

# **Red Tape in Washington**

Horace Towner



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# Red Tape in Washington

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In a certain government department building at Washington there are two desks, in the same room, about twenty feet apart. One of these desks receives the mail addressed to one division of that department, and the other desk receives the mail addressed to another division.

Now in any ordinary business establishment, if a letter came to one desk which should be handled by the man at another desk in the same room, the clerk would toss it over to his colleague, and the matter would be promptly attended to by the proper person. But that is not the way this government department works.

It happens that both divisions handle a great deal of correspondence, and frequently persons writing to the department, not knowing exactly how their letter should be addressed, send their communication with an address which takes it to desk No. 1. It should go, instead, to desk No. 2. The man at desk No. 1, instead of taking it twenty feet across the floor, sends a form letter back to the writer, something like this: DEAR SIR:

Your letter addressed to —— has been received at ——. This matter is under the jurisdiction of ——, and all communications should be addressed thereto.

He thereupon sends the form letter out under the government frank, Uncle Sam carries it through the mails, the sender of the original letter receives it, writes another letter—if he is not discouraged—puts a two-cent stamp on it, and again Uncle Sam carries it through the mails. Eventually it reaches desk No. 2, just twenty feet away from the place at which the complaint or inquiry was originally received.

That is red tape. It is what Dickens derided when he wrote of the "circumlocution office." It is what the late Senator Aldrich meant when he said that he could save the government many million dollars a year by efficient business administration.

But there are two kinds of red tape. One is vexatious and unnecessary, as in the case given above. The other is vexatious, but necessary. The ordinary citizen, in his dealings with the government, often fails to differentiate between the kind of red tape that is merely the result of ridiculous oversystematization, and the kind that is necessary to safeguard the money of the taxpayers. Let us look at an example of the second kind, and see the difference.

### THE STORY OF A PENSION CLAIM

Not long ago a clergyman in a certain Illinois town wrote to his Congressman that one of his parishioners was a needy and deserving old soldier, and ought to have a pension. Somewhat to the good man's surprise, the Congressman was unable to reply by return mail that a pension had been allowed. Instead, he sent an elaborate application blank for the applicant to fill out.

The clergyman wrote back that this seemed to him to be a lot of useless red tape. He could vouch for the man's worthiness, and it was well known in the town that the man had been a soldier. What more could the government want than that?

It did not seem to occur to him that the Pension Bureau had no means of knowing whether the applicant was the man he represented himself to be or not, or whether he had ever served in the Civil War. Further, the man asked for a rate allowed by law only to soldiers who are disabled from some wound or disease received in line of duty, and the bureau had no means of knowing whether he was really disabled or not.

So, with some grumbling, the application blank was filled out, sworn to before a notary public, and sent to the Pension Bureau. This application had spaces for the man's full name, age, dates of service, company and regiment, personal description at time of enlistment, and other facts about his service. It also called for a description of any wound or disease he had suffered, with reference to his hospital record, if any, and included an oath that he was in good health prior to his enlistment, and was now unable to perform manual labor on account of the disability incurred in the service. Finally, on the back of the blank, the man's identity had to be established by some reputable citizen who knew him and could swear that he was the identical person he represented himself

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to be.

The application took its regular place in the files of the Pension Bureau. When the case was reached in due order, the examiner looked it over, found it apparently straight, and sent to the War Department for a transcript of the man's military record.

The record showed that a man of that name had served in the company and regiment given. So far, all right; but the application stated that the soldier claimed a disability rating on account of an injury to his head, which he had received in line of duty, and as a result of which he was now totally disabled. There was no mention in the man's military record of any wound or other injury. His discharge certified that no reason against his reenlistment was known to exist, which meant that he was certainly not suffering from any permanent disability at that time.

### PITY THE POOR VETERAN

So the bureau wrote back, asking for a specific statement of just how and when the injury had been received, and calling for affidavits from other members of the applicant's company testifying to the facts. The letter also demanded the affidavits of two physicians in order to establish the fact that the man was totally disabled, and that such disability was due entirely to the alleged injury to the head, and not in whole or in part to any other cause.

When this demand was received, the clergyman wrote to his Congressman a very sarcastic letter about governmental red tape. He drew a very pathetic picture of this honest and needy veteran waiting for his pension, or perhaps deprived of it entirely, merely because he could not satisfy the ridiculous rules laid down by a lot of officious clerks at Washington.

The Congressman could do nothing, however. The red tape of the Pension Bureau kept on unwinding.

In due time the applicant filed two physicians' affidavits, stating that he was totally disabled and unable to perform any kind of manual labor. These affidavits were from his home doctors, and laid great stress on the man's neediness and worthiness, but were somewhat vague when it came to establishing the historical connection between the alleged injury to the head and the man's helpless condition.

The soldier also filed another affidavit of his own, stating that he was unable to get into communication with any of his comrades who could testify to the injury. In lieu of such testimony he filed an affidavit from his sister, saying that it had always been well known in the family that he was hurt in the head during the Civil War.

The bureau was not yet satisfied. It sent the applicant an order to appear before the board of pension examiners in a near-by town. Again protests were sent to Washington against this interminable delay, but without effect.

The report of the examining board established that the man was disabled, but threw no light on the exact cause of the disability, beyond that it seemed to be partly due to a blow on the head, evidently received some years before, which had caused partial paralysis.

### RED TAPE BARS A DISHONEST CLAIM

Still the bureau was not satisfied, and sent a special examiner to look into all the circumstances. After a thorough investigation, the examiner discovered that the injury to the man's head had been caused by his falling from a step-ladder in the year 1872!

Now this man was entitled to a pension for his service, but he was trying to defraud the government into paying him a larger rate than that to which he was entitled. He had come to the town where he lived some years after the Civil War, and his neighbors did not know the exact facts; but they knew that he was needy, and were willing to stretch a point to help him get a pension from the government. If the Pension Bureau had not insisted on requiring full proof as to every point of the case—in other words, if it had not strictly enforced the red tape which surrounds the administration of the office—a fair-sized lump of the taxpayers' money would have been paid out, every month thereafter, to a man who had no right to receive it.

The government has no means of knowing the personal characteristics of the thousands of citizens with whom it deals. It has no credit man, as have private firms, to look up the standing of an individual. It has to treat every person with whom it deals as if he were a potential thief. This works hardship to the worthy and honest, but it is necessary to protect the government from the unworthy and dishonest.

In any system which deals with a large number of people, concerning whom no personal knowledge can be had, an elaborate system of safeguards must be established. This is justified on the same ground that justifies our elaborate system of procedure in civil-law cases. It is too bad to force the man with a just claim to subject himself to the same delays and inquiries that must be enforced against the man with an unjust claim, but the law and the

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government can be no respecters of persons, and the individual must bow to the rules that protect the whole people.

The converse side of the same principle is seen in criminal law. It is too bad to give the guilty man the benefit of a thousand technical safeguards and immunities, which often bring about the defeat of justice; but it is necessary to give every one accused those benefits, lest the innocent should be punished.

### JUST WHAT RED TAPE IS

Before going further it may be well to define just what we mean by the term "red tape." The phrase originated from the ancient custom of tying together the papers in any legal or departmental case with a band of red tape before filing. The delay and formality incidental to getting the documents out of their pigeonhole, and the fastenings unwound, came to be characterized by the general term red tape. The definition given by the "Standard Dictionary" is:

Official procedure characterized by formality and delay.

This definition is comprehensive, and expresses exactly what the average man means when he uses the words. It includes that kind of official routine which is necessary, as we have seen, and it also includes that kind of formality which is only vexatious, having been devised by minds that have all but lost their human characteristics and become mere card-indexes.

All the government bureaus, even when applying the necessary safeguards such as have been described, are more or less prone to fall into an overelaborated system of routine. This, at its worst, results in such ridiculous examples of circumlocution as we saw in the first example given.

Of course, it is easier to establish an inflexible system, and let it run itself, than to adapt oneself to the varying circumstances of different cases. For instance, it was easier for the clerk at desk No. 1, in our example, simply to mark the number of the form letter required on the communication which he received, and let a stenographer address an envelope and send it back, than it would have been to take the missive over to the other desk and explain the circumstances to the other clerk.

Moreover, there seems to be some subtle influence about department work which takes hold of a man's mind, makes him a slave of form, and eventually metamorphoses him into a kind of human filing-machine. But it is not our purpose to discuss the psychology of the government clerk. Doubtless many learned volumes could be written on that subject without exhausting it.

### MULTIFARIOUS MAP-MAKING

Another tendency of the government bureaus which may be classed as red tape is the result of extreme specialization. Each bureau tends to become highly specialized, and to work in entire independence of other bureaus in similar lines of work. A good example of this is found in the duplication of government maps. There are eight or ten divisions of the different departments which are engaged from time to time in making maps of different sections of the United States.

To begin with, the Geological Survey is engaged in making a complete and elaborate set of topographic maps, which will finally cover the whole of the United States. The Coast and Geodetic Survey makes maps of the coast-line and adjacent territory. The Canada Boundary Survey makes maps of the international boundary-line and near-by districts. The Land Office makes maps of the public lands. The Forestry Service makes maps of the forest reserves and timbered regions. The Bureau of Soils makes soil surveys, which involve mapping the territory covered. The Interstate Commerce Commission makes railroad maps, and the Post-Office Department publishes postal maps.

Between all these different divisions and bureaus that are making maps there is very little cooperation, and the same territory is covered again and again for different purposes.

The map-making is only a single example. Speaking of this condition, Dr. George Otis Smith, director of the Geological Survey, said in an address delivered last April:

Here at the Federal capital we have twoscore scientific bureaus distributed through several executive departments. There exists no general plan or division of duties among these different agencies for public service, but as a fundamental policy we have pinned our faith to a sort of declaration of independence that all scientific bureaus were created free and equal, with the inevitable result that some fields of scientific investigation are occupied by two or more bureaus, other or less attractive fields are shunned, and others, perhaps, are claimed by those not best qualified to make the largest use of the opportunity for work.

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This is the competitive system almost at its worst, because it is countenanced by men of scientific training and high ideals of public service.

Still another abuse which comes under the head of red tape is the delay, not due to any necessary measures of caution, which is met with in too many of our government bureaus.

### THE HUMAN INERTIA OF OFFICIALS

In more than one department, when a communication or application is received, the form reply goes out that it will be "taken up in due course"—which means that it must take its place at the bottom of a pile of items, in the consideration of which the clerk who handles them may be weeks or months behind. This is usually due to faulty administration, whereby one clerk has too much work and another not enough. It is also partly due to inefficient methods, and to the undeniable fact that the average departmental clerk has little personal interest in his work.

It is inevitable that a clerk working month after month at the same routine should become more or less of a machine. He gets into a state of mind where it makes little difference to him whether the task that he happens to have in hand is to-day's work, or last week's, or last month's. The work is all the same, and flows through his hands mechanically, like grist through a mill.

President Taft attempted to stir up the departments and remedy such conditions in 1912. He urged specific legislation looking toward efficient methods, and appointed an Economy and Efficiency Commission, which was expected to revolutionize departmental procedure; but the system proved to be too ancient and too ponderous to be changed in any material degree. After a short career for the commission Congress failed to appropriate for its continuance, and it died a painless death.

Another source of delay is the complicated division of authority, which frequently makes it necessary for a number of different officials to pass on the same matter. A striking example of this was recently brought to the attention of the writer.

A clerk in one of the departments wrote a letter answering a complaint that had come in with regard to the administration of certain matters under that department's control. Under the system in effect, before the clerk could send out his reply, he had to secure the approval of four different men. It happened that all these men were a few days behind in their work.

The letter went to one of the four, lay on his desk for a few days, and then was read and approved. Next it went to another, and remained for some days on his desk. When it finally came back to the clerk who had written it, ready to be sent out, just twenty-two days had elapsed since it had been written.

In a private concern this would not have happened, for it would have been one man's business to write the letter and send it out promptly. In the government departments at Washington there is no such individual responsibility, and no one feels the blame if the matter is unduly delayed.

### RED TAPE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Still another kind of red tape is found in the elaborate precautions which govern transactions by citizens of this nation in foreign countries. Many business men are shy of foreign trade, because they do not like the elaborate formalities they are pretty sure to encounter. Most of these, however, must be classed as necessary red tape, and if the business man were at the other end he would doubtless be glad to have them strictly enforced.

For example, a man in California owns land in a South American country, and sells it to a friend living in the next block. At first thought it might appear that, since these two were the only parties to the transaction, no further formality should be needed than that which is required in an ordinary sale of land in the United States. But it must be remembered that the government of the South American country knows nothing of the parties, and has no jurisdiction over them. It does not know whether the sale was fraudulent or not. Hence, before the title is transferred on its official records, it wants the formal assurance of the United States government that the transaction was regular and valid.

The procedure that would have to be gone through is as follows:

First, the deed would be executed before a clerk of the courts in the State of California, and would bear his official seal.

Next, the secretary of state for the State of California would certify to the authority of the clerk of the courts to execute such an instrument. He would also certify to the clerk's seal, annexing the seal of the State of California, and adding for good measure a little ribbon and such conventional devices as are customarily used in connection{sic} with the seal of that State.



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Then the instrument is sent to the Secretary of State of the United States, and he, in turn, certifies to the seal of the State of California, puts on the great seal of the United States, and adds some more ribbon.

Finally it goes to the ambassador or minister in Washington of the country in which it is to be used, and he certifies to the seal of the United States, and adds his own seal and still more ribbon.

By this time the paper is covered with gilt seals and red, white, and blue ribbons; and then and then only can it be accepted by the South American government and serve to transfer the title to a piece of land on that country's records. Perhaps the flourishes and the ribbons are unnecessary, but it will be seen that no less elaborate system of certification would fully protect the government which honors the document.

So we see that there is red tape and red tape—some of it necessary and good, some of it not so good, and some of it very bad. That which is bad the more conscientious officials at Washington are constantly striving to correct, but it will doubtless be with us more or less as long as governments exist.

Much of it is good, and could hardly be dispensed with. The citizen who is vexed by it should remember that Uncle Sam has a rather big job on his hands taking care of a hundred million people, and if he doesn't tie things up in red tape occasionally they are liable to be badly scattered.

IF YOUTH BUT KNEW

IF youth but knew the joy of life,  
The dear romance thereof,  
The wonders of the sunlit world,  
The majesty of love;

Then he would never trade his days  
For merchandise and gold,  
But he would gird his armor on  
Like a true knight of old;

Then he would take his zither sweet  
While roses had their day,  
And clamber amorous garden-walls,  
And laugh and love and play.

When age was young and golden-haired  
He sold his youth like you—  
And now he hugs the fire and moans:  
"Alas, if youth but knew!"

Harry Kemp

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