



## Consultant Crusades for Better Federal Performance

As the Bush administration presses agencies to link performance goals to their budgets, John Mercer's phone has been ringing off the hook.

Mercer has been working with agencies in applying the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act — the law that requires agencies to set goals and measure results against them — since he started as a consultant in 1998.

"All the departments have performance plans. I help them improve their plans," Mercer said. "A lot of their subunits don't have plans, so I help them develop plans."

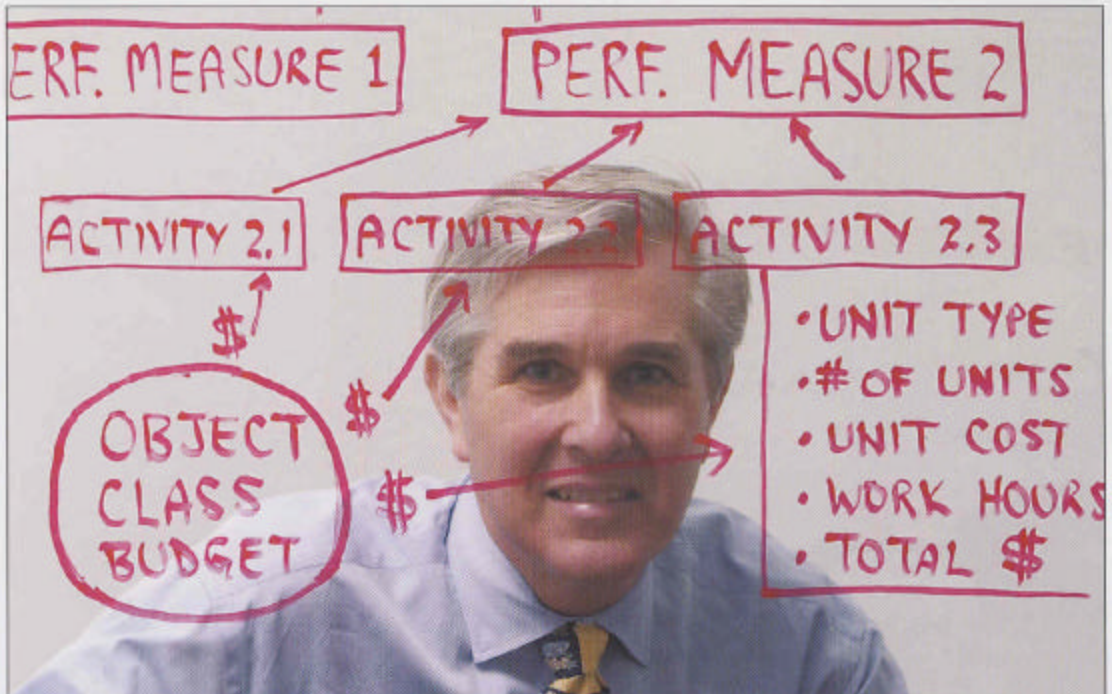
There is good reason many agencies bring their performance reports to this soft-spoken, good-government guru: He helped write the law requiring the reports. At the time, he was an aide with the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee.

Today, Mercer is deputy director for government performance at Logicon Inc. of Herndon, Va., a supplier of information technology products and services.

He is considered by many a foremost expert on performance-based budgeting — a method of linking program results to budget requests that most agencies are trying to achieve.

Since the Bush administration took office, Mercer has briefed top-level executives at the Office of Management and Budget on how agencies should proceed with performance-based budgeting. One large department also is working with him to develop a performance-based budget.

Most agencies are filing performance reports, which are supposed to show whether agencies are meeting their goals and what



Consultant John Mercer helps agencies chart their paths to performance-based budgeting.

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effect their programs are having on the country.

But for many agencies, tying performance levels to specific annual funding levels seems impossible.

Mercer disagrees.

In the 1980s, Mercer was mayor of Sunnyvale, Calif., a city of 130,000 in Southern California. There, he and other city officials established a performance-based budget that caught the attention of local, state and federal government officials from around the country.

"The federal government is different, of course, but there are principles that apply," Mercer said. "The same principles that apply to aerodynamics on a small, single-engine plane apply to a 747."

In Sunnyvale, city officials found they were able to map

out on paper how tax dollars achieved certain results. As a result, tax rates dropped to one of the state's lowest and citizen satisfaction with local government skyrocketed.

Mercer, who once served as an aide to Rep. Charles Wiggins, R-Calif., returned to the federal government in 1988 as assistant secretary of the Housing and Urban Development Department.

There, Mercer tried to implement some of the performance-management practices that had proved successful in Sunnyvale. No luck.

"There was little interest," he said.

"So I started to think, 'Well, there ought to be a law!'"

In 1989, Mercer took a job as Republican counsel on the Senate Governmental Affairs

### IN PROFILE

**Career highlight:** "Proposing an idea for federal management reform and having the opportunity to develop it into a law — the Government Performance and Results Act."

**One needed change to the federal government:** "I would publish the Web-page address for the GPRA

plans and reports of all federal agencies and major programs in the income tax guide sent out to the public every year."

**Part of federal government most in need of reform:** "Bringing greater transparency to the relationship between budget resources, day-to-day activities and program results through real performance-based budgeting."

Committee. After a few months, he presented his idea for the Results Act to Sen. William Roth, R-Del., and drafted a bill.

The incoming Clinton administration supported the bill and helped push it through Congress.

Unlike some previous government-reform bills, the Results Act shows no sign of fading. Though struggling, agencies still are

to implement the act. The Bush administration has named performance management a top priority.

Mercer moved to Logicon — then Federal Data Corp. — in 1998. Since then he has been helping agencies retool performance-management systems in hopes that the federal government's management will be as efficient as Sunnyvale's.

**Bill Landauer**