

Working with People

THE SIZE OF THE GOVERNMENTAL JOB as described in the preceding chapter is a reflection of the size and kind of society that is America. Our purpose in this chapter is to examine the number and kind of relationships with people which a governmental agency must maintain if it is to perform its functions.

Of necessity, many of these relationships are with organizations. Particularly is this true in Washington, and in regional and state offices. Even in counties, the county government, farm associations, chambers of commerce, luncheon clubs, and other organizations present important problems for administration and have a significant influence upon it. To Washington come for the most part those who are in varying degrees and in varying ways representative of organized groups with national memberships or national interests.

No such representative is ever an infallible guide to the sentiments of his group. Groups rarely are unanimous about anything. Even when they favor some policy unanimously, the depth of the sentiment may be little or much and may vary widely with individuals. Professional leaders of these groups tend, of course, to express their individual opinions, the positions of their organizations tend accordingly to become those positions of the leaders to which members do not sufficiently object. Just how meaningful may be the expression of a particular organization spokesman on any particular subject becomes therefore a matter of nice judgment, devolving considerably on a knowledge of both leadership and membership.

But the fact of the existence of these organizations, and of their special importance, and of the demands their functions and dignity make on the time and energy of public administrators, has enormous bearing on public administration. Individuals of prominence and distinction likewise demand attention from governmental officials and have an influence upon their work.

A Cabinet Member's Appointment List

In the Federal government itself all Cabinet and little Cabinet

officers, all heads of independent establishments, and many who have staff or secondary positions around those named feel that they have an unquestioned right of quick and easy access, in person or by telephone, to the head of a department. All 531 members of Congress have that expectation. So do 48 Governors, 96 members of the National Committee of the party in power, 48 state chairmen of that party, a considerable sprinkling of committeemen and chairmen of the opposition party, and many of those who used to hold these posts, especially former members of Congress. So do many newspaper editors, publishers, and correspondents. Then there are some among the hosts of persons the secretary has met socially or who knew him before he entered the Cabinet—not to mention those who know these people and come with letters of introduction to the secretary.

In each particular department, from this point on, the list grows according to the function of the department. In Agriculture, the presidents, deans, and directors of research and extension of the land-grant colleges come high on the list. There are four general farm organizations of national scope, and many special ones, such as the Horticulturists, the Wool Growers, the Livestock Growers, the Sugar Beet Growers, and the Wheat Co-operatives, many of which have state organizations. Next come the state farm associations. Any officer or representative of any of these organizations expects ready communication with the secretary.

The list goes on to include all organizations or concerns having to do with the marketing or processing of farm produce—the boards of trade, livestock commission men in the livestock markets, the packers, the millers, the bakers, the chain-store people, the independents, the farm-paper editors and publishers, the food-trade papers, the millers' journals, the conservation associations, the Academy of Science, the lumbermen, patriotic organizations, magazine writers and artists, the farm-implement people, the fertilizer people, the seed and nursery people, the agricultural agents of the various railways, heads of the County Agents Association, utility people who are nervous about REA, brokers and warehousemen, and insurance company presidents and vice-presidents who are interested in farm mortgages.

When extended to cover all commodities and areas and to include heads of single concerns of size, the list of persons who legitimately

feel that they are important to agriculture or to the secretary or to the government reaches far up into the thousands. While they are learning more and more to transact their business with other people, most of them feel that at least occasionally they should have a chat with the secretary. And when the matters they are prosecuting get what they feel to be unsatisfactory treatment, they invariably wish to appeal to him.

In many cases it is a question simply of personal or organizational dignity. If they cannot report to their associates that they have had long visits with the secretary, their own tenures may eventually be endangered. In some cases, as among farm organizations, this matter of prestige tends to develop at times into an issue of actual dominance of the government department. Veiled hints may be made. "We're telling you what you'd better do if you know what is good for you." Curiously enough, this attitude is often justified on the ground that such is democracy. "We represent the farmers; it is your duty to do as we say."

Requests for Special Favors

The way in which demands are submitted frequently reflects a belief that government agencies act only in response to pressure. It is generally thought that the way to get something done is by using "influential people." Persons who attempt to use influence other than their own are usually seeking special favors. They do not always recognize that what they ask is a special advantage over others. But when they do, they tend to feel that their demand is legitimate in the same way that it is legitimate for a wrongdoer to have an attorney plead his innocence in court. Back of their attitude lies the assumption that "the other fellow" is trying to get by with the same thing and that this constitutes democracy—and if not justice, then at least free competition, which is also virtuous.

I do not mean to imply that these persons are not good citizens. What I have said is by no means the whole truth. But enough of it is true to have some importance in considering public administration. It is true that some people aim at getting more than their deserts and try to get action by reaching or using persons of influence. It is true

that to quite a degree people come to government seeking special favors. And it is true that government dispensing special favors and operating on a basis of influential introductions is opening the door not merely to injustice but to corruption. I do not mean corruption in terms of bribes or presents. I cannot now recall definite knowledge of a single instance of that in all my years in Washington, and I have had circumstantial evidence in only two or three small cases. I mean corruption of good government, its perversion to bad government.

The people who come to Washington on business with the government are in overwhelming majority sincere and honest citizens. What I am trying to say is that they do not look at government business with governmental understanding. Business people are fond of saying that government people do not understand business. It may be so. But my observation has been that business is more a matter of common experience and knowledge than government, and that people generally, whether businessmen or others, do not sufficiently understand government. All these elements in government-citizen relationships should be more explored. I have heard private groups insist in all seriousness, when prosecuting requests to be permitted to run their businesses as they see fit, that they are just as mindful of the public interest as the government is. This I do not believe, not because I hold people in government to be superior, but because their function is more exclusively and more clearly the public interest. It is not equally the business of businessmen to consider the public interest. It is possible for a bureaucrat to be as much concerned for his interest as a businessman is concerned for his profit, but it is not likely. For the benefit to the individual bureaucrat is much less direct, much less discernible, much less certain. And the bureaucrat is so situated that his own tenure and success are more dependent on doing what is publicly satisfactory and generally fair than on advancing the welfare of his associate bureaucrats.

The Bureaucrat's Position

The bureaucrat thinks of each demand in terms of other demands that have been made or are likely to be made upon him. He knows that what he does for one applicant he must be able to do for others

and must be able to explain to citizens of opposite or different interests. What he does is not completely satisfactory to any of those affected, but it tends to be in the direction of the public interest.

Any man coming to Washington to "get action" favoring the interests of some special group should remember that the government official he is addressing is the recipient of similar attentions from his competitors, his customers, and persons in wholly different businesses all over the country. And then he should be mindful, too, that with all the facilities for investigating the poor bureaucrat and making him miserable, no one has ever got enough on him as a collective entity to warrant one per cent of the hue and cry that has been raised.

There is one type of appeal the bureaucrat likes to respond to quickly. It comes from the citizen who has been caught by a law or a regulation in some way which makes him a victim of discrimination. Adjustment in administration to take care of such instances is frequently not easy, but to do a favor when it makes for equity is the line of least emotional resistance. The difficulty is that government must act according to principle and rule as a guarantee of equity. When the rigidity of the rule defeats equity, every instinct supports adjustment. This is a "favor" that can be explained; it will be supported by good citizens when it is explained, and the recipient of the favor will be happy. The bureaucrat invariably wishes to adjust situations of this kind. He will hesitate only to weigh the probable effects of the adjustment on the program as a whole as against the degree of inequity borne by the citizen.

It is not intended to suggest here that the bureaucrat is perfect—or even a superior being. It is intended to make somewhat clearer the situation in which he functions. The bureaucrat's worst sin is to live in fear of "burning his fingers," and, consequently, to play safe. Often he can properly be charged with losing initiative and daring. But, by that very token, what he does is well considered in the sense that it will stand detailed public scrutiny and comparison with what he does in similar cases.

It is in the nature of the bureaucrat's situation that he readily detects an effort to get special favor. As a result he frequently exhibits a feeling which many suppliants mistake for hostility. In reality his reaction is quite different: fear of being forced to do something un-

workmanlike, something ungovernmental, something that would not stand up in a Congressional investigation. Consequently when any citizen makes an appeal supported by "influence," the bureaucrat regards it with more, rather than less, suspicion than normal.

A frequent complaint of businessmen who come to Washington is that they "can't get an answer either way," or that "he said no, but he didn't tell me why." The complaint is often justified, but there are extenuating circumstances. The bureaucrat grows timid under constant fire—and the fire is not only constant, but heavy. In a particular case he may hate to offend by saying no, but he may not be able to say yes—and when the answer is neither yes nor no, the answer is no. Negative answers not explained are partially a result of timidity, partially a way of avoiding renewed argument on issues previously discussed, and partially a reflection of sheer physical inability to tell all the applicants all of the reasons for a decision. In private business such decisions are accepted as real, no matter what the reasons. An executive who decides not to do something would be amazed if he were required—at would of course be impossible—to give all the reasons growing out of a multitude of experiences. It may be granted at once that there will be some governmental decisions that cannot—and should not—be accepted simply as a complex judgment of a particular official. But it should also be recognized that in most instances time will not possibly permit the telling of all the stones of similar cases and of all of the history that enters into a particular decision. As it is, citizens who criticize "waste" and "overhead" in government often expect governmental officials to be able to give unlimited time to explaining what they do—or what they would do if they could stop talking and get a little work done.

In considerable degree the difficulty here is that citizens have insufficient respect for the government man. Frequently they think of him as a "clerk," though he may be a world-renowned specialist or may have thousands of employees working efficiently under his direction. Many other citizens distrust government people and the government on general principles. All of these things make for bad government.

It is a common circumstance for visitors in Washington to assume the necessity of telling government officials things they have heard thousands of times before. The explanation is, patently, that the visitor

believes that the official "doesn't know conditions in our county." Ordinarily, however, the official does know those conditions. For he gets the benefit of a constant flow of information—from the 13,000,000 pieces of mail a year, the 13,000,000 phone calls, and the administrative grapevine from 300,000 people, from conversations with other visitors, and from his own trips to the field. The real difficulty lies in the fact that visitors "don't know conditions in Washington."

All employers have their difficult points. The biggest difficulty about the employer of the bureaucrat is that he has 135,000,000 different aspects and interests. The employers who are most honored in Washington are those who never come to the national capital. Over the common people the government official is inclined to hover as employees hover around the office of the head of the company when some tragedy gives them a sense that the boss is also a sentimental human being. After all, most of the people who come to Washington can take care of themselves pretty well. The real test of the government is what it does out in the field in daily work with the millions. There, in my judgment, good government is going forward. And if there is increasing understanding on the part of the public, it will go forward faster.

There is genuine value in extended conversations between government officials and citizens. It is both administratively helpful and socially desirable for the executives of a department to discuss important actions with leaders of affected citizen groups. Yet there are times when situations develop in Congress, in the government, or in the country that demand immediate action if things are to be kept manageable. There are other actions that because of their nature cannot satisfactorily be discussed in advance at all. There are others in which representations can be heard, but intentions cannot fairly be revealed. For example, because of speculative advantages it would confer, any discussion indicating in advance the level of a proposed corn loan would be wholly out of order. Finally, it should be recognized that it is never possible to discuss an action with everyone who feels entitled to participate, or with any one person for as long a time as he might wish to be consulted.

There have been occasions when the heads of certain private organizations have asserted an exclusive claim to prior consultation

with governmental officials and to the right to express the sentiment of their special group. Formalized advisory bodies have been established at various times in response to such proposals or in an effort to simplify public contacts. But the result of giving a fixed, lasting and rather exclusive consulting relationship—as contrasted with a temporary, special, and non-exclusive advisory relationship—is to confer a governmental standing and function on non-governmental people, on people not similarly charged with responsibility. Actually, no one can represent the citizenry in nearly as comprehensive and effective a way as can the government itself, if it keeps numerous channels of communications open and cultivates numerous associations with the people.

Recently, in an evening discussion, a friend exclaimed in alarm over the power exercised by a great number of public officials. He cited as an example the head of the Visa Division in the State Department, who could, he said, arbitrarily grant or deny the right of citizens of other countries to enter the United States and remain here. Of course, he went on, an occasional appeal would be heard by a higher official, but in most instances the decision of the Division head would obviously govern. My friend used this set of circumstances to argue the fundamental importance of the courts as protectors of the people against the bureaucrats.

The point is not well made. In the first place, the assumption that a higher official, hearing an appeal, would make a better decision is thin and irrelevant; for he would be exercising the same powers, using the same organizational resources. In both cases the decision would be institutional, not individual. Secondly, no matter how many appeals might be made to how many higher officials, including judges, someone ultimately would make an arbitrary, final decision. Third, this very process already has gone on below the head of the Visa Division; recommendations by lower officials are always effective unless and until appealed. Fourth, the availability of the courts for appeals on visa rulings is so slight as hardly to be real. Fifth, in the administration of George Washington—long before the age of big democracy—there existed essentially the same administrative situation with respect to the visa, some bureaucrat always had the power, in the final analysis, arbitrarily to approve or disapprove.

It happens that I personally am inclined to be critical of certain policies related to the issuance of visas. But I cannot see that the "faults" of which I would complain are inherent in bureaucracy. The fact that I am critical may not indicate faults, but merely disagreement. For the policies to which I object are in line with widespread prejudices. Bureaucracy is constantly exposed to this temptation. Good administration, however, can and does rise above it.

The decisive thing in the issuance of visas is the general setting within which that power is exercised. The right to appeal to a higher level is one factor in the situation. The existence of the courts is another—although in this case of small importance. The procedural system within the Division is another. The realization that a consciously bad decision really requires the participation in a conspiracy by so many persons that someone is bound to talk is yet another. The danger that an aggrieved applicant will appeal to the press and to members of Congress is still another factor. There is no new issue involved in the authority of the head of the Visa Division. Indeed, there is no issue in it at all, whether old or new. To discover such authority is simply to discover organization, to discover government. To improve our governmental organization is important. But improved government is not going to have less authority; it is not even going to have less authority vested in single officials.

The present visa problem is really a problem of good administration. It does, however, have certain rather new aspects. Visa control has become a means of political censorship, a purpose for which it was never used in the early days of the Republic. At any rate the issue has certain policy aspects of new importance. The issuance of visas is said to be somewhat out of line with general Administration policy. It may be so. But better administration would still be bureaucratic administration. The real need is always for good policy and good administration. Authority must be exercised in an organized way, through many people.

Essentials of Democracy

In the midst of increasing size and complexity, it is important to see clearly what things are essential in democratic government. I put two considerations above all others: free speech with all that it im-

plies, and free franchise in elections which cannot be adjourned Auxiliary to these is the Congressional function of inquiry and investigation. Likewise the action of the people in writing thousands of letters to the departments and to Congressmen, expressing complaints and questions of constituents; these are a great check against the arbitrary and unreasonable exercise of authority and a valuable means of giving department heads a sample view of their department's activities. Letters of this kind are much more important than members of Congress realize. Add the far-flung and daily contact with affected citizens in the flow of business in a society in which there is free speech and free franchise, and bureaucracy becomes a word that does not properly carry adverse connotations. In combination these essentials have produced in the United States a nation of free men and women and a government considerate of and responsive to their needs.

Actually it is a government in which there appears to be not the least danger that its officials will become isolated or separated from the people. The pounding of public criticism is so intense that, more and more, government officials break under it. Some employees by bearing tales to gossip columnists manage to carry on vendettas against superiors who have given them low efficiency ratings or withheld promotions. Others may tip off members of Congress to things which in partial view seem out of line. Hundreds of thousands of dollars a year have to be spent refuting and reporting on these matters. General public criticism and most of the charges of Washington visitors grow out of such tales and rumors and distortions. There is much less criticism from persons actually affected by governmental action than there is from persons who have heard about something that they resent in theory, something they think has happened or fear may happen. The something may never have been contemplated. If only the people outside of government respected the people in government and assumed that they would do their jobs with reasonable fairness and intelligence, an enormous saving in energy would result. Although a great deal of the shouting at the government has constructive value, the volume of it is really much too great. It is excessive by whatever amount reflects either basic fear or contempt of the people in government.

It goes without saying that it is to the interest of the public that the powers exercised by government officials be superior within their fields to those of all other parties. For all others would be less representative and less responsible. The country was properly shocked when, after the 1936 election, it was reported that John L. Lewis demanded of the President certain specific action in return for campaign contributions. When any single group asserts or tries to assert a direct control over government, governmental officials and citizens alike know that a demonstration of the superiority of governmental power is the first necessity. I know of one equal instance on another governmental front. And there are many minor instances in which others have tried to get the kind of power Mr. Lewis is reported to have sought. All of them underscore the desirability of the government's sustaining a variety of relationships with a wide range of organized groups rather than limiting its relationships to a few dominant groups.

Government must be big enough and powerful enough to be definitely superior to any and all special-interest groups. By the same token, governmental power should be exercised only by government-minded persons, by persons sensitive to the public interest and to public opinion and publicly responsible for their official acts. It is so exercised in the United States government today. The danger that our liberties are being lost because Federal executives possess too much power and because they can use it arbitrarily exists almost entirely in the imagination of persons without perspective. It is my observation that no one in Washington, not even the President, is impressed with his own power. Rather the contrary—the average “high official” is so conscious of the restraints and limitations under which he is obliged to function that his strongest impression is likely to be that of a very restricted power. Indeed, this sense of a lack of power is what drives people out of Washington. To have to “think of everything in terms of everything else” causes many men to think that they are so hedged about by restrictions that they “can’t do anything,” with the result that, after a while, they simply give up with a feeling that they might as well go back home. The orders and statutes in our big democracy do not invest persons with power; they invest organizations with responsibility.