

Working for the Government is Cool

*Memo to twentysomethings:
Forget about law school. Do
work that's interesting,
rewarding, and important*

BY GARETH COOK

One week, Dana Scully and Fox Mulder are rescuing New Hampshire school children from a ring of Satanic parents. The next they are exploring a series of unexplained murders near a traveling circus. Scully is a trained physician and Mulder has an advanced degree in psychology, but neither chose to set up a private practice. Instead, they opted for jobs that take them to the distant corners of the country—from the Arctic Circle to the Arizona desert. They are FBI agents on “The X-Files,” one of television’s hottest shows.

An advertisement for the show features a shot of Scully and Mulder with a striking headline: “Working for the government is cool.” It’s a clever attention getter, an ironic message not to be taken seriously. Indeed, when you set aside the glamorous gun-toters (who themselves risk the “jackbooted fascist” label), the image of the government worker is decidedly *uncool*.

It’s amazing what a bad rap government workers get. People who work in all levels of government—federal, state, and local—are written off with a label that has a powerful hold over the country’s imagination: bureaucrat. The word evokes images of monotonous and pointless office jobs, reams of unneeded paperwork, lazy and dim-witted workers. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer, for example, recently wrote without a hint of shame that the typical bureaucrat is “a pudgy, middle-aged woman slowly applying polish to her fingernails. Every few minutes, she picks up the phone to conduct a conversation with one of her cronies in an adjoining office.” A newspaper ad by R.J. Reynolds features a middle-aged man, triple-jowled and smiling creepily, underneath the headline “Who Should Be Responsible For Your Children, a Bureaucrat or You?”

It has not always been this way. “In the nineteenth century,” says Scott Fessler, president of the National Association of Public Administrators, “‘Good enough for government work’ meant high-quality.” Even in this century, great presidents inspired Americans to join the government and honor its work. FDR called on the nation to conquer the Depression, largely through government projects, and to win World War II. President Kennedy was

Additional research and reporting provided by Renée Swanson.

able to generate a real excitement for the work of government—you could go to Ethiopia with the Peace Corps or to the moon with NASA. “With FDR and Kennedy, the government had a noble, respected mission,” says Fossler. “People had a sense that the government was doing important things.” “Ask not what your country can do for you,” Kennedy famously declared. Now, egged on by politicians who’ve made careers of bashing government, many Americans publicly ask whether anyone can do much of anything.

Certainly, the American public sector has plenty of maddening bureaucrats. Rooting out bad government is one of the *Monthly’s* founding causes. Because of overly zealous civil service protections, it can be almost impossible to fire mediocre, or even incompetent, employees. This is a problem not only for those who want service—I doubt I am the only one who has left the local Department of Motor Vehicles feeling angry and exhausted—but it can also be bad for morale. The public employee unions need to see that nobody’s interest is served in keeping a lug on the job.

But the perception that all government employees are indolent, ineffective bureaucrats cloistered inside the Beltway is simply wrong. First, most government employees do not work for the federal government. The federal government employs 3 million people, while state and local governments employ 15 million. Second, most federal employees don’t even work in Washington: Some 85 percent of them are out in the field.

More to the point, there are many good people in government, and many have interesting jobs. Consider a few pop-culture heroes: Clint Eastwood, the Secret Service agent protecting the president in *In the Line of Fire*; the engineers of *Apollo 13*; the doctors and nurses of “ER”; or “Quincy,” the medical examiner who always gets his man. All of these are government jobs.

Plenty of other jobs haven’t been the topic of a movie or TV show, but easily could be. You could be one of the National Transportation Safety Board investigators who pores through the twisted metal and plastic of a plane wreck, in

search of the clue that will explain the cause of the accident—and, hopefully, prevent it from happening again. Or you could work for the Securities and Exchange Commission, trying to figure out the cons of some of the nation’s most devious criminal minds. Or maybe a park ranger job—a historian and preservationist, who has plenty of contact with people, and does most of the day’s work in nature’s glory—is more your style. “Our big secret” says Greg Carlile, a game warden with Washington state who, among other things, catches salmon poachers, “is that we’re getting paid to do work that we love.”

Yet I can’t count the number of times that I’ve heard the familiar refrain from my twentysomething friends: “I’m not sure what I want to do; I guess I’ll go to law school.” “I don’t really want to be a lawyer,” they usually protest, as if the almost inevitable path to a fairly tedious legal job will not be followed. (See “Golden Handcuffs,” page 33.) Why is law school their fall-back position, when they could go into work that is both interesting and satisfying?

The Name Game

One answer has to be the perverse pride that government at all levels seems to take in devising dreary job titles. How boring does a job as an “Animal Health Technician” sound? That’s actually the title for what would better be described as the government’s cowboys. Their job is to track down and lasso wild livestock that has wandered over the Mexican border carrying diseases. They spend the work week far from civilization, on horseback in the vast spaces between Brownsville and Del Rio, camping under the stars at night. Who would have guessed?

Or consider the dreary-sounding Texas Office of the State Comptroller. The words evoke rich images—flickering fluorescent lights, tortuous standard forms, bleary-eyed lifers counting the days to retirement. So why does Alan Pollock, a 40-year old father of two and the director of the office’s “performance review” division, love his job? And why is the Austin-based comptroller’s office described in heroic terms by the citizens of

Texas?

The answer is that Pollock and his colleagues are a far cry from the unimaginative pencil-pushers you might have envisioned and much closer to being the shock troops of good government—part journalists, part detectives, part problem-solvers, part enforcers. Their small office, with a creative, can-do attitude reminiscent of a start-up software company, is charged with examining the way the state government does just about everything—from welfare to the work of state troopers—in search of ways to do it better.

One of their most public successes was also one of Pollock's most personally satisfying: a plan for sweeping changes at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) that was adopted with praise. For years, there had been talk of waste and mismanagement in the prison system, so Pollock and his colleagues were called in.

They found plenty to fix. Pollock tells of his amazement at seeing the 3x5 cards—with tiny writing scrawled over front and back and stored in what looked like shoe boxes—which were being used to keep track of the prisoners. Meanwhile, the computer terminals scattered all over the complex went unused. When Pollock's team noticed guards standing around with little to do, they did a little digging and discovered that the Texas prisons had about 1.5 times as many guards as comparable systems in other states. TDCJ officials tried to say that none of the changes needed to be made. "But we knew their operations backwards and forwards," says Pollock, "so we were calling their bullshit 'bullshit'."

Today the prisons are doing away with the old card system, guards are being used more intelligently, and the comptroller's work has already saved grateful Texans hundreds of millions of dollars. Now Pollock is gearing up for a major investigation of the state mental health system. "It's great," says Pollock. "Every project is different, and you can see that you're actually changing things." Publicity about their success has brought another change: The office is flooded with résumés from people who want a job at a place called the "Texas Office of the State Comptroller." And there are many other fascinating jobs like Pollock's in the government, at places with unlikely sounding names like the

"Government Accounting Office" and the "Office of Management and Budget."

The fun jobs don't always get a lot of publicity, though. A friend of mine went to her college career office to look at job descriptions for federal positions she had heard were interesting. "They were virtually unreadable," she says. "You could not even tell what the person did." Unfortunately, sometimes, that's the whole idea. Those who are already in the know don't necessarily want a lot of outside competition for great jobs that they'd rather give to their own pals. This, long-time readers of the *Monthly* will recognize, is what's known as the "buddy system": Write job descriptions for the good jobs to match the qualifications of friends, and make the jobs sound uninviting to strangers. The unfortunate side effect, of course, is that it feeds the public's view of drones at work and scares away young talent. The actual process of applying for government jobs can also be off-putting—it can take too long to move through the process.

For those who take the plunge, though, the excitement of some government jobs can be addictive. Try to imagine the rush of knowing that swarms of 400-ton jet aircraft, filled with passengers, are depending on you to help them navigate through crowded skies. You could ask the air traffic controllers who were fired by Reagan: Many simply could not find work that was as satisfying in the private sector. They always dream of coming back.

And very few private sector jobs can compare to being a homicide detective. Consider Jerry Giorgio, a detective with the New York Police Department's 34th precinct, and the subject of a fascinating profile in *The New York Times*. One fall evening in 1981, John Chase Wood, a surgery resident at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, was shot through the heart during a mugging. He bled to death at the hospital where he worked, leaving behind a young, pregnant wife. Long after most of the city had forgotten the slaying, Det. Giorgio continued to painstakingly track down leads. He finally cracked the case and made an arrest last summer. Earlier this year, he arrested the criminal's partner.

Giorgio prides himself on never forgetting a case. Three years ago, he solved a case from 1974. The family of Guadalupe Diaz, a 56-year-old widow whose killer Giorgio collared, still

sends him Christmas cards. “[He] is a legend,” Assistant Chief John Hill told the *Times*. “If there were 1,000 Jerry Giorgio’s, there would be no need for the city’s 29,000 policemen.”

A question for the law-school bound: Which sounds more interesting—helping to decipher the latest corporate tax rules or piecing together the clues that point the way to a killer on the loose? One of the central facts that has been lost in the latest paroxysm of government bashing is that government workers are serving the public. In fact, the desire to do something more satisfying than devising a better way to market high-top sneakers is what draws many talented people to these jobs in the first place. Consider the researchers with the Centers for Disease Control who wrestle with the latest viruses to prevent another plague. Or think about the case worker who saves children from truly awful situations—the raging drug-addicted mother, the father who won’t stop beating his family. Tough jobs, but, as the workers will tell you, it genuinely feels good to do their part to improve society.

To judge from letters that Joe Hoffman gets, New Yorkers remember the day that he saved the city. Hoffman is the man in charge of keeping the city’s subways—750 miles of track and 168 stations—running under sometimes crazy conditions. So he was the one who got the phone call at 5 a.m. on a Sunday morning in July. A 4-foot water pipe, among the city’s largest, had burst under Times Square. Whole trains were under water, and the flooding was flowing south down Manhattan, burying the two main north-south lines in water and mud. With morning rush hour only 24 hours away, it looked like the entire city would be filled with snarled traffic and hundreds of thousands of angry commuters. Just about everyone agreed that the next few days would be trying for a city not known for its patience.

Just about everyone, that is, except Hoffman, a tough-talking former Marine who doesn’t believe in excuses. “Joe Hoffman said ‘I’ll have it back up in 24 hours, in time for [morning] rush hour,’” recalls one of his co-workers.

Hoffman organized nearly 1,000 transit workers and put them on the enormous job: Hundreds of electric switch boxes were covered in muck and had to be hand-cleaned, electric relays needed to be replaced, mud needed to be removed from under the third rails by hand. Hoffman even

pitched in himself. He was seen mopping the floors and showing new workers how to operate the pumps. By Monday morning, just before rush hour, Hoffman was riding the test train through the flood zone. He had kept his promise. To get the subways running again, he had to stay up for 24 hours straight. “This is my job,” he says. “You would do exactly the same thing if it were your job.”

Or would you? How many people feel that their work affects so many people’s personal lives that they cannot go home until their job has been done right? The popular conception of a government job is that it is removed from people and essentially powerless. But public workers often have much more power than their private counterparts, because their work has a real impact on lives. The reason that Hoffman was willing to forgo sleep—beyond his dogged determination—is that people depend on him. The same could be said of emergency medical technicians, who spend their days saving lives. Or consider Jim Bradford, a rehabilitation therapist with the Veterans Administration in Long Beach, California. Instead of providing the usual physical therapy, with monotonous leg lifts and arm extensions, he redesigned a garden for his patients to work in, complete with wheelchair-accessible sidewalks and planting beds. These disabled veterans of war get their exercise, and a measure of satisfaction, by cutting flowers and planting vegetables for the hospital cafeteria.

You also do not need to be one of the top guys—one of the “political appointees” with a fancy title—to have real influence. In the first issue of the *Monthly*, Bill Moyers told of how two civil servants, Chester Cooper and George Carver, were able to convince President Johnson’s highest policy advisors to stop the escalation in Vietnam. And Thomas Joe, a federal welfare official, told *The Washington Post* of how he personally put a 26-word clause into a law, virtually unnoticed, that expanded the Social Security Insurance program and cost the government billions of dollars a year. In the second case, the influence was not as admirable, but the point remains: You do not need a high-profile job to make a huge difference.

The ambitious who see glamour in high-profile private sector jobs should talk to Bill Crowfoot, who was recently profiled in the *Los Ange-*

les Times. He had hit the big time: a well-paying job as a corporate lawyer for Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker, specializing in Latin American work. But one day this past spring, as he was drafting a particularly dull promissory note, he thought: "I can't go on with this."

So Crowfoot gave up a lucrative future as a corporate lawyer and decided to take a job with the Pasadena public schools. Fluent in Spanish, he was able to receive an emergency certification and land a teaching position.

Like any first-year teacher, Crowfoot finds the work exhausting. His classes include students of all levels—in one of his classes, he is supposed to be teaching 11th graders World History at the same time he is teaching 10th graders American History—and some of them are recent immigrants who don't know the first thing about either topic. The kids aren't allowed to take their textbooks home because, Crowfoot says, "we might never see them again." Many of the kids come from poor backgrounds; some of them are involved with gangs. Some kids fear being seen carrying around books or notepaper because they might be labeled a "school boy" and become a target of harassment.

But even in these circumstances, Crowfoot is able to make a difference in a few lives. He set up a file cabinet in his room with a folder for each student, so they can keep their notes without fearing the "school boy" label. In his 12th grade economics class, where many eyes glaze over almost instinctively, Crowfoot broke through by having them read an article in *Inc.* magazine about entrepreneurs. "The lowest paid one earned \$72,000 to distribute VW auto parts," says Crowfoot, "and the kids said, 'I can do that'." Crowfoot also phoned the parents of one kid who shows real academic promise but had been dressing the part of a gang-banger; "I wanted the parents to know that he could be a star if he doesn't make some bad choices," says Crowfoot. And he's even invited kids to his house on the weekend to catch up on English.

"I don't want to overstate the amount of impact that teachers have," insists Crowfoot, and with the moments of job satisfaction comes plenty of frustration. Yet he knows that he now has real power to do something positive in people's lives. So Crowfoot laughs when asked if he misses the old job. "Sure, I make less money now, but

even most lawyers are mortgaged to the hilt," he says. "People live to their incomes." And as hard as teaching gets, he says, few things could be worse than "getting up at 4 a.m. to revise and proof legal documents."

Indeed, imagine what a bad rap the *private* sector would have if everyone devoted the same energies to bashing it as they devote to pillorying public employees: Who would want to spend their time, people could say sarcastically, shuffling from sales meeting to sales meeting where nothing ever gets decided? Or would you prefer to find obscure tax loopholes for a faceless corporation? Or do you want to work for the same idiots who managed to spill crude oil across 45 miles of Prince William Sound? It wouldn't be long before just about any job would sound like the seventh circle of Hades.

But it shouldn't be the aim of our political dialogue to demonize work, should it? What we need is for our national leaders—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents—to agree that the work government does, be it federal, state, or local, is important, and that the people who do it deserve respect. Even as they disagree about the scope of government, or whether the federal government should devolve responsibility downward, they should put aside reflexive bureaucrat-bashing and call on the nation's best and brightest to serve.

Some might say that this message doesn't make any sense in a time of government downsizing. But the opposite is much nearer to the truth. When we are asking more and more of fewer people, isn't it all the more important to have the very best? Isn't that something that Democrats and Republicans can agree on?

Imagine if Clinton kept reminding the nation that public service is noble. Think of Newt Gingrich encouraging people to join the revolution by working to transform the public sector. Others could pick up the non-partisan message that we all want a government that works for the people, that we need a constant supply of talent, and that government employees deserve respect.

Perhaps then, more of my friends who feel lost, or who are taking the Law School Admissions Test out of inertia, would hear the call. And, perhaps, it wouldn't be too long before everyone would be saying it: "Working for the government is cool." □

Tidbits & Outrages

LESSONS IN PUBLIC SPEAKING, PART ONE

At a meeting of students in Fairbanks, Alaska, Rep. Don Young argued against federal funding for the arts. Young said the government had funded "photographs of people doing offensive things." Asked for an example, he answered "buttfucking." The congressman said he was "trying to educate" the students.

LESSONS IN PUBLIC SPEAKING, PART TWO

Doris Allen recently retired as speaker of the California State Assembly, but not before labeling her critics "power-mongering men with short penises."

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN WILL STAND ON STAGE SWEATING, WITH A FIVE O'CLOCK SHADOW, AND LIE

The Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace is staging a musical extravaganza in Yorba Linda, California, to be called Nixonpalooza.

THE HUNT FOR BREAD IN OCTOBER

The Russian Navy is using decommissioned nuclear subs to deliver supplies to remote Arctic regions of the country.

THOSE DAMN LIBERAL REDNECKS

In a September installment of "Larry King Live" (guest-hosted by Robert Novak), Senator Jesse Helms took a call from Tilk, Alabama. "I just think that you should get a Nobel Peace Prize for everything you've done to help keep down the niggers," the caller said. "Thank you, I think," Helms replied. He later added, "I think it was a set up—one of the liberals."

NEXT MONTH: WARREN CHRISTOPHER AND FABIO



THE NATION'S CAPITAL DISTINGUISHED SPEAKERS SERIES

1995-1996 SEASON

President Mikhail Gorbachev
Tuesday, October 10, 1995

President George Bush and Mrs. Barbara Bush
Monday, January 22, 1996

Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan
Monday, March 4, 1996

Ms. Oprah Winfrey
Monday, April 8, 1996