GSA's Blunt Chief

Sampson Praised for Ability, Criticized on Nixon Funds

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First of two articles

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"They want me so bad they can taste it. But they haven't found anything," Arthur F. Sampson, controversial head of the General Services Administration, said recently of the federal prosecutors investigating allegations against the GSA.

In the nearly three years that he has headed the GSA, the federal government's principal business arm, the outspoken Sampson has attracted plenty of attention, both extremely negative and highly complimentary.

Sampson, an appointee of Presdient Nixon, has come under heavy fire for GSA's expenditure of $3.7 million at Nixon's San Clemente and Key Biscayne home and office compounds and for having urged appropriation of $850,000 for the former Presdient during his first year out of office.

Sampson, a 48-year-old former General Electric Co. and Pennsylvania state executive, also has been hotly criticized for having agreed that Nixon could retain title to his White House tape recordings and papers and for GSA's trading of $27 million in property for a now largely empty office building near San Clemente to store the former President's records.

On the other hand, Sampson has been praised as a hard-driving, innovative administrator who has promoted improvements in the design and construction of federal buildings throughout the nation.

William Marshall Jr., president of the American Institute of Architects, has said of Sampson, "His dedication to design quality in federal architecture has given his staff a new pride in being part of a creative agency. And his staff policy of filling key positions with people with strong technical backgrounds has already done much to upgrade the quality of federal buildings around the country."

ARTHUR F. SAMPSON
. . . "a difficult job"

On the negative side, the Civil Service Commission charged last year that a special GSA personnel referral system operating outside regular channels in the nearly 40,000-employee agency provided preferential treatment for political favorites "contrary to essential merit system principles."

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On the positive side, Sampson is described by subordinates as "people-oriented," knowledgeable, decisive and demanding. "I really love Sampson. He's a grass-roots guy. People here, honest to God, love him," said one GSA official.

Though Sampson has gotten a lot of personal publicity since becoming a GSA executive in 1969, little public attention generally is paid to the farflung and highly varied activities of his 26-year-old agency.

The GSA is the federal government's principal civilian landlord, construction agency, real estate broker, purchasing agent, communications provider, computer buyer, recordkeeper, management adviser, emergency planner, building guard and housekeeepr.

As such, it does billions of dollars worth of highly coveted business that can generate extreme political pressures. Sampson has described the GSA administrator's job as "so politically sensitive it's unbelievable."

Sampson, whose salary is $40,000 a year, is credited by his subordinates with shielding them from most of the political heat directed toward GSA's four basic units:

• The Public Buildings Service, which owns or operates nearly 10,000 buildings with 224 million square feet of office space and has about 1,500 construction and renovation projects under way costing a total of $1.5 billion.

• The Federal Supply Service, which purchases 700,000 different kinds of commodities that annually cost the federal government $2 billion. For example, each year GSA buys 337,000 tons of paper, 552,000 pencils and 748 million paper clips.

• The Automated Data and Telecommunications Service, which oversees management of 3,500 computers and operates the Federal Telecommunications System to which one million phones are connected and over which more than 140 million long-distance calls are made annually.

• The National Archives and Records Service, whose National Archives, 15 regional records centers and six presidential libraries together hold 12.2 million cubic feet of records, including 4.9 million photographs, 1.8 million documents and 1.7 million maps.

Dr. James B. Rhoads, archivist of the United States and one of Sampson's deputies, said of the GSA administrator, "He's got a hell of a difficult job even under the best of circumstances. During, the last year it's obviously been more difficult."

Adding to Sampson's problems is an investigation by federal prosecuotrs in Baltimore of alleged illegalities in GSA's awarding of federal office leases in Maryland.

The Washington Post reported last month that Walter Bucher, a Montgomery County architect, has alleged to prosecutors that he obtained GSA contracts by making payments to J. Walter Jones, an Annapolis banker and close friend of former Vice President Agnew.

Jones, who has said he is innocent, was indicted this winter on charges that he extorted an illegal corporate contribution to the 1972 Nixon-Agnew campaign.

Bucher has alleged that Jones got the GSA contracts for him through Sampson, accordnng to informed sources. They said that Sampson himself was not under active investigations by the prosecutors and that there were no allegations that the GSA administrator had been paid by Jones.

"Nobody can buy me and nobody has," Sampson stressed in a recent interview. "If somebody sends me a case of liquor, I send it back. I don't take gifts. I'm very careful about paying for my lunch," he added.

However, in his unusually frank manner, Sampson has complained about the standards set for government executives. In a November address to the Sales Executive Club in New York, he said:

"We are expected to be pure, untouched by personal or public influence of any kind. We're supposed to come out lily white under the harsh lights of publicity and public accountability. And that's an unreasonable standard.

"I'm not perfect or pure," Sampson continued, "and I don't know anyone who is. There are only relative standards of perfection and purity in this world. I would stand up any day for my honesty and capability, but I'm not infallible and I'm not inhuman.

"So measure me, measure government executives of all kinds, on realistic standards—standards of performance, not the absolutes we use today," the GSA administrator said.

Sampson acknowledged in an interview 1½ years ago that he had received recommendations from then Vice President Agnew as to which architect or engineering firms GSA should choose for federal building projects.

Asked what he did when he had to choose between two equally qualified firms seeking a GSA contract—one of whom was favored by Agnew, Sampson said, "If they were equal, I would help the Vice President."

Sampson said in a recent interview that politics previously was an influential factor in 40 per cent of GSA's architect and engineer choices. However, he said the choices always were made from among a group of qualified firms recommended to him by a professional selection panel.

John E. Clarke, a former White House aide, told the Senate Watergate committee how politics was exerted on the selection of architects and engineers for GSA construction projects.

"When contract awards were to be made, which are nonbid awards, the Architectural Engineering Contract Award Board would select

three to five firms who were technically qualified to fulfill the contract and these firms were recommended to GSA," Clarke said.

"I would then be contacted by Larry Roush (a former high GSA official and long-time close friend of Sampson's) and Roush would give me the names of firms who were being considered for an award. I would call Lee Nunn at the Finance Committee to Re-Elect the President and ask Nunn if the committee had any preference as to which of the firms should receive the award.

"It is my understanding," Clarke said, "that Nunn would then check with various sources on the Hill as well as other political sources who might be affected by the contracts to be awarded and ascertain whether or not there was any preference as to the award.

"In a day or two, Nunn would call me and state that there was no preference, if there was none, or indicate which firm was preferred if they had a preference. I would relay the message to Roush at GSA," Clarke said.

Roush acknowledged in a November, 1973, affidavit that he communicated with Clarke at the White House in regard to "recommendations for possible selection of architectural firms." Roush said, "Mr. Clarke's recommendations were accorded considerable weight. They were not always followed."

Last year Sampson defended the weighing of political considerations in selection of architects and engineers to design federal buildings, saying, "A congressman or senator has the right to make a recommendation for his constituents. To me, that's part of the democratic process."

Since Watergate, Sampson said recently, there has been a lot less political pressure on him for business favors. He said members of Congress lately have hastened to tell him not to misconstrue previous requests.

Sampson acknowledged that Jones and he have been friends for "a couple of years. I bumped into him here in a business relationship." This winter a GSA spokesman had denied that Jones had ever had any business contacts with GSA.

Sampson said he sees Jones socially "three or four times a year. He's a very interesting person."

Sampson said he "very reluctantly" agreed last year to new rules for GSA's selection of architects and engineers. The new rules require him to accept the top choice of a professional advisory panel or explain in writing why he decided upon another firm on the panel's list.

"I would much prefer to take the political heat," Sampson said in stressing that he regrets the loss of his latitude in choosing architects and engineers. The GSA administrator said he agreed to limit his authority largely for post-Watergate public relations.

A number of GSA officials have been questioned before a federal grand jury in Baltimore in connection with the current probe. The investigation and accompanying rumors have been painful for many in GSA, such as for one generally well-regarded official whose friends presented him with a set of handcuffs after he had answered the prosecutors' questions.

Sampson has been upset by the allegations and has complained about vague articles "impugning my integrity." However, to most of his associates, Sampson seems as bouyant, blunt and busy as ever.

Between 6 and 7 several mornings each week Sampson can be found on one of the indoor courts of the Arlington Y Tennis and Squash Club, using a membership purchased for him as a Christmas gift by top aides and usually playing tennis with one of his younger employees.

"Oh, come on Sampson!" the chunky GSA administrator admonished himself after missing a shot on a recent morning.

"Oh, Sampson, watch the ball," he told himself, enjoying the competitive challenge of two fast sets of tennis even while losing to a 29-year-old opponent, 6-3, 6-3.

After his early-morning exercise, Sampson drives directly to his sixth-floor office at GSA headquarters at 18th and F Sts. NW. Having parked his dented, old Chevelle in an inner courtyard, GSA's administrator showers in his private bathroom and selects an outfit from a nearby rack of clothes. He's almost always at his desk by 7:30 a.m.

Sampson's office, about 75 by 30 feet, is paneled in handsome English oak, has a high ornamental relief plaster ceiling, two large chandeliers and a central fireplace well stocked with firewood.

In the center of a 60-foot-long rug with a design reflecting the ceiling's pattern are three matching modern sofas. A streamlined conference table is at one end of the long room. Sampson's sleek desk is at the other, backed by a bookcase with a 30-button telephone panel and flanked by an American flag and a blue-and-white GSA flag.

Also decorating the office are a clock embedded above a double door, plants in eight locations, a half-dozen souvenir shovels commemorating building groundbreakings, and walls full of building dedication keys, honorary plaques and framed VIP letters. "Art Sampson" matchbooks are available on a coffee table.

Nearby is Sampson's private dining room and kitchen. He more often dines at the Sans Souci restaurant—"The place to go for lunch in this town. You see a lot of people there and they see you."

Seven secretaries of the Interior had occupied Sampson's office suite before GSA inherited the building. Harold Ickes literally lived

there during the early New Deal days, causing President Franklin D. Roosevelt to threaten to charge him hotel rates.

One of the autographed pictures in the GSA administrator's private dining room reads, "To Art Sampson, with deep appreciaton for his dedicated service to the nation—and for his friendship through the years. Richard Nixon. Feb. 5, 1975."

Sampson said recently he was never personally close to Nixon. He maintained that it is still too soon to make a judgment on the former President, saying, "There is no way anyone today can have an objective opinion on Nixon."

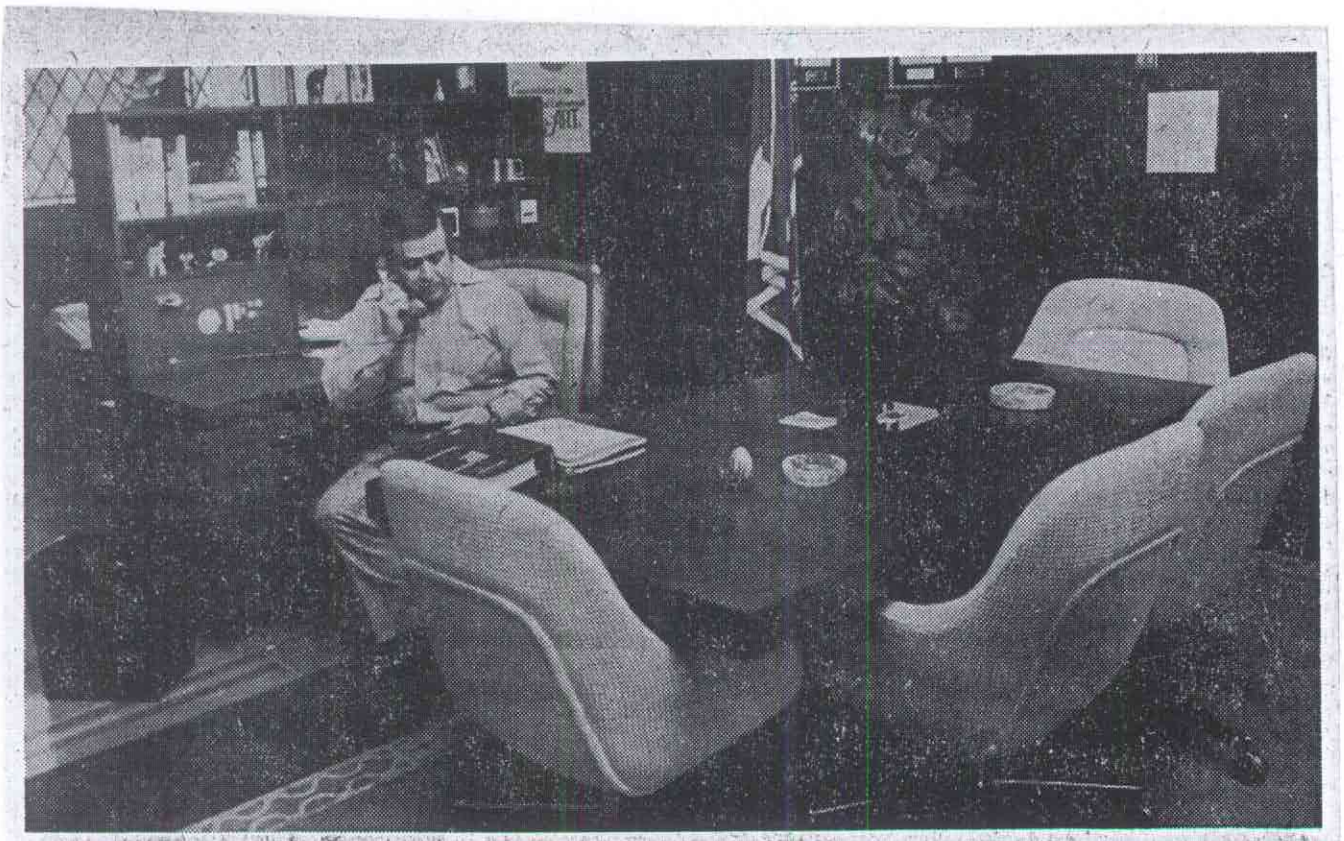
Sampson's executive suite also continues to display an autographed picture from former Vice President Agnew. There is a framed letter from another high official.

"My heartiest congratulations to you on your completion of five years of public service at GSA. You have worked quite long and hard to replace the image many once had of GSA with one of a professional management team that is in fact the business arm of the federal government.

"On a personal level, your own efforts in handling the myriad problems that have faced GSA during your leadership have been exceptional and are appreciated by many in addition to myself."

The letter is dated June 3, 1974, and signed "Jerry Ford."

NEXT: Sampson as manager.



By Larry Morris—The Washington Post

GSA Administrator Sampson works in his office, where he often shows up at 7:30 a.m. after a dawn tennis game.