

# A BUREAUCRAT'S TESTAMENT

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I spoke to a group of retired businessmen and their wives, and at the break one of the men came up to me and said, "You are the first person I ever heard call himself a bureaucrat and be proud of it."

I had not realized that, but he was right. I was and I continue to be proud of the 40 years I spent in the public service in jobs ranging from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco, and back to Texas. I had opportunities to work at the federal, state, and local levels of government and in university administration. And now, through teaching at the LBJ School of Public Affairs in Austin and the Bush School of Government and Public Service in College Station, I am able to influence the thinking and attitudes of over 50 young, aspiring bureaucrats every year about how civil servants should approach their work in government and government-related organizations.

Our democratic system of self-governance is at the heart of my very being. I make no apologies for that. Our country has given us all so much, most of which we do not even realize because we have never been forced to live under oppression, or in dire want, or where injustice is the norm in everyday life.

As a single parent, my mother raised four children through the Great Depression, when there was little help for people in her situation until the WPA brought food and quilts to our home late one night and the city gave us food stamps. Later we lived in public housing, attended public schools, and went to college on the GI Bill. As a result of that public investment in a marginal family truly living through troubled times, we all went on to be successful and, incidentally, through military service and taxes on higher incomes, we have paid back the government many times its investment in us.

Someone has said we cannot express our gratitude to institutions. But certainly we can repay our civic rent through service. So in addition to having had an exciting public service career, I have had an opportunity to pay back some of my civic rent.

In the process of working in government I have always felt a need to pay close attention to how government must be nurtured, improved, and protected. That task I also assumed in my own small way while I worked in government agencies at several levels. What garners

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my continuing loyalty to my country is not that it is perfect, but that it can and does improve through a system of government truly representative of the people and their needs as an organized society. Let me share a few of the improvements and continuing betterment that are most noteworthy to me.

Over 100 years ago our U.S. senators from every state were selected for us by the state legislatures, not by direct vote of the people. Nominations for public offices were decided in closed conventions, not in direct voter primaries among the people. The state legislatures and representatives at nominating conventions in those days were owned and controlled by business, industry, trusts, and the railroads.

Rates for shipping farm products from farms and ranches were controlled and set by the railroad barons. The unbounded greed of those controlling government, capital, resources, and labor became so outrageous that they finally triggered a countermovement. The founding of the Granger movement and Farmers' Alliances and the Populists were early attempts by the people to take back their government. And the Progressives and the voters did get back control of their government. Our government became democratic again and we got direct primaries to elect our senators. And we got the referendum, recall, and initiative to enable people to participate more directly in government. And women eventually got the vote. And the people got protection against contaminated food, spoiled meat, poisonous uncontrolled drugs, and bogus vaccinations. Trusts and monopolies set up to rob and exploit the people came under government scrutiny. Private lands that were being destroyed by the robber barons began to be protected.

In sum, the people began to use government as their instrument to improve their lives instead of letting the rich and powerful robber barons use the government as an instrument for their exclusive welfare and further enrichment. Democracy had been at least partially recaptured by the people.

Recently a friend and I rode back to Austin from College Station. He is the retired Executive Vice President of Motorola and President of Nippon Motorola. A typical Aggie, he told me what was on his mind. He said, "Ken, I just can't figure out how you could have spent 40 years working in government. Government is so inefficient. How could you stand it?"

Well, he was cutting close to the bone. He had raised an issue every public servant will hear many times over a career. I had heard it all too often, and now on our drive for two hours I had this critic of

government captive. I could unload in full what I had long wanted to say to such critics.

First, I told him, unlike business, nothing government does ever gets left alone or is decided with complete finality. Every policy is only a temporary agreement and will be reexamined and changed as political views change. Even something as long established as the Social Security System is not secure from being undone or modified. And as a specific example, right now over 150 government programs are proposed to be cut or eliminated in Washington. It is characteristic of government to keep pulling up the carrot to see if it's growing. This results in a lot of wheel-spinning that results in criticisms of government.

Second, everything we do in government is done in a fishbowl, not in a private board room. To get agreement we have to build enough consensus to move forward, we have to moderate extreme views to a middle ground, and that takes time with the holdouts, and compromise is essential to make progress. Webster defines compromise as *mutual accommodation*, not as one side ignominiously giving in. Without compromise we remain gridlocked, which is the epitome of inefficiency when public action is required.

As we say in the trade, "There are three things you should never watch being made: cottage cheese, sausage, and legislation." Deal making, swapping favors, and finding mutual accommodations may not be pleasant to watch or read about, but since the first negotiations among men sitting on a log together in the Stone Age, that is how political progress has come about. And in this country we do almost all of it in public, even if some of it is considered highly indecent.

Third, I told my friend, government seems to be wishy-washy and flip-flops so often because majorities change. They re-form themselves, and marginal voters move from one party or one candidate to another. And majorities have the ability and the right to change much of what government is doing or not doing. Businesses rarely have this problem with stockholders or partners.

And fourth, effective government is built from the grass roots up. Corporations decide what to do and give orders from the top down. Government decisions are decentralized in the President, the Congress, the Executive departments, the Supreme Court, and independent agencies like the Federal Reserve Board, not to mention the multitude of heads of administrative agencies. And in a representative democracy, they are all affected by what we, the voters, think. And the same applies at state

and local levels. In business, decisions are centralized and narrowly focused.

The multifarious purposes of government can't be summed up in a single slogan as many corporations do. McDonald's says, "Beauty is a Hamburger Bun." Caterpillar Tractor says, "Forty-eight hour parts service anywhere in the world." ADM is "supermarket to the world."

At last my friend did speak up. He disagreed that government can't be summed up in a slogan. He said, "How about, 'Don't Mess with Texas?'"

So, yes, government is slow, and all I had given him was four reasons why government appears to be inefficient. But I went on with my argument. Government is *not* inefficient at what it is most important for government to do.

Only government can keep us all from fighting in the streets over what we strongly disagree on. And I don't mean they keep us from fighting by force of arms and police barricades. I mean by having us all feel there is a better way to handle our disagreements than fighting over them. Regardless how rugged, independent, or powerful the individual in America may be, he cannot serve this function.

Effective representative government provides stability by avoiding constant violence among differing groups. An effective system of governance offers the losers in any political contest an alternative to fighting in the streets. Why? Because the losers say to themselves, well, we lost this go around, but we have a decent chance of changing this horrible outcome in the next election. Do you know *anybody* who has been on the winning side in every election? Now there would be a real flip-flopper. We are all on the losing side from time to time. Yet we realize it is more efficient in the long run to try to make change peaceably than through violence.

It is only when the system becomes so ossified and unchangeable that the losers may come to see no chance of obtaining peaceful change on the things they feel very strongly about. Then they begin to think about going into the streets. As we did with the Civil War. As we did with women's suffrage. As we did to gain the rights of labor to bargain for wages. As we did with civil rights. As we did with the Vietnam War. But with the exception of the Civil War, even when the people go into the streets, they were heard by government and accommodations were made to prevent further protest or violence.

The test of a functioning democracy, Carl Becker, the historian, said, is how we manage to keep on counting heads rather than breaking heads.

That is the system of governance that I have been proud to serve during my career.

But we can never be entirely content with our government. When our county got started, women could not vote, men without substantial property could not vote, African Americans could not vote, Native Americans could not vote. In fact, there was a circumstance where a man who marginally held the assets to vote had his mule die, and as a consequence lost his right to vote. When he went to court to protest this disenfranchisement, the judge who heard his case opined whether the vote resided in the citizen or his mule.

In our nation's beginning our government could not prohibit women and children from being forced to work 60 to 70 hours a week, seven days a week, or workers from being mauled or killed on the job without compensation, or the lynching of thousands of African Americans.

Today we are doing better. Carl Schurz's quote is rarely quoted in its entirety. It says not just, "My country, right or wrong." He adds, "When right to be kept right, when wrong to be set right." We've been on that higher road to achieving justice and true representative governance for over 100 years, trying to correct the deficiencies of our early beginnings. We are once again pursuing the purposes and goals set out in our Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to our Constitution—to form a more perfect union. And that can be done only through our government.

Our Founding Fathers in Philadelphia gave us the best constitution they could fashion out of that "inefficient" political process of swapping, dealing, bargaining, and compromising during that summer of 1787. They acknowledged their product was faulty and not perfect. The states were sort of equally unhappy with large parts of it, but it was the best the state leaders felt they could realistically hope for. The Founding Fathers gave us a governing instrument that would permit us to continue to improve our union. They gave us a *structure* for governance and later added a Bill of Rights to protect us against misuses of that governmental structure against the individual.

Many of those early hopes for achieving improved perfection embedded in our Calvinistic heritage had been eroded or lost until Abraham Lincoln set them before the nation again. At Gettysburg he spoke resoundingly about our unfinished work. Our remaining task was not just to end the war, not merely to honor the dead, not just to free the slaves, nor to punish the rebels. What, then, was our unfinished task to which we must rededicate ourselves?

This is where Lincoln rose to provide a godlike perspective of America in those terrible times. He said our unfinished work was, "That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln rose above the public consciousness of the moment and restored to our nation the idea of the Declaration of Independence, that our government, while not ideal yet, could strive toward greater perfection as a true democracy. He took that occasion to challenge his followers to pursue the higher aspirations of our nation. And while we have come a long way since Lincoln and our re-declaration of freedom and justice, we are still working at it.

Lincoln did not on that tragic day, as Garry Wills puts it, indulge in triumphalism or vilification of the foe or righteousness. "He came to change the world, to effect an intellectual revolution. No other words could have done it. The miracle is that these words did. In his brief time before the crowd at

Gettysburg he wove a spell that has not, yet, been broken—he called up a new nation out of the blood and trauma."

We might have a faulty Constitution, Lincoln said, but it is one that permits us to strive toward a more perfect state. And that continuing betterment of our nation is what has made America the country it is.

Again, that is the government in which I have been privileged to be a servant of the people, a civil servant, and I just have to say it, a proud bureaucrat.

Never have I demeaned the role of business, industry, technology, or entrepreneurialism in this country. For it is their efficiency, and the efficiency of our educated workforce, that have provided the economic surplus, the taxes, that make it possible for our government to meet its many expectations. Even if it seems at times we inside government are slow and inefficient in our efforts to be effective and true to our nation's most fundamental democratic purposes.

**LBJ**