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"BETTER SERVANTS FOR DEMOCRACY"

AN ADDRESS

By

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OF THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

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Forty-six years ago, President Grover Cleveland in his first annual message to Congress, made this significant observation on the subject that is the common interest of the members of this Conference.

"The course of civil service reform in this country," he said, "- - -illustrates how strong a hold a movement gains upon our people which has underlying it a sentiment of justice and right, and which at the same time promises better administration of their government."

There can be no question that in 1939, civil service is still firmly entrenched in the respect and esteem of the American people. It still appeals to the rank and file as inherently just, inherently right, and inherently productive of better administration of government.

Yet, somehow, we have not made the progress that might have been anticipated in Cleveland's day for a reform so obviously necessary and so undeniably progressive. Perhaps the public has been apathetic - as it so often is about reforms of the less spectacular variety. Perhaps those who have a stake in the spoils system have been skillful and energetic enough to ward off a sweeping reform movement. Probably the reason is a mixture of both.

In any event, it is the undoubted truth that the field for civil service reform is still, in the year 1939, broad and fertile. A few facts will help to outline the picture:

In the service of our national government, there are approximately nine hundred thousand civil employees, receiving in salaries approximately one and one-half billion dollars a year. In state and local governments, it is reliably estimated there are over three million employees, being paid

over four billion dollars a year. That gives us the astonishing total of approximately four million government employees, receiving in salaries nearly six billion dollars a year!

I am told there are approximately thirty million families in the United States and that their average income is about fifteen hundred dollars a year. On that basis, the average family's share of the expense of the public payroll is two hundred dollars a year, or over thirteen percent of its total income! Some people have a different view, but I am convinced that it is the average families, in the main, who foot the bill for this enormous payroll, either through direct taxation, or through indirect taxation in the purchase of commodities and services.

I am sure you will agree with me that thirteen percent of a family's annual income for the public payroll alone is too much. Either family income should be increased or the public payroll should be reduced. And at this moment the most immediately promising step seems to be an operation on the public payroll.

But the cost of government is not our only concern.

To be effective, the laws produced by the democratic process must be administered with a maximum of efficiency and a maximum of integrity. If the laws themselves are unsound, complete and effective administration will, very properly, demonstrate their unsoundness and eventually bring about their repeal. If they are good laws, their benefits can be fully realized only through complete and honest administration. Without that kind of administration the best work of the people's representatives, the best intentions of political parties, and the highest aspirations of the people themselves

are foredoomed to frustration.

The sum of it all is this: Other factors being normal, the key to economical and successful government is the employment and retention in the public service of an administrative personnel of the highest professional qualifications, efficiency, and morale.

But if we accept that rule, as we must, then we must also accept this parallel truth: The ancient practice of passing out government jobs in payment of political debts must end. With it we must abandon the old companion idea that the government payroll is a legitimate field for charity and benevolence toward special groups and persons who lack qualification for public service. Both notions are unsound, poor political science, and above all, poor public economy.

In the past ten years, public interest in these and other problems of public employment has grown to an amazing extent. The primary reason is simply that our government has become so complex, so important to our social and economic well-being, and so costly to our taxpayers, that questions of its management, and particularly its personnel management, can no longer be ignored.

The creed of sound public personnel management is very simple. Briefly stated, it is this: The smallest possible personnel, well paid and carefully selected to insure the highest possible qualifications and morale, will conduct the public business efficiently, at the lowest possible cost to our citizens and taxpayers. In my estimation, the problem of putting that philosophy into practice is one of the greatest and most fundamental problems confronting the American people today.

Inevitably we come back to the old, old questions: If the need is so obvious and the program so fundamentally simple, what is holding us back? Why has it not been put into effect before? And how shall we go about it now?

My own experience, which I believe has been duplicated by many others, has indicated to me that the answer lies partly in the fact that a large percentage of public jobs has been, and is today, controlled by machine politics and special interest groups. The opposition of these groups, together with public ignorance of much of the inefficiency, graft, and waste resulting from the spoils system, has been enough to undermine virtually every substantial effort to establish and enforce sound personnel management in our government.

What is the solution? There is only one thing that can do an effective job in the long run and that is a real awakening of our citizens - the people who pay the bills - to the influences that are standing in the way of reform and to the conditions that have grown up under their protection. The task of bringing that awakening about is a problem and a challenge for real American statesmanship.

But before we start to move, we must have an accurate notion of where we are going and what kind of a structure we want to erect.

It is probably true that most people believe the objective is what they loosely refer to as "civil service", without having a very clear idea of just what that is.

The civil service movement started as a reform. Its approach was a purely negative one - that of ending the depredations of the spoilsmen.

That approach was sound enough, but it did not, and does not today, go far enough. It does not insure that highly qualified employees are always obtained for the public service, and it does not guarantee that the number of government workers is held to a minimum. It is probably not far off the mark to say that the old negative method of attacking public personnel problems is actually not much of an improvement over the spoils system, and should not be extended to new fields until its weaknesses and shortcomings are remedied.

This may seem to be a severe criticism, but my experiences with prevailing personnel practices in our national government have convinced me that it is substantially correct. What we need, and must have, today is not a negative system designed merely to prevent patronage. We need, and must have, positive, progressive, efficient personnel management aimed not merely at ending the spoils system but especially at the achievement of real efficiency and economy.

It seems to me that the problem of improving the quality of public service boils down to two large jobs.

First, the people must be made aware of the tremendous importance of sound and efficient personnel management in government - so aware of it that they will tolerate no substitute.

Second, the techniques and procedures of public personnel administration must be refined to a point where they will not only prevent spoils in government, but will bring into the public service the best available employees, to the end that the public business will be efficiently administered at the lowest possible cost to our citizens.

The first of these tasks, I say again, is something to test the mettle of our true statesmen and real political leaders. The second is a problem for the members of this conference, and for your colleagues throughout the country. And until both of these challenges are met, neither the United States nor any other country can hope to have satisfactory and reasonably economical government administration.

I want to leave with you one precautionary word. In saying that our public payrolls should be reduced, I am not proposing drastic curtailment of governmental functions and activities. On the contrary, I am strongly of the opinion that every governmental function - national, state, and local - which is clearly necessary to protect the physical and mental security of our people in this period of transition should be continued. I do maintain that instead of four million employees, less than three million should be plenty, and instead of a payroll of six billion dollars per year, less than five billion should suffice.

We live in an era when great social and economic questions, and government's relation to them, dominate our thoughts. This is natural and proper. When a nation is in reconstruction, the magnetism of events within the process cannot be denied.

But we cannot safely forget the more commonplace and unspectacular, yet tremendously important, task of placing the machinery of government in smooth running order. A law may be progressive and sound and socially necessary, but it will fail if the machinery is lacking. But let the machinery be sound, and that law, without waste or friction, will serve its true purpose of making democracy work.