

THE CULTURE OF BUREAUCRACY:

Chronic Epistlitis

by Robert L. Taylor

Before me on my desk, in a red vinyl folder marked "confidential," is a congressional inquiry. It is addressed to the director of the National Institute of Mental Health. I am not the director, but my task is to act as if I were and compose a reply. Directors never write their own replies. Instead, inquiries are routed throughout the Institute along somewhat lawless traffic patterns, and the loser is the one with nobody to pass them to.

This time, I lost. That's why I'm sitting at my desk, staring at the wall, wondering what the director would say to the Senator from Texas, concerning his constituent, John Dingee of Waxahatchie, who suspects that the Institute doesn't evaluate its programs and challenges us to prove him wrong.

Dingee sought a congressional escort for his question only after a long

series of frustrating exchanges with me. I kept hoping the director's office would refer his letters to somebody else, but each time, like homing pigeons, they found me in the recesses of the Institute. Answering the letters of concerned taxpayers could perhaps provide valuable communication, but the Institute's output can always out-muscle and outequivocate even the most dedicated letter-writer's input. I held Dingee off for months with letters about how we were studying the problem, and, when he asked about the specific studies, I countered with the privileged communications ploy—the studies were being finalized and the information was not available.

That's when Dingee escalated to his senator. Dingee's words were robed in red vinyl with the attached senatorial note: "Please inform me concerning the question raised by my constituent." It is through such "Congressional"—thousands a year at the Institute, 206,241 last year at the De-

Robert Taylor is a psychiatrist in the Division of Manpower and Training at the National Institute of Mental Health.

partment of Defense, 85,000 at HEW—that the act of letter-writing ceases to be a matter of grammar and becomes a matter of Zen Buddhism.

The once simple dialogue between Dingee and me, or between Dingee and the director, now becomes a game of multi-dimensional chess. On the base level, I am still writing to Dingee—it is his question, after all—but answering Dingee becomes the least of my problems. It doesn't matter if my answer satisfies him. It is layers of bureaucrats I am writing to, people who must okay the letter before it can be forever removed from my desk.

The Congressionals move horizontally, but our task is to write them vertically. Not only do I have to worry about what the director would say, if he ever personally wrote his own replies, but also what the director would think the Senator would say if he ever read his own mail. And since neither the Senator nor the director will ever hear of Dingee, the game enters a fourth dimension—my letter must impress not the director but the highest subordinate to the director who will approve or reject it. I must therefore write what the highest subordinate would think the director would say to the Senator, or better, what he would think the director would think the Senator's aide would think the Senator would say. Dingee, as you have gathered, disappears in all of this.

The frustration leads me to consider a direct, even creative answer:

Dear Senator:

Tell Dingee we are going to throw his ass in the asylum if he keeps raving about psychiatric incompetence.

But such responses go unwritten. The political consequences are inevitably brought into the equation. There is hardly any chance that Dingee, his suspicions aroused back in Waxahatchie, could put enough pressure on the Senator to threaten the mental health appropriations, but there is no point in taking useless risks. But then perhaps I should use the grandiose global ploy, where the specific ques-

tion is disregarded and instead the answer refers repeatedly to the "Institute's undying battle for mental health and well-being." Or perhaps I should just say it straight. I recall previous letters I had written stating unambiguous positions, all returned from the director's office with notes listing ways "this information can be used against us" and the curt directive, "Needs to be more vague. Please redo."

Aside from the paralyzing policy problems of Dingee's inquiry, there are the technical questions. Does the director know the Senator personally, addressing him by first name and closing with "Yours truly" rather than "Respectfully"? Should the closing line really retain the standard form insisted upon by the director for all 12,000 letters that go out over his name each year: "If I may be of any further assistance, please let me know"?

This Congressional, I conclude, is too complicated to be answered. So I give in to the reverse Peter Principle (as incompetence rises, so problems fall) and hand the project over to my secretary. Hardened by past experience, I find the secretarial solution easier and easier. I present it to her nonchalantly, as if the matter is too trivial for my own efforts: "Wonder if you might draft a reply to this. Pretty much the same as before. If you have any difficulty, pull the file on old Congressionals." Old Congressionals, no doubt, were written by her, anyway.

Three hours later, she has a draft ready. It seems all right to me, sufficiently noncommittal, but I must not let it pass untouched. I ask her to make a few changes, even though they are unnecessary, to restore my sense of dignity and my faith in government job levels.

It would seem that the Institute has done its duty to John Dingee. We have probably spent more man-hours' worth of highly paid public service on answering Dingee's letters than he contributes in federal taxes, proof enough of the government's interest in

serving the individual citizen. But Dingee has also given in return—he has given several federal employees something to do. For if lower divisions are for writing letters, then upper divisions are for editing them, and still higher echelons exist to undangle participles and rephrase sentences. And what is a director for if not to sign final copies? On each level, the simple question from John Dingee plays its small part in justifying the layers of personnel, the paychecks, the appropriations, and the typewriters.

Three days later the letter reappears in my in-box, having been returned from the next level of bureaucracy, with words scratched out, sentences transposed, and numerous suggestions for inconsequential changes scribbled in the margins. So “the” becomes “this” and “as you know” is changed to “as you *well* know.” “If I may be of any further assistance, please let me know *immediately*” is substituted for “If I may be of any further assistance, please let me know” in order to convey real concern.

At this point I could not care less. What the letter says is strictly secondary; the original question is long forgotten. Once again, I hand the letter to my secretary, with instructions to make the changes indicated. The ping-pong process continues: the draft to me and back to her with an “O. K.” for the second “final” copy. But at last, in victory the secretary appears with the copy. I check it for “perfection,” and it passes. The final product.

And now for the last hurdle. The letter is sent in full regalia to the Office of the Director. An official “letter secretary” records receipt of the letter. It is ushered into the Office of the Special Assistant to the Director who has final responsibility for making sure that all is correct with these labors of creative vaguery. Suddenly, he sees a dangling participle. Back the “final” copy goes into its red folder with the terse note of righteous indignation: “Please correct!” The let-

ter passes from special assistant to secretary, to interdepartmental mail, to secretary, to me. At least the mistake was a good, solid one. The last Congressional came back because of an unnecessary comma.

This time I deliver the “final” myself to the director’s office. Upon leaving there can be no complete peace of mind; there is the haunting possibility of another dangling participle or split infinitive lurking somewhere in that reply.

Days pass before I receive a phone call: “Remember some Dingee letter you were writing for the director?” It’s his special assistant talking to me. “Before I had a chance to look it over again for corrections, the director informed me that the Senator’s office had called, asking why he hadn’t received a reply to his inquiry of four weeks ago. The director assured him of an immediate, personal reply. So I drafted a new letter, expressing his considerable concern.”

Thus relieved, I can return to my work—preparing papers on new ways of looking at things at the Institute. Like the next Congressional, they must go through channels. ■

BACK ISSUES

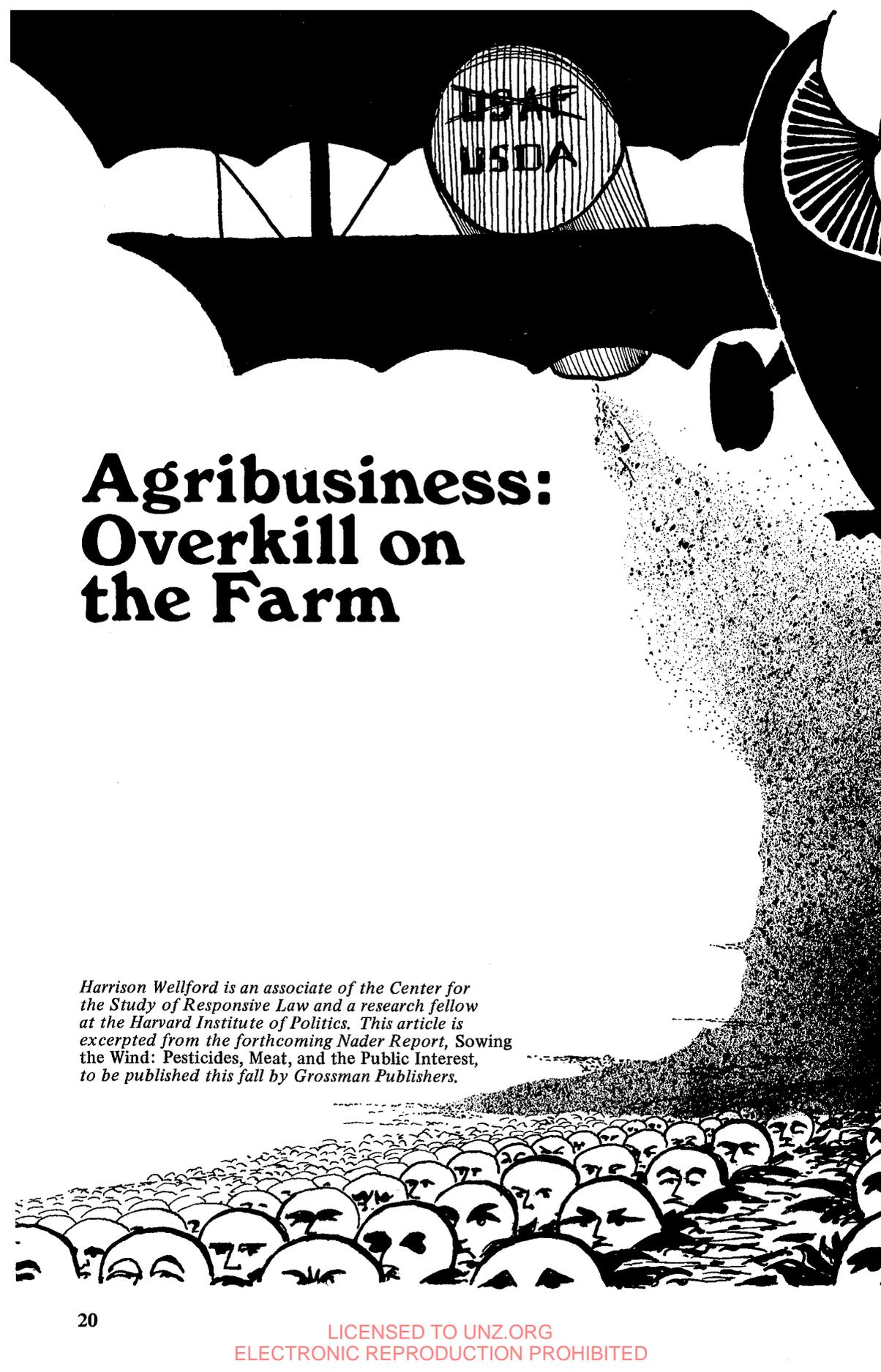
For readers and libraries who wish to purchase back issues of **The Washington Monthly**, the following are available at \$1 each:

June 1969	June 1970
July	October
September	November
October	December
May 1970	All 1971 issues

(We’re sorry—all other issues are sold out.)

Send \$1 for each copy to:

Back Issues
The Washington Monthly
1150 Connecticut Ave. N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20036



Agribusiness: Overkill on the Farm

Harrison Wellford is an associate of the Center for the Study of Responsive Law and a research fellow at the Harvard Institute of Politics. This article is excerpted from the forthcoming Nader Report, Sowing the Wind: Pesticides, Meat, and the Public Interest, to be published this fall by Grossman Publishers.