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GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
The United States Senate

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Electronic Government
Committee on Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joe Lieberman
July 11, 2001

Good morning and welcome to all our witnesses and guests. Thank you for joining us today to examine the universe of possibilities the Internet and other information technologies are bringing to bear on government and the people it serves. We have a growing consensus in this country, in both parties, that the era of big government is over. Our goal is not to make government bigger, but to make it smarter, less wasteful, and more efficient. That is the responsibility of this Committee and the purpose of this bill.

The reach of the Internet and the speed with which it achieved that reach may be the big story of the last decade. In order to get ahead in today's world, you must be plugged in and powered up, connected and ready for business, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The result is that just about every aspect of society in America is undergoing major transformation, and it is our obligation to see that government does not lag behind.

Information technology offers an unprecedented opportunity to redefine the relationship between the public and its government, just as it has redefined the relationship between retailers and consumers, teachers and students, soldiers and their foes. The idea is to apply the lessons of the online private sector to the mission of government, and that means providing better services, more accessible information, and greater accountability, at significant cost savings. At its best, the Next Generation Government would exchange what is now cumbersome, static and often bewildering for a dynamic, interactive and user friendly government. In the end, a more efficient, more effective government will emerge.

This Committee has an important role to play in this transformation. Today, we'll be talking about the "E-Government Act of 2001" - bipartisan legislation Senator Conrad Burns of Montana and I, along with 12 other co-sponsors, introduced two months ago to bring focused leadership to electronic government. Our goal is to use information technology to bring about a revolution in current bureaucratic structures so that we can engage the public, restore its trust and, ultimately, increase public participation in the democratic process.

As it stands today, electronic government at the federal level lacks a unifying vision. Fortunately, we are not beginning at square one. But a variety of projects are underway and several agencies have created imaginative web sites that provide a wealth of information and numerous services online. Already, taxpayers may submit their income tax forms online, students may apply for loans electronically, and some agencies have instituted electronic rule-making. But overall, progress in digital government is uneven. We have a loose-knit mix of ideas and projects that are often poorly coordinated, sometimes overlapping, and frequently redundant. Remarkable innovations dreamed up by visionary government employees can be found in some quarters, but elsewhere innovations are hampered by regulatory and statutory restrictions, the inability to move beyond traditional models of government management, and "stove-pipe" conceptions of agency jurisdiction. The result is that the progress of electronic government at the federal level has been inconsistent, particularly in areas that require intergovernmental coordination.

One of the most important impediments to progress is the lack of concentrated, high-level leadership on information management issues. That is why our bill creates a Federal CIO inside of OMB to implement IT statutes, promote e-government, and foster innovation. The CIO would not replace the agencies' authority to pursue their own IT programs but rather would provide a much-needed, strong, government-wide perspective. Among other things, the CIO would address privacy and computer security issues, develop e-government initiatives with state and local governments, the public, private and non-profit sectors, and oversee a fund to promote cross-agency projects, which are central to the kind of integrated service delivery and consolidation that will truly transform government.

We want information and services offered over the Internet to be accessible to citizens through a single, federal on-line portal, building on the progress already made by the FirstGov.gov web site launched by the federal government last year. Government websites should be organized comprehensively and logically by subject, rather than agency jurisdiction. We would create a single directory of government web pages, so citizens can find the help they need with a few clicks of the mouse, rather than with impractical searches that often produce thousands of results.

Based on the experience of the private sector, we expect major cost savings from more efficient agency-to-agency interactions. Progress in this area, however, requires that we establish standards for electronic compatibility between the agencies, and within agencies.

As the government steadily moves information and services on-line, it must beware of what Senator Thompson warned against and that is automating existing inefficiencies. If we take this moment of opportunity to re-examine our existing processes, then, I believe we must also implement performance measures to determine which e-government applications are successful and cost effective so that we aren't duplicating government's inadequacies.

This task will not be without headaches. Fortunately, we have excellent models in the private sector that have transformed their practices, and now serve customers better, while saving billions of dollars in the bargain. We will hear about two of those models today.

As I said when we introduced this bill, and I want to emphasize again today, our legislation is a work in progress. It reflects the insights of many people and organizations. We will continue to seek comments and feedback, especially from the Administration and from the members of this Committee. I expect the bill will change as we work to achieve a broad consensus, and I hope everyone will maintain an open mind as we strive for that compromise. New information technologies are like seeds from which great things grow. For us, they offer an unprecedented opportunity to re-engineer the way government operates and serves the public. Let's make the most of it. Senator Thompson?

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