotspots in the world, including Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Is there a criterion that signals an ability to provide proactive leadership in a world of uncertain-

ty and which should be found in any agency head nominated by the president including the comptroller general? Yes. It is the capability to convert the momentum of crisis, need and responsibility into an infusion of leadership that strengthens the efforts and credibility of an agency. After all, the job is not to become a shock absorber for the rest of the agency.

Arguably, this is precisely the environment that Obama has found himself in and the skill set that he needs to demonstrate on a daily basis. And it is specifically the case for numerous new agency heads — from the Treasury secretary entering his position in the midst of the economic meltdown, to the new Health and Human Services secretary landing in the job during a pandemic flu. From the Food and Drug Administration commissioner who arrives on the job anticipating a new law authorizing the FDA to regulate tobacco, and within days of which an E. coli bacterial outbreak

occurs in the grocery aisles, to the infusion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding along with even greater expectations and responsibilities in numerous agencies across government. The secretary of Energy, for example, in addition to an annual budget of about \$26 billion, must administer Recovery Act funds totaling \$32.7 billion in grant funding and \$137 billion in loan guaranty authority.

Coming in part two: Comptroller general independence in a one-party majority of Congress and the White House, and interviews with former Comptrollers General Charles Bowsher and David Walker.

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