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THE CAREERIST-POLITICAL APPOINTEE RELATIONSHIP: AN ESSAY ON ONE ASPECT OF THE "CRISIS" IN THE U.S. CIVIL SERVICE

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDD/HR

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A Research Project by Sheila R. Buckley

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D O C U M E N T I n t r o d u c t i o n

Among persons concerned with the public interest there is growing attention to the current and future quality of the United States Civil Service. Many government activities are essential to citizens' health, welfare and security. Our increasing dependence throughout society upon ever more complex scientific and computational processes is going to require increasing competence and excellence in the government work force. People who make decisions about toxic waste, space exploration or weapons acquisition that will set the national course on these matters well into the twenty-first century simply must know what they are doing.

Moreover, the demand and need for government services will continue to grow. The environment, defense, public safety, support systems for the poor or disadvantaged are all activities in which the private sector has little or no incentive to become involved. The continuing public policy debate will therefore be not about whether government is deeply engaged on these fronts but about how much it does and how well it performs. While continuous adjustments to the mix between public and private sector activity, and that among local, state and federal entities can be expected, there will not be the kind of radical shift in American values that would be necessary fundamentally to decrease the role of government. In short, the quality of public service is of vital importance. Questions about that quality are emerging. The evidence suggests that things are not as they should be. There is a "crisis" in the U.S. Civil Service.

Approach

For my "February Project," I pursued my interest in this overall subject through extensive readings, as well as in discussions with career civil servants, political appointees, academic experts and members of special interest organizations in and out of government who are turning their attention to it. I attended Congressional hearings on various pieces of relevant legislation and participated in a three day conference sponsored by the Federal Executive Institute on "The Future of Public Service." (The FEI is a government run management/leadership training program for selected senior careerists.) By the time I had familiarized myself with the major activities and writings on the subject, it became clear that what I could contribute in a limited time by way of formal research would be largely duplicative of a number of excellent efforts already underway. For example, in September, 1987, a group of eminent, concerned citizens established the National Commission on the Public Service. Its report, which will probably become known as the Volcker Report after its chairman, should be the most comprehensive study in many years of all aspects of the Civil Service. I decided to write more of an essay than a research paper, and have included what should be a useful list of resources. I have drawn on the sources noted and on my own experience as a foreign policy specialist in the Civil Service.

D E S I G N E D Methodology

My initial intent was systematically to interview senior Civil Service careerists working directly on foreign policy issues. To scope the problem, I defined this group as the Senior Executive Service (SES) employees of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Policy (OUSD/P) and of the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA). (There are some civilian employees of the Department of State, the Military Departments, other parts of the Office of the Secretary of Defense and so forth who would also fall into the category.) After obtaining most of the personnel data that I had requested about this population, I designed a questionnaire for use in exploring their individual views. In the event, however, the number of individuals involved was quite small (about 45, depending on counting rules) and at least half of them were known to me. Thus it was not possible to provide reliably for the anonymity of the respondents. Concluding that the answers to some of my questions were likely to be affected, I did not widely circulate the questionnaire.

It is appended as of possible interest. The "answers" circled are those that I believe reflect, with enough accuracy to be useful, the opinions of most senior civil servants working in the foreign policy decision-making arena today. That assessment is based on limited use of the questionnaire itself, my various discussions and observations, and literature suggesting that similar "answers" have emerged from more thorough surveys. Developing and refining the questionnaire did prove extremely useful as an organizing tool for me and I drew on it in virtually all of my discussions.

The Senior Executive Service

In 1978, Congress created within the federal service a corps of senior executives who would, it was envisioned, provide a permanent source of managerial talent and substantive experience upon which successive administrations could rely in maintaining efficient government services and effecting policy shifts consistent with presidential agendas. Almost all of the 6000 SES members are in the domestic arena.

The special focus of this essay is SES professionals working directly on foreign and national security policy making and, in particular, the relationship between that group and the political appointees who rotate through the top leadership positions of government. One question in looking at this SES group is whether they differ markedly from their SES counterparts in other government agencies. They apparently do not. With respect to their professional environments, they seem to share similar frustrations and gratifications. Like their SES colleagues elsewhere, they identify principally with their respective agencies, rather than with the Civil Service as a whole or even the Senior Executive Service. And they see themselves as having more in common with their fellow foreign policy specialists outside the Civil Service than with other members of the SES. Indeed,

the SES community is only now moving toward the most rudimentary notions of "identity." Even that process will stall out unless at least two important elements of the SES system as envisioned by its proponents -- interagency mobility and systematic development, through training, of a leadership corps -- are fully implemented.

Who are these senior foreign policy civil servants? Most entered government in the late fifties or early sixties and are now within five or ten years of retirement. Almost all are well educated, white and male. Many have seen pre-Vietnam military service. A significant number will cite the Kennedy call to "service" as an important motivation for their having chosen or, for those coming in a little earlier, having decide to commit to a government career. They, their families and peers saw government as an exciting, even noble endeavor. What the public was perceived to demand of its public servants then was excellence and what the public was thought willing to return was respect. Through at least the early sixties, the Vietnam War appeared winnable and the goals set by two presidents for our engagement in that effort inspirational. Comparably in domestic affairs, of course, the Peace Corps and Vista (the Poverty Corps) offered the nation's youth and others a means of enriching themselves by observing the direct results of helping others.

In both foreign and domestic areas, energetic, idealistic students moved from the campus directly to government careers "in order to make a difference." It was widely believed that government offered one the opportunity to have a significant impact on the people's and the nation's well being. The middle aged civil servant who came into government in those years typically looks back fondly on the era and on his own decision. Perhaps he does so because it really was an unusually inspiring time. Or perhaps one tends to remember best the time of early adulthood and adult commitment, whether to a cause, a person, a career, a field of study.

In any case, whatever the perception of the senior careerist today about his own past, however much he may be romanticizing the good old days, it is clear that the late eighties are different.

The foregoing walk down memory lane is not merely a digression. It is telling that senior careerists compare today's system with a vision of a lost and happier era, nevermind about the accuracy of that memory. It is telling that most careerists would not recommend government service to their own children.

The Civil Service "Crisis"

The same problems and negative conditions prevailing in the Civil Service today are repeatedly identified by observers, commissions, interested legislators and so forth: pay, low morale, recruitment, retention, negative public attitudes and a deeply troubled relationship between political appointees and careerists. Each relates to the other.

The current situation, which applies throughout the Civil Service professional ranks, is grim. Recruitment of top performers out of colleges and graduate schools is very difficult. There are not a large number of entry level positions, so there is still competition for jobs and a few outstanding people are entering government, often through highly selective avenues such as the Presidential Management Intern Program. But the lack of positions is caused largely by a pension system that makes retirement before age sixty-five, or certainly sixty-two, financially prohibitive for most workers. "Early out" provisions would be useful on this problem, but their effect could also be to lose people at the peak of their expertise and usefulness. Moreover, the top performers who do come into government often leave it after a few years, sometimes just at the point where their early training and experiences are beginning to pay off for the tax payer. They move, understandably, to jobs that offer more of what matters to top performers anywhere: authority, responsibility, power, money, opportunity and, perhaps of the essence, an environment in which they can reliably measure their own contributions. Few organizations or professions can ensure that their people are always satisfied on all of these dimensions. The U.S. civil servant is frequently dissatisfied on several. For example, though the results vary with the assumptions, numerous studies of pay and compensation show that in terms of so-called comparability with the private sector, the Civil Service component of government runs significantly behind at the management levels -- about twenty-four percent. In terms of the relationship of pay to economic trends, the buying power of senior careerists is down forty percent over the past ten years due to failure of salary increases to keep up with inflation. Finally, military compensation, which not too long ago barely matched that of civil servants, now substantially exceeds it.

A number of prescriptions are being offered in these areas. They include substantial restructuring of pay scales to differentiate more broadly among occupations (to make comparability a more meaningful concept) and various pay increase formulas. These latter recognize, however, that government pay should always be somewhat lower than the private sector. There is an element of idealism and sense of service that it is thought could be compromised by complete comparability. There are also a range of proposals addressing the need for fair implementation of reward systems responsive to performance and examining ways to increase management's authority to help, penalize, reassign or remove poor performers.

One of the most serious problems for the Civil Service is that its members do not enjoy public approval and confidence. Compounding the problem, political leaders rarely resist playing to that theme. "Bureaucrat bashing" is firmly established in the American political vocabulary after twelve years of highly visible presidential contempt for government employees. Together with pay, most careerists raise this situation as one of the principal sources of their unhappiness. Most mention it even if they rate their overall job satisfaction as fairly high.

Although it would not be wise for the careerist to respond to these attacks in a mindlessly defensive way, it is time for a response. That response is building in, for example, the formation of associations and the expansion of political activism by government employees. It is a fact that the careerist often takes the blame for failures of the elected Congressional or Executive leadership, for the mistakes of political appointees who leave government before their mistakes catch up with them, or simply for problems caused by circumstances literally beyond the careerist's control. After all, at least in theory, if a thing were easy to do or if the private sector were motivated to do it, it would not be tasked to the government in the first place.

At the same time, the careerist must also bear responsibility for some of his lack of standing with the American people. He is not a bystander. He can not be intellectually or morally neutral. Every time documents are released showing that "the government" lied or misled, the public can be expected to conclude that a government employee (Civil Service or other) participated in the deception or remained silent while it occurred. Such events may, in fact, often be misread by the public, or may have occurred because the persons responsible at the time were genuinely ignorant of the consequences of their actions (for example, release of toxic materials), or may have happened as a result of a level of human error which any organization of humans routinely must tolerate, or even have resulted from a conscious decision at the time to withhold information or do other damage in pursuit of the greater good. The complexity of those kinds of choices cannot be underestimated, but they are choices, and ones from which government employees, no more than others, should not divorce themselves. It is a useful and necessary concept that the public servant follows the lead and the will of the elected leadership. He is asked to provide expertise and judgment, not ideology. He can generally feel comfortable about the American electoral process and confident that power will not be abused, or not for long, at the top. But when his values are deeply challenged by certain policies or practices, the ethic of public service makes hard demands. When he can not cooperate in good conscience, he should speak out, get out, or both.

The Careerist-Political Appointee Relationship

It is taken as a given herein that the use of political appointees at the top levels of government reflects desirable and immutable values in the American political system. In that system, the major changes are made by presidents. A president has four or eight years in office, often confronts a non-cooperative Congress, is not himself the first choice of the majority of voters (because of the way the primary process works); acquires a permanent work force that is more experienced than he or his advisors in virtually every aspect of producing what the government produces (services, military readiness, regulations and their enforcement, scientific research), and has probably been elected on a platform of change. In short,

he comes to town with the intent to do, undo or do differently a wide variety of government activities, yet he has limited understanding of or control over the resources available for the task. At a minimum, he needs people at the top, across government, who are committed to help him. And within the limits of common sense, they should do so whether or not that puts them at odds with the careerist "experts." Otherwise, a new president can not respond to the political forces that brought him to power.

The relationship between careerists and appointees is strained by competition for power, different views of what each ought to bring to the policy making or implementation process and different opinions of how valuable their respective contributions are. The personal interface in the careerist-appointee relationship occurs at the senior careerist levels. There in particular, the negativism associated with these kinds of strains -- all of which, note, have to do with self-image and concepts of success -- can sap energies, produce inefficiencies and lead quickly to very ineffective government. Many of the strains are inevitable, arising from the nature of the roles of both groups and the natural competition those roles impose. Some, however, may be subject to amelioration through structural and attitudinal changes.

Structurally, the trend toward ever greater numbers of political appointees at ever lower levels within the bureaucracy ought to be reversed. The practice is destructive because (1) it effectively has appointees trying to serve in positions designed to be filled by substantively and technically specialized personnel and (2) it engenders great resentment among the careerists, making them feel that their jobs are not considered worth doing well and/or that they are not trusted to do them. The practice also undermines the concept of the kind of mix that is supposed to prevail in a careerist-appointee led government. And, if the motivation for the practice includes penetrating the career system because the political leadership does not in fact trust the careerists, then this "politicization" is likely to be accompanied by other behaviors, such as controlling information flow and divide and conquer strategies that are simply devastating to effective government.

The attitudinal issues between executive level careerists and political appointees are even more debilitating. Careerists think that too many appointees are unqualified (they are not expected to be experts, but to be competent), do not like or trust careerists, are less deserving of their power (as in "he bought the job I earned"), are selfishly motivated (as in "for him this is just a stepping stone to a paying job" or "he wants to play at government for a couple of years"), and are not sufficiently accountable for their actions because they are short timers.

Political appointees carry their own prejudicial baggage. Many believe that too many careerists are unable or unwilling really to

get with the presidential program, do not quite have the smarts or courage to break out of their stale, unproductive environments and to function in "the real world," and probably cannot even learn to be innovative because they see change as a challenge to their power and turf. These caricatured characterizations reflect opinions held by enough people in both groups to have an operative impact on the relationship between the two. Moreover, like most stereotypes, there is a grain of truth to them. It is possible to find a careerist who has not produced anything in fifteen years; it is possible to find a political appointee whose ignorance and arrogance ensure that the principal effect of his sojourn in government will be to undermine the president he is supposed to serve and damage the programs or institutions he is supposed to manage.

The interesting question is not whether we should retain the careerist-appointee system, or whether the sins of all the players can be accurately catalogued. The interesting question is whether their interactions are so dominated by negative attitudes and behaviors that the quality of government is seriously affected and aspects of the nation's well being thereby put at risk. If one can define a culture by understanding the norms and standards by which people interact in getting a job done (Dillon and Long), the government culture, at least at the intersection of careerist and appointee, can be defined by the lack of trust and respect among its members. As a result, the culture is highly subject to inefficiencies and not immune to paralysis. The relevant question is "can things be made better?"

The leadership philosophy of the president is vital to shaping, changing or sustaining that culture. But the appointee's leadership capabilities are also important. If the appointee can broaden his perspective and put initial faith in the careerist, the latter will probably respond with an effective effort. If the appointee also develops an interest in the careerist's world and institutions, he will clearly enhance the careerist's effectiveness. Many pressures are at work on the appointee, however, not to do those things. Whatever his politics and whatever his degree of selflessness in choosing to take on limited government service, he will find it extremely difficult to identify with the needs of careerists. Even if he can do so, he will not have the resources to make many of the modifications he may deem useful. He can not change the compensation system. He will be unable by himself to affect the personnel evaluation system or the distribution of rewards and bonuses. If there are non-performers, he will have great difficulty disciplining them. But of greatest significance to his unwillingness and inability to act in these areas, is the fact that he himself is being rewarded for his responsiveness to the president and his ability to achieve certain policy and program outcomes. He will not be rewarded, and will probably pay a price in that his peers will conclude that he has misspent his time, for leaving behind a better organization and more highly motivated people. So with the limited time he will have

available, it is almost inconceivable that the appointee will devote himself to those kinds of long term, low visibility tasks that have to do with the management of his organization. Quite naturally, he will respond instead to his own needs for recognition and adopt the standards of success laid down by his political peers and superiors.

Presidential Leadership

As already emphasized, the deepening tension between the careerist and the political appointee undermines the prospects for achieving good government. Observers would not agree about which of several elements and conditions during the past several years, or which aspects of our political system itself, have been the most significant sources of the problem. All would agree, however, that the possibilities of good government are severely diminished when some of the intellectual and emotional energies of its employees -- permanent as well as transitional -- are diverted to internal strife, competition, hostility and the management of distrust.

It is currently assumed that the next president will be Bush or Dukakis. It is anticipated that either would be moderate, a manager and personally attuned to the issues discussed in this essay. If that turns out to be so, the work of the Volcker Commission and similar groups will come at the right moment. They may affect the president's thinking. If the new president indeed takes note of some of the Civil Service "crisis" issues, believes that they are important and then acts, the 1988-1989 transition could initiate needed changes.

It is hopeful that the negative relationship between careerists and appointees almost invariably changes for the better after a period of time. That fact suggests that unfamiliarity, insensitivity and simple ignorance may be significant contributors to the problem. If so, there may be some systematic ways to attack it. It should not be necessary to virtually waste the early months or even years of a new presidency while waiting for the careerists and appointees to get to know each other!

The investment of presidential attention is absolutely essential. Only if the president communicates that he both sees a problem and does not intend to tolerate it, can he have any affect. The new president could take a number of steps.

-- The president should make a major speech about government by March 1, 1989. Its purpose, as is that of most major presidential speeches, would be to educate the public, to set goals and standards, to signal presidential interest, to announce a new approach, and to cause the president, personally to focus on the subject so that he will retain a useful level of interest in it when more pressing matters begin to consume his time. The speech should contain straight talk about the need for quality, with examples of where government productivity and policy making seem to be working well and where they

are not. The president should give his views on the prospects for improved government efficiency and responsiveness. He should encourage positive public attitudes about government employees -- principally by expressing them himself. He should praise the patriotism of political appointees and call directly on all government employees to live up to the highest standards of excellence and integrity. He should say that government service is indeed special; that it is potentially one of the most gratifying careers one could choose. The president should call upon the patriotic and idealistic among his more youthful listeners to sign on.

-- As a matter of policy and practice the new administration should generally limit its political appointees to the level of Assistant Secretary and above, and their special assistants.

-- All political appointees below the Cabinet level and their senior deputies should be required to attend a three day course in leadership, management and facts-about-the-Civil Service. The fact that such a thing would actually be required, of course, imparts a clear presidential message from the outset to both his political team and the careerists. During the course, the appointee should be introduced to the culture he is about to enter. He should be informed about the deadwood he will encounter, the resources that he will find unbelievably scarce (particularly if a tenet of his faith is that the government spends mindlessly), and the fact that he should adjust downward the expectations of power that his title may have suggested to him. He should also begin to learn, however, that he will have handed to him a ready and willing staff of competent people who want him to succeed. His staff will much prefer it if he demonstrates his wisdom by taking their advice, but few of them will try to subvert him if he does not.

-- Through presidential and departmental direction, it should be made clear to the appointee that one of his responsibilities is efficiently to lead the career service and to be actively concerned with its health.

-- Department heads should actually be held accountable by the president, which in turn will cause them to hold their political staffs accountable, for the implementation of the above. Slowly, the Washington culture must shift and the bureaucrat bashing stop.

It is not intended that the new administration give itself entirely over to the care and feeding of civil servants. The permanent employees themselves have a great deal to do, starting with a genuine commitment to cooperating rather than merely coping with their new political leaders. At the same time, the civil servant should recommit to some of the basics of his job. While it is much easier to follow the first set of directions, the civil servant must be willing to go back many times if he is convinced a new policy is wrong headed. At the same time, if he ultimately loses, and he is reasonably confident that the relevant information did get to the right decision-maker, he

must shift gears. In the matter of careerist-appointee relationships, probably the single biggest frustration of both the Carter and Reagan presidencies were those persons who essentially subverted, by inaction, policy. Finally, the defensiveness, cynicism and self-righteous retreat from the playing field with which some senior careerists have armed themselves over the years would have to be abandoned.

This essay has postulated that improvement of the careerist-appointee relationship is both necessary and possible. There are obvious reasons why the relationship should and can not be an entirely smooth one. But a better appreciation by both groups of those goals, priorities and interests that are shared, as well as those that inevitably are not, would enhance the abilities of both to contribute to the larger goal of good government. This country ought to be able to attract and retain dedicated, competent and wise career employees. In the coming year, a president with vision could begin to move us toward creating a climate and a dialogue necessary to permanently achieving that goal.

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REFERENCES

SOURCES

The following encompasses the best current work on the U.S. Civil Service. Although I have not cited particular references, I drew on most of these sources in developing my essay.

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ORGANIZATIONS

The Center for Excellence in Government

The Federal Executive Institute

The National Academy of Public Administration

The National Commission on the Public Service

The Senior Executive Association

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Section I

Please characterize your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

Key

- 1 - Strongly disagree/rare in my experience.
 2 - Somewhat disagree.
 3 - Generally agree.
 4 - Strongly agree/frequently encountered in my experience.

Circle One

- | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Political appointees enter government with a positive attitude about career personnel. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| (2) Political appointees are usually well qualified for their government positions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| (3) There are serious difficulties in the political appointee-careerist relationship, particularly at the start of an Administration. (If you check 3 or 4, go on to # 4; otherwise go to # 5). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| (4) Those difficulties are due to: | | | | |
| - Negative perceptions (accurate or not) held by the careerists about the appointees. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| - Negative perceptions (accurate or not) held by the appointees about the careerists. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| - The nature of the system itself. (Tension is to be expected when new and outside leadership seeks to change policy and organizational direction, and to do so relatively quickly.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| - The fact that most appointees are not informed about or interested in career personnel issues (training/non-political recruitment/compensation/retention/quality of management). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| (5) (This question concerns your opinion about the opinions of political appointees, at least initially, about you.) | | | | |

Most political appointees seem to believe that career personnel:

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Are mostly dedicated and competent. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Are typically second rate and have risen to their current ranks largely through longevity. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Cannot be fired. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

(Key repeated:

- 1 - Strongly disagree/rare in my experience.
- 2 - Somewhat disagree.
- 3 - Generally agree.
- 4 - Strongly agree/frequently encountered in my experience.

Circle One

Do not really understand the "profit motive" and are therefore less able to perform efficiently. 1 2 3 4

Are mostly "on the liberal side" politically. 1 2 3 4

Are fundamentally hostile to political appointees because they threaten change, and possibly the power and "turf" of the careerists. 1 2 3 4

Distain political appointees as "short timers" who must be "educated." 1 2 3 4

Believe that political appointees do not trust them. 1 2 3 4

Are willing to work constructively for/with the political appointees in pursuit of the new President's agenda as the political appointees define it. 1 2 3 4

Would be in the private sector if they could get a job there. 1 2 3 4

Are in government largely because they are committed to public service and gain job satisfaction from that role. 1 2 3 4

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Section II

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Circle

- (1) Would you encourage your children to enter public service? Yes No
- (2) Do you see yourself as a "careerist," i.e. part of a group with common interests larger than those of your Department or professional expertise/field? Yes No
- (3) Are you a member of the SES Association? Yes No
- (4) Have you given much thought to the quality of the career civil service? Yes No
- (5) Do you believe there is a serious "crisis" in the civil service (recruitment, retention, pay, public image)? Yes No
- (6) During the last five years, have you applied for or otherwise explored, even informally, a job outside the civil service? Yes No
- (7) Do you plan to retire as soon as you are eligible? Yes No
- (8) If you had an "early out" opportunity, would you take it? Yes No
- (9) How would you rate the professional quality of your SES associates?

- Excellent - Much better than generally perceived by outsiders. _____
- Pretty Good - It's true that the tax payers get what they pay for. _____
- Mixed - A number of them are not really producing. _____
- Poor - The "bureaucrat bashers" actually have a point. _____

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