

Red Tape

NOT LONG AGO certain magazines gave wide circulation to a listing of nineteen steps by which cases of price gouging and fraud on military contracts are investigated and prosecuted by the War and Justice Departments. Their whole point was evidently to demonstrate that government is in the hands of moans and wasters. One of the magazines used for its main title, "Washington Wonderland," with a subtitle, "Bureaucracy Defined," and offered what it regarded as appropriate editorial comments in the form of critical quotations from members of Congress.

Caricature of Bureaucracy

One need not know the War and Justice Departments, but only large organizations whether governmental or otherwise, to know that in actual practice, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, three of the nineteen steps listed are never taken at all, in perhaps ninety-eight cases out of a hundred two or more of the nineteen steps are never taken, and that in practically all cases seven more of the nineteen steps never require separate action. They are together a single process of reference and of transmittal just as going from Washington to New York is a single process even though one necessarily stops in and goes through Baltimore, Wilmington, Philadelphia, and several other places. If one wishes to be analytical about such a trip and break it down into all its steps, one sees the fireman stoking the engine, the engineer releasing the brakes, opening the throttle, ringing the bell, blowing the whistle, the conductor signaling, taking tickets, answering questions, settling difficulties, the Pullman conductor going through his duties, giving the diagram to the porter, the porter shining shoes, making berths, and putting out clean towels. And in division and general offices a lot of people are working at a lot of different things, auditing tickets, keeping trains from colliding, buying coal, paint, oil, tickets, funny lanterns, red flags, tmetables, spikes,

and what have you. A railroad man would put in a thousand "steps" I have left out. It almost makes that last step up to the ticket window too much. Do I really need to go to New York?

Yet the railway companies somehow manage to run trains every once in a while. And most people are content to let the railway bureaucracies refer things back and forth from maintenance to operations to general superintendent to general freight agent without wondering very much about how the section crew at Chattanooga got approval for that little job of special repair they had been recommending since last April.

It is not that people *think* more about processes of operation and organization in the case of government; they just *exclaim* more. And one might argue that the processes of government are probably more efficient than those of nongovernmental agencies for that very reason.

The magazines mentioned above somehow saw bureaucracy "defined" in the listing of nineteen steps—mostly hypothetical—in a governmental process. Should we try to find in a similar listing of the steps in a commercial process a definition of "merchandising"? Let us assume that I am going to buy a couple of neckties. I approach a big store, determined to cut red tape and insistent on not "going through proper channels"

1. I enter store.
2. I search first floor for tie counter.
3. Ditto second floor.
4. Ditto third floor.
5. I find there is no fourth floor.
6. I return to first floor and discover stairway to basement.
7. I descend stairs and find tie counter.
8. I get attention of salesman and explain my need.
9. I look for the \$1.50 ties, inspect \$2.50 ties, and ask for \$2.00 ties.
10. I find three that suit me, ask salesman to charge them, and sign the charge slip, telling salesman to deliver ties to my residence, together with goods my wife bought yesterday.
11. Salesman sends charge slip to business office.
12. Clerical assistant refers it to cashier.
13. Cashier refers it to credit manager.

14. Credit manager refers it to an assistant.
15. Assistant digs up my record, finds I have not paid my bill for forty-five days
16. Assistant reports to credit manager, who studies the account and instructs assistant to call City Credit Bureau
17. Assistant calls and gets report that my other accounts seem to be in good condition
18. Assistant reports to credit manager, who tells clerical assistant to O.K. the charge and notify salesman
19. Salesman sends ties to delivery department, which assigns package to "C" truck for afternoon handling
20. "C" delivery crew load for afternoon delivery and in due course arrive at my residence. Since it is Thursday afternoon, the mail is not at home and my wife is at a Red Cross meeting
21. Deliveryman takes ties back to store, places them with parcels awaiting tomorrow's delivery
22. Ties loaded again and delivered safely
23. I wear them, find that one does not look in daylight as I had assumed it would, but the thought of all those steps discourages my making attempt to exchange it

Exaggerated? Well, a little. Yet, to the extent that the steps enumerated really are separate steps, most of them are essential. As for the above investigations by the War and Justice Departments, the procedure indicated actually saves time and effort as compared with having individual investigators and attorneys and army officers hunt for one another and wonder what and when and to whom to report.

Red Tape in Business

But the fact remains that all large organizations have bureaucracies and red tape, that they have to have them, and that these are the means to the efficient transaction of business. It is every bit as easy to find instances of inefficiency in commerce as in government, although newspaper reporters and Congressmen do not similarly busy themselves trying to find them. My wife's experience in trying to buy a running board may serve to illustrate a series I have at hand. The following is a faithful recital:

"I telephoned a big department store one day, asked for the house-furnishings department, and announced that I wanted an ironing board. A very pleasant voice said, 'Would you like the services of a shopper?' and when I replied: 'Not particularly,' she said she would be very glad to get me a shopper. When the shopper, who was to expedite matters for me, answered, I explained that I wanted an ironing board, a good, firm one. After a little discussion of the different kinds of ironing boards they had, I decided on their best one and asked if it already had a pad and a cover. I was assured that it did, and that it would be sent out the next day.

"Many days later I saw the maid doing the family ironing in the laundry room and said to her: 'Well, how is the new ironing board?' She had been struggling for many weeks with one that had been cracked in moving and I thought she would be pleased because I had finally remembered to get her a new one. In a very weary voice she said she had not yet got a new ironing board. I stepped to the phone at once, went through the business of telling the clerk on what day I had ordered the board, what style board I had ordered, and with which shopper I had talked. I was assured that the board would be sent out immediately.

"The next day it came, just as I was leaving the house, so on my return I said cheerily: 'Well, now how is the new ironing board?' Once again I was met with an utter lack of enthusiasm—the ironing board had no pad or cover. I called the store on the phone again, asked for house furnishings, was referred to the 'shopper' who would supposedly smooth my way, and explained to her that the ironing board did not have a pad and cover as she had assured me it would have, and asked if she could have sent out, on the first possible delivery, one pad and two covers. She was very apologetic, carefully retook my name and address, and said the pad and covers would be out the next day. The next day the maid said to me as I came in the door: 'I didn't know why you ordered two more ironing boards. I was sure it must be a mistake, so I sent one back and kept one, but it hasn't any pad or cover either.'

"In desperation I went once more to the phone, went through the entire business of recalling the transaction to the person who answered, and said that I still needed one pad and two covers for my

ironing board, and that I wanted the extra board picked up and returned to the store. The next day the pick-up truck came for the extra board, leaving us, however, neither pad nor cover. Then a few days later, from my upstairs window, I saw the delivery truck outside and hurried down to open the door and get the pad and cover for the ironing board, as on that particular day we were once more badly in need of them. When I opened the door, there stood the delivery boy—with an ironing board! I told him to take it right back to the store, and, completely exasperated, called the store and told them that if they sent me any more ironing boards I would not return them but would give them to my friends, and would they *please* send me *one* pad and *two* covers. The clerk apologized profusely and asked me to hold the phone just a minute. When she returned she said very sweetly, "We have no pads or covers. Would you like to have me order one?" I told her I would not, that I would pick them up in the neighborhood, and, having done that, dismissed the whole matter from my mind.

"Four or five days later a delivery boy from the same department store came to the door with two packages under his arm. I told him that I had ordered nothing from the store and that he must have come to the wrong number. However, my name and address was on each of the packages, so I asked him to wait while I opened them. Each package contained one pad and two covers, all of which I returned.

"The final chapter in this tale of the efficiency of private enterprise came when I received the monthly statements of my bill. Four ironing boards were charged and all four listed as returned, but I was charged with two pads and four covers. I hadn't the courage to call the store again, so I paid for all the pads and covers, and for no ironing board. The store was the loser by fifty-six cents."

Bureaucratic Organization: A Technical Subject

The organization of a bureaucracy is a technical subject about which most intelligent citizens know nothing. Except for the aspect of public accountability, bureaucratic organization and administration in large business concerns is quite similar to that in government. Those who discover and exclaim over bureaucratic procedure are either complete illiterates with respect to organization or so hostile

to government as by passion to be blinded to their own experience. The procedures of bureaus, which are simply the major divisions of an organization, constitute a field for technical study. One reason for this is that diligent attention to detail can invariably discover minor ways of improving procedures. There is a more important reason, however: bureaus change to meet changing conditions, and procedures have rather constantly to be changed to meet new work loads and new situations. Any company having a twenty per cent increase in a certain field of its business inevitably has to rearrange its bureaucracy and its procedures. Men even write books on problems of business bureaucracy. To cite but one example, Holden, Fish and Smith have recently published a volume entitled *Top Management Organization and Controlled Research Study of the Management Policies and Practices of Thirty-one Leading Industrial Corporations*.

To exclaim wildly over bureaucracy and bureaucratic procedure is to betray one's ignorance. That is, of course, one's privilege. Unfortunately, however, it directs public attention to a technical subject to the understanding of which few among the general public can make any contribution, and it diverts public attention from concentration on broader questions that the public alone can resolve. There is an incidental result, too, which is profoundly harmful: it fosters a basic public distrust of the government and damages the morale of men and women in public service.

Emerson refused to eat a small berry between meals because it would set in motion the whole intricate process of digestion. No one, however, would wish to become so conscious of the complexities of metabolism as to become unwilling to eat the meals themselves. Altogether too many of our citizens bring single, between-meals berries of public business to heads of departments. The country would profit greatly from their development of a greater sense of discretion about taking such fodder "straight to the horse's mouth." The business of organized society must and will go on. It will be carried on by bureaus of one kind or another.

The intricacies of the linotype machine remain impressive even after long acquaintance. One wonders how anyone could have invented it. The big rotary presses that grind out tens of thousands of

newspapers an hour are another amazing achievement. One can spend an interesting life working at and with linotypes or presses—though the man who does either will usually not be a publisher. A publisher need not know a great deal about either linotypes or presses. His job is the management of an even more intricate mechanism—the bureaucracy embracing composing room, stereotyping and press rooms, mailing room and circulation departments, advertising department, news room, editorial, engraving, and business departments. The linotype operator is a complete specialist, the head of the composing room is a specialist executive, the mechanical superintendent less a specialist and more an executive, the business manager still more an executive; and the publisher almost wholly an executive. Yet among businessmen he is a specialist—a newspaper man. All this is familiar enough and accepted. The public marvels, but not too much. Only in the case of government is there a tendency for people to fix their eyes on the linotype machine and say “It won’t work!”

Yet if government cannot become more complex as the rest of life becomes more complex, society cannot grow. Inevitably it would become decadent and chaotic. If John Centipede Citizen becomes too much concerned about the processes by which he moves, he will be unable to move. Those questions are for the technicians. John C. Citizen has rather to decide in what direction he wishes to go.

The Uses of Red Tape

One can gain a slight view of red tape in small establishments in their cash registers with separate drawers for different sales clerks. In larger establishments the tape takes the form of a special cashier whose accounts must check with sales slips. The train conductor who is accompanied by an aide as he takes tickets affords another mild example of red tape, recalling the days when it was generally believed that many conductors carried on something of a personal business in transportation. What we see here at work is the old principle of “check and double check”, it has of necessity been highly developed in big organizations. Integrity in transactions is demanded much more completely in government than elsewhere. This accounts for much red tape.

The importance of red tape as a safeguard against fraud was illus-

trated by a case that attracted much attention in 1937. It involved what was popularly described as a "Take CCC camp." A lengthy analysis printed, after thorough investigation, in the *Congressional Record* for January 19, 1938, culminated in the simple explanation that the CCC had not insisted on quite enough red tape.

As *someone has* well said, "Red tape is that part of my business you don't know anything about." Certainly it is not something peculiar to government. It is not something that government people like in some special way and spin because they like it. Practically everyone within a given organization rebels more vigorously at its red tape than the average outsider does. The explanation should be obvious: most people like to simplify their jobs. They like to feel confidence about that for which they are responsible. This latter desire may inspire some red tape, but it also inspires simplification of procedure. When better red tape is made—and it is being made continually—the bureaucrats, not the commentators, make it. They make it to meet their own necessities, not the demands of the commentators. There is no absolute simplification of what is inherently complex. There is only relative simplification. Red tape means exactly that—relative simplification. We shall have it with us always. And the more complex our civilization becomes, the more red tape we shall need.