Investigations of Federal Record-keeping, 1887-1906

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National Archives

"THE people demand reform in the administration of the Government and the application of business principles to public affairs." [2] Such was the view in 1885 of Grover Cleveland, one of the foremost advocates of administrative reform in the Federal Government during the last quarter of the 19th century. Although this demand was most evident in the exciting fight for civil service reform, it also appeared in a less spectacular movement for a general reform of Government operations. The movement took shape with the establishment of a Senate investigating committee in 1887, went forward with the work of a joint congressional commission created in 1893, and gained impetus from a Presidential committee appointed in 1905.[3] Recordkeeping as a phase of administration received considerable attention in the work of these investigating bodies. In the period following the Civil War new political, economic, and social conditions brought about a tremendous expansion in Government functions. Administrative practices that had been satisfactory or harmless when agency functions were few or relatively simple were often found unsatisfactory or even harmful when the functions became more numerous and complex. By the time of Cleveland's first administration the need for reform appeared, especially in administrative delay. As Gustavus A. Weber, a prominent student of the subject, has pointed out: "Not a few bureaus were months and even years behind in their work. The feeling was very strong that this delay was only partially due to an inadequate force; that primarily it was due to archaic business methods and especially to the performance of much useless work." [4]

[1] Paper read at a staff seminar of the National Archives, Jan. 6, 1956. The writer is on the staff of the Agriculture and General Services Branch of the National Archives.

[2] *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States*, p. 141 (82d Cong., 2d sess., *H. Doc.* 540).

[3] Earlier investigations authorized by Congress or the executive branch of the Federal Government had been concerned only with particular administrative methods or operations in particular offices. See Gustavus A. Weber, *Organized Efforts for the Improvement of Methods of Administration in the United States*, p. 44 (New York, 1919).

[4] Weber, *Improvement of Methods*, p. 57.

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An important part of the archaic methods of many Federal agencies was their cumbersome and outmoded system of keeping records. To begin with, it was a system without any legal provision for the disposal of valueless records. Indeed, there was a legal barrier to disposal under the act to prevent frauds upon the Treasury of the United States, approved Feb. 26, 1853, which provided a penalty for the willful destruction of records or the attempt to destroy them.[5] Vast quantities of valueless records accumulated year after year and eventually hindered the transaction of business. By the 1870's many Government office buildings in Washington were literally jammed with records. War Department offices were cluttered with bulging files containing applications for positions, letters of transmittal, monthly personal reports of officers, records pertaining to changes of station or duty, applications of soldiers for discharge or remission of their court-martial sentences, and vast quantities of other material of transitory value.[6] By 1872 more than 7,000 cubic feet of records were being accumulated annually in the Treasury Building, and these records were displacing the desks of clerks and overflowing into corridors.[7] Offices of the Department of the Interior and the Post Office Department were similarly overburdened with almost unmanageable files. Among these huge accumulations there were many records of unquestioned administrative value and historical interest, but most of them had little or no value.

Faced with this situation Government officials usually demanded more and more storage space for records. The unusual recommendation of the Quartermaster General of the Army in 1875 that Congress authorize the destruction of worthless papers went unheeded.[8] Meanwhile the ravages of fire, dampness, heat, and insects emphasized the need for better care of public archives and brought about the movement for a Hall of Records as a solution for the record storage problem. After Congress failed to act on several bills for a Hall of Records, more executive officials began to seek authorization for the destruction of useless records. In 1881 the Postmaster General received congressional authority to dispose of papers accumulated then and thereafter in his Department that were "not needed in the transaction of current business" and had

[5] 10 Stat. 170.

[6] *Report* [of] *the Select Committee of the United States Senate . . . to Inquire Into and Examine the Methods of Business and Work in the Executive Departments, etc.*, 1:241 (50th Cong., 1st sess., *S. Rept.* 507), hereafter cited as *Select Committee Report.*

[7] Treasury Department, *Annual Report*, 1872, p. xiv.

[8] War Department, *Annual Report*, 1875, p. 200.

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"no permanent value or historical interest." Similar authority was given in 1882 to the Secretary of the Treasury for the disposal of records of the auditor for the Post Office Department and to House and Senate officers acting under the direction of the committees on accounts of their repective houses.[9]

These authorizations doubtless gave some relief to the affected agencies. But they did no more. They established no regular procedure for describing and evaluating records selected for disposal; and, of course, they were limited to specific agencies. In the authorized agencies some officials, under pressure to provide more office space or through sheer ignorance or carelessness, destroyed records of historical interest while in other agencies executives watched worthless papers pile up and begged for more storage space. Their predicament was accentuated by the failure of Congress to provide a general archival depository to which valuable but inactive records might be transferred from operating offices.

In addition to the lack of procedures and facilities for disposing of records, the Government recordkeeping system of the post-Civil War period was inadequate. Its deficiencies first attracted attention in the War Department, which after 1879 became heavily involved in pension administration. This Department, through its Surgeon General's Office and Adjutant General's Office, was called on to investigate the military service of thousands of pension applicants. Department clerks had to search laboriously through great quantities of muster rolls, strength returns, hospital books, reports of sick and wounded, and other records, all varying in form, method of filing, and state of preservation. They had, moreover, to handle an increasing amount of pension correspondence under the slow, traditional letter-book system with its voluminous series of indexes and registers of letters received and copies and indexes of letters sent. A part of the system, too, was the time-consuming method of folding, briefing, and annotating letters received. Despite the employment of additional clerks and overtime work, the Department was unable to cope with the rising flood of pension applications. Eventually it found Capt. Fred C. Ainsworth, who developed a way of handling them expeditiously. But in the meantime Congress was stirred to action.

The Cockrell Committee

Francis M. Cockrell, a Democrat of Missouri, had by 1887 become one of the most respected and influential members of the

[9] 21 Stat. 412; 22 Stat. 228.

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United States Senate. On March 2 of that year he introduced a resolution providing for the appointment of a select committee of five Senators to investigate the business methods and work of the executive branches and to determine the need for additional public buildings and the proper use of existing public buildings in Washington. This resolution received bipartisan support. Discussing examples of delay in Government business, Senator Cockrell pointed out that the War Department had reported to the Senate that the adjustment of certain pay claims of military personnel would require 4½ years. Similar cases of delay had been reported by other Federal departments, and Senators were "receiving letters every day inquiring into these matters." [10]

There was some opposition to Cockrell's resolution from Senators who feared that it might lead to an attack on the activities of the Bureau of Pensions, an agency of preferred status in the eyes of many politicians. More serious objection was raised against the provision in the resolution relating to public buildings, a matter which some Senators contended fell within the jurisdiction of the standing Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds. Senator Cockrell agreed to the elimination of this provision and on Mar. 3, 1887, obtained Senate approval of the amended resolution providing as follows:

> Resolved, That a select committee to consist of five Senators be, and the same is hereby, constituted and appointed, whose duty it shall be to inquire into and examine the methods of business and work in the Executive Departments of the Government, the time and attention devoted to the operations thereof by the persons employed therein, and generally to inquire into and report to the Senate the causes of the delays in transacting the public business said to exist in some of said Departments.[11]

The following Senators were appointed to the Committee: Francis M. Cockrell, Isham G. Harris of Tennessee, James K. Jones of Arkansas, Orville H. Platt of Connecticut, and Shelby M. Cullom of Illinois. Cockrell was designated chairman. In a letter addressed to the head of each executive department, the Cockrell Committee called for a detailed statement of the methods of transacting business in the bureaus under their jurisdiction. This statement was to show how and by what employees a typical business transaction was handled in each bureau from beginning to end.[12]

[10] *Congressional Record*, 49th Cong., 2d sess., p. 2591 (Mar. 2, 1887), p. 2663 (Mar. 3, 1887).

[11] *Select Committee Report*, 1:1.

[12] *Select Committee Report*, 1:3.

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In addition to obtaining information in this manner, the Committee is reported to have gone into Government offices, sat beside clerks, and watched them perform their duties.[13] Its investigation extended over 2 years.

On Mar. 8, 1888, the Committee presented to the Senate its findings and recommendations. Its report, the most elaborate and comprehensive document on Federal administrative methods that had so far been prepared, contains a great deal of information about recordkeeping practices of the Federal Government. To begin with, the Committee found much of the recordkeeping activity in nearly all of the executive departments to be useless and wasteful. There was more registering, briefing, annotating, and copying of letters and more bookkeeping than seemed necessary to preserve a proper record of transactions or to prevent errors and frauds. The Committee especially questioned the usefulness of a large number of employees engaged in copying by hand into huge record books press copies of outgoing letters. There were 94 persons so employed in the Treasury Department, 39 in the Department of the Interior, 32 in the War Department, 11 in the Navy Department, 10 in the Post Office Department, 4 in the Department of State, and 2 in the Department of Justice.[14]

Also an impediment to transacting public business, in the Committee's eyes, was the practice in several departments of preserving great quantities of records that were not needed in handling current business and had no permanent value or historical interest. In this connection a survey of the War Department revealed some striking facts. There the office responsible for publishing the Civil War records reported that it had accumulated more than a ton of valueless records — proofs, preliminary prints, transcriptions of original manuscripts, and the daily waste paper of the office. Chief Signal Officer A. W. Greely stated that his office had preserved several hundred cubic feet of letters received, various routine personnel and property records, and personnel records duplicated by originals in the Adjutant General's Office, which might well be destroyed. The Adjutant General thought that more than 1,500 cubic feet of letters, books, reports, and other records of his office had ceased to have administrative value and lacked historical interest. Reporting that his office undoubtedly had accumulated a great quantity of useless papers, the Commissary General of Subsistence explained: ". . .

[13] Herbert D. Brown, "The Work of the United States Bureau of Efficiency" (paper read before the Monday Lunch Club of the National Association of Manufacturers of the United States, Sept. 13, 1920), photostat in the National Archives Library.

[14] *Select Committee Report*, 1: 106-109, 115.

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under existing laws and regulations and the varying exigencies of the service a vast amount of correspondence and reports gravitates to the Bureau at Washington where it remains permanently on the files." [15]

The Cockrell Committee made definite recommendations for improving the recordkeeping methods that it observed. It concluded that the copying of press copies of letters into so-called "permanent record books" was unnecessary since the press copies themselves were sufficiently durable if they were made on the best grade of tissue from originals written with the best quality of ink. And it urged, therefore, that this work be discontinued.[16]

The disposition of valueless papers, the Committee recognized, was a matter that could be dealt with effectively only through new legislation. All executive departments needed disposal authority comparable to that given earlier to the Post Office and Treasury Departments. On Mar. 8, 1888, therefore, Senator Cockrell introduced in the Senate a Committee bill to authorize the disposition of useless papers in any executive department. The bill was passed without opposition and became law on Feb. 16, 1889. It provided that whenever there should accumulate in an executive department papers no longer needed in the transaction of current business and of no permanent value or historical interest, the head of the department should report the fact to Congress, submitting a concise statement of the condition and character of such papers. The report should then be examined by a special congressional committee composed of two members of the Senate and two members of the House; and if this committee reported to Congress that the records described, or any part of them, were not needed in the current business of the department and had no permanent value or historical interest, the head of the department should sell them as waste paper or otherwise dispose of them.[17] This law was amended by a section of an appropriation act of Mar. 2, 1895, to cover any accumulation of useless papers in buildings under the control of the executive departments.[18]

Although the Cockrell Committee had been appointed largely because of unsatisfactory conditions in the War Department, it found in that Department an incipient archival system that it heartily approved — the famous Ainsworth card-record system. This system

[15] *Select Committee Report*, 1:239, 245.
[16] *Select Committee Report*, 1:112.
[17] 25 Stat. 672.
[18] 28 Stat. 933.

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was devised by Capt. Fred C. Ainsworth, Chief of the Record and Pension Division of the Surgeon General's Office, when in April 1887 he began to think about the constant pressure on his division for information about pension applicants and to observe the unusual wear and tear on records caused by searches for this information. The Ainsworth system involved the use of so-called "index-slips" or cards on which were written extracts of the medical history of soldiers obtained from hospital registers. Each extract was copied on a separate card, and the cards were arranged by regiment and thereunder by the name of the soldier. To provide a check on the authenticity of the cards, the pertinent file number and page of the register were entered on each, so that the extracted information could readily be compared with the original record.[19] The system obviated time-consuming searches in cumbersome and voluminous records. Original records could be retired from active use, the copying of worn and defaced records could be discontinued, a soldier's medical history could be quickly furnished even in cases where only his name and military organization were known, and the printing and publication of essential medical-history data for all necessary Government uses could be easily done.

The Committee recommended that the system be extended to the Adjutant General's Office. In this office there had been for several years an accumulation of business, the transaction of which required the examination of 402,916 muster rolls of Civil War volunteer forces. These records had been damaged considerably by frequent use and required copying or repair. To cope with the situation the Committee considered several methods. The desideratum, it seemed, was to produce a record that would be convenient to use, would contain the entire history of each soldier, and would eliminate, so far as possible, reference to the worn and mutilated muster rolls. Such a record might have been obtained from the so-called "regimental registers" of Civil War volunteers that had been begun several years earlier, but by the end of 1887 these registers had been completed only for the six New England States. Their compilation for the other States would require several more years and large appropriations. Mounting and binding the muster rolls in atlas form or printing them, it was thought, could reduce the wear and tear on the rolls caused by unfolding and refolding them in reference use. But it was realized that neither the binding nor the printing of the original rolls would bring together in one place the full military record of a soldier and reduce the time for searches to a minimum. The solu-

[19] *Select Committee Report*, 1:168-182.

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tion to the problem, in the Committee's opinion, was to adopt the card-index record system. Data concerning the military history of each soldier of the volunteer forces should be taken from the numerous muster rolls, reports, and other records and entered on cards, which were eventually to be arranged by State, military organization, and soldier's name. The Committee urged that the compilation of regimental registers be discontinued.[20]

Senator Cockrell and his colleagues called attention to some unsatisfactory recordkeeping practices for which they could offer no remedies. For example, they described the anomalous situation in which the Paymaster General's Office of the War Department was kept busy supplying information from its records to the Second Auditor's Office of the Treasury Department although the latter office had the same information in its own files. The situation had grown out of differences in the recordkeeping methods of the two offices and the failure of the Second Auditor's Office to adapt its methods to current administrative needs. More specifically, at a time when the Second Auditor had to handle an increasing number of claims of individual soldiers for pay, his pertinent files in the form of vouchers for the payments made by Army paymasters were arranged by name of paymaster and could not conveniently be searched for information about individual soldiers. The Paymaster General's Office, on the other hand, maintained disbursement record books in which the vouchers of individual soldiers were recorded alphabetically by name and were thus more useful to the Second Auditor than his own files in adjusting and auditing individual claims.[21]

The business methods of the War and Treasury Departments were considered by the Cockrell Committee to require more study than it could devote to them. It accordingly recommended that the head of each of these Departments appoint "a committee or commission of three competent, industrious, painstaking officers or employees" to examine closely the business methods of his Department. Such persons, it was suggested among other things, should determine how the public business could be transacted with the least possible "briefing, notating, and copying" of records "and with the smallest number of record entries and record books." [22] On Mar. 20, 1888, the Secretary of the Treasury appointed a Commission on Business Methods; and on Mar. 22, 1888, the Secretary of War appointed a Board on Business Methods.

[20] *Select Committee Report*, 1:182-192.
[21] *Select Committee Report*, 1:192-199.
[22] *Select Committee Report*, 1:116.

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The Commission on Business Methods of the Treasury Department made a report on Jan. 4, 1889. Two weeks later Secretary Fairchild informed Senator Cockrell that several changes were being made in his Department in accordance with recommendations of the Commission. Changes affecting recordkeeping methods included reduction in the number of warrants required to be issued, signed, recorded, and checked by Treasury Department officials; adoption of a briefer method of recording accounts in the offices of the Second Comptroller and First Auditor; consolidation of several accounts of the same class into one report; reduction of the bulk of certain accounts by eliminating duplicate vouchers; discontinuance of some record books by binding and preserving original papers previously copied in the books; reduction of routine correspondence; discontinuance of the hand copying into record books of all letters sent and substitution therefor of press or carbon copies; and destruction of useless files.[23]

The War Department's Board on Business Methods made its report on Jan. 21, 1889. And the Secretary of War notified the Cockrell Committee that his Department was effecting several changes on the basis of the Board's recommendations. Among the changes were discontinuance of routine letters transmitting so-called "settlement certificates" or statements of claims; elimination of certain record books relating to "certificates of deposit"; reduction of the amount of correspondence and other records made in crediting to the proper appropriations funds handled by Army paymasters; application of the "card-index system" to some records of the Adjutant General's Office; reduction of papers created in preparing "credit requisitions"; elimination of duplicate requisitions for printing and binding; establishment of the rule that only such papers should "be filed in a given bureau or office as clearly belong to its business"; abolition of daily reports showing the work and attendance of employees; and discontinuance of the recording and filing of several types of routine communications.[24]

On Mar. 28, 1889, with the submittal to Congress of information about the actions of the Treasury and War Departments, the Cockrell Committee ended its work. Some significant effects of its activities on recordkeeping practices were already evident; others were to appear in the next few years. By 1889 the so-called "book

[23] *Additional Report of the Select Committee to Examine the Methods of Conducting Business in the Executive Departments*, p. 2 (50th Cong., special sess., *S. Rept.* 3), hereafter cited as *Additional Report.*

[24] *Additional Report*, p. 5-10.

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period" in the War and Treasury Departments was drawing to a close. Legislation had been obtained that was to provide policy and procedure for the disposal of useless papers of the executive departments for the next 45 years. The approval and publicizing of the card-record system by the Committee were undoubtedly responsible for the rapid extension of this system in the War Department during the 1890's. In general, the Committee put all recordkeeping practices of the Federal Government under closer scrutiny than ever before and jolted the idea that the age of existing practices was an argument in their favor.

On the debit side it might be pointed out that the Cockrell Committee's judgments on some recordkeeping methods were not entirely realistic. Its blanket endorsement of press copies as sole record copies was given in the face of a great deal of testimony raising doubts of the durability of such copies. The endorsement failed to include specific safeguards against the use of impermanent inks and paper.[25] The consequence was that some offices began to rely exclusively on press copies that after a few years faded and became illegible. Moreover, the disposal procedure established by the act of 1889, though a step in the right direction, left something to be desired. It neither provided for obtaining adequate information about the records recommended for disposal nor established a system for the competent appraisal of such records. As a result many records of value for research were probably destroyed under the act of 1889.

The Dockery Commission

The Cockrell Committee had done much to improve administrative methods in the executive departments. But it had made only a beginning toward the administrative reform needed by the Federal Government at the close of the 19th century. The need for further examination of business methods in the executive departments was brought to the attention of Congress in the annual report of the Secretary of the Treasury for 1892. The Secretary recognized that various congressional and departmental committees in the past had made valuable reports on departmental methods but thought that these groups had been too much burdened with other duties to make thorough investigations. He therefore recommended the establishment of a "non-partisan commission, similar in its organization to the Interstate Commerce Commission" to work for about 3 years and to examine "existing methods of business and work in the several

[25] *Select Committee Report*, 1:109-112; *Additional Report*, p. 68.

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Executive Departments, more especially as to the disbursement of public money and the examination, adjudication, and settlement of public accounts." [26]

The recommendation of the Secretary of the Treasury was approved in substance early in 1893 by the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives [27] and was adopted in an appropriation bill enacted Mar. 3, 1893. This measure provided:

> That a joint commission, consisting of three Senators, members of the Fifty-third Congress, to be appointed by the present President of the Senate, and three members-elect to the House of Representatives of the Fifty-third Congress, to be appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Fifty-second Congress, shall, during the Fifty-third Congress, inquire into and examine the status of the laws organizing the Executive Departments, bureaus, divisions, and other Government establishments at the National Capital; the rules, regulations, and methods for the conduct of the same; the time and attention devoted to the operations thereof by the persons employed therein, and the degree of efficiency of all such employees; whether any modification of these laws can be made to secure greater efficiency and economy, and whether a reduction in the number or compensation of the persons authorized to be employed in said Executive Departments or bureaus can be made without injury to the public service.[28]

A significant proviso in this authorization was that the Commission should have no jurisdiction to inquire into the sacrosanct domain of pension legislation. Of interest from the standpoint of operations was the authority given the Commission to employ at least three experts for such assistance as might be needed. This provision was apparently an acknowledgment of the limitations of Congressmen as investigators of the technical aspects of finance, accounting, and other administrative matters. According to Oscar Kraines, it resulted in the first use by Congress of professional business experts in a general investigation of administration.[29]

The House of Representatives appointed to the Joint Commission Alexander M. Dockery of Missouri, James D. Richardson of Tennessee, and Nelson Dingley, Jr., of Maine. The Senate appointed Francis M. Cockrell, James K. Jones, and Shelby M. Cullom, all of whom had been members of the Cockrell Committee. Cockrell was made Chairman of the Senate branch of the Commission. Dockery

[26] Treasury Department, *Annual Report*, 1892, p. lxxix.

[27] *Congressional Record*, 52d Cong., 2d sess., p. 1342 (Feb. 8, 1893).

[28] *References to Laws Organizing Executive Departments and Other Government Establishments at the National Capital*, p. 1 (53d Cong., 1st sess., *H. Rept.* 49).

[29] Oscar Kraines, "The Dockery-Cockrell Commission, 1893-1895," in *Western Political Quarterly*, 7:461 (Sept. 1954).

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became Chairman of both the House branch and the Joint Commission. Hence the Commission became known as the Dockery-Cockrell Commission or simply the Dockery Commission. On May 24, 1893, the following experts were appointed: J. W. Reinhart, C. W. Haskins, and E. W. Sells. Haskins and Sells later formed an accounting firm, which was consulted in several investigations of Federal administration, including those of the Hoover Commission.

The Dockery Commission conducted its inquiry through correspondence, personal interviews, inspections, and conferences. The inquiry covered the organization and administrative practices of all Federal executive departments and independent agencies in Washington. It began in May 1893 and continued until March 1895.

The reports submitted to Congress by this Joint Commission contained fewer details concerning recordkeeping in Federal agencies than those of the Cockrell Committee. They gave, however, considerable attention to some practices that had been of great concern to that Committee, particularly to the methods of preserving copies of letters written in the agencies. As has been noted, these methods often included transcribing by hand to so-called "permanent" or "official" record books press copies of letters sent. In some offices, the solicitude for preserving copies of outgoing letters went further. The Office of the Supervising Architect, Treasury Department, for example, kept its clerks busy transcribing copies of letters to books, even though the Office made and preserved typewritten carbon copies of the same letters.[30] In many offices the work of copyists was months or even years behind. A case in point was the General Land Office, Department of the Interior, whose Commissioner reported in 1895:

> In addition to the specific work of the respective divisions reported in arrears, there are in every division the letter press copy books for the past seven years, which must eventually be transcribed into permanent records. They consist of about 1,700 volumes of 500 pages each, or 850,000 pages, which it is estimated will require the services of eighty copyists for two and one-half years.[31]

In general, the Commission was struck by the lack of typewriters in many Government offices, especially since these machines by the 1890's were being used widely and effectively in private industry. Obviously, much of the Government's clerical work could be ex-

[30] *Reorganization of Supervising Architect's Office*, p. 6 (53d Cong., 3d sess., *H. Rept.* 1974).

[31] *Condition of Business in the Departments of the Government at Washington*, p. 25 (53d Cong., 3d sess., *H. Rept.* 1851).

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pedited by replacing the pen with the typewriter. In the General Land Office, for example, 36 clerks were employed in the slow, tedious handwriting of land patents and selected land lists. The Commission estimated that the use of typewriters and carbon copies for this work would save the time of at least 20 clerks and greatly reduce the possibility of errors in transcribing the records.[32]

The Commission also observed much needless reporting and bookkeeping, which resulted in large accumulations of records contributing nothing to efficient administration. Among such records were the periodic detailed reports to Congress on the accounts of the Treasurer of the United States, international money-order transactions, the names and salaries of employees in the executive departments, and the purchase of supplies by the Quartermaster General. The Commission believed that bookkeeping in the Office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General to record deposits by postmasters was unnecessary and slowed down the work of the Auditor of the Treasury for the Post Office Department. And it doubted the usefulness of much of the work of the Register of the Treasury.

The disposition of valueless records also engaged the attention of the Dockery Commission. Some offices were found to be preserving massive confused accumulations of records that were searched only rarely and with great difficulty. Such an accumulation, for example, was discovered in the Office of the Auditor of the Treasury for the Post Office Department, which had preserved literally tons of money orders and postal notes in the basement of the Old Post Office Building in Washington. The experts of the Commission observed:

> It is impossible to make any use of these old money orders without arranging them so that they would be accessible. They are only of use in the event of an application for the payment of a money order that has been outstanding. The expense necessary to store the papers is considerable, and will increase from time to time as the orders accumulate.[33]

As a result of these findings the Dockery Commission made several recommendations on recordkeeping. Especially notable was the following recommendation on the copying of letters sent:

> It is recommended that the handwritten record of letters sent be dispensed with; that they be written upon the typewriter with one or more carbon copies and be press-copied in tissue books, the carbon copy being retained in a convenient place, without handling, for the purpose of binding into volumes, and paged to cor-

[32] *Engrossing and Recording of Land Patents*, p. 8 (53d Cong., 3d sess., *H. Rept.* 1652).

[33] *Disposition of Old Money Orders*, p. 2 (53d Cong., 2d sess., *H. Rept.* 971).

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respond with the numbers of the pages in press-copy books; that the letter press copy books be used for the convenience of the office in referring to current matters, and in the course of years, as they become worn or faded or not frequently referred to, be dispensed with, the permanent record being the bound carbon copies.[34]

The Commission urged the use of carbon copies because they could be produced more quickly than handwritten copies and several copies could be obtained at the same writing, all uniform and legible. This opinion was also supported by chemical tests, which indicated that some carbon copies were more durable than records made with some inks used for handwriting. Moreover, the Commission said that an extra carbon copy could and should be made in an important transaction so that it could be filed with related documents to make a complete case file. In this connection the Commission recommended that the General Land Office discontinue the preparation of handwritten land patents and lists and use instead typewriters and carbon copies. It suggested that at least three copies of patents be made, "one for the applicant, one for the record, and one for use in the office and to be filed with the papers." [35]

Several Government offices had already discontinued the copying of letters by hand and were relying only on press copies as records of outgoing communications. A few had begun to use carbon copies. The Commission's recommendation in this connection seems to have been directed mainly at the Treasury and Interior Departments, where considerable copying had been observed. Despite the opposition of its copyists the Treasury Department adopted the recommendation. In a circular of Dec. 9, 1897, the Secretary of the Treasury ordered:

> Hereafter, all records of correspondence in the Treasury Department, other than the letter press copies shall be made up of copies made by the ordinary carbon process, and such carbon copies, after being perfected shall be bound in permanent records.
>
> The practice of copying official correspondence in longhand for permanent records, is hereby ordered discontinued.

The substance of this order against hand copying was repeated on July 31, 1902. The binding of carbon copies was discontinued by an order of Dec. 27, 1905, directing that carbon copies should be filed with the other papers to which they related. Meanwhile the copying of letters by hand continued in many offices of the Department

[34] *Preserving Copies of Letters Written in the Departments*, p. 2 (53d Cong., 3d sess., *H. Rept.* 1976).

[35] *Engrossing and Recording of Land Patents*, p. 9.

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of the Interior, despite the recommendation of the Dockery Commission. By an act of Mar. 2, 1895, proposed by the Commission, however, the General Land Office was authorized to use typewriters or other machines in engrossing and recording patents for public lands.[36]

The Commission also made recommendations to eliminate unnecessary reporting and bookkeeping by the executive departments. It urged the repeal of legislation requiring the preparation of detailed reports to Congress on the accounts of the Treasurer, international money-order transactions, names and salaries of Government employees, and the purchase of supplies by the Quartermaster General and the Commissary General of Subsistence. It advised repeal of the provision requiring postmasters to send their certificates of deposit through the Office of the Third Assistant Postmaster General rather than direct to the Office of the Auditor of the Treasury for the Post Office Department. It recommended discontinuance of much of the bookkeeping and filing work of the Office of the Register of the Treasury and the transfer of certain accounting records from that office to the officials responsible for auditing and settling particular accounts. By March 1895 legislative approval had been given to all these recommendations. Especially noteworthy was the so-called Dockery Act of July 31, 1894, which provided for the first major revision of the Treasury Department's accounting system since its establishment in Alexander Hamilton's time. This act, rightly hailed as the most fruitful accomplishment of the Dockery Commission, brought greater uniformity in the filing of accounts and reduced the volume of accounting papers that had to be made out and kept. It empowered the Comptroller of the Treasury, under the direction of the Secretary of the Treasury, to "prescribe the forms of keeping and rendering all public accounts, except those relating to the postal revenues and expenditures." [37] This provision, however, was not much used by the Comptroller to effect a standardization of accounting forms.

The destruction of the huge files of old money orders and postal notes previously mentioned could not be accomplished under the disposal act of 1889. Accordingly the Dockery Commission prepared a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Treasury and the Postmaster General to destroy all money orders, postal notes, and related records more than 10 years old. This bill was passed with the proviso that all unpaid money orders outstanding for any

[36] 28 Stat. 807.
[37] 28 Stat. 206.

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length of time could be redeemed under such regulations as the Postmaster General might make. The Auditor for the Post Office Department was thus enabled to sell as waste paper by the end of 1894 some "3,000 full mail sacks of money order vouchers and statements, amounting to 224 tons, covering the period from 1864 to 1884." [38] The retention period on these postal records was reduced to 7 years by an act of Mar. 3, 1897. In these and other special laws for the destruction of records passed after the general law of 1889 can be seen the germ of the record disposal schedule of today.

The Keep Committee

Hardly more than a decade after the Dockery Commission's work was done, the cudgels for administrative reform were taken up again. This time, however, they were wielded by Federal executives rather than Congressmen. The clear shift of leadership in the movement for administrative reform came during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. If there was still need for such reform in the Federal Government, Roosevelt could be expected to see it. His experience in municipal, State, and national government gave him unusual knowledge of administrative practices. The need for futher reform apparently was first seriously presented to Roosevelt by Gifford Pinchot, who was called by a later Roosevelt the first of the "brain trusters." Pinchot, who in 1898 became Chief of the Division of Forestry, Department of Agriculture, made important changes in the business methods of the Division, including the introduction of new systems of filing. In 1903 he persuaded President Roosevelt to create a Committee on the Organization of Government Scientific Work to find ways of increasing efficiency and economy in such work. Two years later he organized the Forest Service, a bureau widely regarded as the model of administrative efficiency.

The view that the Government's business methods needed improvement was expressed in a story popularized in the autobiographies of both Roosevelt and Pinchot. According to Roosevelt:

> An officer in charge of an Indian agency made a requisition in the autumn for a stove costing seven dollars, certifying at the same time that it was needed to keep the infirmary warm during the winter, because the old stove was worn out. Thereupon the customary papers went through the customary routine, without unusual delay at any point. The transaction moved like a glacier with dignity to its appointed end, and the stove reached the infirmary in good order in time

[38] Post Office Department, *Annual Report*, 1894, p. 590.

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for the Indian agent to acknowledge its arrival in these words: "The stove is here. So is spring." [39]

This story was not entirely true. The request for the stove had been made on Feb. 10, 1905, rather than in the autumn, as Roosevelt stated. The other details, however, were substantially correct. The stove cost $6.75 and was delivered May 1, 1905. The documentation of this routine transaction consisted of 17 letters, including 2 signed by the Secretary of the Interior, and 10 miscellaneous papers.[40] This state of affairs, according to Pinchot, showed the Government to be "debased by generations of political control, sunk in the mire of traditional red tape" and "far below the level of decent or even tolerable . . . administration." "The Government machinery," he declared, "needed a thorough overhauling," and he added with characteristic self-confidence, "I thought I knew what was needed." [41]

At any rate, on May 23, 1905, Pinchot, with James R. Garfield, head of the Bureau of Corporations, prepared an outline for the work of a proposed Committee on Department Methods. Among the topics suggested for consideration were "uniform methods and materials of correspondence," "standard . . . forms," and "methods of book-keeping, cost keeping and accounts." [42] Pinchot carried this outline to the President, who on June 2, 1905, appointed a committee "to investigate and find out what changes are needed to place the conduct of executive business of the Government in all its branches on the most economical and effective basis in the light of the best modern business practice." [43] The Committee's attention was invited especially to matters dealing with the preparation of decisions, salaries, supplies, accounting, costs of work, interdepartmental cooperation, uniform standards and efficiency, and publication of an official gazette. With typical vigor and directness Roosevelt urged:

> A resolute effort should be made to secure brevity in correspondence and the elimination of useless letter writing. There is a type of bureaucrat who believes that his entire work, and that the entire work of the Government should be the collecting of papers in reference to a case, commenting with eager minute-

[39] Theodore Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, p. 367 (New York, 1913).

[40] "Report of the Committee on Department Methods to President Roosevelt, October 22, 1906," in Gifford Pinchot papers, Library of Congress.

[41] Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground*, p. 296 (New York, 1947).

[42] "Outline of Work of a Proposed Committee on Department Methods, May 23, 1905," in Pinchot papers.

[43] Elting E. Morison, ed., *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 4:1201 (Cambridge, 1951).

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ness on each, and corresponding with other officials in reference thereto. These people really care nothing for the case, but only for the documents in the case. In all branches of the Government there is a tendency greatly to increase unnecessary and largely perfunctory letter writing. In the Army and Navy the increase of paper work is a serious menace to the efficiency of fighting officers, who are often required by bureaucrats to spend time in making reports which they should spend in increasing the efficiency of the battleships or regiments under them.[44]

To the new investigative unit, officially called the Committee on Department Methods, Roosevelt appointed Charles H. Keep, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury; Frank H. Hitchcock, First Assistant Postmaster General; Lawrence O. Murray, Assistant Secretary of Commerce and Labor; James R. Garfield, Commissioner of Corporations; and Gifford Pinchot, Forester, Department of Agriculture. Keep was designated as Chairman, and the Committee was popularly called the Keep Committee or Keep Commission. Overton W. Price, Assistant Chief of the Forest Service, whom Pinchot called "one of the most effective and useful men" in the Government service, was chosen as secretary of the Committee.

Like the Cockrell Committee and the Dockery Commission, the Keep Committee conducted its investigation by means of correspondence, personal interviews, inspections, and conferences. One of its first acts was the distribution to all executive departments and bureaus of a printed questionnaire asking for essential information about their organization, personnel and business methods. A section of this questionnaire, entitled "Correspondence and Files," contained 22 questions on such matters as the distributing, opening, and recording of mail, the preparation of correspondence, the handling of remittances, the referral of letters, the use of postal cards, letters of transmittal, the abstracting of letters, filing systems, methods of letter-press or carbon copying, and the use of form letters and rubber stamps. Replies to these questions were received during the autumn of 1905.

By the end of 1905 the Committee had obtained much information on prevailing administrative practices in the Federal bureaus. Recordkeeping practices were found to vary greatly from department to department and even from bureau to bureau within a department. But some general tendencies were apparent. Most of the departments, especially the older ones, continued to fold and brief incoming letters. Most of them used press copying as the principal method of preserving a record of outgoing letters. Handwritten

[44] Morison, ed., *Roosevelt Letters*, 4: 1202.

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letter books generally were no longer maintained except in the Department of the Interior. Press or carbon copies of replies were usually filed with related letters received. The card-index record system was widely used. Here and there "vertical files" were reported to exist although bureau replies did not always show whether the papers in such files were folded or unfolded. A few bureaus reported the maintenance of "subjective files." [45]

Meanwhile in 1905 the Keep Committee was following with interest some recordkeeping developments in the War and Navy Departments. These developments stemmed from President Roosevelt's request that Chairman Keep confer with the Assistant Secretaries of these Departments to get them to prepare a plan for eliminating unnecessary paperwork.[46] On June 27, 1905, Robert Shaw Oliver, Assistant Secretary of War, sent to the Chief of Staff a memorandum directing the General Staff to take up the question of reports, returns, correspondence, and records required by the various bureaus of the War Department and to report on the possibility of simplifying or reducing the volume of such material. In accordance with this directive the First Division of the General Staff made an investigation of business methods in headquarters and field administrative units of the War Department and in a report of Sept. 27, 1905, recommended, among other things, abolition of the so-called "letters sent and received books" and their replacement by a "correspondence book" and "document file" at all administrative levels below department headquarters and the use of the card system, prescribed by War Department Orders of May 15, 1894, at department and division headquarters. The correspondence book was to contain an entry for each item of correspondence, which would show the name of the writer; date of receipt; place, date, and purport of communication; action taken; and disposition of the original document — whether filed, forwarded, returned to higher authority, or referred to a subordinate. Each item was to be numbered and indexed under a subject and when necessary under the name or official designation of the writer and the name of any person or persons referred to in the communication. The document file was to be numbered and to contain letters received and carbon, letter-press, or

[45] These statements concerning recordkeeping practices in 1905 are based on replies to the Keep Committee's printed questionnaire, which are interfiled with records of the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency accumulated by the Budget Bureau and are part of Record Group 51 in the National Archives. Hereafter these records are cited as PCEE records, RG 51, NA. In citations to other records also the symbol RG is used for Record Group and NA for the National Archives.

[46] Morison, ed., *Roosevelt Letters*, 4: 1202.

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other copies of documents sent relating to a particular transaction. Documents differently numbered but dealing with a related matter were to be filed together with a reference slip inserted to account for their absence from serial order. Beyond the mere notation of the fact of origin or receipt and disposition no record was to be made of several classes of papers lacking permanent value. This report of the General Staff was approved by Assistant Secretary Oliver on Oct. 13, 1905, and by the President on Nov. 2, 1905. Directives were then issued to put the recommendations of the report in effect.[47]

Whether the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Charles H. Darling, made a report to the President on paperwork in his Department is uncertain. He conferred with the Keep Committee on the subject on Sept. 16, 1905, and later promised to send the Committee a copy of the report to be made. No such report has been found, however, in records of the Keep Committee or the Navy Department in the National Archives.

Although replies to the Keep Committee's questionnaire and the special report on paperwork in the War Department furnished valuable information on Government business methods, further investigation was considered necessary to enable the Committee to formulate definite recommendations. Accordingly the Committee early in 1906 appointed "assistant committees" or subcommittees — task forces, if you please — to study particular aspects of administration and organization and present definite plans for improvement. The subcommittees were composed of about 60 Government officials described by Chairman Keep as being among "the brightest and most capable men in the Departments." Their work began auspiciously. On Mar. 20, 1906, Pinchot entertained the Keep Committee and its subcommittees at his Washington home, where President Roosevelt expounded to them his ideas concerning Government reform "in a free and easy speech lasting nearly an hour." Roosevelt warned them of the evils of excessive paperwork with the following story:

> I remember very well the pride with which a certain high officer in one of the bureaus in the Navy Department, a good many years ago told me, pointing to a big case of papers, that in that he could find out through the reports of the officers of each battleship how many bottles of violet ink each captain of a battleship was responsible for. I remarked that I did not care a snap of my finger about the number of bottles of violet ink on the ship, that what I wanted to know was whether the men at the guns could shoot.

[47] Report of the General Staff, "Simplification of War Department Methods," Sept. 27, 1905, and related records, in the Keep Committee records accumulated by the Forest Service, RG 95, NA.

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The President then declared: "The paper work must be subordinated in the departments and bureaus to the efficiency of the work itself; keeping only enough of it to make a record of what is done." [48]

Among the investigative units created by the Keep Committee was the Subcommittee on the Distribution, Record, and Handling of Correspondence appointed on Jan. 29, 1906, and referred to hereinafter as the Subcommittee on Correspondence. James B. Adams of the Forest Service was designated as chairman of the Subcommittee. Its members were, in general, officials of bureaus that had adopted newer or more efficient filing methods.

During March and April 1906 the Subcommittee on Correspondence made a study of methods of handling and filing correspondence in the Departments of Commerce and Labor, Agriculture, and the Interior. Also during this period, one member of the Subcommittee examined correspondence and filing systems in use by Marshall Field and Co., the United States Steel Corp., and Montgomery Ward and Co., in Chicago. The investigation in the Departments was conducted in some instances by the entire Subcommittee and in others by a special committee consisting of three or more members. It was regarded as a necessary preliminary step before the making of detailed studies. During this preliminary examination, however, the Subcommittee devoted considerable attention to the different methods of preserving copies of letters written in the Departments — a matter investigated and reported on by the Dockery Commission. Contrary to the recommendation of that Commission many offices were found not to have a system of recordkeeping combining the press and carbon copy methods. To the Subcommittee this situation was not undesirable since it concluded that in view of the different kinds of business transacted no one system could be prescribed for all Government offices.

The Subcommittee on Correspondence, therefore, outlined the criteria by which a method of copying letters sent might be selected. Four factors were considered important — permanency, authenticity, economy, and adaptability. By permanency was meant "that quality of a copy by virtue of which it will resist destruction when exposed to the usual conditions of heat, sunlight, moisture, and ordinary wear and tear." Authenticity was defined as "the value of a copy as secondary evidence in legal action." Economy was considered to mean "the relative cost of labor and material in producing copies by the different methods." By adaptability was meant "the

[48] Clipping from the *Washington Star*, Mar. 23, 1906, in Pinchot papers.

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adaptability of the copies to the various uses to which they will be put." While the handwritten copy was regarded as the most permanent record, the Subcommittee did not believe that the business of any office required a more permanent record than that afforded by the typewriter carbon copy. Press copies, because of their fragile character and the action of sunlight, could not be expected to furnish a satisfactory record for more than 50 years. These views on relative permanency were based largely on information furnished by scientists of the Bureau of Chemistry. A conclusive statement on the relative value of handwritten, press, and carbon copies as legal evidence could not be made. The Subcommittee was informed that copies were admissible as evidence only when original letters were unobtainable, and their admission depended on the circumstances and manner in which they were made. The weight given a copy in court depended on the degree of assurance furnished that it was a true and correct copy of the letter alleged to have been sent, and that the letter of which it was a copy really was sent. This assurance, said the Subcommittee, depended on the system of checking, initialing, and so on, rather than on the method by which the copy was made.

The tissue press copy was found to be the most economical method of preserving copies of letters sent because the material was cheaper than the paper for carbon or handwritten copies, and it could be produced in less time and by a less expensive class of labor. For adaptability to either "open" (vertical or flat) or "folded" filing systems, carbon copies were rated superior to press and handwritten copies. It was recommended, therefore, "that each responsible administrative officer determine the relative value of . . . permanency, authenticity, economy, and adaptability, as applied to the correspondence of his own office, and that his action be reviewed from time to time upon the same basis by competent authority." [49]

While the Subcommittee on Correspondence was formulating recommendations concerning letters sent by all Government offices, it was conducting a detailed investigation of the methods of handling and filing correspondence in the Department of the Interior. This undertaking was to constitute its principal contribution to the work of the Keep Committee. Overton W. Price, secretary to the Keep Committee, had made several highly critical comments about the organization and methods of the Department as shown by its replies to the Committee's questionnaire. And on the basis of infor-

[49] "Report Outlining a System by Which a Method of Preserving Copies of Letters Sent May Be Selected," Aug. 11, 1906, in Keep Committee records, RG 95, NA.

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mation furnished by Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock, President Roosevelt in October 1905 had directed the Keep Committee "to make a searching investigation of the organization, business methods, and personnel of the Interior Department in all its branches." [50] The report of the Committee on this investigation had mentioned some unsatisfactory recordkeeping practices.

In May and June 1906 the Subcommittee on Correspondence made a close examination of the Department. Some recordkeeping practices of the Department were found to be outmoded or of questionable usefulness. Among these were briefing letters, maintaining book registers and indexes, and filing letters by arbitrary serial numbers without regard to their subject matter. Objectionable also was the requirement or custom compelling the bureaus to correspond with each other through the Secretary's office. On the other hand, the Subcommittee noted with approval a decline in the keeping of handwritten letter books, an increasing use of card registers and indexes, and a beginning of flat and vertical filing.

The archival system of the Secretary of the Interior, based largely on instructions issued by Carl Schurz in 1880, was obviously in need of reform. Under the system, press copies of letters sent were still being transcribed by pen and ink into bound volumes. This work was in arrears from 3 months to 3 years. Division chiefs defended the handwritten letter books on the ground of their superiority as permanent records but admitted that they contained many letters of transitory value and were rarely used for administrative purposes when good press copies were available. They conceded that durable carbon copies would be satisfactory substitutes for handwritten copies.[51] Other antiquated recordkeeping practices persisted in spite of the demonstrated advantages of newer methods. For example, all divisions except the Division of Lands and Railroads maintained folded files; and this Division, although possessing vertical files, still continued to abstract letters as under the folded system. The Division, however, had made a break with the past in 1901 by replacing its book registers and indexes of correspondence with a card-index system.

In the General Land Office the Subcommittee on Correspondence observed an elaborate system of registering letters received. There was a "registry" or "registering" room in the Chief Clerk's Divi-

[50] Roosevelt to the Keep Committee, Oct. 14, 1905, in Pinchot papers.

[51] Statements obtained by the Subcommittee on Correspondence from James I. Parker, Chief of the Division of Lands and Railroads, May 5, 1906, and from Joseph C. Clements, Chief of the Indian Division, May 10, 1906, in Keep Committee records, RG 95, NA.

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sion, in which incoming letters were entered in five series of registers based mainly on classes of correspondents. Each register was divided alphabetically, entries being made in chronological order under the appropriate letter of the alphabet for the name of the sender of the communication registered. For each communication the register showed the date of receipt, file number, date and purport, and referral. These registers were supplemented by "numerical registers," which showed only the file number of the letters entered, the initials of the writers, and the division to which the letters were referred. The two types of registers filled about 32 volumes a year. At the same time nearly all the divisions of the General Land Office kept separate registers of letters received (averaging 26 volumes a year), similar to those in the registering room. The only additional information in the division registers was the initials of the clerks to whom the letters were referred for action.

The Subcommittee was concerned too about the conditions under which General Land Office records were kept. There was no uniform or standard equipment for filing papers. While Woodruff file boxes and "plain shelving" were used in some divisions, open pigeonhole cases were more common. It was apparent that the accumulation of dust and dirt was not only damaging the files but also endangering the health of file clerks.

Other recordkeeping practices were observed by the Subcommittee in other bureaus of the Department of the Interior. Administrative regulations had saddled the Office of Indian Affairs with a burdensome and poorly controlled system of correspondence. In the Bureau of Pensions letters received were neither briefed nor registered but simply forwarded for filing in particular divisional case files, or, if dealing with no particular case, returned to the writer with the requested information or publication. Neither press nor carbon copies of letters sent were made in the principal adjudicating divisions. Here the writer of the letter noted upon the case jacket a brief synopsis of his letter. In these divisions 30 percent of the letters were being written in longhand. The Patent Office still made extensive use of book records. In the Geological Survey a card system of registering and indexing correspondence was widely used, and carbon copies of all letters sent were attached to related incoming papers. No recordkeeping problem or innovation was evident in the Bureau of Education, whose correspondence amounted to about 15 letters a day.

In a report of Sept. 29, 1906, the Subcommittee on Correspondence submitted to the Keep Committee its findings and recommenda-

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tions concerning the methods of handling and filing correspondence in the Department of the Interior.[52] This report, which contained some observations applicable to other Government departments, recommended the discontinuance of handwritten letter books, letter-press copy books, book registers and indexes of letters, and the briefing and folding of letters. It urged greater use of card records and typewriters, the establishment of chronological files of carbon copies of letters sent, and the filing of incoming papers with copies of outgoing papers related to a particular transaction. It suggested the elimination of unnecessary letters of transmittal and acknowledgment, restatement of the contents of letters received, and excessive internal correspondence through intermediate offices. It also recommended the cleaning of dusty files and the acquisition of suitable filing equipment.

Early in October 1906 the Subcommittee on Correspondence ceased to function. By that time departmental and bureau committees on business methods were being established in accordance with recommendations of the Keep Committee.[53] Some members of the Subcommittee discussed tentatively whether the record disposal act of 1889 should be amended to give "general authority for the destruction of certain classes of papers under certain conditions." [54] This discussion was prompted by an inspection of the Bureau of Statistics, Department of Agriculture, where it was discovered that the Chief of the Bureau had been disposing of accumulations of old files without obtaining the required authorization. This practice was found to exist in other bureaus. The Subcommittee did not explore the matter in detail but suggested that while the destruction of useless records was undoubtedly advisable, it should follow the method prescribed by law.[55]

The findings and recommendations of the Keep Committee and its Subcommittee on the handling and filing of correspondence were not published. But they were probably made available to the various department and bureau committees on business methods, which were established in the latter part of 1906 and which included some officials who had worked with the Keep Committee. And copies of

[52] "Report of Subcommittee on Distribution, Record and Handling of Correspondence," Sept. 29, 1906, in Keep Committee records, RG 95, NA.

[53] James B. Adams to Overton W. Price, Feb. 12, 1907, in Keep Committee records, RG 95, NA.

[54] Report of a special committee to the Subcommittee on Correspondence, Apr. 12, 1906, in PCEE records, RG 51, NA.

[55] Report of the Subcommittee on Correspondence, Sept. 29, 1906, p. 7, in PCEE records, RG 51, NA.

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the principal report of the Subcommittee on Correspondence were sent to representatives of the American Association of Public Accountants and the firm of Gunn, Richards and Co., both of which were later called on by various Government bureaus for advice on filing methods. More important perhaps was the fact that some basic records of the Subcommittee were used a few years later by the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency in formulating principles to govern the handling and filing of correspondence.

The Keep Committee's investigation of special areas of administration also touched recordkeeping practices. Its Subcommittee on Accounting observed a great multiplicity of forms used by the executive departments in keeping and rendering public accounts. Although the Dockery Act had empowered the Comptroller of the Treasury to prescribe most of these forms, he had not generally exercised this authority. Consequently each department had designed its own forms. In some instances the departments had begun with a simple and comprehensive system of forms but, as new situations arose, had created new forms without reference to existing ones. In some bureaus the forms had become so varied and numerous that it was difficult in a particular instance to determine readily what form should be used, many of the forms did not elicit from administrative officers evidence necessary to the accounting officers for a proper settlement of the accounts, and many of them were unnecessarily large.

The Subcommittee on Accounting realized that it was difficult for the Comptroller to initiate every form used throughout the Government service in keeping and rendering accounts. It recommended, therefore, the issuance of a circular providing that all forms used in keeping and rendering accounts to the accounting officers of the Treasury not already approved by the Comptroller and the Secretary of the Treasury should be submitted for approval and should be resubmitted whenever changes were proposed, the date of last approval being printed on each form.[56]

The Keep Committee particularly criticized the contract forms used in many Government bureaus. It found that they often contained legal defects, conflicting provisions, and ambiguous statements of the rights and obligations of the contracting parties, which led to frequent litigation. And there was no uniformity as to the number of copies of contracts required to be executed. In

[56] Report, "Standardizing Forms," by the "Assistant Committee on Accounting," June 11, 1906, in Keep Committee records, RG 95, NA.

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one department all contracts, regardless of the amount involved, were made in quintuplicate. The Committee thought that, except in the case of certain contracts required to be filed in the Returns Office of the Interior Department, only three copies were necessary. It suggested, however, that the whole question of the preparation of Government contracts should be fully investigated by a special Presidential committee.[57]

Investigation in the field of accounting also led the Keep Committee to consider records of cost accounting. This form of accounting, widely used in the commercial world by 1906, had been little used in the Federal Government. The Committee therefore recommended three classes of cost records: "records of stores," "records of service," and "records of product." By records of stores was meant a perpetual inventory showing the quantities and values of stores received and issued. Records of service were considered to be time books or work-report slips giving data on the work and pay of employees. Records of product were described as reports of the quantities and varieties of the completed output. The Committee recognized that cost keeping was most readily adaptable to "industrial" operations of the Government but held that its principles were also applicable to most branches of the Government service.[58]

The Keep Committee investigations touched recordkeeping in other ways. Its Subcommittee on the Documentary Historical Publications of the United States Government expressed concern over prevailing unsatisfactory record storage conditions and disposal procedure. This group, a veritable galaxy in the historical firmament, was composed of Worthington C. Ford (chairman), Charles Francis Adams, William A. Dunning, Albert Bushnell Hart, Andrew C. McLaughlin, Alfred T. Mahan, Frederick J. Turner, and J. Franklin Jameson (secretary). In a report submitted to President Roosevelt by the Keep Committee on Jan. 11, 1909, these distinguished men in showing the relation between archives and historical publication declared:

> Vast quantities of material, some of it valuable historically, much of it worth great sums of money to the Government are annually "colonized out" by departments into outside buildings, unsuitable and unsafe, and in which it is practically impossible to consult them . . . We strongly recommend as the only

[57] *Government Contracts; Report to the President by the Committee on Department Methods*, Apr. 30, 1907.

[58] *Cost Keeping in the Government Service; Report to the President by the Committee on Department Methods*, Dec. 29, 1906, p. 19.

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remedy that a National Archive House be built and that the earlier records and papers of the administrative departments be segregated and stored in it, under modern and scientific arrangements, as soon as is possible. We further recommend that Congress be requested so to modify its laws respecting the destruction of departmental papers as to insure that papers no longer useful for administrative purposes be not destroyed without giving some expert person, such as the Chief of the Division of Manuscripts in the Library of Congress or the head of the future archives establishment, the opportunity to preserve such as still possess historical value.[59]

The report of the Subcommittee on Documentary Historical Publications in 1909 constituted the final work of the Keep Committee. By that time its membership had dwindled to two persons: Lawrence O. Murray, who had become its chairman, and Gifford Pinchot. In actuality the Committee had discontinued most of its work by November 1907, when Murray had suggested that it should be "prorogued" by the President. Pinchot had agreed to the suggestion but had also proposed establishing an "Inter-Departmental Committee" to continue the work of the Keep Committee.[60] Whatever plans there may have been for continuing the work of the Committee were dealt a mortal blow by Congress in 1909, when it passed the so-called Tawney Amendment to the Sundry Civil Appropriation Bill, prohibiting Federal bureaus from doing work for any commission, board, or similar body appointed by the President without legislative sanction.

Although Congress was cool if not hostile to its work, the Keep Committee brought considerable change in some administrative activities without benefit of legislative action. This was especially true in the area of recordkeeping. Much of the revolution in the archival system of the Department of the Interior beginning in 1907 can be traced directly to recommendations of the Keep Committee and its Subcommittee on Correspondence. This revolution was evidenced in the disappearance of handwritten letter books, folded files, and briefing and in a greatly accelerated trend towards vertical and flat filing systems, card records, and case files. By 1911 most of the bureaus of this Department were using flat or vertical files and carbon copies of letters sent.[61] The investigation of other depart-

[59] *Report to the President by the Committee on Department Methods; Documentary Historical Publications of the United States Government*, p. 39 (60th Cong., 2d sess., *S. Doc.* 714).

[60] Murray to Pinchot, Nov. 21, 1907; and Pinchot to Murray, Nov. 23, 1907, in Pinchot papers.

[61] Records of the Committee on Economy and Efficiency, 1908-11, in records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, RG 48, NA; Department of the Interior, *Annual Reports*, 1908, 1:180-182, 189, 2:14; 1909, 1:53, 130, 169, 2:73.

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ments by the Committee doubtless stimulated some changes in recordkeeping. In 1907 a congressional Committee on Expenditures in the Department of Agriculture reported that several bureaus in this agency were beginning to use vertical files and card records and to file copies of letters sent with related incoming letters.[62] By 1911 it was stated by an Agriculture Department committee that the "great majority of the bureaus use either the vertical or the flat file system, together with a complete system of card indexes; others have the vertical file system without the card index; while others have only flat alphabetical files or subject files with only important subjects indexed." It was further reported that about half of the bureaus were using "only the method of retaining carbon copies of letters sent." [63] Meanwhile improvements in business methods were being made in the Post Office Department. By 1908 the Department had begun to replace certain book records with card record systems.[64]

The findings and recommendations of the Keep Committee were not lost with its dissolution in 1909. Nineteen reports of the Committee were published and distributed widely to Government offices, business firms, and organizations interested in public administration. The basic records of the Committee, which had been accumulated by Forest Service officials, were transferred on Oct. 20, 1910, to the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency and subsequently were interfiled with that Commission's records. Theodore Roosevelt, with much pride and perhaps not a little bias, suggested that the "somewhat elaborate and costly investigations of Government business methods" made by this Commission "served merely to confirm the findings" of the Keep Committee, which, he contended, "were achieved without costing the Government a dollar." [65] Although this statement is questionable as it applied to the entire work of the Committee, it is substantially correct as it related to the findings and recommendations on recordkeeping. In its recommendations for the discontinuance of the briefing and folding of letters and the keeping of book registers and in its statement of the considerations that should govern the method of preserving copies of letters, the President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency clearly carried forward ideas presented by the Keep Committee. Similarly in the matter of accounting records the Commission's ideas were strikingly consistent with those advanced by the Committee.

[62] *Report of the Committee on Expenditures in the Department of Agriculture*, p. 31 (59th Cong., 2d sess., *H. Rept.* 8147).

[63] Department of Agriculture, *Report of the Committee on Efficiency and Economy in the Department of Agriculture*, p. 27 (Washington, 1911).

[64] Post Office Department, *Annual Report*, 1908, p. 7.

[65] Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, p. 367.

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Summary

The principal work of the Keep Committee ended about two decades after the Cockrell Committee had launched the movement for reform in the business methods of Federal executive departments. The progress of the movement during these years was not spectacular or universally evident. Its goal was not apparent to an Agriculture Department official who in 1910 declared that his office had been established for scientific research and therefore had "no administration, no business, and hence no regular business methods." [66] Despite such attitudes, however, administrative reform made progress. Notable changes took place in recordkeeping. In the period between 1887 and 1909 the long reign of book registers and indexes and letter books came to an end. Handwritten copies of letters sent were deposed by press copies and the latter in turn by carbon copies. Card systems came of age and began to revolutionize many recordkeeping operations. The traditional separation of letters received from copies of letters sent gave way in many offices to the creation of case files and other file units that foreshadowed the subject files of today. The folding and briefing of letters were discontinued. Flat and vertical files began to win wide acceptance. To a remarkable extent these changes, which have shaped contemporary recordkeeping in the Federal Government, were influenced by findings and recommendations of the Cockrell Committee, Dockery Commission, and Keep Committee.

[66] Head of the Division of Forest Pathology to the Acting Chief, Bureau of Plant Industry, Dec. 10, 1910, in correspondence of the Chief, records of the Bureau of Plant Industry, Soils, and Agricultural Engineering, RG 54, NA.

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