

MEMO OF THE MONTH

THE TOBACCO INSTITUTE
is pleased to announce that
BONNIE ST. CLAIR PARKER

formerly
Staff Director
and
Staff Administrator
Select Committee on Ethics
United States Senate
has joined The Institute as
Senate Liaison
Federal Government Relations

1875 I Street, Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20006

Personal Extension
(202) 457-4815

April 1988

THE WASHINGTON MONTHLY/OCTOBER 1988

Assistant Secretary of What?

The secret jobs that can really make a difference.

by Matthew Cooper, Jason DeParle, and Charles Peters

It's November 9. You're exhausted. You've just spent two months pledging allegiance and two years traveling from Des Moines to Pennsylvania Avenue. Now comes appointment time. But far from being a pleasure, it's taking all your energy. Just thinking about who should be Secretary of Agriculture gives you a headache. (The farm state governors are calling you; the National Cattlemen's Association has some ideas; your staff is bickering again.) The last thing you want to think about is your appointment to the Merit Systems Protection Board or the Consumer Products Safety Commission. You can leave this stuff to your cabinet secretaries or your pollsters or the people in the party. You just concentrate on the big jobs, like Treasury and Defense.

But sometimes the president should focus on the trees as well as the forest. We're not saying that he should pore over every job in Carter fashion. But there are little-known posts in the government that demand the president's interest—jobs with long, boring titles that, if performed well, can become truly important. Call them Power Pockets. Do you remember Julius B. Richmond? He was Jimmy Carter's Surgeon General. Today C. Everett Koop has made that office important by banging the drums—sending everyone in the country a pamphlet on AIDS, going *mano a mano* with the New Right on sex education, wrestling with the tobacco lobby. You can't forget his Amish-style beard, and you can't

deny he's made a difference. Same with William Bennett. The education secretary isn't exactly the most pivotal member of the cabinet; after all, town councils and state legislatures run our schools. But Bennett, of course, came in and gave a boost to the reform movement—fueling important debates on awarding teachers merit pay, teaching great books, and controlling the costs of higher education. (He steered the AIDS debate in a lousy direction, but that's another story.) He filled the Power Pocket.

If an appointee is going to bring provocative ideas to his office—ideas guaranteed to earn him the wrath of interest groups, Congress, and the civil service—then he needs the president's support. Ideally, the president will stand up for him, loudly at press conferences and quietly on the phone to lawmakers. Barring that, the good appointee needs a healthy dose of presidential indulgence, the freedom to speak from the heart even if the president won't embrace his ideas. Reagan doesn't buy the whole Koop agenda, but he hasn't shut him up either.

We don't stay awake nights thinking Michael Dukakis will take our counsel. (And we're even more doubtful that George Bush has the vision to pick those we're proposing.) These are not the staid names from permanent Washington—fixtures like Robert Strauss, Zbigniew Brzezinski, James Schlesinger, Anne Wexler (see "The Powers that Shouldn't Be: Five Washington Insiders the Next Democratic President Shouldn't Hire," Paul Glasstris, October 1987). But haven't we had enough? For instance, when it comes to campaign spending, we do not

Matthew Cooper, Jason DeParle, and Charles Peters are the editors of The Washington Monthly.
