

BUREAUCRACY

By MORRIS MARKEY

WE WENT from a vast marble lobby into a passageway marked "BOXES—A to L"—and up a gently sloping ramp, to look upon an appalling manifestation of the theater. Stage and orchestra pit, parterre and swung balconies, were swarming with people who pounded on typewriters. Telephones were ringing. Boys with arms full of paper were wandering up and down the aisles. A low, droning sound rose up from men dictating to secretaries. It was a Max Reinhardt dream: the hall so crowded with actors that there was no space for an audience.

But this, gentlemen, was in Washington, down by the Potomac. And in that fabled city you must not be too startled at the sight of a stenographer pounding her Underwood in a theater's royal box, with a \$50,000 pipe organ in her lap. If matters of that nature catch your breath, coronary thrombosis would have you in a week. You see, the amoeba-like genetics of the Bureau System under our New Deal have sent newborn

colonies of government clerks scurrying everywhere for shelter—for a place to bang those typewriters. And this colony I had got into, the WPA, no less, had holed up in the Washington City Auditorium, a handsome place once given over to such futilities as the contrapuntal ecstasy of Johann Sebastian Bach.

All nonsense of that sort having been shooed briskly into the street, the hall was charged now with a more febrile drama—with what seemed, at least, a far more purposeful drama. We stood in a balcony aisle. Before us opened the mighty bay of the stage. On its floor a hundred desks were massed, and people sat at the desks, picking up papers and putting down papers, the lofty arch of the proscenium bending over them like a benign and protecting hand. Directly beneath us, in the erstwhile orchestra pit, composition-board partitions made a score of little cubicles. Two or three men and women, sometimes more, were in each of the cubicles, and we

could see them gravely regarding each other across the mahogany of their work tables.

Down each side wall of the building, diagonally from the roof to the edge of the stage, the boxes were pitched in echelon. Severely drawn, square and solid, they were painted a delicate shade of green, with geometric designs worked in for embellishment. There were two girls to a box, two typewriters to a box, one telephone to a box, and several hundred pounds of paper to a box. The pipe organ, a noble and glistening affair, soared upward from the last of the boxes at the left and the girls who were working there looked, indeed, as if they were supporting the weight of the golden tubes.

A man was with me—a man who worked in the WPA and who had hospitably engaged to show me around. I said to him, “Mister, in God’s name, what are all these people doing and what is being written on all that paper?”

He gave a deprecatory gesture. “You haven’t seen anything yet,” he said. Wherewith he led me downstairs, into the basement of the auditorium, and let me look at three times as many people, sitting at three times as many desks. But the most arresting item on this lower floor was neither humanity

nor desks, but filing cabinets. Rank upon rank of them, golden oak or olive steel, stood up from the ground, looking like the infinitely repeated image of a single object seen through double-reflecting mirrors. Girls moved in front of them, opening and shutting the drawers, and all the drawers were full to bursting with pink papers and white papers, blue papers and yellow papers.

The man said: “Now all the applications for federal money to use on Works projects—all those applications come here.”

I understood. They came into the theater, past the pipe organ, and were reduced to a uniform appearance by the typists and printed forms. Then they were sent to the White House, where batches of two or three hundred at a time were initialed by the President. Then they went to the Comptroller of the Treasury, who had a lot more clerks in his office trying to check up on duplications and such. Then they came back to the Washington City Auditorium, and were examined again to see that all the initials had been put in the right places. And then somebody wrote out a Treasury check and sent it to whoever had asked for money in the first place.

That sounded like, a simple

routine. So simple, indeed, that I questioned the need of two or three thousand clerks to handle it. But the man said, "Oh, we're terribly undermanned."

I went into a lot of bureaus in Washington, but I never found one that was not terribly undermanned. Some of the bureaus were in places almost as odd as the Auditorium. One, for example, was in the famous McLean House. You have heard about it: the strong feeling which the original builder entertained for plumbing fixtures? Well, hardly a stenographer in that house but works in the shadow of a fountain, a bathtub, or a toilet seat. One of the chief clerks said the girls did not mind, though. Got a lot of work done—and Heaven knew, there was plenty of work.

Some of the bureaus were in hotels—whole hotels just taken over. (Chambermaids and bellhops dismissed, I presume, though I never thought to ask.) Some were in apartment houses and some in old abandoned office buildings, some in mothy lofts and some in quaint little private houses out Georgetown way. It goes without saying that the regular government buildings—Commerce and Agriculture and Treasury and so on—were crowded to the eaves with people working.

Perhaps I can make you understand the effect all this had upon me. I had gone to Washington for a specific purpose: to look objectively at this thing called Bureaucracy and try to write a description of Bureaucracy at work—what it does, how it appears to the eye, what sort of people sit at all those desks, and what they do to earn the money we pay them every month. But, you see, I was vanquished by detail. It became plain after a few days of wandering among these desks and clerks that such a description as I had contemplated would be cruelly boring. There were, at last account, 112,370 federal employees in the city of Washington alone. There would be no great point in saying, 112,370 times over: He got up in the morning and went to his desk at the Bureau. He handled papers until lunch time, filing or dictating or making decisions or writing out checks. After lunch, he handled another great mass of papers until quitting time, whereupon he went home.

So, then, I was forced to abandon the appealing human interest note and fall back upon the graver aspects of Bureaucracy: gloomy aspects they turned out to be, too, and even a little disturbing to the average observer.

II

More than one of us has dished up, time past, the old tattered phrase about ours being a government of Chief Clerks. Well, it is hardly Chief Clerks any more. Just clerks. Throughout our hallowed land these days, a total of 810,000 of them sit there and tell us what to do—their monthly pay checks cropping up idly in the tax lists. The total of the pay we give them is about \$150,000,000 a month.

When Dr. Roosevelt made that noble speech from the portico of the Capitol in March of 1933, there were 240,000 fewer men and women getting a government pay check every month.

We had seven agencies for constructing public works. Now we have sixteen.

We had five agencies for building and supervising our national parks. Now we have ten.

We had two agencies for dealing with disputes between labor and the employers of labor. Now we have thirteen.

It would be tedious to go through the whole list. The fact is that we have, in these honeyed days, more than fifty bureaus and agencies which did not exist at all when Dr. Roosevelt took office. We have 240,000 government

clerks who were finding their cakes elsewhere when Dr. Roosevelt moved in to become the Stepfather of His Country. The money that we pay to these *additional* clerks—virtually all of whom are political appointees, virtually none of whom are on the Civil Service lists—amounts to about \$432,000,000 a year.

But the essence of Bureaucracy does not lie in statistics, it does not lie with totals, either of political parasites or of money spent. Bureaucracy is endemic to democracy. The acuteness of the ailment, whether it is found in America or France or Italy or Britain, depends upon the power which the bureaus take unto themselves. It might be well to glance at one or two of our new agencies and see how much authority they have to collide with the ordinary routine of our daily affairs:

The Commodity Credit Corporation was set up by executive order from the White House on September 18, 1933. In a blanket preamble, this Corporation was given power to engage in *any* activity in connection with the production, transportation, storing, manufacturing, and marketing of agricultural commodities and the products thereof. Then, specifically, item by item, the Corporation

was given authority to deal in commodities, borrow and lend money, buy and sell real estate, help in reducing agricultural production, and to enter into contracts of every sort for any lawful purpose *without limit as to amount*.

Similarly, by executive order, the President set up the Electric Home and Farm Authority, another corporation. Here is what it can do: Manufacture and sell electrical appliances, equipment, and goods of any description; lend money "with or without collateral security of any kind whatsoever"; borrow money by issuing notes, bonds, or any other kind of security "without limit as to amount"; constitute itself trustee of any property for the purpose of securing its obligations, "*or for any other purpose*"; develop, buy, hold, sell or lease lands, real property, and any personal or mixed property, and any franchises; to deal in stocks, bonds, "or any other obligations"; and guarantee the payment of dividends upon any stock.

As though this were not quite enough, the charter of the Electric Authority empowers its directors "to do all and everything necessary, suitable and proper for the accomplishment of any of the purposes or the attainment of any of the objects or the furtherance of any

of the powers set forth, either alone or in association . . . and to do every other act or acts, thing or things, *incidental or appurtenant to or growing out of or connected with the aforesaid business or powers or any part or parts thereof. . . .*"

One might inquire whether, under the terms of this charter, there is any business or economic activity whatever in which the Authority may not engage.

These two corporations which I have given as examples — bureaus in the guise of corporations — offer manifest advantages over the familiar government agency, old style. They have a permanent existence, even though the statutes under which they are set up have a limited life or are declared unconstitutional. They can borrow funds, without specific congressional authority, to any extent the lending public will stand for, pledging the credit of the United States Government. They are spared the supervision of the Bureau of the Budget and the congressional committees on appropriations, although their accounts must be audited by the Comptroller General. Yet they enjoy bureaucratic privileges which are denied to ordinary corporations against which they presumably

compete: that is to say, they have the postal franking privilege, and they are exempt from all taxation.

Under the charters of these two agencies alone, the United States Government could establish a federal banking system, and could own and operate government farms, factories, warehouses, railroads, steamship lines, communication systems, and marketing agencies for dealing in all agricultural commodities and electrical equipment, and for carrying on any activities in any way *relating to* these enterprises.

III

So, then, the unsettling facts I came upon when I looked into the remoter truths about our new bureaucracy. And having gone thus far, I can tell you that I wished myself back in that theater, pipe organ and all, regarding no more serious an affair than simple nonsense. One thing, more grave than all the rest, stood up: The subtlest danger in this new bureaucracy lies in the comical dress it wears to hide its mighty powers. A bureau housed in a theater is funny — until you begin to inquire what that bureau can do to your life and mine.

To put it another way, the sur-

face manifestation of bureaucracy, its appearance to the glancing eye, is merely the hurly-burly of an extravagant spree. It takes a little searching to discover that the revelers conceal in their wads of red tape such things as gats and stiletos, blackjacks and garrotes.

One more item:

I sat down one evening in Washington and hoisted a few with a half-dozen young men who work for bureaus. They were very personable fellows indeed, not too long out of their colleges, and they had jobs somewhat like the jobs of junior executives in business houses. That is to say, they carried responsibilities and they worked very hard.

I made my speech, after a while. I said: "All right. Justify yourselves. On behalf of the taxpayers, I question the salaries you are getting. Prove to me that you earn them."

They roared with indignation. Earn the money? Earn it? Great God! They often worked eighteen hours a day — worked harder and longer than any corporation would ever demand. Furthermore, they did it voluntarily. Nobody made them do it. They were not old-fashioned civil servants, doing time with a pension for goal. They were giving their best to the country,

giving up recreation and sleep for the pleasure of doing a job thoroughly. . . .

I believed every word of it. I said: "Granted. Everything you say is granted. You are conscientious men working twice as hard as anybody will believe of government employees. You are more than that. You're zealots, no less. But what the hell are you working for? What is the essential purpose? What the result? What the noble accomplishment you strive for?"

Well, they struggled with words. They were aiding Recovery, saving the country from ruin, getting business back on its feet, spreading a new and nobler social doctrine — everything, as a fact, but making the world safe for democracy. And the upshot of their talk was this: They were toiling like superb robots at jobs they were told to do, with no idea at all of objectives.

I said: "Gentlemen, pity and sympathy stirs in my heart. But give me an honest answer to this one: Suppose your job — all the work you are doing so eagerly — were abandoned tomorrow. Would the country be worse, or better off?"

"The machine would be worse off. We are cogs in a machine. Take out a cog and the machine can't work properly."

"Okay. What is the machine doing?"

No answer.

No answer because a man with half an eye can see what the machine is doing. It is spinning twenty-four hours a day to perpetuate itself.

You see the progression from that sort of thing, of course: A machine which has no genuine purpose must find purposes — must find work which might look useful and good. And the work that it is inventing for itself is something more than a mischievous and expensive annoyance to the ordinary flow of our daily lives. It can, if let alone, snarl the whole pattern of our daily lives — it can penetrate our simplest and most fundamental activities, interfere with them, disrupt them, and leave us, at the last, wondering however in the world we allowed such a monster to get headway, and grow like a tropic vine, and foul our decent human aims.

THE RAT

BY ALAN DEVOE

THE Rat came in the Autumn — October, I think it was — and that was the only name by which we ever called him. Simply The Rat. One is tempted to call most small creatures — indeed all beings lesser than man himself — by some kind of affectionate or jocose or patronizing nickname. Men call bears Bruin and canary birds Dicky; and cats are Toms and tabbies and pussies. Probably this is done in an unconscious effort to humanize them, to make them knowable, to bridge that unbridgeable gulf that lies between our psyche and theirs. For two years now, a giant garter snake, as long as my arm and very curiously striated, has lived in our old stone wall, and we call him Chester. I don't know where we got this name, but we always use it, and its bearer seems in consequence somehow a little more companionable, a little less terrifyingly alien, as he lies on the sun-warmed stones or glides through the meadow grass with a struggling cricket in his cold triangular jaws.

But I am getting away from The Rat. The Rat had no nickname because . . . well, because there was that about him which forbade it. I very well remember our first encounter — The Rat's and mine. It was in our cellar, where I had gone to get some of our Astrachan apples which I keep in baskets there. Our farmhouse was built in 1802 and it has a tiny cellar, really a sort of scooped-out cavern in the ground, under one room. I have to carry a lantern when I go down, and I generally flash the light carefully into the crannies. All sorts of unexpected earth-creatures get into the cellar by accident — moles and salamanders and glass snakes and the like — and I discover them and get them out if I can. This particular evening in October, when I went down to get the apples, I was flashing the lantern in the corners in this way, when the light picked out The Rat. He was crouched on the floor near the water pipe, gnawing an apple paring. When the ray from my lantern fell on him he stopped gnawing, but he did not