

always reason for current authorities to believe that the bureaucracy is more committed to the legacies of the past than the policy agendas of the present.

A bureaucracy wedded to any given political perspective or any particular party inevitably presents problems for the democratic alternation of power. The career civil service may need to be responsive to the present incumbents (a task made difficult by the American system, with its diffused political authority), but it also needs to be regarded as essentially neutral and fair. A senior civil servant from our 1986-87 sample stated in a particularly folksy way the core problem faced by civil servants trying to balance adaptation and neutrality:

We have to start with the frame of reference of the statute that's passed and to be implemented with a given administration in power. The way that law can be administered can vary within a spectrum, depending upon the lineage of the statute. . . . I think it's our job to try to follow what the administration wants to do in its approach to accomplishing that particular statute's objective, without allowing that statute to be distorted. . . . Let's say I'm a politician; you're the bureaucrat. I'm gonna stand over there and wave at you, and I'm gonna say come on over here in the burro pen and I'm going to get you as far as I can get you, but you better not get there. If you do, you're gonna be in trouble. I try to live by that because I know that the administration is gonna try to pull you to their way of thinking as far as they can, and the next administration is gonna do it the other way. And I think it's our job to keep the objective on the highway without getting into the burro pit. . . .

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ROBERT REICH

From *Locked in the Cabinet*

University professor Robert Reich was appointed to President Clinton's cabinet in 1993 to be his Secretary of Labor. Writing with all the candor and humor that is Reich's trademark, he gives readers three important criteria he considered in selecting his assistants and then concludes, "I'm flying blind." His daily schedule is packed, and he is motivated to escape from the "bubble" and actually tour the vast buildings of the Labor Department. Finally, Reich offers an instructive anecdote about an idea developed by an obscure civil servant in the department, an idea that turns out to be a real winner and becomes an important new government policy.

February 1, [1993] *Washington*

I INTERVIEW TWENTY people today. I have to find a deputy secretary and chief of staff with all the management skills I lack. I also have to find a small platoon of assistant secretaries: one to run the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (detested by corporations, revered by unions); another to be in charge of the myriad of employment and job training programs (billions of dollars), plus unemployment insurance (billions more); another to police the nation's pension funds (four trillion dollars' worth); another to patrol the nation's nine million workplaces to make sure that young children aren't being exploited, that workers receive at least a minimum hourly wage plus time and a half for overtime, that sweatshops are relegated to history.

The Department of Labor is vast, its powers seemingly endless. With a history spanning the better part of the twentieth century—involving every major controversy affecting American workers—it issues thousands of regulations, sends vast sums of money to states and cities, and sues countless employers. I can barely comprehend it all. It was created in 1913 with an ambitious mission: *Foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, improve their working conditions, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment.* That about sums it up.

And yet here I am assembling my team before I've even figured it all out. No time to waste. Bill will have to sign off on my choices, then each of them will be nipped for months by the White House staff and the FBI, and if they survive those hurdles each must be confirmed by the Senate.

If I'm fast enough out of the starting gate, my team might be fully installed by June. If I dally now and get caught in the traffic jam of subcabinet nominations from every department, I might not see them for a year. And whenever they officially start, add another six months before they have the slightest idea what's going on.

No other democracy does it this way. No private corporation would think of operating like this. Every time a new president is elected, America assembles a new government of 3,000 or so amateurs who only sometimes know the policies they're about to administer, rarely have experience managing large government bureaucracies, and almost never know the particular piece of it they're going to run. These people are appointed quickly by a president-elect who is thoroughly exhausted from a year and a half of campaigning. And they remain in office, on average, under two

years—barely enough time to find the nearest bathroom. It's a miracle we don't screw it up worse than we do.

Part of my problem is I don't know exactly what I'm looking for and I certainly don't know how to tell whether I've found it. Some obvious criteria:

1. *They should share the President-elect's values.* But how will I know they do? I can't very well ask, "Do you share the President's values?" and expect an honest answer. Even if they contributed money to the campaign, there's no telling. I've heard of several middle-aged Washington lawyers so desperate to escape the tedium of law practice by becoming an assistant secretary for Anything That Gets Me Out of Here that they've made whopping contributions to both campaigns.
2. *They should be competent and knowledgeable about the policies they'll administer.* Sounds logical, but here again, how can I tell? I don't know enough to know whether someone else knows enough. "What do you think about the Employee Retirement Income Security Act?" I might ask, and an ambitious huckster could snow me. "I've thought a lot about this," he might say, "and I've concluded that Section 508(m) should be changed because most retirees have 307 accounts which are treated by the IRS as Subchapter 12 entities." Uttered with enough conviction, bullshit like this could sweep me off my feet.
3. *They should be good managers.* But how to find out? Yesterday I phoned someone about a particular job candidate's management skills, at her suggestion. He told me she worked for him and was a terrific manager. "Terrific?" I repeated. "Wonderful. The best," he said. "You'd recommend her?" I asked. "Absolutely. Can't go wrong," he assured me. I thanked him, hung up the phone, and was enthusiastic for about five minutes, until I realized how little I had learned. How do I know he recognizes a good manager? Maybe he's a lousy manager himself and has a bunch of bozos working for him. Why should I trust that he's more interested in my having her on my team than in getting her off his?

I'm flying blind. . . .

March 2 Washington

This afternoon, I mount a small revolution at the Labor Department. The result is chaos.

Background: My cavernous office is becoming one of those hermetically sealed, germ-free bubbles they place around children born with

immune deficiencies. Whatever gets through to me is carefully sanitized. Telephone calls are prescreened, letters are filtered, memos are reviewed. Those that don't get through are diverted elsewhere. Only [deputy secretary] Tom [Glynn], chief of staff Kitty [Higgins], and my secretary walk into the office whenever they want. All others seeking access must first be scheduled, and have a sufficient reason to take my precious germ-free time.

I'm scheduled to the teeth. Here, for example, is today's timetable:

6:45 A.M.	Leave apartment
7:10 A.M.	Arrive office
7:15 A.M.	Breakfast with MIB from the <i>Post</i>
8:00 A.M.	Conference call with Rubin
8:30 A.M.	Daily meeting with senior staff
9:15 A.M.	Depart for Washington Hilton
9:40 A.M.	Speech to National Association of Private Industry Councils
10:15 A.M.	Meet with Joe Dear (OSHA enforcement)
11:15 A.M.	Meet with Darla Letourneau (DOL budget)
12:00	Lunch with JG from National League of Cities
1:00 P.M.	CNN interview (taped)
1:30 P.M.	Congressional leadership panel
2:15 P.M.	Congressman Ford
3:00 P.M.	NEC budget meeting at White House
4:00 P.M.	Welfare meeting at White House
5:00 P.M.	National Public Radio interview (taped)
5:45 P.M.	Conference call with mayors
6:15 P.M.	Telephone time
7:00 P.M.	Meet with Maria Echeveste (Wage and Hour)
8:00 P.M.	Kitty and Tom daily briefing
8:30 P.M.	National Alliance of Business reception
9:00 P.M.	Return to apartment.

I remain in the bubble even when I'm outside the building—ushered from place to place by someone who stays in contact with the front office by cellular phone. I stay in the bubble after business hours. If I dine out, I'm driven to the destination and escorted to the front door. After dinner, I'm escorted back to the car, driven to my apartment, and escorted from the car, into the apartment building, into the elevator, and to my apartment door.

No one gives me a bath, tastes my food, or wipes my bottom—at least not yet. But in all other respects I feel like a goddamn two-year-old. Tom and Kitty insist it has to be this way. Otherwise I'd be deluged with calls, letters, meetings, other demands on my time, coming from all directions. People would force themselves on me, harass me, maybe even threaten me. The bubble protects me.

Tom and Kitty have hired three people to handle my daily schedule (respond to invitations, cull the ones that seem most promising, and squeeze all the current obligations into the time available), one person to ready my briefing book each evening so I can prepare for the next day's schedule, and two people to "advance" me by making sure I get where I'm supposed to be and depart on time. All of them now join Tom and Kitty as guardians of the bubble.

"How do you decide what I do and what gets through to me?" I ask Kitty.

"We have you do and see what you'd choose if you had time to examine all the options yourself—sifting through all the phone calls, letters, memos, and meeting invitations," she says simply.

"But how can you possibly *know* what I'd choose for myself?"

"Don't worry," Kitty says patiently. "We know."

They have no way of knowing. We've worked together only a few weeks. Clare and I have lived together for a quarter century and even she wouldn't know.

I trust Tom and Kitty. They share my values. I hired them because I sensed this, and everything they've done since then has confirmed it. But it's not a matter of trust.

The *real* criterion Tom and Kitty use (whether or not they know it or admit it) is their own experienced view of what a secretary of labor with my values and aspirations *should* choose to see and hear. They transmit to me through the bubble only those letters, phone calls, memoranda, people, meetings, and events which they believe *someone like me* ought to have. But if I see and hear only what "someone like me" should see and hear, no original or out-of-the-ordinary thought will ever permeate the bubble. I'll never be surprised or shocked. I'll never be forced to rethink or reevaluate anything. I'll just lumber along, blissfully ignorant of what I *really* need to see and hear—which are things that don't merely confirm my preconceptions about the world.

I make a list of what I want them to transmit through the bubble henceforth:

1. The angriest, meanest ass-kicking letters we get from the public every week.
2. Complaints from department employees about anything.
3. Bad news about fuck-ups, large and small.
4. Ideas, ideas, ideas: from department employees, from outside academics and researchers, from average citizens. Anything that even resem-

bles a good idea about what we should do better or differently. Don't screen out the wacky ones.

5. Anything from the President or members of Congress.
6. A random sample of calls or letters from real people outside Washington, outside government—people who aren't lawyers, investment bankers, politicians, or business consultants; people who aren't professionals; people without college degrees.
7. "Town meetings" with department employees here at headquarters and in the regions. "Town meetings" in working-class and poor areas of the country. "Town meetings" in community colleges, with adult students.
8. Calls and letters from business executives, including those who hate my guts. Set up meetings with some of them.
9. Lunch meetings with small groups of department employees, randomly chosen from all ranks.
10. Meetings with conservative Republicans in Congress.

I send the memo to Tom and Kitty. Then, still feeling rebellious and with nothing on my schedule for the next hour (the NEC meeting scheduled for 3:00 was canceled) I simply walk out of the bubble. I sneak out of my big office by the back entrance and start down the corridor.

I take the elevator to floors I've never visited. I wander to places in the department I've never been. I have spontaneous conversations with employees I'd never otherwise see. *Free at last.*

Kitty discovers I'm missing. It's as if the warden had discovered an escape from the state pen. The alarm is sounded: Secretary loose! Secretary escapes from bubble! Find the Secretary! Security guards are dispatched.

By now I've wandered to the farthest reaches of the building, to corridors never before walked by anyone ranking higher than GS-12. I visit the mailroom, the printshop, the basement workshop.

The hour is almost up. Time to head back. But which way? I'm at the northernmost outpost of the building, in bureaucratic Siberia. I try to retrace my steps but keep coming back to the same point in the wilderness.

I'm lost.

In the end, of course, a security guard finds me and takes me back to the bubble. Kitty isn't pleased. "You shouldn't do that," she says sternly. "We were worried."

"It was good for me." I'm defiant.

"We need to know where you *are*." She sounds like the mother of a young juvenile delinquent.

"Hello!" they roar back in unison. Laughter. A good start, anyway. . . .

"Who's first?" I scan the crowd—left, center, right. No hands. I'm back in the classroom, first class of the semester. I've asked the question, but no one wants to break the ice. They have plenty to say, but no one dares. So I'll do what I always do: I'll just stand here silently, smiling, until someone gets up the courage. I can bear the silence.

I wait. Thirty seconds. Forty-five seconds. A minute. Thousands of people here, but no sound. They seem startled. I know they have all sorts of opinions about what should be done. They share them with each other every day. But have they ever shared them directly with the Secretary?

Finally, one timid hand in the air. I point to her. "Yes! You! What's your name?" All eyes on her. The crowd explodes into rumbles, murmurs, and laughs, like a huge lung exhaling. A cordless mike is passed to her.

"Connie," she answers, nervously.

I move to the front of the stage so I can see Connie better. "Which agency do you work in, Connie?"

"Employment Standards."

"What's your idea?"

Connie's voice is unsteady, but she's determined. "Well, I don't see why we need to fill out time cards when we come to work and when we leave. It's silly and demeaning."

Applause. Connie is buoyed by the response, and her voice grows stronger. "I mean, if someone is dishonest they'll just fill in the wrong times anyway. Our supervisors know when we come and go. The work has to get done. Besides, we're professionals. Why treat us like children?"

I look over at Tom. He shrugs his shoulders: Why not?

"Okay, done. Starting tomorrow, no more time cards."

For a moment, silence. The audience seems stunned. Then a loud roar of approval that breaks into wild applause. Many who were seated stand and cheer.

What have I done? I haven't doubled their salaries or sent them on all-expenses-paid vacations to Hawaii. All I did was accept a suggestion that seemed reasonable. But for people who have grown accustomed to being ignored, I think I just delivered an important gift.

The rest of the meeting isn't quite as buoyant. Some suggestions I reject outright (a thirty-five-hour workweek). Others I write down and defer for further consideration. But I learn a great deal. I hear ideas I never would have thought of. One thin and balding man from the Employment and Training Administration has a commonsensical one: When newly unemployed people register for unemployment insurance, why not

determine whether their layoff is likely to be permanent or temporary—and if permanent, get them retraining and job-placement services right away instead of waiting until their benefits almost run out? He has evidence this will shorten the average length of unemployment and save billions of dollars. I say I'll look into it. . . .

September 20 *Washington*

Tom tells me that calls are pouring in from members of Congress demanding that unemployment benefits be extended beyond their normal six months. "We've got to find several billion dollars, quick," says Tom. But I don't know where to find the money other than taking it out of job counseling and training—which would be nuts.

"We *won't* extend unemployment benefits if it means less money for finding new jobs!" I'm defiant.

"I don't think you have a choice," says Tom. "People just don't believe there're new jobs out there. All they know is they had a job. They think it's coming back eventually, and they need money to live on in the meantime."

Kitty rushes in. "I've got it!"

"What?"

"The answer. Remember the fellow at the department town meeting who had the idea for fixing the unemployment system?"

"Vaguely." I recall a tall, hollow-eyed career employee who spoke toward the end.

"He suggested that when newly unemployed people apply for unemployment insurance they're screened to determine whether their layoff is temporary or permanent—and if *permanent* they immediately get help finding a new job. *Well . . .*" Kitty pauses to catch her breath. "I spoke with him at some length this morning. His name is Steve Wandner. Seems that a few years ago he ran a pilot project for the department, trying his idea out. Get *this*: Where he tried it, the average length of unemployment dropped two to four weeks! The poor guy has been trying to sell the idea since then, but no one has ever listened."

"I don't get it. How does this help us?"

"Think of it! Do what he did all over the country, and cut the average length of unemployment two to four weeks. This saves the government \$400 million a year in unemployment benefits. That's \$2 billion over the next five years, if you need help with the math."

"I understand the math. I just don't understand the *point*. So what?

That's money saved in the *future*. How does that get us the money we need now?"

Kitty stares at me with her usual what-is-this-man-doing-as-a-cabinet-member expression. "If we can show that we'll save this money over the next five years, we can use it *now* to offset extra unemployment benefits. It's like extra *cash!*" She lunges toward a stack of paper on the corner of my desk and tosses the entire pile into the air. "*Manna from heaven!*"

"I still don't get it. And by the way, you're making a mess."

Kitty is excited, but she talks slowly, as if to a recent graduate of kindergarten. "Try to *understand*. The federal budget law requires that if you want to spend more money, you've got to get the money from somewhere else. Right? One place you can get it is from future savings, but only if the Congressional Budget Office believes you. Follow me?"

"I think so."

"Now comes our brilliant geek from the bowels of the Labor Department with *proof* that we can save around \$2 billion during the next five years. And the true *beauty* of it" — Kitty beams — "is that this reform brings us a step closer to what *you've* been talking about. We get a law providing emergency extra unemployment benefits — \$2 billion worth — covering the next few months. And *at the same time* we permanently change the whole system so that it's more focused on finding new jobs. It's a twofold! A win-win! Nobody can vote against it! I *love* it!"

I look at Tom. "Is she right?"

"Yup." Tom is impressed.

Kitty begins to dance around the office. She is the only person I have ever met who can fall in love with proposed legislation. . . .

November 24 *The White House*

B sits at his elaborately carved desk in the Oval Office before the usual gaggle of cameras and spotlights. Clustered tightly around him in order to get into the shot are five smiling senators and ten smiling House members. B utters some sentences about why people who have lost their jobs shouldn't have to worry that their unemployment benefits will run out. He signs the bill into law. The congressmen applaud. He stands and shakes each of their hands. The spotlights go out and the cameras are packed away. The whole thing takes less than five minutes.

Kitty is here, smiling from ear to ear. I congratulate her.

Against a far wall, behind the small crowd, I see Steve Wandner, the hollow-eyed Labor Department employee who first suggested the idea

that was just signed into law. I made sure Steve was invited to this signing ceremony. I walk over to where he's standing.

"Good job." I extend my hand.

He hesitates a moment. "I never thought . . ." His voice trails off. "I want to introduce you to the President."

Steve is reluctant. I pull his elbow and guide him toward where B is chatting energetically with several members of Congress who still encircle him. They're talking football — big men, each over six feet, laughing, telling stories, bonding. It's a veritable huddle. We wait on the periphery. Several White House aides try to coax the group out of the Oval. It's early in the day, and B is already hopelessly behind schedule. Steve wants to exit, but I motion him to stay put.

The herd begins to move. I see an opening. "Mr. President!" B turns, eyes dancing. He's having fun. It's a good day: signing legislation, talking sports. It's been a good few months: the budget victory, the Middle East peace accord, the NAFTA victory. He's winning, and he can feel it. And when B is happy, the happiness echoes through the White House like a sweet song.

"Come here, pal." B draws me toward him and drapes an arm around my shoulders. I feel like a favorite pet.

"Mr. President, I want you to meet the man who came up with the idea for today's legislation." I motion Steve forward.

With his left arm still around my shoulders, B extends his right hand to Steve, who takes it as if it were an Olympic trophy.

"Good work," is all B says to Steve, but B's tight grip and his fleeting you-are-the-only-person-in-the-world-who-matters gaze into Steve's eyes light the man up, giving him a glow I hadn't thought possible.

It's over in a flash. B turns away to respond to a staffer who has urgently whispered something into his ear. But Steve doesn't move. The hand that had been in the presidential grip falls slowly to his side. He stares in B's direction. The afterglow remains.

I have heard tales of people who are moved by a profound religious experience, whose lives of torment or boredom are suddenly transformed, who actually *look* different because they have found Truth and Meaning. Steve Wandner — the gangly, diffident career bureaucrat who has traipsed to his office at the Labor Department every workday for twenty years, slowly chipping away at the same large rock, answering to the same career executives, coping with silly demands by low-level political appointees to do this or that, seeing the same problems and making the same suggestions and sensing that nothing will ever really change — has now witnessed the impossible. His idea has become the law of the land. . . .