

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CIVIL SERVICE

Inflated Grades

by Marjorie Boyd

Anti-bureaucratic sentiment may be abroad in the land, but so is the desire for the government's services; so big government is usually blamed on the constant creation of new programs designed to help the general populace. Politicians often present government growth as an insoluble, illusory dilemma: the federal government has actually grown very little in the past ten years, they say, and what growth has taken place has only been in response to the public demand for new programs and services.

But the federal budget has grown in the last decade from \$170 billion to \$400 billion; twice as fast as the cost of living, at the same time that many huge programs have been cut back or ended. And if the public desire for services can't be lessened, there are obviously other things that can. One major culprit in the growth of the federal budget that has nothing to do with the desires of the American people is the civil service system. Everybody knows that the civil service

was originally set up to get the hacks out of government, which it has done. But because it has become so enormous, complex, and shrouded in confusing language it hasn't gotten much attention.

Behind its aura of virtue, however, lurks the most wasteful organization in America. The civil service is at the very heart of government growth.

Between 1955 and 1965 the civil service white-collar work force grew from about 1 million to about 1.8 million. Since then it has stayed relatively stable in size; the growth has been in its cost. The line of a graph charting the rise in payroll costs for all federal workers looks like the trajectory of a rocket launch. The increases have raised the average government salary to \$12,521, while the average salary in private industry is only \$10,522. Of course, there are still government workers who are not paid as well as their counterparts in private industry—Cabinet officers, top management, and research scientists—but these are few in number, and they are all on the highest rungs of govern-

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ment. Paying these people handsomely is at least a reasonable position, assuming that they do have very special skills and abilities. What isn't reasonable is paying the hundreds of thousands immediately below the top well over what they would get outside of the federal government.

The rise in government salaries is the product of a system that is ongoing, so it can be expected that the gap will widen in the future. To understand that system, it is necessary to understand how the civil service works.

White-collar government workers are classified in 18 civil service grades, and grade is the sole determinant of salary. Grades 1 through 4 are generally clerical and low-level technical workers. Grades 5 through 12 are called "administrative" and cover a wide range of workers described as "the college graduate type," though a college degree is not required. Grade 5 is where young administrative workers usually enter the government, but some start out higher. Grades 13 through 15 are called "supervisory," and grades 16 through 18 "management." The bulk of the civil service is in the lower and middle grades; of the 1,349,104 graded federal civil service employees, only 4,605 are in the top three grades and only 363 are grade 18s.

Within each grade there are ten "longevity levels," each at a progressively higher salary. For instance, a grade 10 at the lowest longevity level is paid \$15,524, while a grade 10 at the highest level makes \$20,177. These longevity salary increases are granted at one- to three-year intervals according to a set formula. While poor job performance could theoretically cause a worker to be denied his longevity increase, I could find no one in the government who had heard of such a case. "All you have to do is breathe," said one official.

It stands to reason that an administrative employee entering the government at grade 5 would move up the grades one by one, but that isn't the

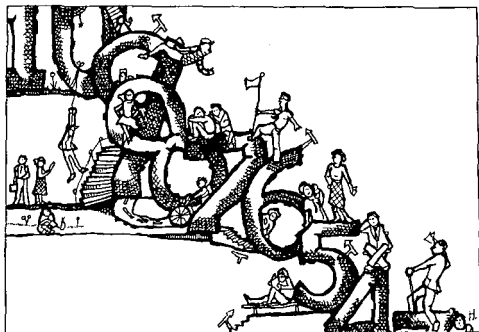
way it works. Grades 6, 8, and 10 are reserved for "special employees," such as administrative secretaries, bookkeepers, and technical designers; so all administrative employees go from grade 5 to grade 7 to grade 9 to grade 11 before their grade-by-grade ascent begins. The average time it takes to rise from grade 5 to grade 11 is nine years, but ten per cent do it in as little as three years. The lowest level for a grade 5 is \$9,303, and the lowest salary for a grade 11 is \$17,056. Holders of master's degrees enter government at grade 7 (\$11,523) and lawyers enter at grade 9 (\$14,097), so their ascent is even more rapid.

Until 1962 most civil servants were underpaid because they had to depend on the caprice of Congress for pay increases. But that year the entire system of government salaries was overhauled, and ever since, according to the Brookings Institution, federal pay has been riding faster than pay in private industry.

The post-1962 system is called "comparability," and it is based on an idea that, on paper, seems scrupulously fair to both taxpayers and government workers. The system starts in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which each year makes an extensive survey of salaries in private industry. Taking descriptions of government jobs provided by the Civil Service Commission, the Bureau of Labor Statistics identifies "comparable" jobs in a range of industries spread over a wide geographic area and arrives at an average figure for each job. The Civil Service Commission then fits the jobs into the grade system and sets up a new pay scale by grades. The process is repeated each year and a new salary scale is constructed and presented to the President. If he does nothing, the raises go into effect every October. If the President feels the increases are too high, he can make another proposal that goes into effect unless it is vetoed by a majority of one of the houses of Congress.

Something happens in the trans-

lation of this system from paper into practice that results in an average government salary about 20 per cent above private industry's average. It's a problem of definitions. While the Civil Service Commission prints stacks of books purported to contain exact descriptions of the jobs in each grade level, those descriptions are sufficiently vague and elastic as to cover, if the need arises, almost any human activity. Take accounting, a profession whose work should be easy to classify and quantify. It ought to be possible to state clearly the activities of a grade 12 auditor, but here's how the Civil Service Commission does it: "Characteristic of this level are assignments that require the ability to develop audit plans and analyze policies,



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functions, procedures, internal controls, and accounting systems of complex activities primarily in terms of evaluating the future impact of current practices and proposed actions." That kind of gobbledygook is used to describe each grade level, and is complemented by a sprinkling of sentences here and there pointing out that "the work of a grade 12 is more complex than the work of a grade 11." All judgments are relative.

Mike Causey, *The Washington Post's* civil service columnist, says, "There's no such thing as a typing pool in the federal government any more. It's been replaced by a 'word processing unit.' If you're a supervisor, you don't mind giving a GS-3 or GS-4 to a typist, but you feel rotten

giving it to a word processing specialist."

In the personnel office of each government agency is a job classifier who is responsible for the grade classification of jobs. A classifier is an administrative employee, typically a grade 11. Some classifiers are responsible for as many as 4,000 low-level jobs; a few classifiers oversee unusually technical or varied jobs and may cover as few as 500; but the average is around 1,000. The Civil Service Commission provides the classifiers with voluminous written "standards" and offers counsel as well as conducting periodic reviews of the classifiers' work.

Because the only way to get a substantially higher salary is to get a different job with a higher grade classification, government offices are in a constant state of reorganization and realignment. New sections and new jobs are perpetually springing up. While bureaucrats contend, even to each other (perhaps especially to each other), that these ever-changing arrangements enable them to perform their tasks more efficiently, the reorganizations also have the effect of rapidly raising salaries. If a supervisor works up an idea for a new, improved section, it usually entails creating several up-graded positions. The new job descriptions are sent to the agency classifier for approval. Some agencies have permissive classifiers who approve supervisors' plans without checking further; others conduct "desk audits," visiting the reorganizing offices and questioning both supervisors and employees. In agencies that have strict classifiers, a newly up-graded employee is coached extensively in preparation for the classifier's visit.

Even More Enticing

Since the comparability system went into effect, the salaries of the higher grades (except the management grades) have risen much faster than the salaries of the lower grades be-

cause salaries for “comparable” jobs in private industry have been rising faster. This has made the prospect of moving up the grade ladder even more enticing.

Thus over the years the distribution of federal workers in the grades has changed drastically. While the number of workers in the top three “management” grades has remained about the same and the number in the lower grades has either grown slightly or declined slightly, grades 12, 13, 14, and 15 have all undergone enormous booms. There are now 300,000 workers in these four civil service grades—that’s more than the total population of Birmingham, Alabama or Tucson, Arizona—all of whom make between \$20,442 and \$43,923 a year. Grade 13, which had only 65,000 workers in 1965, now has 105,000—a 62-percent increase.

The increase in grade 13s has affected not just government’s cost, but its size as well. Because grade 13 is the first “supervisory” grade, the civil service regulations make it clear that, except in rare cases, a grade 13 must supervise other workers—and the more he supervises, the better for the job description. After an ambitious grade 12 convinces his supervisor that his particular project is important enough to merit a new section and that he should be promoted to grade 13 so he can head it, he goes out and gathers a group of grade 9s, 10s, and 11s to be promoted for assignment to the new section. Then new offices, clerical employees, equipment, and furniture must be requisitioned. As soon as the new section is in operation, everyone moves up the scale to fill the jobs vacated by its employees, so more grade 5s and 7s must be recruited from the outside.

Now our new grade 13 section chief must be constantly on the lookout for ways to bring more employees under his wing in order to position himself to make his ascent to grade 14. It would be hard to imagine a system that more effectively encouraged people’s natural inclination

toward empire building. Every person in the civil service system has a powerful financial interest in seeing the government get bigger.

Of course, in the struggle over bodies to supervise there are always losers, and some are shoved aside to work on nonexistent “special projects” alone—but the keep supervisor’s salary as a badge of former glories. Nobody in the government ever gets a pay cut.



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When Rep. Paul Simon was interviewed recently about the bureaucracy on CBS’s “Sixty Minutes,” he mentioned in passing that he had heard of a postal official who made \$29,000 a year but did not work. Simon hastened to add that he was sure this was a rare situation indeed. After the program, to Simon’s surprise, he received several phone calls and letters from highly paid bureau-

crats who insisted that they too did no work. One official of the Postal Department called to say he was being paid \$38,000 a year for doing nothing. Another government worker wrote:

"You are wrong when you say that the unoccupied \$29,000-a-year bureaucrat is a rarity. . . . I have had no meaningful work to do since June 1965 and my present annual salary is \$29,168. I share an office with another employee who is in the same salary and non-work category."

The cases of government workers who *actually* do nothing—who do crossword puzzles every morning and go to the track every afternoon—are, of course, extremely rare. What isn't rare at all, however, are the people who spend all day either in meetings and conferences or writing memos and conducting briefings about what went on in the meetings and conferences. Effectively, they do nothing, but for eight hours a day they at least maintain the appearance of activity.

A Different World

Although bureaucrats insist it isn't so, the world of government agencies is vastly different from the outside world. The idea of comparability, so reasonable on paper, not only is distorted in practice; it may also be intrinsically wrong in principle. Is it possible to compare a job in private industry, where performance is judged by widely recognized standards, with one in government where standards are fuzzy and unclear? Can you compare anything with a system in which people make \$30,000 a year for jobs like Suggestions Award Administrator or Fringe Benefit Specialist of Manager of Creative Services? Is the comparison valid between a government worker whose job is totally protected and a worker in private industry who, despite his best efforts, may have his livelihood snatched away by such vagaries as the whims of consumers?

The government employee takes

no risks. He faces no competition, unless he chooses to take part in in-fighting. And even if he loses out in office intrigue, his salary is not threatened and he cannot be fired. (One example: a man named Norval Perkins, as executive secretary of the District of Columbia Board of Elections and Ethics, presided over several spectacular election foul-ups, most notably a primary in which the ballots weren't counted for 12 days. His job was reorganized out of existence; he appealed to the Civil Service Commission, and got his job back and \$15,000 in back pay.)

To the outsider, the process by which government employees are promoted seems incredibly casual, despite the Civil Service Commission's stacks of printed procedures, standards, and regulations. No private industry would allow promotion to a \$30,000-a-year job to be proposed at the middle-management level and then approved only by the department classifier, a \$19,000-a-year administrative employee. The civil service is a system promoting random growth that may or may not fit in with the overall plans of management.

And it is an ingrown system without checks from the outside. From the Bureau of Labor Statistics auditors to the Civil Service Commission reviewers to the agency classifiers to the supervisors, everyone who determines salaries and promotions is an employee of government. Employees of the Office of Management and Budget and the General Accounting Office, the two efficient, no-nonsense government agencies, have put out studies and issued memos complaining that government jobs are over-graded, but since they are government employees themselves, their motivation to push for reform is not strong. While the integrity of the very best of government employees is of the highest caliber, many of their judgments are subjective—and in matters pertaining to one's own financial well-being, bias can often be so deeply ingrained as to be unconscious. ■

Inflated Job Descriptions

by Leonard Reed

He was new in government, this Young Executive, and they didn't do here like they did in Georgia. So, when the woman who sat outside his cubbyhole, occasionally pecking at the typewriter, said she wanted a promotion from Grade 4 to Grade 5, he asked a more seasoned colleague how to go about it.

"No problem," said his colleague. "Just write a new job description for her."

"Job description?" Young Executive looked blank.

"You don't know what a job description is?" the colleague asked incredulously. "Listen, friend, you had better go see Murgentroyd."

* * *

"Let's see, now," said Murgentroyd. "What does this young lady do?"

"Well, suh," said Young Executive, "If I were putting a help wanted ad in the paper, I'd say, 'Typist. 50 wpm.' That's what it comes down to in fundamentals."

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A cloud darkened Murgentroyd's face.

"Look," he said. "I'm a busy man. I have no time for fundamentals. Nobody gets a grade raise by typing. Now, on the other hand, if she were to 'establish work-flow priorities' . . ."

"Well, I don't know. I think all she does is. . ."

"Now, see here," Murgentroyd interrupted impatiently. "Does she have to make judgments, like, say, whether to start typing before or after she puts paper in the machine?"

"Well, I suppose. . . ." said Young Executive slowly, as he noted on his pad: "Establishes workflow priorities."

"What happens," Murgentroyd demanded, "when she runs out of paper?"

"I guess she runs down to Supplies and gets some more. . . ."

"You mean," Murgentroyd asked, "that she is 'responsible for the logistical support of the entire section' and how about Xeroxing?"

"Nope, never got the hang of it—she gives it to the Xerox maintenance man."

"Good, good," said Murgentroyd, rubbing his hands. "She 'prepares requisitions and specifications for