

Both parties scrambling to find federal programs to cut

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WASHINGTON — Over the last 70 years, the federal government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on helium for military blimps. The program has escaped budget cuts even though it has enough gas to supply the entire world's need for the next decade.

Now, a death sentence seems inescapable.

The World War I-vintage helium reserve will probably be one of a slew of casualties in a race between the White House and the Republican Congress to dismantle federal agencies and eliminate programs deemed no longer necessary.

Democrats and Republicans are furiously searching for programs to slash in the aftermath of the November elections. President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore already had succeeded in shrinking government by 100,000 people over two years in their "Reinventing Government" program, but the elections sparked a new zeal for deeper cuts.

"Once the election happened, it was like adding a booster rocket to a plane that was gliding along just fine," said David Osborne, author of the best-selling book, "Reinventing Government," which helped launch the effort to restructure the bureaucracy.

"Now, the perspective is: We've

got to reinvent or we'll die."

In the second phase of their reinventing drive, Clinton and Gore have sent teams into every government agency. Their instructions are to raise fundamental questions about a bureaucratic state that has basically grown unchecked since the early 1930s.

The issues are: What does the government do and should it be doing this? What's obsolete? Can it be done better at the state or local level? What can be sold or given away? And if it must be kept, how can it be streamlined and improved?

"The administration understands that Republicans would like to take an axe and not a

scalpel to the federal budget and agencies, and therefore they're trying to get a little out front of that effort," said Thomas Mann, a Brookings Institution specialist on government. "It's partly opportunity, it's partly fear."

Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich has advocated slashing the federal government in half within 20 years. GOP members of Congress are championing a bill to freeze all federal regulations.

"The Republicans are going to win this race," said William Kristol, a Republican strategist and onetime adviser to former Vice President Dan Quayle. "We believe in shrinking government.

The Democrats have to be dragged along kicking and screaming."

The battle against big bureaucracies is also being played out in capitals around the world as other deficit-plagued governments rethink how they do business. Forty-eight countries have sent observers to Washington to check out Clinton and Gore's reform program. The vice president's 1993 report on reforming government has been translated into Chinese, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Korean.

"The most important legacy, frankly, of this administration will be the transformation of the government from Industrial Age

to Information Age management," said Elaine Kamarck, a senior adviser to Gore and head of the administration's reinventing government effort.

"It's going to change everything we do," she said. "It's already changed warfare. It's going to change every human endeavor."

The helium reserve is a good example of the administration's new determination to limit government.

The program survived GOP attempts to kill it in the Reagan and Bush administrations. Gore's National Performance Review task force placed it on a hit list of programs in 1993 but the idea died at the White House.