

Big Government and Little Analysts

Frank von Hippel

At least once a week during my 16-month stint as assistant director for national security in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, I would ask myself whether I was doing more good on the inside than I had been doing on the outside, as an independent "policy physicist." On one occasion I confided my continuing doubts to a career official in the State Department, a man whose opinions I hold in great respect. His response was immediate: "Oh, you're having much more impact on the inside! Those outsiders are like gnats!"

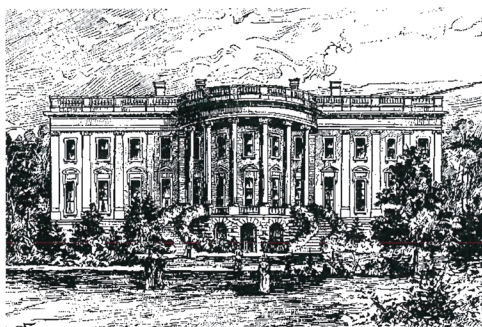
I was amused by this response, because my friend did not seem to realize that the Administration's agenda was largely shaped by ideas generated by the activity of those "gnats" in the country's nongovernmental sector. Although the executive branch is generally relatively impermeable to outside thought, ideas developed by public-interest groups and academics do find their way in indirectly when they are picked up and advocated by key Congressional leaders or even (in my own experience) by Moscow.

Before my stint in the White House, I had only been able to treat its reactions to outside input as those of a black box. Now I was inside the black box and able to see how it works—or, often, doesn't.

One problem is a mode of operation that shreds time into almost useless bits. Meetings on major policy issues are called on a few hours' notice, making it impossible to study and prepare properly. Concurrence on cables to be sent to foreign governments setting out Administration positions is often requested within an equally tight time frame: "If we don't hear from you by COB [close of business] today, we will assume that you concur." Similarly, "options papers"

on alternative policy approaches to a problem are often demanded with only a few days' notice; this results in the few knowledgeable—and therefore already overburdened—officials having to write these papers, because there is no time to ramp up the involvement of knowledgeable experts who are not already "in the loop."

I was fortunate in that I came in with some intellectual capital: a pretty good background understanding of the issues with which I was dealing and also some ideas about the policies that I wanted to get adopted. Under the conditions of "thought deprivation" prevailing in the White House, however, I found that this capital was rapidly depleted, and I felt my judgments becoming more superficial. Nor was I the only one: A young colleague who had been in government for two years decided that he had to



get out because he was in danger of losing his ability to do high-quality analysis. He complained about the imperviousness of some career bureaucrats with whom he was struggling, but then he paused and observed quietly, "They must have been smart once too." There are exceptions, of course. I worked with a few remarkable career officials who were intellectually quick enough and able to organize their immediate environments well enough that even under these conditions they had been able to sustain a high level of competence for decades.

With all this frenetic activity, one would get the impression that, for better or worse, important decisions are

being made at a furious pace. In fact, however, the interagency decision-making process is usually inconclusive, because a decision on any significant new proposal cannot be made at the working level without a consensus of the key departments. Failing a consensus, the issue can be pushed up to the next higher level in the government—ultimately to the President—but there is a natural reluctance to do so, because higher-level officials are usually much less knowledgeable and so would be condemned to fight clumsily over the same terrain using "talking points" prepared by the working-level people. As a result, if a consensus is not reached at the working level, an issue will often be dropped—only to be picked up a few months later when some outside event or deadline forces it to the fore again. Thus there is time to organize

a much more systematic and searching decision-making process. The problem is that the time is not used. The decision-making process reminded me of the old quantum field theory concept of *Zitterbewegung*, in which a particle jitters at near-light speeds in all directions under the influence of virtual emissions and absorptions, while its average speed is small.

A large part of the problem is that the greatest consumer of energy at the upper levels of government is fighting over turf. In the short run at least, the perception of power in the government depends more on the size of one's policy domain than on what one does with that power. This leads to incessant warfare at the boundaries of the different policy domains, with the more aggressive constantly trying to seize turf from others, who are then forced to expend much of their energy on defensive maneuvers or else lose "access" to top officials and the "influence" that is assumed to come with such access. One unfortunate result is that overwhelmed officials who need help are often unwilling to accept help because of fears that the "helper" might end up seizing a piece

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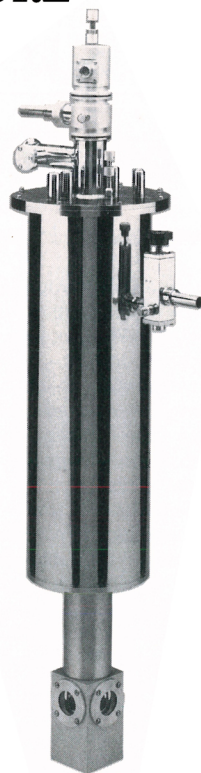
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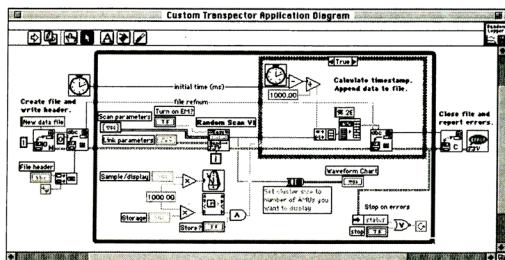
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of their turf. I often muttered to myself in frustration, "They need help but they don't want help!" That my position came without much turf turned out to be a blessing in disguise: I was able to spend much more time and energy on substance than could many of my colleagues.

In the national security area, at least, secrecy is also misused to impede participation in the decision-making process. For example, one office in the National Security Council regularly issues secret meeting notices that are "inadvertently" not distributed to White House offices holding a differing point of view and sends options papers marked "Eyes only" to high-level officials who have no time to read them. In fact, there are few real secrets in most classified papers—often because the same officials who insist on shrouding the policy-making process in secrecy systematically leak information to the press; this enables them to bypass the inter-agency process and present their own interpretation of the information, or "spin," to higher-level officials and Congress through the press. As Steve Aftergood, a freedom-of-information expert at the Federation of American Scientists, has observed, "If current trends are taken to the limit, everything will eventually be classified, but nothing will be secret."

These somewhat disillusioning observations helped me understand why the analyses prepared by small non-governmental groups are so often more well-researched and cogent than those prepared within the government. The conditions under which nongovernmental analysts work allow them to use the government's vast resources of expertise much more effectively than distracted government officials are able to.

The overall situation reminds me of a conversation I had with my young son on a moonlit walk many years ago. He asked, "Dad, now that they have solved the problem of solar power, what about lunar power?" I responded (calculating quickly) that the light of the full moon is only about a hundred-thousandth as intense as sunlight. But, he suggested, "If one smart person can solve solar power, maybe one hundred thousand smart people could solve lunar power!" I responded with a question of my own: "Do you really think that one hundred thousand smart people can combine to be one hundred thousand times as smart as one smart person?" After a moment's thought, his response was, "Maybe not." ■