

Letters

Green Stamps

David Hapgood's piece, "Diplomatism: How We Zone People" [*The Washington Monthly*, May, 1969], was a gem. Each reader ought to send a copy to a dean of his choice.

Students are the customers of the university, but they almost never demand better meat, produce, or canned goods. They get deceptive packages each semester. They just don't seem to care about the merchandise they receive. What they do focus on is the "green stamps" they get at the checkout counter. The "green stamps" have become all-important. You glue them into your stamp book, which at the universities we call a transcript. If you collect enough stamps in your book, you can take it to the redemption center some June and turn it in for the only prize in the university's premium catalog, a diploma.

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Pavlov at the Pentagon

Here is a pattern of behavior which bureaucracy tends to produce:

In Pentagon offices, as well as elsewhere, the telephone takes precedence over the human being. The acceptance of telephone priority is widespread in that increasingly impersonal production system which we still think of as a society. We pay more attention to a bell than to a live human.

In large offices, it has become the general practice to give the telephone priority over any person old-fashioned enough to visit one at one's desk. Congressional

secretaries, for example, are much more attentive and helpful to the constituent on the phone than to the drab-looking office visitor, who is made to sit for a long time while phones ring and are cooed into.

We cite the Pentagon only because it is the largest set of offices with which we are personally familiar. Here we have "action officers," the term generally applied to harassed middle-grade military or civilian employees who must keep papers moving away from their desks in order to survive. If an action officer goes to see another action officer, this is known as "personal contact."

However, it is a Pentagon tribal custom, accepted by both parties, that any human visiting a desk in this manner is secondary when the bell or buzzer sounds—unless, of course, the visitor is someone of a higher military or civilian grade. This latter qualification is important; one never keeps a boss waiting. If the boss is making a "personal contact" visit to an action officer, the action officer usually answers the phone with, "May I call you back, Jim? I have to rush now." This makes the boss feel good and is considered sound practice.

Whatever violence it may do to our sense of proportion, the precedence of telephonic over direct communication does have its virtues. Telephone conversations on business matters tend toward an economy of language that might be rude in the "personal contact" encounter. In face-to-face dealings, individual personality quirks must be coped with, and in frequent cases they become a problem that one would prefer to avoid.

A.B.M.

A.B.M. is the pseudonym of a civilian action officer at the Pentagon.

Kenya and Tanzania:

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTRAST

by Peter Edelman

In the course of this decade the politics and problems of Africa have gradually etched themselves into the American consciousness. Repression in South Africa, revolution in Algeria, the murder of Lumumba, the adventures of Tshombe, the secession of Rhodesia, war and starvation in Biafra—all of these have brought us to a level of awareness far more acute than it was when the Kingston Trio used to sing, "They're rioting in Africa."

