

Memo of the Month

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

INFORMATIONAL MEMORANDUM

February 10, 1994

TO: HFAC majority staff
FROM: Mike Van Dusen
RE: Format for memos for the chairman

The purpose of this memo is to enhance the consistency and clarity of HFAC staff memos for the chairman. This memo's format and content are meant to be a model for staff memos, but memos do not need to be exact replicas of this one. Lee has asked that longer memos begin with an italicized "headline" like this one, indicating in as few words as possible the main point or issue raised by the memo.

Background

Since Lee receives notes and memos from several sources every day, HFAC memos should be clearly identified as committee products at the top.

Memos should also clearly indicate at the top whether they are an:

- ◆ "Informational Memorandum";
- "Action Memorandum";
- ◆ "Meeting Memorandum," or
- ◆ "Meeting Request".

Any memorandum that ends with a recommendation for action or questions should be designated an "Action Memorandum."

If a "Meeting Memorandum" includes talking points, let Lee know in the "Re:" entry. The "Re:" entry should also note the date, time, and location of the meeting.

The "From:" entry should include the names of all staff who contributed to the memo. If someone on the staff reviewed or approved the memo, please add his or her name in a "Through:" entry. If you are comfortable doing so, the chairman doesn't mind being called "Lee" in memos or in person.

If necessary, include a "Background" section like this one. This section should contain any information you think will be necessary to put an issue or problem in context. If this or any other section of your memo is long, use sub-headings to organize the material for easier reading. A "Background" section may be unnecessary in some cases, and you can start off with "Talking Points" or an "Action" section.

The World's Most Dangerous Yard Sale

*How the U.S. government sold
hardware and blueprints
for a nuclear bomb to
an Idaho used-car
salesman who wants
to sell them overseas.
Really*

BY TIMOTHY NOAH

Most people's eyes glaze over when they see the term "public-private partnership." It denotes a boring-but-laudable solution to bureaucratic anomie: Give certain governmental tasks to private industry and they will be performed more efficiently. Who could object to that?

Increasing the number of public-private partnerships is a cornerstone of the Clinton administration's gospel of "reinventing government," which draws heavily on the 1992 book of the same name by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler. Government is urged to "steer," not "row," delegating the actual delivery of services to lower-rank public or private entities. Thus Al Gore's 1993 National Performance Review calls for, among other things, privatizing Defense Department data processing.

"Steer, don't row" can sometimes be good advice. As Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman demonstrated in their best-selling *In Search of Excellence*, overly centralized management in a large organization does tend to deaden creativity. In government, probably the most extreme example of the problem is the way modern presidents have taken to using sophisticated communications technology to usurp military commanders in the field.

Sometimes, though, the problem with government isn't that it rows too much, but that it rows too little. The case that will forever cause me to shiver when I hear the seemingly innocuous phrase "public-private partnership" is that of Tom Johansen, a used-car dealer in Pocatello, Idaho, who bought major components of a nuclear reprocessor from the Energy Department's contractor-run Idaho National Engineering Lab. If I had my wish, all Clinton administration officials who brainstorm about ways to "reinvent government" would be required to hear this cautionary tale about what happens when the government allows too much control over important public matters to slip from its grasp.

Tom Johansen, 41, is the proprietor of Frontier Car Corral, a battered beige corrugated-metal edifice in Pocatello, outside of which stood, when I visited in late July, a green 1973 Chevy pickup, a beige 1975 Sportscoach motor home, and a 1972

Timothy Noah is a former editor of The Washington Monthly. This article is based on his reporting on the Tom Johansen story for The Wall Street Journal.