On Recruiting Federal Officials

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As a people, we have long availed ourselves of the democratic privileges of lambasting those who serve as Federal officials, and of paying them little. It has never mattered much that the deprecatory jokes and criticisms with which we showered them were little founded in fact; taking potshots at the bureaucrats has been such good clean fun. Nor has it seemed to matter much that our Federal officials, particularly those at the topmost levels, like their counterparts in private business, must support their families. Indeed one could conclude that we Americans believe that there are three things any man can do: Rock a baby; Poke a fire; and Handle any government job. Hence why pay them a reasonable salary?

Probably as a consequence, "For some time," one of these books declares, "there has been presumptive evidence that the United States government is facing serious difficulties in attracting the numbers of able people it needs. . . . It is a matter of grave public concern when any major enterprise essential to social welfare and progress fails to receive its necessary share of these resources."

Why, in a decade when the responsibilities of government are expanding, should the most important and influential governmental enterprise in the world face serious difficulties in attracting the number of able people required to carry out its crucial functions?

Fresh, factual bases for answering this question are provided in two recent volumes. In the first, **The Image of the Public Service** (Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1964. 319 pp. $5), Franklin P. Kilpatrick, Milton C. Cummings, Jr., and M. Kent Jennings picture what Americans think of Federal employees and of the Federal government as an employer. In the second, **The American Federal Executive** (Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn., 1963. 425 pp. $7.50), which was published only a few months earlier than the Brookings study, Lloyd Warner, Paul P. Van Riper, Norman H. Martin, and Orvis F. Collins picture what the men and women who occupy jobs in the upper ranks of the Federal service are really like—what kinds of families they come from, how well they are educated, how broadly they are experienced, and how rapidly they have risen in the public service.

These two volumes consider a significant problem of this evolving, free enterprise, democratic society, and together they apply to that problem the skills of the social psychologist, the political scientists, and the sociologist. The aggregate result of their researches is a rich picture of what citizens think Federal officials are like, and of what these officials are like in fact. These volumes present a juxtaposition of abstraction and fact that provide citizens, and those responsible for getting better people into important governmental posts, a rich mine of information never previously available—and they prod citizens to do something about a problem that has too long been neglected.

The Image of Official and Job

The fact that the Federal government has been unable to compete with private employers for the talent it needs has been explained many times in terms of inadequate pay (and this review was written two days after the House of Representatives voted down proposals originated by President Kennedy and supported by President Johnson to raise the salaries of top level civil servants), lack of opportunities for promotion, political interference, and the burden of inflexible red tape. But Kilpatrick and his colleagues add a new dimension to our understanding of why the Federal government competes so unsuccessfully in the manpower hunt.

The attractiveness of a job and of an employer, they say, is not what *is* (in terms of the nature of the work, compensation, and opportunity) but in how the job and the employer are "perceived" by those the employer would hire. Thus this book tells us (i) what "images" people have of Federal civil servants; (ii) what "images" people have of the Federal government as an employer; (iii) what occupational aims people try to realize and whether they believe they can achieve them in the Federal government; and (iv) how these images and aims vary among people—by occupation, education, age, sex, and other differentiations.

A nationally representative sample of more than 5000 individuals was interviewed to get at these facts. Their responses to a detailed questionnaire constitute a mountainous volume of material that is presented in a companion volume, the **Source Book of a Study of Occupational Values and the Image of the Federal Service** (Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1964. 681 pp. $10). Indeed, at times the reader of *The Image* feels that its authors found the statistical stew they brewed almost indigestible.

Yet, Kilpatrick and his co-workers come up with conclusions that shed light on why many American mothers do not raise their boys to work for the Federal government.

With respect to *the people* who serve in government, they conclude that it is not possible to say that the American public image of Federal officials is either "good" or "bad." When they think of Federal employees, Americans tend to think of the clerk, the mailman, the tax collector, and of red tape. They do not often think of the astronaut, the forest ranger, the defense scientist, the chargé d'affaires in Zanzibar, or the professional administrator.

With respect to *jobs* in the Federal government, most people look at the nature of the job and its rewards when considering employment, not at whether the employer is the Federal government or a private businessman. But they base their judgments on their personal experiences with, and their knowledge of such jobs and on their own values and job goals. Hence, those about to graduate from high school tend to see in government jobs much that they want, and they look with favor on the

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idea of working for the government. On the other hand, college seniors, these authors found, were significantly less attracted by government jobs.

People who value security, who need the assurance of a continuing, even though relatively low income, and who treasure the prospect of a pension tend to find in government employment what they personally want. Do they bring to government the imagination and enterprise government wants? Some do.

Some top level scientists find in government both opportunity and security—the opportunity to work on unprecedented scientific programs and to utilize facilities not found elsewhere and the security of the highly qualified professional who knows that the skill and recognition he can build in government (for example, as a lawyer in the Anti-Trust Division of the Department of Justice or as an astronomer with NASA) will be in demand no matter what may happen to his organization or his superiors.

The variety and excitement of government jobs is little understood by men and women outside government. The businessmen who were interviewed, for example, seldom recognized either quality of Federal employment.

Federal employees tend to think much better of government employment than do people outside the government. Unfortunately, however, this viewpoint is more prevalent among those at the lower levels of government than among those who have risen to the top and whose scarce talent is desperately needed. Similarly—and unfortunately, too—of those outside the government, it is those at the upper levels of talent and education, the ones most needed by government, who are least disposed to work for their government.

The Profile of Those in Government

Kilpatrick and his colleagues report on attitudes and opinions that prevail in the 1960's. They have added precision and sophistication to long-held beliefs about what the prevailing attitudes and opinions were. But, if these attitudes and opinions have long prevailed, what has been the effect upon the caliber of those who serve in the upper levels of the Federal service?

Lloyd Warner and his cohorts present the results of a study of the careers of 12,929 "civilian and military executives" who occupy jobs classified at Grade GS 14 (or its equivalent in the military—captains and colonels) and above. The answer their analysis gives to the question posed is in the form of a "profile of the Federal executive." That profile can best be depicted in terms of a comparison with the profile of a similar sample of business executives, and a basis for such comparison can be found in the following paper and books: "Profiles of government executives," by W. L. Warner *et al.* (in *Business Topics*, Autumn 1961, pp. 13–24); *Occupational Mobility in American Business and Industry* (University of Minnesota Press, 1955), by W. L. Warner and J. Abegglen; and *Big Business Leaders in America* (Harper, 1955), by W. L. Warner and J. Abegglen.

In terms of social origins (that is, the educational and occupational level of the father), approximately equal proportions of both Federal and business executives came from the lower levels—from laborers and white collar workers—and from the upper levels—from fathers who were business owners and professional men. S. H. Aronson's book, *Status and Kinship in the Higher Civil Service* (Harvard University Press, 1964), indicates that the tradition of drawing our top civil servants democratically from all social classes was established more than a century ago, during the times of Jefferson and Jackson. This similarity of background, however, is less apparent when public and private executives are compared in terms of education; Federal executives are, on the whole, more highly educated than are business leaders.

In terms of experience, Federal executives have moved up the hierarchical levels less rapidly than their counterparts in business, and there is further evidence that they moved around, from one employing agency to another, more than business executives move from one employer to another; but it is on this point— the mobility of Federal executives within the government—that I find the evidence least persuasive. Finally, these authors say, it is in their deep sense of mission and calling and a fervid belief in the importance of their work that Federal executives are "set apart from other men."

There is a seeming contradiction in the results presented in these two volumes. Kilpatrick and colleagues claim that the Federal government has not been getting its fair share of the talent in oncoming generations, and they highlight this conclusion by evidence that the most qualified (the better educated!) look with least favor on working for the government. Simultaneously, the Warner group pictures the present corps of Federal executives as relatively well educated, experienced, and dedicated to their tasks.

The contradiction stems in part from the contrasting styles of the two groups of authors and in part from a body of fact not dealt with in either volume. Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings generalize from their survey findings much more freely; they treat the statistical data soundly but deduce from it freely. In the hands of Warner, Van Riper, Collins, and Martin, statistics are made to speak for themselves, and they are less often used as a basis for speculation. Hence, we have less fact or opinion about what manner of men these Federal officials are (venturesome or precedent-bound) than we have about what those outside government think these officials are.

But the seeming contradiction posed by these two volumes, when brought together, tends to disappear, if it is recognized that government has not been able to meet its need for talent in any of the four crises it has faced during the past three decades—the Depression Crisis of the 30's, World War II, the Korean War, and the Technological Crisis presented by the Bomb and Sputnik. In each instance, the existing corps of civil servants then in government had to be supplemented; the Federal government sought able, educated, experienced, and enterprising men and women from business and the universities. They recruited many who would take government jobs when our way of life was threatened—and then, because the recruits found that government was involved in exciting as well as important tasks, many stayed after the crisis had passed.

But the facts presented in these two volumes are foreboding for a future when government will be called on to perform even more varied and complex functions. They offer little hope that the Federal government will be able to renew regularly the human resources that it now has and recruit the variety of high talent that it requires. And, although this was not a prime purpose of either group of authors, they offer little or nothing in the way of a solution for a problem that steadily becomes more serious.