

## *How to Fix Government*

Sargent Shriver, the first director (1961–66) of the Peace Corps, ought to be a role model for government's reinventors, contends Charles Peters, editor of the *Washington Monthly* (Dec. 1995).

*Although he later went on to perform many other assignments with distinction, it was at the Peace Corps that he made the administrative innovations that should earn him canonization as the man who showed us how to make government work. In the present time, when many despair whether government can do anything right, what he did to make the Peace Corps a success could not be more relevant.*

*What he understood was, first, the importance of selecting the right people to staff the organization and of getting rid of those who didn't work out, and second, the importance of knowing better than anyone else what was happening where the rubber met the road for his agency, which in the case of the Peace Corps was what the volunteers were doing in the field. . . .*

*And just as Shriver did not hesitate to fire staff members who didn't work out, as many as a third of a volunteer group would be dropped from a training program if it appeared they could not do the job overseas.*

*Other government administrators do not have the power over personnel that Shriver exercised. Shouldn't we give it to them if we are truly serious about making government work?*

Republican legislative candidates win to ensure his own election. When, on arriving in the west-central part of the state, he noticed clusters of itinerant Irish laborers around the railroad station, he became worried, Neely says. "Irish-Americans always worried Republicans, for these Catholic newcomers to the country were notorious for their allegiance to the Democratic party and for their footloose ways." Since there was no voter registration then and election laws were lax, voting fraud was easily accomplished.

In a letter to a Republican operative, Lincoln offered "a bare suggestion": "When there is a known body of these voters, could not a true man, of the 'detective' class, be introduced among them in disguise, who

could, at the nick of time, control their votes? Think it over. It would be a great thing, when this trick is attempted upon us, to have the saddle come up on the other horse. I have talked, more fully than I can write, to Mr. [John Locke] Scripps, and he will talk to you. If we can head off the fraudulent votes we shall carry the day."

Neely does not say (perhaps it is unknown) whether Lincoln's plan was carried out, but, in any case, he failed to unseat Douglas. Curiously, Neely observes, the indiscrete letter is seldom included in Lincoln anthologies. The sooner historians stop trying to keep this supreme politician free from the "taint" of politics, he concludes, "the closer we will come to understanding him."

## *Adventures of a Bureaucrat*

"Adventures in Wonderland: A Scholar in Washington" by Diane Ravitch, in *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1995), Phi Beta Kappa Society, 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

In July 1991, during the Bush administration, Ravitch, the noted education historian and author, was sworn into office as an assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. She was put in charge of the Office of Educational Research and

Improvement (OERI) and given a grand office with a full view of the Capitol. During the next 18 months, she writes, she found herself "constantly amazed or angered by the ways things worked."

OERI, her \$450 million domain, had

some 500 employees, including 130 who worked for the respected National Center for Education Statistics. (Like every other bureaucracy, hers was rife with acronyms. OERI was a POC—"principal operating component"—and Ravitch herself, as she "discovered to my alarm," was a "POC-head.") OERI also was in charge of, among other things, dozens of miscellaneous small programs, many of dubious worth but, as she soon learned, virtually all sacrosanct.

Ravitch and her deputy managed to get the ordinarily sluggish bureaucracy to produce "a steady stream of publications," but it took "constant pressure and nagging." Many career employees "worked very hard and very effectively," Ravitch says, but others, some of them making as much as \$110,000 a year, "did nothing at all, ever, and it was impossible either to remove them or to get them to do any work."

Ravitch's worst problems, however, were on Capitol Hill, where Democrats then controlled both houses of Congress. While

the senators and their staffs "were always cordial and straightforward," House Democrats and their staffs, after 40 years in the majority, "exhibited the arrogance of uncontested power." Their attitude was that they alone "decided every educational issue and the department did their bidding." Anything the department did that was not to their liking was "politicization," she notes, "but nothing that they themselves did—like directing federal funds to their favorite causes or harassing administration officials—ever amounted to 'politicization.'"

With the advent of the Clinton administration in 1993, Ravitch left public service. Among the lessons she took away with her: "The federal government is run by Congress, especially by the House of Representatives, which controls the budget and decides how much money will be spent, who will receive it, and what they may or may not spend it on." Another lesson: turnover in public office is a good thing.

## *The Motor Voter Surprise*

"Motor Trouble for Democrats" by Geoff Earle, in *Governing* (Aug. 1995),  
2300 N St. N.W., Ste. 760, Washington, D.C. 20037.

Fearing it could only hurt Republicans and help Democrats, GOP leaders in Congress and elsewhere dug in their heels against the 1994 "motor voter" law, which lets citizens register to vote when they renew their driver's licenses. Democrats, for their part, expected to sign up millions of "natural" Democrats—the poor, the young, the mobile—dissuaded from enrolling in the traditional ways. In California, GOP governor Pete Wilson called the law "flatly unconstitutional" and refused to enforce it (until a federal court last June made him); a handful of other Republican governors similarly resisted. As it turns out, however, reports Earle, an editor at *Congressional Quarterly*, it seems that if anyone should be worried, it's the Democrats.

In the first three months after the legislation took effect at the start of 1995 (later in some states), it produced two million new registrants, Earle says, including "a large new crop of independents—many of them in areas where Democrats might have

expected to reap motor voter dividends." In Kentucky, for example, where only three percent of voters were registered as independents in 1992, about 25 percent of the new voters registered as independents. Registration rose fastest in the increasingly Republican South. In Florida, 250,000 people registered under the new law. In both states, the two parties lost ground to the fast-growing independents, but the Democrats lost much more than the Republicans.

In the end, though, the motor voter law may not much hurt or help either party, Earle says. Young people and people who recently moved are prominent among motor voter registrants, and when it comes to voting, neither group acts much differently from their neighbors. If everybody who might have registered and voted in the last election had done so, Berkeley political scientist Raymond Wolfinger says, "the outcome . . . would have been about the same."