

The Civil Service

by.

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The Civil Service

The Civil Service in its general sense, consists of the service rendered by persons whose appointment lies in the power of those officers who are elected by the people.

The Civil Service of the United States, previous to the election of Gen Jackson to the Presidency in 1829 had a career uneventful and very satisfactory to the public. But when Jackson came into power, he introduced his "spoils system" which was adopted by succeeding presidents. This system which has proved such a bane to the government has been carried out, until public sentiment brought about the "merit system", and attempted to plant purity and honesty in the government service. The "spoils system" still exists to a certain extent, and always will exist in spirit. But the "merit system" now stands supreme, and we hope it may ever stand so. We will see the opposing forces of these two systems as we follow the progress of the Civil Service through its career.

We find that from the beginning of Washington's Administration to the close of that of J. Q. Adams, no faithful officers were removed on account of

political reasons, except a very few under Jefferson. During the first forty years of the government under the Constitution only seventy four officers were removed; less than two a year. But this was not to last long. Political creed and party lines were soon to make their appearance and curse the then-almost-perfect system of civil service.

If we were called upon to name the axiom or adage that contains the greatest amount of political mischief, we should quote the sentence attributed to Gen Jackson. "To the victor belongs the spoils". If he is responsible for this doctrine, his memory deserves to be everlastingly execrated. When he came into power in 1829, he proceeded to carry out the principles that he advocated, and to which his name is inseparably attached. The ground upon which he based his principle, was, that to have the whole system work in harmony, all in the Service must have the same political views. Hence he removed the officers of other parties and substituted in their stead men of his own party. He did not take into account the qualifications of the men removed or of those appointed in their places. This was the commencement of the "spoils system", sometimes called the "system of rotation in office". Hardly a political evil of to-day has not grown from practice

based upon that doctrine. The rule of second and third rate men replacing good men in our offices, the unprincipled struggle of parties in power, and the disgraceful jobbery that seems inseparably to be connected with government expenditure of money, grow directly out of the doctrine: "To the victor belongs the spoils."

When the Whigs came into power in 1841, Jackson's "spoils system" was accepted and practiced by them. Under this system the government was managed until the election of Grant; when at this point we see a change. The first effective steps were taken in the line of reform.

Civil Service Reform means the removal of abuses in the public service, and the enforcement of such principles as will contribute to good government. Although a successful reform was not accomplished until 1883, several attempts were made previous to that time. As early as 1853 pass-examinations had been made a prerequisite to entering the civil service in the Department at Washington, but the regulation amounted to nothing. The pass-examinations could be taken only by a favored few;—those who were friends of the great politicians, by whom they were recommended. The first systematic endeavor against the 'spoils system' was made in 1865, by Hon. Thos A. Jenckes a Representative from Rhode Island.

In 1866 Sen. B. Gratz of Missouri undertook to get the "spoils system" superseded by the "merit system". But no success attended these efforts. In 1870-71 reform in the Civil Service became almost an issue. It was one of the three cardinal principles of the Liberal Republicans, and received more or less favor from politicians of all stripes. In 1872 it was recognized for the first time in all party platforms.

On March 3-1871 an act was passed authorizing the President, through a Commission, to be appointed by himself, to ascertain the fitness of candidates as to age, health, character, knowledge and ability, by examinations, and to prescribe regulations for conduct of appointees. The rules were submitted by the Commission and the new system went into effect. Pres. Grant reported that the new method had given superior men in office. But the system began soon to lose favor. In 1875 Congress failed to appropriate funds for the Commission to work with, and it was forced to suspend work. A door for spoils was not the sole cause for this. Many of the friends of the system thought it too stiff and bookish. Labor leaders opposed it because they found that its requirements excluded themselves and all but the most favored of their children from public office. Unfortunately, the President cared as little

as did Congress for pure Civil Service, and again we see a reform pushed aside.

On January 16-1883 a second act was passed by Congress, entitled: "An act to regulate and improve the Civil Service of the United States". It was to take effect in July of the same year. A commission of three consisting of Dorman B. Eaton of New York, Jno M. Bosgray of Illinois and Leroy D. Thomas of Ohio, to carry out the principle, was nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. The principles involved in the act, or rather the principles subordinate to carrying out the rules were: "1. Official authority and influence must no longer be used to impair the freedom of elections or to coerce the political action of citizens. 2. Extortions from those in public service whether in the form of political assessments or otherwise, for the purpose of paying the expense of parties or candidates, must come to an end. 3. Selections for the Executive service on the basis of political or official favor and partisan influence must be suppressed by requiring examinations and other adequate tests of character and capacity as the conditions of entering the Civil Service. 4. The true responsibility and independence of the Legislative and Executive departments under the Constitution must be restored and preserved." It was the purpose

at the outset to enforce the new system broadly enough to fairly test its merits without making it so general as to involve serious inconvenience in case of failure. Concerning the fitness of these principles, little need be said, for their merit is apparent to everyone. The moment that the declared and fixed policy of the nation makes eminent fitness for office a prerequisite for official position and responsibility, that moment second and third rate men and first rate rascals will drop out of party politics. The only way to have good government is to place good men in office and keep them there. During the Civil War we tried an experiment of poor men in military service and the result was what might have been expected. We cannot blame a man of high character for refusing to go into service under a system by which he must sacrifice his reputation, his time and half of his income in order to repay those who put him in office. Under such a system it is not necessarily an honor to be elected to congress, and it is a doubtful compliment to be elected to the Presidency.

It was inevitable that one of the chief objects of the Civil Service act was to establish a system of free, open, competitive examinations. The Civil Service Commission that was appointed by Grant in 1871 provided competitive examinations, but they were

conducted under many embarrassments. However, competitive examinations had a trial more thorough than those under Grant. The trial, or example set by the first Commission lead to a rigid enforcement of such examinations at the Custom House and Post Office at New York City; and since that date selections for appointments in these places have been made from the highest of a list of examined competitors. So quickly were the good effects apparent that the Annual Message of the President in 1880 commended this for consideration of Congress. The result, is the competitive system of to-day.

There is nothing in the competitive examinations requiring different subjects or harder questions than those in pass-examinations. But they require the merits of those seeking employment to be put in comparison; and it is but natural that competition should raise the standard. With a few exceptions, the subjects to which alone the examinations must be confined, are stated. They are required to be practical in their character, and so far as may be, relate to those matters which fairly test the capacity and fitness of the persons examined to discharge the duties of the service into which they seek to be appointed. After being graded according to merit, those examined must

be certified for appointment in the order of their grade. The parts of the public service for which such examinations are appropriate are those in which the applicants' opinions are not qualifications. Consequently they are suitable in choosing men to do good public work under the direction of superior officers; but they are not suitable guides by which to choose elective officers who must represent political parties and local interests.

The rules governing the examinations are fully in the hands of the Commission. They select examiners from those already in the service and thus save the expense that would incur were they to select outside men. For the executive department at Washington, a common board of ten is selected; two from each of the three departments having the largest number of subordinates, and one from each of the other four. Besides this Board, special ones are selected to examine applicants for places of special skill. The Commission does not directly conduct examinations, or mark, or grade those examined, although some of its members attend the majority of the examinations held; and it is a board of final appeal in all complaints.

Every applicant for examination is required to fill out a blank, certifying his age, name,

residence, past occupation &c. If the statements that he makes are satisfactory, the applicant is notified to appear at the next examination held at a convenient place. Only a common-school ^{education} with a few exceptions; is necessary to enter the civil service. This seems not to encourage higher education; but the points sought for, are to secure good character, and to place the service in reach of as many as possible. Especially to place it within reach of those who have not the means to obtain a better education. A few places, however, require higher branches than those obtained in the common school. These are clerkships where some knowledge of draughting, law, and technical science is necessary.

The questions for examinations are invariably prepared by the commission. They are printed on the same paper on which the answers are to be written, and these papers are kept as a permanent record. No question is asked that is not entirely proper and appropriate. No foreign or no technical terms are ever used.

The marking and grading of papers are done by boards of examiners who do not know whose papers they are grading. This saves the examiners from bias and from suspicion of partiality.

Those who have attained a grade showing fitness for appointment are placed upon the registers of their places of their sought appointments. When a vacancy occurs, one person is appointed from the four most eligible. If the vacancy is in the Department at Washington, the four names are chosen from the four states most deserving in appointments, and the one standing highest is chosen. In some particular vacancies, the head of the department knowing best the requirements, is allowed his choice of the four standing highest.

Nowhere on the part of the Commission or its subordinates is there any favor, or disadvantage allowed for reason of sex. Under open competitive examinations women have fared equally with men of like abilities, and hence the number of women waiting to be certified is about the same proportion of the whole number, as those examined are of the whole number examined.

When the Commission first made its rules it did not provide for examinations for promotions in the service. But later the Statutes were amended providing for examinations for promotion as well as for appointment.

When an applicant is admitted into the service, he must serve six months on probation, in the work which he is to do

if he receives a regular appointment. At the end of this time he goes out of the service unless he is reappointed. This test is to decide the oft-repeated objections based on the assumption that no literary examination can show all the qualities required in a good officer.

By the foregoing we see the conditions from which grew the present Civil Service System, and also we see the form and requirements of the system. Let us look farther and follow its growth and extension during a period covering only about a decade and a half.

At the outset the examinations extended to a little over 14000 places, distributed as follows: — Department at Washington, 5,650; Custom Service 2,573; Postal Service 5,690. During the first two years of the Commission's work, — ending January 16-1885; 9889 applicants were examined, of which about 65% passed. The appointments for the same time were about 2300; — these for the probationary period. During the third year 7,602 were examined, 5034 passed and 1,876 appointments were made. During that year the Departmental Service was extended to include the Department of Agriculture; not included before. At later dates two more branches were added to the classified service: The Indian Service and

The Railway Mail Service. In 1893 the Forw-delivery Post offices were added to the Postal System, which added 557 post-offices and 7660 employees. The number of applicants annually increased and during the year ending June 30-1894, for the fine branches the total number examined was 37,879 of which 22,181 passed. The number of appointments made, was 4,372. During the next year 31,036 were examined, 19,811 passed, and 4,792 received appointments. The next year, ending June 30-1896, 81,276 were examined, 20,492 passed, and 5,084 received positions. During the year between June 30-1894 and June 30 1895, 8,896 places were added to the classified service, and 2,779 places were withdrawn from the excepted class and made competitive, and 33 were transferred from the non-competitive to the competitive list. The number of places subject to examination was thus increased by 11,708, making the whole number of places to which appointments can now only be made through competitive examinations about 53,000.

The status of the Civil Service, as given by the commission in their report for the year ending June 30-1896, gives the total approximate number of positions in the Civil branch of the Government, as 178,717 of which 87,107 are in the classified and 91,610 are in the unclassified service. Of those in

the classified service 84,239 are arranged in classes according to compensation and subject to examination or registration, and 2061 are Indians in the Indian service. The aggregate compensation paid in the Executive Civil Service of the United States during the year ending June 30-1896 was approximately \$100,000,000.

But still greater extension has been made to the roll of accessible places. Looking back and comparing figures: we find that during Pres. Arthur's administration 15,000 federal officers were included; during Cleveland's first term 27,000; Pres. Harrison extended the list to include more than 43,000; and during Cleveland's second term the classified list still increased by natural growth, and was in one more greatly extended. This move was Cleveland's Emancipation Proclamation, issued May 16-1896. It brought under the Civil Service rules, virtually all of the federal employees. It completed the freeing of the political slaves whose redemption was begun by Jackson over sixty years ago. What one democratic president done, another undone. By this act, 85,200 employees were removed from control of politicians. This leaves nothing for the 'Spoils' men to scramble for except a few private clerkships, cashierships and fourth class Post Offices, the Consularships and foreign missions, - mainly those filled by the President and

confirmed by the Senate

Thus we see fulfilled the principles forwarded by Geo. W. Curtis, Mr Jencks, Mr Schurz and others, when they made their first attempt at Civil Service Reform. The reform has been accomplished and their efforts have been rewarded.

The Civil Service of The United States has passed through all stages of growth and at present seemingly stands developed and mature, and in a condition needing only faithful work to give our country a government that she may well be proud of. Yet the system stands at the mercy of the political party in power, and its perpetuity depends on the policy of those who are elected to hold the reins of government. It is our earnest hope that the life of the system may be long and prosperous. May it, if this be possible, improve in the future as it has in the past, and make our Government an example that we will be proud to hold up to the other nations of the world.

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