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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

The Scholar in Politics

"Preparations for a Politic Life: Sir Thomas More's Entry into the King's Service" by Jerry Mermel, in *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Spring 1977), 6697 College Station, Durham, N.C. 27708.

After Henry VIII acceded to the English throne in 1509, the Dutch humanist Erasmus remarked on the number of scholars that had enlisted in royal service. The King, he observed, had created "not a court but a temple of the Muses."

For 16th-century men of letters, the decision to enter politics turned on a resolution of the age-old argument over the merits of the contemplative vs. the active life, writes Mermel, a former professor of literature at Touro College. Thus, "while many Tudor literati were attracted to the classical ideal of the eloquent scholar-statesman," they also worried about the "disappointments and compromises that might attend the quest for power or influence" in government. Some like Erasmus, chose to keep their distance from civic matters and to influence kings and courtiers through their writings. Others, like Thomas More, chose to combine an education in the classics with the study of law in preparation for "a politic life."

More began his political career in 1504, when, at the age of 26, he served as a burgess in Parliament. His tenure in this position was short, due to his opposition to Henry VII's request for additional funds. However, he later wrote five fulsome epigrams to honor Henry VIII's coronation, "each filled with eloquent compliments"; shortly thereafter, he was commissioned by the new King to carry out an inquest in Middlesex. After holding several municipal and diplomatic positions, More began work on the first volume of his *Utopia* in 1515.

The stern argument against government employment in *Utopia* and More's reluctance to confide his ambitions to Erasmus (who regarded royal service as a form of slavery) suggest that More was still plagued

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by doubts concerning the mixing of scholarship with politics. The inconclusive nature of *Utopia's* dialogue on court service, however, provided a hint of More's later leap into royal affairs. By February 1516, Ammonius could write to Erasmus that More "now haunts the smoky chambers of the Palace." The decision was not easy, says Mermel, "but it was one for which [More] had long been readying himself."

Reorganization and Civil Service

"Can Carter Chop Through the Civil Service System?" by Joel Havemann, in *National Journal* (Apr. 23, 1977), Government Research Corp., 1730 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

President Carter has vowed to reorganize and consolidate federal executive agencies. He has also pledged that reorganization will not involve firing or demoting any government employees. While Congress has given the President authority to enact wholesale reforms, there is some question, says *National Journal* reporter Havemann, whether Carter can deliver on either promise, let alone both.

One major problem, he notes, is simply getting a grip on the 2.8 million civilian workers who make up what is called, usually derisively, the federal bureaucracy. While Zachary Taylor, under the old patronage "spoils" system, could replace a third of all federal employees in one year (1849-50), passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883 brought an end to such abuses. The bill, establishing the Civil Service Commission, was intended to bring the needs of department managers and the rights of workers into balance. Havemann quotes critics, among them Carter aide Jules Sugarman, who contend that the pendulum has swung too far. "We've erected a pretty firm wall against effective managerial action," Sugarman complains. It is now virtually impossible to fire employees for poor performance; built-in seniority rules make it difficult for federal managers to reorganize their own staffs; and Civil Service permission is required for even the most routine personnel measures.

The Carter administration can fill only about 2,200 jobs—mostly high-level policy positions—without having to deal with the Civil Service. The remaining "career" Civil Service jobs, from grades GS-1 up through GS-18 are subject to labyrinthine regulations. Even the Civil Service Commission admits that, as a result, hiring delays are excessive. For grades GS-9 through GS-12, the time required to fill a vacancy is three months; GS-13 through GS-15, six months; GS-16 through GS-18, more than a year. Even more difficult is firing, which can take from 6 to 18 months or even longer, depending on how tenaciously an employee manipulates appeal procedures.

Havemann's conclusion: Even if the administration's reorganization proposals are acceptable to congressional committees, upper-level bureaucrats, and special interest groups, they could well be impeded by the "harsh reality" of the Civil Service system.