

# Search for Efficiency in Federal Record Management: Introduction

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IT has been said that government, like clothes, is a sign of lost innocence. But governments themselves have sometimes shown a certain naivete, and certainly for a long time the Government of the United States remained in a state of innocence as to the problems of official records — largely, of course, because those problems had not yet become crucial. Although the Government subjected itself to a long series of self-examinations during the first century of its existence, very few of them concerned its official records, and those few touched upon the subject in only a limited or superficial manner. Not until the beginning of its second century did the Government attempt a general, overall attack on the problem.

From its establishment to the present day there have been well over 200 investigations of various aspects of the Federal administration. In a "Bibliography of Inquiries Into the Conduct of the Business in the Executive Departments of the United States," compiled by the Taft Commission on Economy and Efficiency,<sup>2</sup> no less than 206 such investigations are listed for the period between 1789 and 1909. One hundred and five of these were conducted by agencies of Congress, 1 by a Presidential agency, the Keep Commission, 94 by the executive departments,<sup>3</sup> and 6 by private firms hired by individual departments.

Analysis of the timing of these investigations leads one to conclude that after 1880 the Government was increasingly aware of the need for economy and efficiency in its work. Forty-six of the congressional inquiries listed by the Taft Commission were made during the 90 years between 1789 and 1880, 59 in the 30 years between 1880 and 1910. Of the departmental self-investigations, including those made by private firms, 8 were made between 1789 and 1880, 92 between 1880 and 1910.

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<sup>2</sup> Records of the Commission on Economy and Efficiency, Record Group 51, file 145, in the National Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these departmental inquiries were made in conjunction with the work of the Cockrell Committee, the Dockery-Cockrell Commission, and the Keep Commission.

Most of the investigations before 1910 were limited in the number of agencies covered or the phases of administration examined. Sixteen of the 105 congressional investigations were directed at all or a majority of the executive departments, but most of these were concerned with single administrative problems, chiefly accounting matters and retrenchment in expenditures. A few, however, related to matters of organization and personnel, and two — those of the Cockrell Committee and the Dockery-Cockrell Commission, occurring after 1880 — concerned general administrative problems of all the agencies. The remaining 89 congressional investigations related to specific executive departments. Six concerned the State Department, 12 the Treasury Department, 8 the War Department, 1 the Department of Justice, 10 the Post Office Department, 18 the Navy Department, 6 the Interior Department, 6 the Agriculture Department, 6 the Department of Commerce and Labor, and 16 the Government Printing Office. None of these was an overall survey of the agency, and most of them were concerned with single problems such as organization, expenditures, buildings occupied, laws regulating the agency, accounting methods, frauds, and contracts.

In the late 1880's there began a series of increasingly comprehensive and methodically searching explorations into the business and business methods of the Federal Government. This series began with the Cockrell Committee (1887-89); and it has continued down to our time with the Dockery-Cockrell Commission (1893-95), the Keep Commission (1905-9), the Taft Commission (1910-13), the Joint Committee on the Reorganization of Government Departments (1921), the President's ("Brownlow") Committee on Administrative Management (1936-37), the Senate Select Committee ("Byrd Committee") on Investigation of Executive Agencies of the Government (1936-37), and the two recent ("Hoover") Commissions on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government (1947-49 and 1953-55). The aim of all these investigations was to bring about greater economy and efficiency in the operations of the Government.

Several forces stimulated the drive for better administration in the Government. Basic among them was the country's economic, scientific, and technological development and its growing stature in international relations. Between the Civil War and the First World War, the United States emerged as a great industrial nation and world power. In that period its land area and natural resources were enlarged and enriched by the acquisition of additional territory. The

number and size of its industrial organizations vastly increased. Its agricultural, mineral, and manufactured production soared. Its domestic and foreign commerce grew. Its internal communication systems extended. And its population steadily mounted.

Along with this increase in the country's natural and industrial resources, the forces of labor expanded, drawing in many workers from the multitudes of immigrants who poured into the country. Stresses and crises in labor-management relations developed, and labor organizations grew in size and power. In the area of management, enormous corporations merged to form even more enormous trusts. Business flourished for a time in a golden age of *laissez faire*.

Under the pressure of changing social and economic conditions, the old idea that government should be limited to the essential functions of maintaining order at home and security against foreign aggression, with a minimum of restraint on the individual, gradually gave way to the theory that government should have a hand in all activities that affect the public welfare. The Federal Government began to move into social and economic areas, stimulating and aiding the development of the country's resources and regulating the social and economic effects of the expansion.

Many new functions were taken on by the Government, and many of its older activities increased. Bureau was added to bureau and program heaped upon program. The organizational structure of the executive branch grew in size and complexity; its personnel multiplied; its physical plant and equipment expanded. Without system or plan, in response to the exigencies of the time, the Government grew big.

With the Government's growth in size came increasing costs of operation but not proportionately increasing revenue. Even before the outbreak of the First World War, the Government had become a huge, complex, and costly mechanism; and its need for administrative reform was patent. But — tied down by statutes, hampered by the interplay of congressional politics and bureaucratic jealousies, and weighted by inertia — the executive departments were unable, of their own accord, to make the needed reforms.

Events since the First World War continue the story on a grander scale. Hot and cold world wars, economic booms and economic depressions, scientific and technological advances, continuously expanding industry, increased agricultural productivity, growth in the power of labor, the merging of large corporations, increasing Federal concern in social and economic matters, international assistance programs, and world leadership have brought the Government to a

size and complexity that dwarf the conditions that prevailed before World War I.

In private industry, also grown large and complex, the importance of good administration was early recognized and acted on. Free to change their organization at will, unencumbered by statutory red tape, and spurred by the hard necessity of making a profit to survive and grow, private industrial organizations took great strides in developing new and more efficient methods for the conduct of their affairs. The theory of scientific management evolved around the turn of the century, and principles of efficient administration were formulated, to be applied in the office as well as on the production line. The voice of the efficiency expert was heard in the land, crying out his tenets of fact-gathering and administrative planning. With Frederick W. Taylor leading the way and many after him refining and developing theories and methods of business efficiency, private industry discarded old ways of thinking and of doing and adopted new and more effective methods and equipment suited to its modern needs.

Congress, highly sensitive to rising costs of Government, was aware of the contrast between Government and private industry in efficiency of organization and operations. Eloquent speeches were made in protest against the Government's wastefulness, overlapping functions, and obsolete business methods. Congressional pressure for economy and efficiency in the executive branch increased. And Congress and the President sought, particularly after 1880, to find a way to those virtues through repeated investigations of organization, functions, and methods throughout the whole of the executive branch.

One of the problems of efficient administration that still plague the Government is the control and management of the great volume of official words it is creating.

In 1955 the National Archives began a seminar for its staff on the subject of the record problems and practices of the Government. Among the papers presented at the seminar were three studies of the most important efforts of the Government to bring efficiency and economy into its record management. The first of these, by Harold T. Pinkett, covering the Cockrell Committee, Dockery Commission, and Keep Committee appears in this issue of the *American Archivist*. The two other papers, on the Taft Commission on Economy and Efficiency and the Hoover Commissions, will appear in subsequent issues.