

What Government Information Means to Me (or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Bureaucracy)

When I think of Government Information, I cannot help but think of work. For the past eleven years—seven of them as a military “Fed” (Government Issue, although “GI” is not used much anymore) and nearly four as a contractor—civil service has been a third (or so) of my life. When I try to think of what government is outside of my career choice, the images are not flattering, nor are they as clear. Bureaucracy and deficit spending spring to mind. Granted this is no revelation, personal or otherwise, but maybe this next part is. The reason I am in government work is because it is so poorly managed and I would like to make a positive splash against the current of dishonest selfishness. By this I mean that although the Federal Government has been spending more than it takes in for a long time, the international mind-set is still that the U.S. can feed the poor, fight the world’s battles, and care for the down-and-outs.

Hastily kicking away the soapbox, my personal awareness of government information causes me to both question and be impressed by the thoroughness of its collection. On the questionable side, exhibit one is how I personally have been counted in every census I should have been part of. In 1960 I was the youngest of eight children and in 1970 I was the eighth of nine children. However, the forms used for these two counts allowed for only six children, with a note to parents of larger families saying basically “check here and a census official will get back to you.” Never happened. In 1980, the census form arrived at my mailbox at Penn State. “Cool,” I thought. “I’ll finally be counted.” I was, twice. My father, since I was still my parents’ dependent, counted me on his form, too. Now, perhaps they cross-referenced these two. (How many Jeffrey Brian Romanczucs could there be in Pennsylvania?) However, it gets worse. In 1990, now part of a three person family serving in Germany, my wife, son, and I were not counted at all. After the fact, the Air Force said it was going to send its information to the Department of Commerce, but the whole thing left most of the Americans in Europe

scratching our heads. So, I have probably been uncounted three times and once counted twice.

Exhibit two (my *thorough* example) concerns everybody's least favorite service, Internal Revenue. On my 1986 return, I did something not quite right. We bought a house; to make the down payment, I cashed in a retirement plan from my two years as a teacher. Since I counted this money in the house buying reporting, I figured I was justified in not counting it as formerly "tax-sheltered" money. Not so, the IRS said four years later, the end result being we had to pay not only the back taxes but also penalties and interests. My wife and I were some weird combination of impressed and chagrined.

Both of these examples demonstrate long term government influences on me individually. As a day-to-day influence on the world at large, arguably the best example is Mr. Greenspan's tinkering with the interest rates, which causes the banks to react, which causes Wall Street to react, which causes the world stock markets to react. In the hypothetical sense, since I never really cared enough about money to understand it completely (and figure I will never have enough money to be greatly concerned), the domino theory of finances is fascinating to watch. The other financial aspect of government, and one I unfortunately understand a little better, is the national debt. I am not optimistic the government will ever balance the budget because too many people are working against each other. The best they will do is tread water year to year, as each unexpected expense eats away at any realization of us ever digging ourselves out of this easy credit quicksand.

On that happy note, coming back to my jobs in government, I can only say that tracking government information day in/day out is not pretty for several reasons. The main ugliness is how often the information changes. I am working now on evaluating 28 Department of Energy orders which were recently reissued. The whole numbering scheme has changed, along with a lot of the content of the orders themselves. The goal is admirable: to have the rules (as in, Code of Federal Regulations), orders, standards, and guides, all match each other, with only the level of detail being broad at the general "rule" level, down to the distinct (often thick) implementation guides. In practice, though, the conversion has been scatter-shotted, with some Deputy Secretaries diving in

and others dragging their bureaucratic feet. Most of the time I cannot even get an analysis into writing and give it to our client before something changes it.

Not to be totally negative, I think the main reason information in a democracy gets ugly is because there is so much of it. Still, it beats dictatorships. The U.S. Government may be bloated and poorly managed, but we do not have a history purging military coup every six months or have young, black-bearded revolutionaries in fatigues hanging on and on to become old, gray bearded revolutionaries in fatigues. Our government may “sugar coat” the information it publishes. Their statistics can be pretty elastic, but I do not think they purposely lie (at least not all the time, or even often). The balance, if it can be called that, comes in because our news media are at least free to print the darker side, their only fear being possible litigation, not banishment or death.

I have tried to present not just the good and bad of government information, but the personal and universal, the small and large, the work and play, the grim and light. Like you, because I am one I do not see all government workers as “dead wood.” I may tend to concentrate on what is wrong with government information processes, but this is only because what is right does not need a lot of words or work.