

Taylor Branch

# We're All Working for the Penn Central

In the federal bureaucracy normality is a very depressing thing. It does strange things to men's minds. Listen:

I always had a tremendous sense of self-doubt—of thinking that if I ever really looked at what I was doing, square in the face, I would discover that none of it made a damn bit of difference. Even at my level, there was a lurking sense that the job was just feeding me well. I liked it for the excitement and power, but I couldn't really look at it, ever.

There was almost a constant drone of excitement. Somebody would come running into the office and shout, "The President wants this, so it's BIG!" And what does he want? He wants a statement saying how much he cares about the people in Appaloosa somewhere who got squelched by a hurricane. So we work frantically for several hours, expending hundreds of man-hours to figure out how many cows were killed and how many feet of highway were destroyed. Four or five other departments are working on the same statement. And the hurricane crisis at least is some kind of an emergency. Many of them aren't. That kind of thing happens 100 times a day.

It's sad. I was constantly troubled about the energy devoted to how things might look to the press and to jurisdictional squabbles and in-fighting. Many of our agencies were just tub-thumping around in search of a rationale.

Such is a view from the executive level, as the speaker is a former special assistant to several Cabinet members. But things are often similar in the ranks of the middle managers. George Beckerman, for example, is a GS-13

(base pay \$19,700-\$25,613) in the Department of Commerce:

We worry a lot. People worry about the stock market, the morning's automobile traffic, the government's multiple health insurance policies, and the fortunes of political friends elsewhere in Washington.

Some of the agencies really have to produce. They have a product that people can see, like air traffic controllers landing airplanes, or Social Security checks. But usually you spend at least 50 per cent of the time looking inward—making the agency a better place to work. We've been moving furniture around for more than two years. And you're always satisfying the information requests of other people in the agency, or evaluators. There are all kinds of evaluators—GAO auditors, Budget Bureau people, external contractors evaluating next year's appropriations request, interested staff members from the House Subcommittee on Economic Development, and so on.

No social problem has ever been solved this way. Time just passes them by—people forget and give them to us. It's very frustrating.

There is a kind of vicious cycle of insecurity at work in many parts of the Executive branch. A computer programmer for the Navy remarked that it was hard for him to review the past two years, during which he had been honestly engaged in "about three weeks" of meaningful work. "Despite yourself, you begin to lose confidence in your ability to get anywhere on the outside," he sighed, "and so you value that niche a little more. So you stay, and your confidence erodes further. The world loses more of its color, and the longer you stay, the more you need to stay even longer."

"And you begin to build an inner

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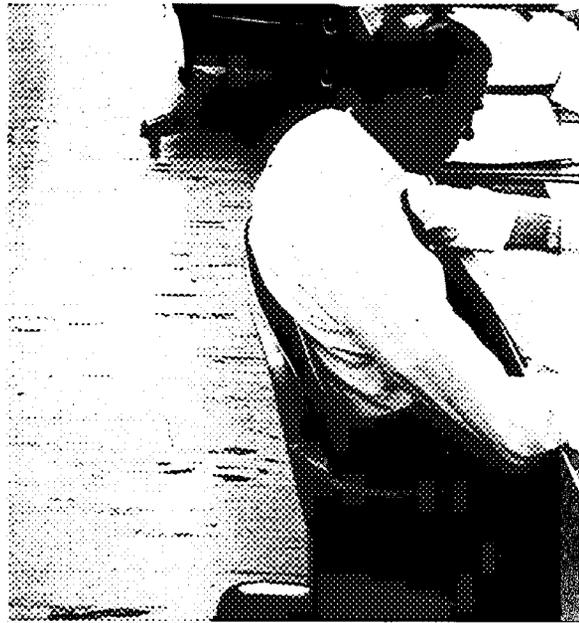
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value system around the office activities alone," said a senior official of the Civil Service Commission. "Can you give a better conference or sound better in a staff meeting than old George? How do you come off in the internal battles for signs of significance—promotions, parking places, and publications? These concerns can ride right over the long lunches and the endless hours of sitting and talking."

The personal insecurity of many civil servants is paradoxical in view of the strong job protection provisions of the Civil Service laws. Once a federal employee obtains tenure, after three years, his employment is safe, barring egregious incompetence or criminal activities. His promotions are in question, as are his prestige and his particular job, but his salary, at least, is nearly guaranteed, especially if he knows the rules. And yet so many civil servants *feel* insecure. "There is a fantastic effort to keep criticism off the record," said Andrew Bennett of his 10 years in the Departments of Labor and Commerce. "You can't admit error. It's just not done. You can't ever talk freely about what you really do—that would be a direct threat to the agency's appropriations and to everybody there. And you can't really have your name on anything controversial."

Part of the celebrated bureaucratic caution comes from ambition, of course. Promotions contain a large measure of social acceptability, and people don't build esteem by criticizing their own guild. Part of it comes from the knowledge that the government has become a fairly lucrative place to work. Only about 5,800 federal employees have achieved the coveted "supergrade" (GS-16-18) status, which carries a base pay of \$31,203 to \$41,734. However, 40 per cent of the regular civil service employees fall into grade levels which have some managerial or policy functions (GS-9-15), and which draw base salaries of \$11,614 to \$34,971. This kind of money is enough to lure most

people into pure caution, even in a tenure system. The temptation is compounded by the expected trend in public sector wages. Washington is now committed by law to the comparability principle—automatic increases equal to private sector productivity gains in comparable jobs—although no one has dared define productivity in government or to argue enthusiastically that business managers and government managers have the same motives. State and local governments must follow the federal pay scales; and public employees possess enough political power to keep the trend on the track. Sixteen million people are directly employed by federal, state, and local governments in



the United States, out of a total employment of about 85 million jobs. Moreover, the number of people indirectly paid by government has never been calculated—all the people (and towns) building missiles, highways, tanks, schools, space equipment, and all those in management-consultant firms. No one has ever counted heads in the consulting firms which ring Washington and most major cities, and which have made a deal with governments to exchange white paper for green. Some federal agencies contract

almost everything out—the Atomic Energy Commission even contracted out the administration of the city of Oak Ridge. All these direct and indirect employees of the governments have a high-energy interest in raising public spending and salaries. It has been said that the bureaucracy and its dependents may do what capitalists always feared from the poor in democracy: they may vote in a sneaky socialism—for the middle class only.

In any case, the money and the opportunity are worth all the caution for most people. They are worth going along for. And there is also the fear of being ostracized into one of the more meaningless non-jobs. There are many people in government who could say, as did one candid GS-14 in the Veterans Administration, “I don’t have much to do. I’ve been reorganized into a corner. I think I’ll do some writing.” And no doubt much insecurity seeps into the gray cubicles, because the inhabitants, like all of us, subconsciously expect to be flushed out into public scrutiny. “There are not many people at all who do nothing,” observed an assistant secretary of a large department. “In fact, most people here are terribly busy. But there are a lot of people who do nothing useful.” There are just a lot of people, that’s all—clipping their vowels, clearing their throats, and above all, being careful.

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### Idler Gears

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The Executive branch of the federal government may be characterized as a vast purring machine of idler gears, vibrated by the echo of typewriters and ticked by the flow of money. There are also merely idler-gears within every department and certain entire idler agencies. The jurisdictional tangles and appropriations powers of Congress are especially critical to the survival of the latter.

Take highway safety agencies, for example. Harold Seidman, who spent 25 years observing the bureaucracy from the Bureau of the Budget, has

written a book called *Politics, Position and Power*, in which he says that these bodies provide excellent examples of how Congress transfers its own overlapping powers and superfluities to the Executive branch.

When jurisdictional problems could not be resolved, the Congress in 1966 created two agencies—the National Highway Safety Agency and the National Traffic Agency—to administer the highway safety program. The President was authorized to designate a single individual to head both agencies. All that was gained by creating two agencies—where only one was needed—was to give two Senate committees a voice in the confirmation of the agency head.

Congressmen spring to the defense of all sorts of Executive curiosities as long as the inhabitants are friendly and cooperative in spending money in the right places. Members of the Commerce Committees can be counted on for support of the pitiable Business and Defense Services Administration in the Department of Commerce—about 2,000 people with excellent industry and congressional connections in a bureaucratic legacy of the Last War, surviving on the strength of those connections and the vital-sounding ring of their agency’s title. Members of the Interior committees are programmed to protect the slightly embarrassing Bureau of Indian Affairs. After all, they have some say in who spends those funds where and in what way. And, without a great many defections, Southerners and other farm congressmen will rally behind Representative Jamie Whitten to protect the Agriculture Department, which, in an inspiring fulfillment of Parkinson’s Law, doubled in size over the last 40 years while the number of farms has halved. (A corollary of Parkinson’s Law states that an organization of 1,000 people or more is capable of generating a full workload for everyone internally, and therefore has no need of contact with the outside world: the Department of Agriculture employs about 125,000 people.) The Joint Committee on Atomic Energy will probably never grant the Atomic Energy Commis-

sion's (AEC) own request to get rid of four of the five commissioners. Harold Seidman found that "the Atomic Energy Commission is probably the only commission in history whose members unanimously recommended their own abolition." But the Joint Committee will have none of it, because such a reduction would remove four confirmations. More importantly, the committee's bargaining position for favors and matters of high policy would deteriorate seriously if it had to face a single director of the AEC instead of a five-member commission with required unanimity. And so on.

Reorganization, of course, is one of the principal tools of bureaucracies themselves in dealing with criticism. If the heat is on, a department or agency should go through six months of shuffling the organizational charts and then hope the crisis has passed, as is usually the case. But most organizational struggles have little to do with economy or public criticism—involving, on the other hand, the classic battle over who shall rule. In most cases, the question is which people or which department shall rule over a particular idler-gear program and its budget.

Take the United States Travel Service, a Commerce Department program funded over the years at between \$3.5 and \$4.5 million. It is designed to attract foreigners, primarily Europeans, to vacation in the United States, and its employees have a good time plastering Europe with billboards, leaflets, and TV commercials. "We did a study of the Travel Service," said Fred Simpich, general counsel of the Commerce Department for the last year of the Johnson Administration, "which showed that it had a zero effect on the travel patterns of Europeans. If the European economy is good, they come to the United States. If not, they don't. But the study didn't matter. We still had a full-scale, six-month war over who should have the Travel Service. The fight involved Treasury, State, Interior, and Commerce, with the

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"None of us ever really asked whether we should have a Travel Service at all," Simpich mused. "You couldn't look at it that way. You had to say, 'I'm not going to let those jerks get this program.'"

"There must be hundreds of programs like the Travel Service that are just wheel-spinning," Simpich concluded. He won that battle for the Department of Commerce. And so on.

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### The Theory

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There comes a point at which students of bureaucracy must look for general guidance in determining which departments are likely to contain the most idler-gear programs and which programs utilize the highest proportion of idler-gear people. Fortunately, administrative science has scored here with a number of frameworks with which to coordinate and effectively manage one's thinking on this weighty subject. In fact, there are four theories to deal precisely with the idler-gear location question.

The first is called the Life-Cycle Theory of Bureaucratic Ossification (LICTBOSS), which says that the proportion of idler-gears increases with the age of the organization. The theory is based on the observation that agencies never abolish anything and often innovate on their margins with additional people and money. So they grow slowly over time, whether or not the need for them keeps pace. In this sense, LICITBOSS is much like Parkinson's Law, although more refined and flexible. There is, for example, an absolute-size corollary, which holds that the effects of age can be mitigated significantly by holding the absolute size of the organization below 1,000 people. This modification helps explain the relative efficiency of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Council of Economic Advisers.

There is also a structural corollary, stating that any multi-headed organization is three times as likely to be

crawling with idler-gears, *ceteribus paribus*, as a comparable single-headed agency. This bit of fine tuning may be plugged into LICITBOSS to predict that 80 per cent of the government's multi-headed independent agencies are useless. And you can safely calculate that 95 per cent of the multi-headed statutory advisory bodies are duly-constituted governmental warts. Harold Seidman provides the following partial list of those with majority private membership:

National Insurance Advisory Board, Flood Insurance Advisory Committee, National Advisory Commission on Low-Income Housing, Advisory Board of St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, National Historical Publications Commission, Advisory Councils to each of the HEW Institutes, National Advisory Council to the Office of Economic Opportunity, Advisory Council on Vocational Education, and National Advisory Council on Extension and Continuing Education.

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### End of the Spurt

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Closely related to the life-cycle theory is the Short Public Responsibility Theory (SPURT), which holds that the maturing process of a bureaucracy involves movement away from service to publicly stated goals and toward service to the organization itself, i.e., toward an idler-gear composition. Accordingly, new agencies begin with a burst of idealistic activity and chiliastic rhetoric. They also begin with modest budgets, having cut to the bone to get their revolutionary programmatic concept past the Congress (the first time is always the hardest). They are full of fresh new employees, mostly young, attracted to the agency by all the publicity accompanying its birth. Everyone works very hard for the first year or so. They are dedicated. They also know that the President has not forgotten them yet and that the press will write human interest stories about the personnel—and news stories about agency achievements—for a while longer.

After a few years, the career civil servants in personnel and administra-

tion will decide that the new agency has established itself. They will transfer in and begin to regularize procedures and communications systems and to tell people what the Civil Service regulations say they can't do. Top agency people will begin to acquire congressional contacts and to exchange kindnesses with members of the appropriations committees. People won't worry so much any more. Soon the new agency fades from public attention and everyone begins to talk about how Rome wasn't built in a day.

A press scandal or presidential ire may revitalize a hardened agency for a short while, but the odds are that a big reorganization and patience will ease the glare of attention. And even a modicum of skill might turn the crisis into increased appropriations by using the old saw about what squeaking joints need.

SPURT has already happened to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Office of Economic Opportunity. It happened in record time to the Office of Minority Business Enterprise. It happened quite recently to the Peace Corps and the Department of Transportation. All these were established after John Kennedy took office, and they are all already full of idler-gears.

The third theory of idler-gear location is called the Soft-Hard theory of product identification (SOHA). It holds that any hard bureaucracy can be expected to have fewer idler-gears spinning than a comparable soft one. A hard bureaucracy is one which produces a tangible product, as the Army Corps of Engineers produces dams and canals or COMSAT produces satellites. A soft bureaucracy produces intangibles, like "government," which can scarcely be identified let alone measured. And within any agency, the jobs vary along the same soft-hard continuum—ranging from the assembly-line workers to the engineers to the production technicians to the planners to the program coordinators and developers and final-

ly to the administrators.

Liberals, as a rule, don't like SOHA, because most of the quality-of-life bureaucracies get classified as squishy-soft and therefore selfish, although a group of economists have been trying to prove that the Pentagon's "national security" is the most intangible product of all. Conservative businessmen have also been turning away from SOHA, because the line between a hard bureaucracy and a business has become so thin that more and more large businesses are being labeled hard bureaucracies rather than private enterprises. This causes much discomfort to the businessmen.

So almost everyone now thinks that SOHA is a bad theory, but most people agree with an official of the Labor Department, who observed that "the long-run trend is toward the soft bureaucracy."

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### Holy Grail

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The final theory of idler-gear location is again closely related to its predecessor. It is called the Deliver the Mail/Holy Grail dichotomous theory of problem protection (DETMAHOG). The idea here is that problem-solving (Holy Grail) agencies have an inherent propensity toward wheel-spinning. If such a bureaucracy is making no progress whatever toward the solution of its statutory objective, it is by definition a bureaucracy on welfare, idling in neutral. If, on the other hand, it is grasping its particular Holy Grail or moving toward doing so, the bureaucracy eats up its own *raison d'être* in the process. Turning this story around, DETMAHOG theorists argue that a Holy Grail bureaucracy cannot persist over time without acquiring large numbers of idler-gears—either by solving its problem and not going away or by not solving its problem and sitting there.

Hence Holy Grail bureaucracies have a tendency to protect the problem they are mandated to solve. This tendency comes from the first law of survival, which bureaucracies observe

with a special tenacity. Problem protection has been in fashion ever since the Marshall Plan people disbanded to go into foreign aid. It preserves the Indian problem, the poverty problem, the farm displacement problem, the economic development problem, the cigarette problem, the ecology problem, and the pornography problem, among others.

The other side of the coin, delivering the mail, refers to the growing routine tasks of the bureaucracy—measuring things, collecting data, and keeping records. The term itself springs from a famous quotation from a GS-15 in the Economic Development Administration: “Once the government delivers the mail and writes its checks, it’s tired and can’t do any more.” The mail side of the dichotomy enjoys a bright employment future, for as every DETMAHOG theorist knows, administrative bureaucracy is required by centralization which is inexorably produced by interdependence which is always increased by specialization which is produced by freedom, the free market, progress, and the entry of liberated women into the labor force.

The problem, of course, is that the mail side of the bureaucracy appears dull, and it is especially depressing to have the bright side of the bureaucratic future be the dull part. Looking at things this way robs government of its new frontier image—of the idea that government is where it’s at for bright young people of conscience. To top it all off, there is a corollary to DETMAHOG, which states that while idler-gears are required in Holy Grail bureaucracies, they are also *very likely* to be in Deliver the Mail ones.

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### Rickover’s Solution

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Despite recent refinements in LICTBOSS, SPURT, SOHA, and DETMAHOG, most people still hesitate to make precise numerical estimates of idler-gear percentages within any given bureaucracy. There are so many little variables to be figured

in—so many people whose doings could possibly be useful in the future—that almost everyone looks at the theories for heuristic purposes only, to suggest fruitful topics with wide typicality for further research. Only Vice Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of the atomic submarine, can be counted on for a forthright estimate of fat and wheel-spinning in his own department, the Pentagon. The Admiral finds that at least 50 per cent of the Pentagon payroll is a welfare payment (eat your heart out, Daniel P. Moynihan), the recipients of which should be fired. Recently, he outlined to a House Appropriations subcommittee his plan for stripping the Pentagon’s idler-gears:

On a given Monday morning, I would close off the fourth floor of the Pentagon and allow in only enough people to fill the first three floors.

The next Monday, I would have the third floor roped off and permit only those who fill the first two floors to retain their jobs. That would be a good start.

But even the Admiral is hedging his bets these days. He followed that proposal with another which revised the idler estimate up to 67 per cent, but which recommended keeping that very vocal, well-educated horde on the payroll—only out of the way:

Classify the Pentagon people A, B, and C. A does the work. B and C are given offices without secretaries, messengers, desks, rugs, telephones, typewriters, or water pitchers. They do get scratch pads on which to write letters to each other in longhand.

The letters would be dropped in dummy mail boxes and there would be no collection . . . . They could show up for work and leave any time they desired. Vacations would be unlimited. Their checks would be mailed to their homes.

You have all kinds of people in the Defense Department who are making work for the very few who are engaged in and capable of work.

There comes a point at which students of bureaucracy must recognize the limits of theory, and, with Admiral Rickover, take that bold leap of faith.

One tangle in putting this bureaucracy mess into context is the increasing number of idler-gears everywhere—in businesses, universities, consulting firms, the Army reserve, churches (the first soft bureaucracies), and even magazines.

Admiral Rickover, in the course of declining to be interviewed on the general bureaucracy snarl, could not resist making the magazine point only somewhat facetiously.

“Are magazines effective?” he asked out of left field.

“Well, sir, I don’t know what you mean.”

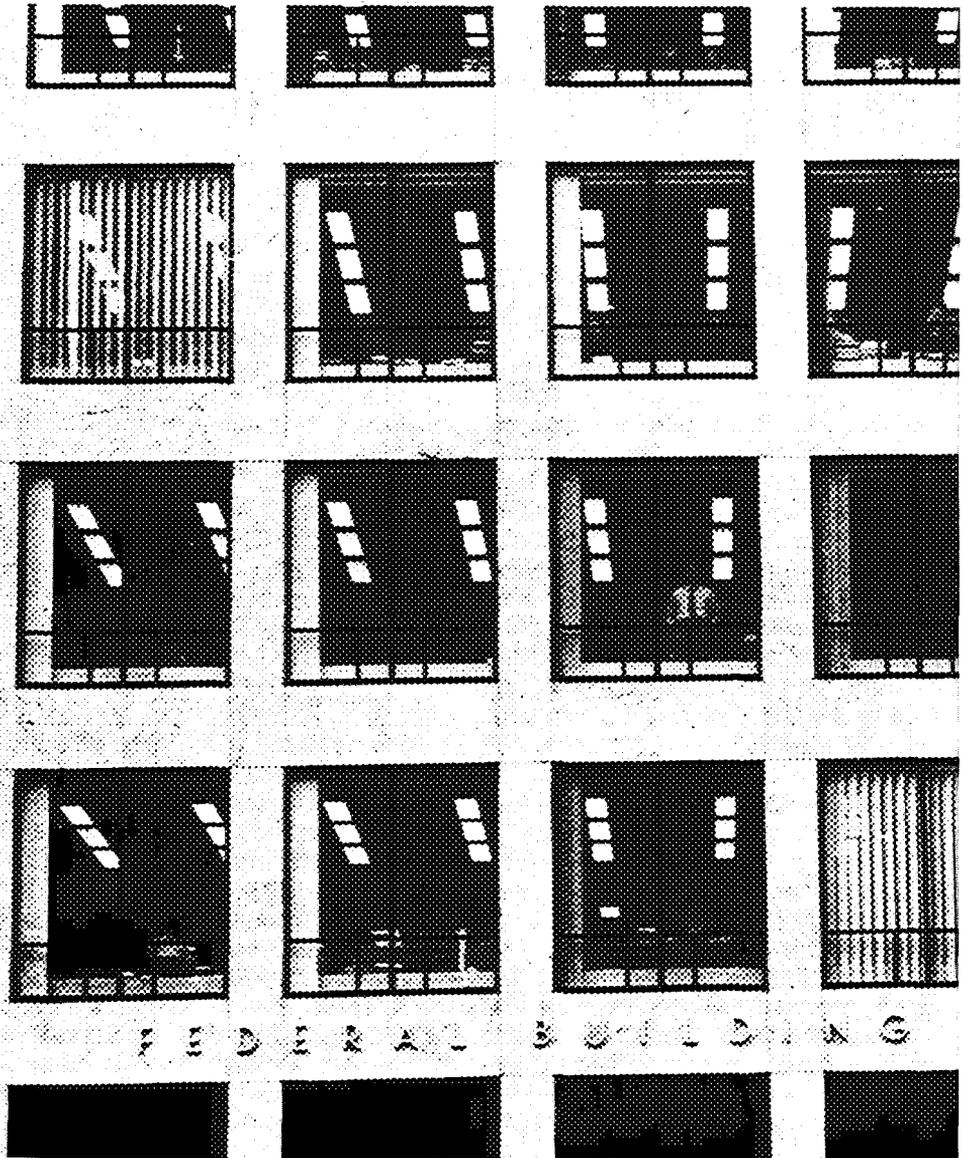
“Let’s be specific. Is *your* magazine any more effective than the bureaucracy?”

“Probably so, because there are only three or four of us to spread bureaucracy among.”

“That’s a good point, but you’d probably be better off with just one. You tell your boss I said so.”

“O.K. But then I might be fired.”

“That’s the whole problem, isn’t it?” ■



Suzannah Lessard

# Let Those Hillbillies Go Get Shot

Some years back, waiting for the Long Island Railroad to pull into my hometown of St. James, I noticed something new on the familiar platform. On inspection, it turned out to be a small brick memorial to the Vietnam war dead. Rectangular steel plaques with names engraved on them had been affixed in one-and-a-half columns. It's a small town, but I'd gone away for high school, so I didn't recognize any of the names—a few could have been people I'd known in grammar school, but as their surnames were Kelley and Jones, I couldn't be sure. Then the train came and took me to New York—to Columbia University—to intelligent discussions of foreign policy, passionately anti-war friends, rallies in Sheeps Meadow, marches on the UN. In those discussions and marches one sensed frustration, yet there was always the feeling of pitching one's energy, however frail, into a corporate effort to stop the war. Reading those names for the first time, and then again and again, standing on that same platform and reading new ones, the columns growing plaque by plaque, that sense of straightforward corporate effort would cave in.

Partly the feeling was the sick helplessness most women experience when faced with military deaths. Protected because of your sex, all you can do is endure; not taking those risks yourself, even your protest is somehow unpersuasive. The St. James memorial, however, put me in double

jeopardy of those feelings because I was also protected from the reality by class: those boys probably died because they didn't have the options of going to college, retaining lawyers and doctors, or facilely expressing their conscientious objection. The sense of being protected at the expense of others is a nasty feeling.

Yet the people making those sacrifices tended to support the war. Wearing a black arm band with the number of dead printed on it, for instance, was in a way taking unfair advantage of dead men, because, were they able to speak, they might well condemn your peace effort. And not only might those angry hecklers on the sidelines be their brothers and sisters, parents and wives, but the failure of the movement to attract their support—the great middle of the population from which the army was drawing its manpower—had everything to do with its ineffectuality.

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## The Privileged Sanctuary

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The fatal class rift had yawned as soon as students and liberals began to decry the war as "immoral." "They're against our boys," came back the angry retort, and thus the pejoratives began to fly between the more extreme representatives of both sides: traitors—pigs, cowards—facists, faggots—war criminals. The antipathy soon took on a life of its own, influencing even the moderate, and making it possible years later for hard-hats to beat up peace demonstrators when they themselves believed we should get out of Vietnam; possible,

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*Adapted from an article in the April, 1972, issue of The Washington Monthly.*