



Smoke and Mirrors

Charles Bailey for Tinhelmet
30 December 2004

A basic review of high school civics explains one half of the mirror reference. State and local government structures mirror those of the national government*, though they at times have different names. We have county executives instead of a president and county councils instead of a congress. We have mirrors. We have inefficiency and untold numbers of reform attempts. And like our national counter-parts the reform efforts all seem to fizzle and fail. We also have great debates amongst the many factions of our structures.

That the national government's administrative apparatus was designed to be inefficient is obvious. The rationale for this design is clear, the framers of the Constitution were afraid that government that worked too well would find a way to take away civil liberty. To avoid this they designed an inefficient government (Shafritz and Russell 2005).

Starting out the federal system with the finished product in hand, the Constitution was and is an immediate barrier to innovation and reform. A system that is slow to move, and inefficient by design has both little incentive to change and even when the will exists the means are difficult. The energy driving reform is often absorbed in the labyrinth of government machinery. Again, we have another mirror.

The ability of our local governments to move and act quickly is inherently limited. But why all this yack about government and constitutions? Why concern ourselves with this; is this the smoke part?

No, this is not the smoke. The smoke represents the impediments to good relations between career and volunteer firefighters in combination fire departments. My sole fire department experience has been in combination systems. I volunteer in a combination system and work in another. Over the course of my career I have seen numerous battles emerge from the inherent friction that comes from having these two parties operating in the same firehouses.

Typically the agitators on both sides set up a dichotomy that insists that the paid personnel and the volunteer personnel are working towards a different goal. Charges of inefficiency and ineptitude are hurled from both camps. Today I hope to take a closer look at the relations between paid and volunteer firefighters from a slightly different perspective.

I argue that the conflict that exists between the paid firefighters and their governmental bosses mirror the same conflicts present at all levels of government. I also argue that the volunteers who fight new mandates and initiatives are not dinosaurs left from some other period but rather "citizen advocates," left over from the libertarian colonies who are more

closely related to their communities than their paid counterparts. I finish by asserting that efforts to end the discord between paid and volunteer members, while noble in thought, are wasted effort. The idea is not to end conflict because conflict generates progress. The idea is to limit the harmful effects of that conflict. In the end whether paid or volunteer the purpose is the same, to save lives and preserve property. And the sooner we get to doing that with a healthy respect for one another the better.

The conflict between the paid firefighters and their governmental bosses.

Robert Behn argues that there are three major issues requiring research and study in public administration, [among others] (Behn, 1995):

1. Micromanagement
2. Motivation
3. Measurement

Micromanagement is best evidenced by the agency that is performing poorly. Let's take the fire department by way of example. What happens is that the legislature grows tired of the fire department's inefficiency and begins to pass legislation to correct this problem. Out of this legislation grow new rules, rules slow progress, leading to more legislation. (Behn, 1995). Eventually you get enough rules that as Behn states, "Indeed the agency may conclude that its only real purpose is to follow the rules." In the case of the fire department you do not typically see the county council intervening tangibly in day-to-day operations but the administrative apparatus of the fire department mirrors the national intervention of the legislature.

Our rules about narcotics record keeping are not driven by any real need but rather by past scandal that lead to more rules. Our new safe driving initiatives are not driven by science but rather by reaction to an increase in the number of collisions. Our base line training is not motivated by any thing other than compliance with any number of federal, and NFPA statutes.

I do not argue here that these rules are not necessary. I argue that the rules left unchecked to grow do not lead to increased performance and efficiency but rather lead to a group of people who do not act in the best interest of the public but rather seek only to avoid trouble. The citizens spend way too much money in taxes to have public servants who are satisfied with "not getting into trouble." However, the machinery of administration does not reward innovation, because innovation is by definition a defiance of the rules. The machinery of administration simply withholds punishment for those who remain in the confines of the rules.

Given the preceding set of circumstance there should be no wonder that a motivated civil servant is hard to come by. What makes this dearth of motivation all the more exceptional is that few of us took this job as a firefighter for money. For most of us it was the realization of a childhood dream, or a job where you could make a positive and real impact on the world. Those reasons imply motivation, a motivation that is lacking. Where did the motivation go? The motivation died in the corridors of policy, mandates, rules,

and laws. It died because the paperwork to change anything just takes too long. The motivation was absorbed by the administration that tracks the worker too closely.

And that leads us to the evaluation question. Just how do you measure the input and output, the productivity of a firefighter? That measurement is invariably based on a series of job specific ratings used in annual evaluations, ratings that are incapable of capturing the true impact a firefighter has on his or her community. How do you measure the importance of delivering a holiday meal to a poor family or driving Santa Claus around the neighborhood on Christmas Eve?

Of course I simplify, of course the relationship between the career firefighter and his administration is much more complicated than I let on but my time is limited. Public administration scholars struggle with those issues, micromanagement, motivation and measurement, and surely we do not expect our fire department leaders to be scholars in this field and scholars of fire as well. What we do expect and do deserve though is an environment that builds on our innate desire to do the right thing the right way at the right time. We will deal with the deviations, the screw-ups as they come, but they should not lead to increased micromanagement or more paperwork.

Now it seems that I have deviated some from the initial discussion that involved paid and volunteer firefighters. I have not. I sought only to find a baseline for discontent among the paid, municipal employees. In setting up that baseline we can now contrast it with the baseline for the volunteer and see how their resistance to new mandates and changes is not the residue of dinosaur DNA but rather a vital civic function.

Unlike their paid counterparts the volunteer firefighter likely lives in the area where he or she volunteers, even if it is as a college live-in. (A program where college students live for free in the fire station in exchange for a few nights of service.) Because it is not their full-time job the volunteer has to make a near extreme effort to not only get their initial certifications but to maintain them in light of all the “re-certifications” that are mandated each year. By the time the volunteer finishes all their required training, training they take on for free, they have sacrificed a great deal, be it socially (lost time with family and friends), economically (no second job or fewer overtime hours), or emotionally (the job does have an emotional impact). This time and money lost is not to be recuperated and even if we include the selfish motives that some have for volunteering the public still makes out on the deal, getting fire quality fire protection from their friends and neighbors for the low price of training.

All that jazz is nice but the crucial part of this discussion is the fact that most of the volunteers live in the community in which they serve. They are tied into the landscape by relatives, or a house, or a real concern over the quality of the neighborhood schools. In physics they spend a lot of time trying to divine the smallest part of matter. In civics matters are a little easier to divine, it is the individual who is the smallest part of the political machine. And as that machine is built from the individual up, each layer is supposed to represent the interests and thoughts of their constituents, the individual.

In our polity we select people to represent us, in Washington, and in Rockville, and in Marlboro, and in any number of other county seats across the nation. The volunteers are part of the electorate at the local level, not the paid firefighters, (in general, there are isolated exceptions, but they are both isolated and exceptions). In other words the volunteer fireman represents the interest of the community they serve at its most basic level. They have families and jobs that are tied to that area. It stands to reason that the volunteer would be passionate about different aspects of the service than the paid personnel.

When a paid fire chief decides to eliminate a service in one area and the volunteers protest there are accused of interfering with progress. I don't think ideas of progress have anything to do with it. The volunteer is thinking about their elderly mother or grandfather having to wait two more minutes for an ambulance to arrive. And back to the mirrors for a minute. People who fought against remote control of local action and decision-making founded this country.

I must deviate here to say that not all volunteers act in the best interest of the community, to expect moral perfection out of them when we cannot expect moral perfection out of our elected officials is unfair. But in general, the volunteer right or wrong, acts to protect the interest of their community.

So when the volunteer protests perhaps the root cause of that protest is a belief that somehow the community will be ill served. It takes a lot of patience, foresight, and insight sometimes to uncover the motives. Sometimes the volunteers are not the most verbally acute bunch. But think about it, the government functions for the protection of the rights of the individual, not for the promulgation of the government. The volunteer is a clearer representative of the people and as such at least deserves to be considered.

What to do then with the conflict between paid and volunteer? To venture an answer at this I borrow from James Madison who wrote, "There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects." (Federalist, #10). Madison goes on to discuss how to remove the causes of faction, "There are again two methods of removing the causes of faction: the one, by destroying the liberty which is essential to its existence; the other, by giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same positions, and the same interests." (Federalist, #10).

Wow. It is certain that neither of those options is acceptable. So then the object of our work should not be in preventing conflict but rather in preventing the ill effects of conflict from interfering with progress. Furthermore, it is in the argument, in the discourse that we are able to more finely tune our thoughts and arrive at mutually agreeable solutions. It is through the trial by fire of deliberation that innovation is forged. It is human nature to disagree. Again, I run back to Madison for help:

"By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or

interest, must be rendered by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression.” (Federalist, #10).

In the case of the fire department Madison’s statement translates as follows:

In a combination fire department, neither the paid fire fighters, nor their union, nor their administrative apparatus, not the volunteer portion of the membership, should be allowed to make all the rules. The rules must be arranged so the interests of all are heard and at least considered. But Madison took it wee step farther by saying that the majority should not be able to “concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression.” (Federalist, #10). In the case of the combination fire department that means that neither the paid nor the volunteers should be able to unilaterally act in ways that negatively impact the other or the community.

If you are still with me at this point you are wondering what the overarching point of this discussion is. So am I. No, really. The point is this. We stand, paid and volunteer, in these austere fiscal times, as the first line of help for the citizens. Beyond all the politics and all the hype the mission is simple. Do your very best every time for the citizen. Where the brotherhood starts to break down is when we get to deciding who gets to decide what is best for the community.

I may not have been as effective as I intended to be but what I had hoped to show is that the paid staff faces significant pressures, unfunded mandates, and other problems endemic to government. The volunteer, is the first line of defense in emergency and in those non-emergent times acts as a de-facto representative of community interest, especially since they tend to live in the community. Given these pressures and disparate motivators it is not unexpected for conflict to exist. What I would expect is that both parties, and those others, the paid administration and the union leadership, all come to see that while the dissolution of faction is neither possible nor desirable, the management of faction’s ill effects is both possible and necessary.

In the end we have smoke and mirrors, the smoke of clouded judgment, administrative inefficiency and unclear motives and the mirrors that show us we are not alone, we can at least take some comfort in that.

** I call it the national government because our government system is a federal system. It is a misnomer to call it the federal government because we are all a part of the federal government.*

References:

Behn, R. (1995). The Big Questions of Public Management. *PAR*.

The Federalist #10. Electronically retrieved December 17, 2004 from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/fed/fedpapers.html>

Shafritz, J., Russell, E. (2005). *Introducing Public Administration*. New York. Pearson Education Inc.