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Abstract:

Recounts the author's experience as the Assistant Secretary in the US Department of Education, in charge of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in 1991. Lessons learned while in Washington, D.C.; Encounters with Congress; Mixed feelings regarding bureaucracy; Internal review of top-ranking proposals; Issue behind the move to Washington, D.C.

## ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

### A Scholar in Washington

I guess I was ready when the call came. Although hard at work on a new book, I felt the stirrings of a vague kind of restlessness, the sort that used to draw people in other times to go to sea, join the circus, or hit the road. The call came from Lamar Alexander, former governor of Tennessee and recently appointed by President Bush to be Secretary of Education. He invited me to come to Washington and tell him what I thought he should do. To those of us who spend our hours hoping to speak truth to power, never quite sure whether anyone is listening, the invitation was irresistible.

At lunch a week later, Alexander and his deputy, David Kearns, former chairman of Xerox, listened to me intently on the subject of education (later they told me they couldn't get a word in edgewise). A few days later, Alexander asked me to join his team. We would start a crusade to improve education, he said, and my assignment would be to put the topic of standards high on the nation's agenda.

Despite my aforementioned restlessness, I truly didn't want to do it; I liked working at home in jeans and didn't want to feel compelled to go to an office every day. As a writer and academic, I had never had to mouth anyone else's opinions or defer to any party line; besides, I was a lifelong Democrat. But Alexander said to me, "Sometimes in your life, the right combination of people, ideas, and opportunities come together. And when it happens, you have to take a chance." I heard the music begin to swell in the background, and my brain seemed flooded with clichés about seizing the day, daring greatly, entering the arena, and all that. I believed it. In July 1991, I was sworn into office as Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Department of Education, in charge of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), and Counselor to the Secretary.

Eighteen months later, I was the last person left at the Education Department, the official who turned over the metaphorical keys to the incoming Clinton administration on January 21, 1993. I sat in the Secretary's empty office, Acting Secretary for the day. My one substantive (and humiliating) task was to sign letters to approximately 150 of my former colleagues, informing them that their services were no longer required by the Department.

Since I left government, I have often thought about what I learned while I was there. I have occasionally recalled a brief conversation with James Pinkerton, a young domestic policy adviser

on President Bush's staff, at a Christmas party in 1991. I was still finding my way around Washington when, upon meeting Pinkerton, he said to me, "It's a good thing that you are here, because you have to write about it later. You have to let people know what really happens." I wondered why he thought I might have any special insight into "what really happens," but I later realized what he meant. Most people who work in the federal government become socialized to the status quo; they accept the way things work because, so far as they know, it has always been that way and it will always be that way. Pinkerton recognized that I brought to Washington an outsider's perspective: I was constantly amazed or angered by the ways things worked. Fortunately--I at least think it fortunate--I left before I lost my capacity for outrage.

What I learned in Washington can be distilled into eight basic and interrelated axioms:

First: The United States has two dream factories--Hollywood and Washington, D.C. Both of them feed the fantasies of the American public by encouraging people to believe that intractable, deep-rooted problems (and even their psychological needs) will be solved by a magic feather or a new program.

Second: The federal government is run by Congress, especially by the House of Representatives, which controls the budget and decides how much money will be spent, who will receive it, and what they may or may not spend it on.

Third: Those who work inside the Beltway in Washington, D.C., believe that they are smarter than everyone outside the Beltway because they have the power to write the laws and regulations that everyone else in the country has to obey.

Fourth: There is one sure way to achieve eternal life: Become a federal program. Many programs administered by the Department of Education long ago outlived their usefulness, but they continue to receive appropriations year after year, protected by friends in Congress. Most programs are seldom evaluated; on the odd occasion when a program gets a negative evaluation, its friends respond that it needs more money and more time.

Fifth: All federal education programs are designed by lobbyists employed by education interest groups. Congressional staff members rely on them because they are presumed to know much more about the issues and problems than anyone else, and they know exactly who should get the federal dollars (their clients). The nation's children do not have lobbyists, but many organizations representing publishers, unions, teachers, principals, school superintendents, counselors, gender-equity trainers, trade schools, universities, and school boards do. Because these lobbyists represent mostly nonprofit associations, the media assume that they are above self-interest. If they were corporate lobbyists, the media would watch them closely. But lobbyists are lobbyists, and the same principle obtains: Follow the money.

Sixth: Euphemisms disguise purposes. A tax was called a "revenue enhancement"; a bill meant to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to state education departments was titled "the neighborhood schools improvement act." See above: Follow the money.

Seventh: Anything worth funding is worth funding in several different federal agencies at the same time. I spent countless hours meeting with counterparts who were running similar or identical programs in other offices within the Department of Education, as well as in the Department of Commerce, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, and other federal agencies. In one area alone-- mathematics and science education--there are programs in seventeen different federal agencies, expending more than \$2 billion annually. There is no logic to this duplication, nor is there any real capacity for coordination; a recipient of federal largesse, found incompetent by one agency, will sometimes succeed in wheedling money from a different agency, unaware of the applicant's previous failure.

Eighth: The federal government will never be the leading edge of educational reform because political considerations make it impossible either to reject bad programs or to recognize good programs. Federal programs work best when distributing money based on need because it is easy to measure whether everyone got what they were entitled to (regardless of the quality of education they support). Federal programs work worst when any judgment about their quality or effectiveness is required because politics gets in the way of making such judgments.

Lest I sound too cynical, let me assure the reader that working in government as a sub-cabinet officer was one of the most exciting experiences of my life. Despite some bad days when I wondered what I was doing there, I loved the glamour and political drama of working in Washington; I also felt pride in doing public service, no matter how often I wondered about how well the public was served. There was never a humdrum day.

One of the joys of my job was visiting exemplary schools around the country, where enthusiastic teachers and principals showed what dedication could accomplish. I will never forget, for example, San Francisco's Mission High School, where inner-city children were solving difficult math problems based on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum"; or the Wesley Elementary School in Houston, where first graders, who were mainly poor and black, demonstrated a command of English grammar that was better than many graduate students that I had taught; or an innovative elementary school in Tucson that had a planetarium in unused office space, a student bank in another room, and a nature trail and garden in the front yard.

Once in a while, I could even quietly claim credit for stopping something from happening. I recall, for example, that the Department's Office of Civil Rights proudly displayed a banner that it intended to distribute to every school in the country. It said, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, and words will surely hurt me." No, I said, no. Don't do that. That message from the federal government will unleash an avalanche of speech codes and inspire everyone to claim victim status, based on any thoughtless comment. Besides, my generation grew up saying, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Isn't that what we want kids to say when faced with taunts and bullies? Doesn't a free society, with words coming from all directions, require a thickening of everyone's skin? I don't know if my criticism alone stopped it--perhaps others reacted the same way--but the banner was never reproduced.

Learning about the culture of the federal government was, of course, a revelation. Even before I was sworn in, I encountered the ethics rules. Despite the popular perception, the rules for the

executive branch--when observed--are rigorous. I was surprised to hear Bill Clinton say during the 1992 campaign that his administration would be the most ethical ever, as if he were wading into a swamp of misbehavior, because the ethics rules for senior political appointees were already very strict. As a Presidential appointee, I was told that I must resign from every organization that I belonged to and also recuse myself from any relationship with any organization in which I had participated during the previous five years. Every source of my income had to be revealed and was carefully scrutinized by the Department's ethics lawyers. I resigned my memberships in various professional associations, and I sold my one hundred shares of Time Warner stock (because the Department made decisions affecting textbook publishers and educational technology). Furthermore, I was not permitted to accept any gifts, or to allow anyone to pick up the check for a meal, or to keep the frequent-flyer miles accrued while traveling on government business (the previous Secretary of Education was then under investigation for allegedly using frequent-flyer miles earned on government travel). Nor could I receive payment for speaking or writing, even if the subject had nothing to do with my official duties. The only outside income that I could legally accept (other than dividends and interest) was royalties from books.

And each year, I would be expected to fill out a new financial disclosure form. At first, I thought that the ethics rules were unduly restrictive (why not allow a journalist to buy lunch?), but I came to believe that they are, in fact, reasonable and fair. Federal officials make decisions that affect the allocation of millions of dollars, and they should not receive gratuities that might influence their judgment. Besides which, Washington is chock-full of lobbyists who, if they saw an opening, would quickly rush in bearing gifts and favors.

It did gall me that neither members of Congress nor their staffs lived by the same ethics rules that govern executive branch officers. People "on the Hill" sought any opening to criticize members of the administration on ethics issues, but they themselves were free to accept money (campaign contributions), meals, vacations, and gifts from lobbyists. I never understood why the press tolerated this blatant double standard.

Although there were no perks, life in the executive suite had its compensations. Unlike some other cabinet offices, the Department of Education did not have a dining room or a chef, nor was there ever a free lunch; when we had a weekly luncheon meeting, each of us paid seven dollars for a box lunch. The Secretary and Deputy Secretary had a driver and limousine; assistant secretaries called for a pool car when traveling on official business. However, I did have a grand office with a full view of the Capitol and a large personal staff. And I had a free parking space in the garage of my agency's building. When I took office, my immediate entourage included a deputy, a chief of staff, two speechwriters, personal assistants, secretaries, and policy analysts. Never having had more than a part-time research assistant, I was not sure what to do with all those people, but they seemed to know what to do and kept doing it. I couldn't get used to having speechwriters, so I reassigned them and stayed up into the pre-dawn hours drafting my own speeches, which is practically unheard of.

The agency that I ran, OERI, had some five hundred employees and a budget of about \$450 million. The most valuable part of the agency is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which collects statistics about education; it is well respected for its professionalism.

NCES includes the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which regularly tests national samples of American students and supplies the most useful information that we have about student achievement. The statistical agency represents the historic root of the federal role in education, created in 1867 to report to the American people on the condition and progress of education. OERI was also in charge of research centers, library programs, dissemination of public information about research and practice, and dozens of miscellaneous small programs related to teacher education, technology, gifted children, civic education, drug education, school health, teacher training in the South Pacific, and so on.

When I discovered that so many small programs were assigned to OERI, my first impulse was to ask, "Why is the federal government doing this? Who does it help? Does it make a difference?" I told OERI staff to ask these questions before they sent up proposals for funding. In short order I learned that there was no money to evaluate programs that Congress had authorized and funded for years; the career staff knew that I could raise questions but could not cut off funding to programs, regardless of their quality. Each year the administration tried to "zero out" many of them, but it was a waste of time. Almost every program had a lobbyist, a bevy of nonprofit groups that received federal funding and lobbied for more, and a Congressional friend. The lobbyist for the education research groups told me that his ambition was to have Congress view educational researchers just like tobacco farmers, protected in the federal budget each year by their friends.

A major part of the agency's budget was devoted to nearly a score of relatively small university-based research centers and ten "regional education laboratories." The centers and labs, as they were known, constituted the heart of the Department's modest commitment to education research and development. Created during the Great Society years, the centers and labs were supposed to herald a new day in American education, as researchers unlocked the secrets of learning and shared their wealth with the nation's schools. That never happened, of course, and there was widespread feeling in Washington that education research had been a dismal failure.

Education researchers believed, with some justification, that the failure was owing to a lack of federal funding; a report published by the National Academy of Sciences during my term in office recommended a vast increase in federal spending on education research. But research funding dried up for two reasons: first, because the Democratic majority in Congress never trusted a Republican administration with control of the education research agenda; and second, because many members of both parties were deeply suspicious of the value of any education research, believing that the field mainly produced useless gobbledygook (sometimes they were right).

The regional education laboratories were a special puzzlement. When I first arrived in Washington, I was not quite sure what they were; living in New York City, I had never seen or heard of "our" regional laboratory, which is in Amherst, Massachusetts. I soon learned that their presence may be slight or invisible in the nation's urban schools but is felt very strongly on Capitol Hill. I was told by Democratic and Republican staff members alike not to tangle with them because they were politically powerful, far more powerful than a mere assistant secretary. That I administered their funds, I was told, should not give me the idea that I had anything to say about their operations or budget. Each regional lab covers several states and has a board that

includes important public figures. Together they receive about \$50 million in federal funds each year.

The labs maintained a lobbying organization in Washington that was run by an energetic woman who had previously worked for a senior Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee. The labs also had powerful friends in the Senate, including Republican Senator Mark Hatfield, who has a lab in his state. Each year, at appropriations time, the labs' funding was guaranteed, but the rest of OERI's budget was not. In fact, I found myself courting the labs' lobbyist, trying to get her to intercede on behalf of the rest of the agency's budget. A waste of time, I might add; the labs never did anything for any other part of the agency and fought fiercely only to enhance their own budgets.

Like other federal programs, the labs were always on the lookout for new pots of money, and it was easy to spot their thumbprints on new education proposals. If the appropriation bill said that the funds were to be awarded to ten regional competitors, everyone knew that the money was intended for the labs. For example, when Senator Hatfield decided that the nation needed ten regional mathematics and science centers (\$12 million annually for the lot), a national competition was conducted, and--surprise!--the labs won all ten contracts. Republican Senator Nancy Kassebaum's education staff assistant was greatly enamored of the labs, and she decided that the labs should receive an additional \$30 million annually to train classroom teachers as education researchers. I argued that classroom teachers belonged in the classroom, that the federal government should not promote an exodus of the most talented teachers, that there were many other agencies better qualified to train new researchers, but there was no dissuading her. She wanted the labs to get more money for this vital federal mission. And into the OERI budget went another plum earmarked for the labs.

On one of my visits outside Washington, I saw a state (not federal) education lab in Harris County, Texas, that was very impressive. It sold its services to about fifty local school districts and to the state education department, and it was very entrepreneurial in supplying what districts wanted, including teacher training (about two hundred different courses, beamed out over its own local cable stations); computerized payroll services and student records; a lending library of educational videos; machines that translated textbooks into braille; and a showroom with the most advanced electronic communications devices for children with handicaps. This lab actively competed for state and federal contracts. I thought it was a model of what an educational laboratory might be, a service provider, doing the work that school districts and the state wanted done, rather than an organization that uses political connections to remain permanently on the federal dole. I urged the federal labs to think about transforming themselves into similar entrepreneurial organizations. Needless to say, the lab directors and their lobbyists did not appreciate the suggestion.

My encounters with Congress were frequently disheartening and sometimes painful. The senators and their staffs were always cordial and straightforward, even to a representative of the Bush administration, in part because of their courtly tradition but also perhaps because they had occasionally been out of power. They actually seemed to believe that the elected administration should have some role in managing the Department. I had only one startling encounter with a Democratic staffer from the Senate, a man who was customarily nonpartisan. Both of us were

invited to address a gathering of the teachers and principals of the year on the subject of the federal role in education. I discussed the national education goals and the importance of establishing standards. He gave a stemwinder, flailing at the Republicans and listing the multi-million-dollar programs that Congress had authorized for principals, school boards, teachers, schools of education, and other deserving recipients. The only problem was that most of the programs he described had not received a penny of appropriations; nor were they likely to. The promised programs, in short, were nonexistent. The speaker correctly assumed that his listeners would not know that federal programs receive authorization from one Congressional committee, and appropriations from another committee, and that programs can be authorized without receiving appropriations. I was dumbfounded, but realized that this behavior, this indulgent expenditure of promises and empty rhetoric, was part of the political game, engaged in by all sides.

Dealing with House members and their staffs was a constant ordeal; the majority had been in power continuously for forty years, and they--especially their staffs--exhibited the arrogance of uncontested power. Exchanges with them often made me feel like a freshman undergoing a hazing ritual. I was taken aback by their intense partisanship. They were especially enraged at the thought that President Bush wanted to be "the education President," a prospect that brought sneers and a determination to block anything that the Department proposed. The attitude of House members was that they (and they alone) decided every educational issue and the Department did their bidding; under no circumstances was the Department to have a program that did not emanate from the Democratic majority in Congress. So, for example, when Secretary Alexander awarded competitive grants for teacher-training academies in subject areas (math, science, history, English, geography) without asking for permission first, the House Education and Labor Committee punished the Department by cutting millions of dollars in discretionary funds. This activity, they said, was unauthorized by Congress and amounted to "politicization" (anything that they didn't like was characterized as "politicization," but nothing that they themselves did--like directing federal funds to their favorite causes or harassing administration officials--ever amounted to "politicization").

My agency was "up for reauthorization," meaning that Congress was about to rewrite its charter for the next five years, and House Democrats had decided to reconstruct it. One Congressman, whom I will call Mr. X, headed an oversight committee of one and held the fate of the agency in his hands. Since the agency was his baby, he had grandiose plans for its future. Mr. X had no use for Republicans, and he devised a plan to assure that the administration would have little to say about the education research agenda in the future (actually, the administration had little to say about the research agenda even before reauthorization, because Congress closely circumscribed the uses of research monies and scrutinized every funding decision made by OERI). Mr. X asserted that the agency had a "treasure chest" of knowledge about how to fix the nation's schools and he wanted to make it available to everyone. In his redesign, the agency would be authorized to expend billions of dollars through major research institutes; it would have an extensive network of federal extension agents (like agricultural extension agents) who would bring the latest research findings into inner-city schools; and it would be controlled by a powerful policy-making board that consisted mainly of representatives from organizations that received or sought money from the agency.

I knew that the agency was not suppressing knowledge about educational regeneration and that it lacked the capacity to staff the research institutes that Mr. X projected; I also disagreed with his proposal to create a powerful board with extensive executive authority (including the authority to conduct research and run conferences, just like the agency) and its own large staff. But there was no shaking the Congressman's conviction that the only way to "depoliticize" the agency was to turn control over to the people and organizations that compete for its funding. He called it "a new paradigm."

I spent many hours visiting members of Congress, trying to find support for an advisory board of distinguished people who-- unlike Congressman X's board--would not have the power to select personnel or to intervene in grant-making decisions. Since no one in Congress cared much about education research, it was hard to stir up interest. And I became utterly hopeless when I met with the most important education staff member in the Congress, a twenty-five-year veteran of the House Education and Labor Committee. It was, in fact, the worst single hour of my time in the federal government. In his quiet, assured way, he told me that no one in the majority was interested in what the administration wanted; that all decisions about education policy in general, and my agency in particular, would be made by the Committee, meaning the Democratic majority. As I listened to him, I wondered what I was doing in Washington. He made me feel entirely ineffectual, as was, doubtless, his intention.

During my time in Washington, Congressman X's legislation never came to a vote, because of opposition from the Senate Democratic staff, who thought it was irresponsible. Mr. X concluded that I was to blame (I was flattered that he thought I could influence the actions of the Senate). For my intransigence, I was rewarded with hostile and persistent scrutiny by Mr. X's staff. There are no secrets inside federal agencies because Congressional staff have friendly contacts within the bureaucracy, no matter who is in power. When a contract for \$1500 went to an education researcher named Laurie Alexander, there were immediate inquiries from Congressman X's staff about her possible relationship to the Secretary or to my deputy, who had the same last name (there was none). When I hired a hotel room (for \$425) for an agency-wide meeting, with free homemade peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, there were threats of a Congressional investigation for misuse of government funds. In mid-1992, as he grew increasingly frustrated by his inability to pass his legislative reorganization of OERI, Mr. X requested a list of every contract, grant, cooperative agreement, and purchase order for the past year. We sent the list. Then he requested the same information for 1990 and 1991. Then he requested specific details of every proposal that did not get funded, reviewers' comments, and resumes of reviewers--literally thousands of pages. It was a fishing expedition, intended to harass the agency, at a huge cost in staff time and taxpayers' dollars. After the election, my successor hired the Congressman's legislative aide, which undoubtedly improved relations with him. The agency was reauthorized in the fall of 1994, and early in 1995 President Clinton appointed its new policy-making board, which included members whose organizations are funded by OERI.

About the bureaucracy, I continue to have mixed feelings. Many of the career employees worked very hard and very effectively; the leaders of the agency included people who were as smart and capable as anyone I had met in private life. Some are now my friends. The able members of the career staff were usually as frustrated as I. When I asked two of the best agency research experts to offer suggestions for the redesign of the federal government's major program to help

disadvantaged youngsters, they submitted a first-rate plan, targeting more money to the poorest districts, but told me that it had not a chance of being considered by Congress because it would not pass muster politically. They were right. There were also highly paid employees (in the salary range from \$80,000 to \$110,000 annually) who did nothing at all, ever, and it was impossible either to remove them or to get them to do any work. One person ran a business in his spare time, very possibly on the job when no one was watching. There was a malingerer who claimed to suffer from a syndrome that required him to have an office with a window (a rarity in our agency); apparently his syndrome also prevented him from doing any useful work, because he spent most of his time filing grievances and writing a scurrilous union newsletter. Among the malingerers was a high-ranking civil servant who was noted for his distinctive lack of personal hygiene: according to his supervisor, he didn't wash or wear underwear or socks (he also didn't work). And there were two or three members of the Senior Executive Service, the highest level in the Civil Service, who were biding their time, waiting for a lucrative buyout offer, pretending to work, but doing as little as possible.

Among the 500 or so employees in OERI, about 130 worked for the National Center for Education Statistics, which collects data and regularly issues reports on the condition of American education; of the remainder, there were perhaps thirty who could be considered education researchers (many of them worked as administrators, not researchers). Consequently, the agency lacked the capacity either to conduct the kind of major research projects that one would expect from the federal government or even to monitor the quality of the research that it funded. Most employees were civil servants who had worked for many years in the federal government. They included clerks, secretaries, and grant administrators, who had no particular qualifications to assess the quality of research or to design new education programs. The agency badly needed competent researchers to evaluate the work of the labs and centers and other research activities. But there were no job slots available, and the timeservers held on, waiting for the buyout offer (which they eventually received).

As head of OERI, I tried to emphasize quality and publications. I rejected sloppy reports and on several occasions withheld funding (at least temporarily) from projects whose leaders were unable to explain their work in plain English; some tried to improve, but others went to their Congressman to demand a restoration of their funding. During my brief time in office, the agency produced a steady stream of publications whose purpose was to demystify education research, including a series of brief "consumer guides" explaining research findings, booklets for parents who wanted to help their children, and a historical summary of statistics about education. My deputy Francie Alexander (who was not related to the Secretary or anyone else in the Department) made publications her priority. Achieving this level of productivity required constant pressure and nagging, because the agency was accustomed to moving at a snail's pace. I discovered on many occasions, especially after President Bush sank low in the polls, that the bureaucracy had the power to block appointments of new personnel as well as to stop publications that it did not like (such as a report on research about single-sex education and a report on school choice in Eastern Europe, neither of which ever appeared despite many months in the pipeline).

Within any bureaucracy, the English language is always in peril, because the temptation is irresistible to replace words with acronyms and initials, whose usage not only saves time but

connotes a certain *savoir dire*. The newcomer requires an initiation period to learn how to communicate with others in the organization. OERI was a POC ("principal operating component," pronounced "pock"), and I--I discovered to my alarm--was a "POC-head." Insiders never referred to a program by its official name, which was usually unwieldy. The agency's main divisions were NCES, OR (the Office of Research), PIP (Programs for Improvement of Practice), and FIRST (Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching). There was also FIE (the Fund for the Improvement of Education), NDN (the National Diffusion Network), and ERIC (a retrieval system for education information). NCES maintained databases such as IPEDS, SASS, NELLS: 88, and CCD, and student surveys such as NAEP, SIMMS, and TIMMS. NAEP (pronounced "nape") had a policy board called NAGB (pronounced "nagob"). The Department's regional laboratories and centers contributed such acronyms as SERVE, SEDL (pronounced "seedie"), CPRE (pronounced "see-pre"), McREL, SWERL, and NCREL (pronounced "N-crel"); the labs' lobbyist was CEDAR. The Department's bible of regulations was EDGAR. The other agencies of the Department had their own acronymic titles, including the IG, OBEMLA, OVAE, OSERS, and OCR.

It took several months to master the new language so that I too could converse in bureaucratic jargon, acronyms, and numbers (usually representing pending legislation). With practice, I could say, the words tripping lightly off my tongue, "OERI signed an MOU with NSF," meaning that our agency signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Science Foundation. As a representative of the Department, I went to meetings of FCCSET (pronounced "fix-it") at OEOB, also to international meetings of CERI at OECD. And beyond acronyms and initialized titles, there was the lingo of the politicians. One warned colleagues of a pending problem by saying, "I am going to give you a heads-up." And one referred to an ally on Capitol Hill who was trying to win support for the Department's agenda by saying, "He is carrying our water."

One of the agency's continuing responsibilities was the management of competitions for federal grants. It worked like this: Congress would appropriate funds for a new educational program or activity; based on legislative language, someone at OERI would write up a description of what the funds were for and then advertise a request for proposals in the *Federal Register* or *Commerce Business Daily*, which are carefully read by grant hunters and lobbyists; proposals were submitted; a peer-review panel would read them and make recommendations; and I, as assistant secretary, would sign the recommendation to the Secretary to award funding to the winning proposal. I never knew who the peer reviewers were, nor did I pick them (I have heard that some of my predecessors screened the lists, but I worried about charges of "politicization" and kept my distance); this meant that the career staff exercised enormous power over decision making and they tended to defer to familiar names in the leadership cadre of education organizations. (I suspect that the peer reviewers were the same in both Democratic and Republican administrations.)

In 1992, Congress directed the Department to award a five-year grant for \$25 million to establish a center for information about mathematics and science education. When I learned about this, I was surprised, since there was already a federally funded center with this purpose at Ohio State University. But ours was not to wonder why, so a competition was held, and there were two competitive proposals. The peer reviewers favored the proposal from Ohio State University. So now there were two federal centers on the very same campus with the same purpose!

The most controversial competition of my tenure demonstrates the way it works (or, in this case, did not work); it was the only time that I rejected the recommendation of the peer reviewers. A Republican Congressman from Michigan wanted to put some money into the Department's budget for his district, which was laying expensive fiber-optic cable. But the House Appropriations Committee wouldn't let him earmark funds for his district, so he wrote into the Department of Education's appropriations bill that there was to be a competition for a single award of up to \$6 million for a high-technology demonstration project. We advertised the competition and received 110 proposals (which suggests that only 110 lobbyists read the Federal Register on the day the competition was announced).

Eventually, the results of the competition ended up on my desk, and I read the winning proposal. It did not come from the Congressman's district (which ranked far down on the list). It came from a state department of education, where the applicants proposed to add the money to a continuing statewide technology program; it was a grandiose proposal that claimed it would wire everybody, solve every educational problem in the state, but it lacked specifics about implementation. I called in the staff and said that I thought this was a poor proposal and that it would demonstrate nothing at all. Several days later, they brought back another recommendation, this time from another state; this proposal had more specifics than the first one, but it did not look like the "demonstration" project that the legislation called for.

The day after I made the decision internally not to make the award to either proposal, with no public announcement, the Secretary's office received calls from the office of a very important Democratic senator. His staff had heard that his state had won the award but that I was giving it to someone else. (Actually, his state was second choice, not first.) His staff director told me that they suspected political interference from the White House. The Secretary's office wanted to know what was going on. I responded that, for more than a year, I had signed my name to one worthless award after another; this time I was not going to sign my approval unless there was a project that seemed worth \$6 million. That made everyone nervous. That is not the way Washington works. Go along to get along--that's the way it works.

I decided to do an internal review of the top-ranking proposals. I asked several key staff members to read the six highest-ranking proposals, and we met to discuss them. One non-career adviser suggested that the best thing to do was to return the \$6 million to the Treasury,; none of the proposals was worth much. But the career people thought that was dangerous; they explained it this way: If you give the money back to the Treasury, everyone will be angry. You can't afford to anger Senator A (Democrat) because he sits on the Labor and Human Resources Committee, which controls education legislation; and you can't afford to anger Senator B (Democrat), because he is on the same committee. Nor could you ignore the third-ranking proposal from the state of Senator C (Republican), who is the Department's best friend on the appropriations committee.

We jointly decided that we would do what we thought was the right thing, which was to pick the best proposal and hang the political consequences. We decided that the best proposal came from a little school district in McKinney, Texas, which proposed to convert a school into a high-technology center, where there would be 250 students, a teacher-training center, and access to the community six days a week. At least, we thought, this really would provide a demonstration

of the uses of high technology in education. Unfortunately, McKinney was ranked fourth by the peer-review panel, which meant that three politically powerful applicants would be furious.

As soon as our decision became known, one of the aggrieved senators announced that he was asking for a formal investigation by the General Accounting Office (GAO), on grounds that I had ignored the recommendations of the peer reviewers and made the decision solely to help President Bush win Texas. This was a consideration that quite frankly had never occurred to either me or my advisers.

To make a long story short, after many interviews by an Abbott and Costello team from GAO, I was cleared of nefarious political designs, the money went to McKinney, and the case was closed. I subsequently learned that our internal processes were embarrassingly inept: the staff lost the comments from the original peer review, the peer reviewers were drawn from the small and incestuous world of educational techies (including the wife of an agency employee), and the peer reviewers were picking the gang that they knew and liked best. No one had heard of the McKinney District, and surprises like that are not supposed to happen. Even later, I heard that the McKinney District was racked with dissension because of resentment toward the new high-technology school. Sometimes you just can't win, no matter what you do.

Another contretemps occurred by accident. I got a call one day from a reporter, asking what I thought of the newly released gender-bias study by the American Association of University Women. I should explain that, as a rule, federal officials were not supposed to make spontaneous comments to the press. If I gave a speech or wrote an article, it was supposed to be reviewed and cleared by the Secretary's public affairs office, to be sure we were all saying the same things on policy matters. If I were interviewed on the telephone, my liaison from the press office was usually on an extension, presumably to protect me against misquoting. But I forgot about the system when a reporter asked about the AAUW report called "How the Schools Shortchange Girls." The report presented a dreary picture of persistent bias against girls in American schools, allegedly resulting in lowered self-esteem and lowered achievement. I took issue with the report because I had seen data documenting the remarkable improvement in women's educational status between 1970 and 1990. I explained that women were now a majority of college students, a majority of B.A. recipients, a majority of M.A. recipients, and were approaching 50 percent of enrollments in law and medical schools (in 1970, women received less than 10 percent of law and medical degrees). The whole campaign was rather surrealistic in that it was not girls but black males who were far and away the worst performing of any group in the schools (and some studies showed that black males have very high self-esteem, which may have a negative relationship to academic achievement). Little did I know that the AAUW and a clutch of other feminist organizations were trying to get Congressional authorization of \$350 million for gender-equity training (which these same organizations would supply). My data momentarily slowed them down.

Jane Pauley of NBC came to interview me, and I knew she was looking for a quote with which to hang me. The interview lasted for half an hour, and I was careful to say the same things over and over again. Whatever she asked, I tried to answer with the data about women's advances in education. But then she said, "Suppose my daughter were in a school where the teachers were horrible to girls, what should I do?" I said, somewhat flippantly (big mistake), "I would put her

in a girls' school." The previous day, I had participated in a research seminar on single-sex education, a rapidly disappearing sector in the United States, and it seemed clear that many girls benefit academically in such settings. So I felt comfortable suggesting single-sex education as an alternative to Jane Pauley, and of course that fifteen-second exchange was the only part of the interview included in a program that documented how girls were the victims of grievous gender bias in American schools. Soon after the Pauley program was aired, the Secretary received a letter signed by more than fifty Democratic senators and congressmen demanding that I be disciplined or fired for proposing that girls should be sent to single-sex schools. He laughed.

The issue that brought me to Washington was standards, and I spent most of my time promoting the importance of them. American students don't work very hard in school; there are no consequences attached to schoolwork, neither rewards for good work nor sanctions for poor work. Motivated students, driven either by their own inner fires or their parents' ambitions, pursue excellence; the great majority know that little is expected of them. Part of the mission of Alexander's team in the Department was to make the country aware that changes in the economy demanded higher educational attainment by young people.

Every time I gave a speech or wrote an article, I explained why standards mattered and that low expectations were damaging to students. We had initially hoped to sponsor a voluntary national test of academic achievement so that parents and schools could find out how their children were performing; that idea was flatly rejected by Congress and education interest groups. In retrospect, it seems like a naive idea because the crucial issues had not been addressed--namely, who would write the test, what would be the role of the federal government, and how could it be kept free of contentious battles about multiculturalism and political correctness?

We were impressed by the apparent success of the standards promulgated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which had been developed without federal support and which were being used in about forty states. In the fall of 1991, the President of the National Academy of Sciences, Frank Press, asked Secretary Alexander if the Department would be willing to give the Academy a grant to develop national standards for what American students should know and be able to do in science. He readily agreed, and OERI was responsible for processing and supervising the grant. This was dangerous ground, because Congress had not authorized the Department to make grants for national standards, even voluntary ones, and the Department has been prohibited since 1970 from exercising any control over curriculum, instruction, administration, or textbooks (a prohibition that is regularly violated). The reputation of the National Academy of Sciences neutralized criticism, however, and the grant went forward. In light of what subsequently happened, I have to wonder about our arrogance (and my own responsibility) in letting this genie out of the bottle.

During the next year, the Department--in collaboration with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts--also awarded grants to establish standards in history, the arts, civics, geography, English, and foreign languages. In each case, we made the awards to groups that seemed to be the most reputable and inclusive in each field--for example, the National Council for Geographic Education in geography. The English award was made only days before we left office to a tripartite coalition composed of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the International Reading Association, and the Center for the Study of

Reading at the University of Illinois. This was a big gamble, because the director of NCTE had testified before a federal hearing in opposition to standards truly a year earlier. The negotiations took months, and I was never certain whether the leaders of the English profession seriously intended to develop standards, since many resisted even the idea of standard English. As it turned out, people in the field were apparently not ready to commit themselves to real standards for what all students should know and be able to do. In the spring of 1994, the Department of Education canceled the contract for English standards on grounds of lack of progress.

The history standards (especially the American history standards) provoked the greatest controversy. In the fall of 1991, the Department and the National Endowment for the Humanities made a grant to the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California at Los Angeles to arrive at a consensus on national history' standards. I knew that the effort to forge history standards would be rife with minefields, but I expected that it could be done, because of my own experience in drafting the California history curriculum, which balanced the claims of multiculturalism and the common culture and which placed the democratic idea at the center of the history. curriculum. The UCLA Center had received several years of funding from NEH and was well known to Lynne Cheney, NEH's chairman.

Publication of the standards in the fall of 1994 set off a war of words; many critics, led by Lynne Cheney, attacked them; the U.S Senate voted 99-1 to express its disapproval of them; the talk-show hosts savaged them; but state and local school boards around the country quietly began incorporating their lessons into the local curricula. The earnest effort by the writers of the standards to de-emphasize traditional heroes like George Washington and Thomas Edison and to discover little-known heroes who were not white males set off a furor that has not yet died down.

It is too soon to say that the attempt to promote national standards was a failure. Some of the efforts, especially the standards in civics, geography, and the arts have won praise for their intellectual rigor. I know that if I had to do it all over again, I would have insisted on different elements in the contracts. For example, proposals for national standards in any subject area should be parsimonious, not exceeding one hundred pages in length (the history standards-- world, U.S., and K-4--exceed six hundred pages); standards should be confined only to what all students should know and be able to do (documents should not be so detailed that they summarize the field or offer explicit instructions on how to teach); any proposed standards should be published in a loose-leaf notebook with wide margins for comments, so that it is clear that they are provisional and subject to revision; every consensus arrived at should include people who are neither scholars nor teachers, people such as parents, journalists, lawyers, legislators, civic leaders, and scientists (this is known as "the barbershop test"); any proposed national standards should be field-tested for three years in several school districts or states before they are offered for adoption; the standards in any field should be non-intrusive in the sense that they ought not dictate a particular teaching method (for example, phonics or whole-language in English); and standards should not present as authoritative any interpretations that are disputed by reputable scholars (if an issue is unresolved, it should be presented as a controversy).

Hindsight, of course, supplies 20/20 vision. At worst, the effort to create national standards gave millions of federal dollars to partisans in the culture wars; but at best, the discussion about standards, what they are and why we need them, has become an undeniable factor in state and

national debates about education, which is valuable in itself. I don't like to fall back on the cliché "time will tell" to assess the ultimate value of this venture, but in this case it seems to apply.

When I think back on my brief career in the federal government, there is one incident that summarizes best what I learned in Washington. In the summer of 1992, I attended a meeting with David Kearns and the people in the Department who worked with Congress on appropriations. The issue before us was what to do about several congressional earmarks--that is, directions to spend money on specific projects. One was for \$1 million for a half-baked proposal from a state university to create an "institute for the reinvention of schools," proposed by a professor with no particular qualifications or experience; his senator, a Republican, wanted it for his state. Others were for programs that would duplicate existing federal activities, backed by senators whose states wanted the money. After an hour of discussion, Kearns, one of the finest and gentlest of men, banged his fist on the table and said in exasperation, "This is crazy; we are sitting around trying to figure out what to do with earmarks and at the same time Japanese educators are sitting around a table on the other side of the world figuring out how to make their schools better."

When I left, I felt sad about "striking the set," as the team with which I had worked closely for eighteen months disbanded. I knew that I would miss not only the group that Lamar Alexander had pulled together, but those with whom I worked in OERI, including both those I brought in as well as career employees. In the academic world, I had never had that sense of comradeship, of striving together with a large group to reach a goal. For a few months after I left, people would ask, "Did you accomplish anything?" And I would talk about the publications, none of them earthshaking, and about the efforts to make the idea of standards palatable to educators, which was a matter of conviction.

Do I regret working in Washington? Not a bit. What I learned is not in any of the textbooks; for some kinds of knowledge, there is no substitute for experience. My faith in the two-party system is stronger than ever, because I learned the value of turnover. The amount of power that is concentrated in the nation's capital is immense. Only a regular rotation of newcomers with a fresh perspective, with an intention to go home someday, and with an undiminished capacity for outrage, can restrain and counter the permanent and insular political class that has made Washington its home.

Two weeks after the 1992 election, I attended a gala dinner at the New York Public Library, where I was among a group of writers who were honored as "Literary Lions." I was still a government official and felt slightly illegitimate since the intensity of government work leaves little time for any writing other than speeches or an occasional article (which, so long as one is in a political job, has at least a strain of boilerplate). As I looked at the other writers, I reflected that we were being honored for what we had done on our own, without politics, without negotiation, without compromise, without pre-clearance, without deference to committees, commissions, or tethered minds. And I knew that night in which world I belonged.

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By DIANE RAVITCH