GSA Chief: Tireless and Controversial

Last of two articles

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Arthur F. Sampson, the hard-driving, hotly criticized head of the General Services Administration, has a plaque near his desk and has passed out duplicates to aides. They say, "Excellence."

That has hardly been the word most often used to describe GSA since its creation in 1949 to consolidate a wide variety of the federal government's more mundane but essential activities, which now include everything from operating a 3,594-member force of building guards to maintaining 77,000 government vehicles.

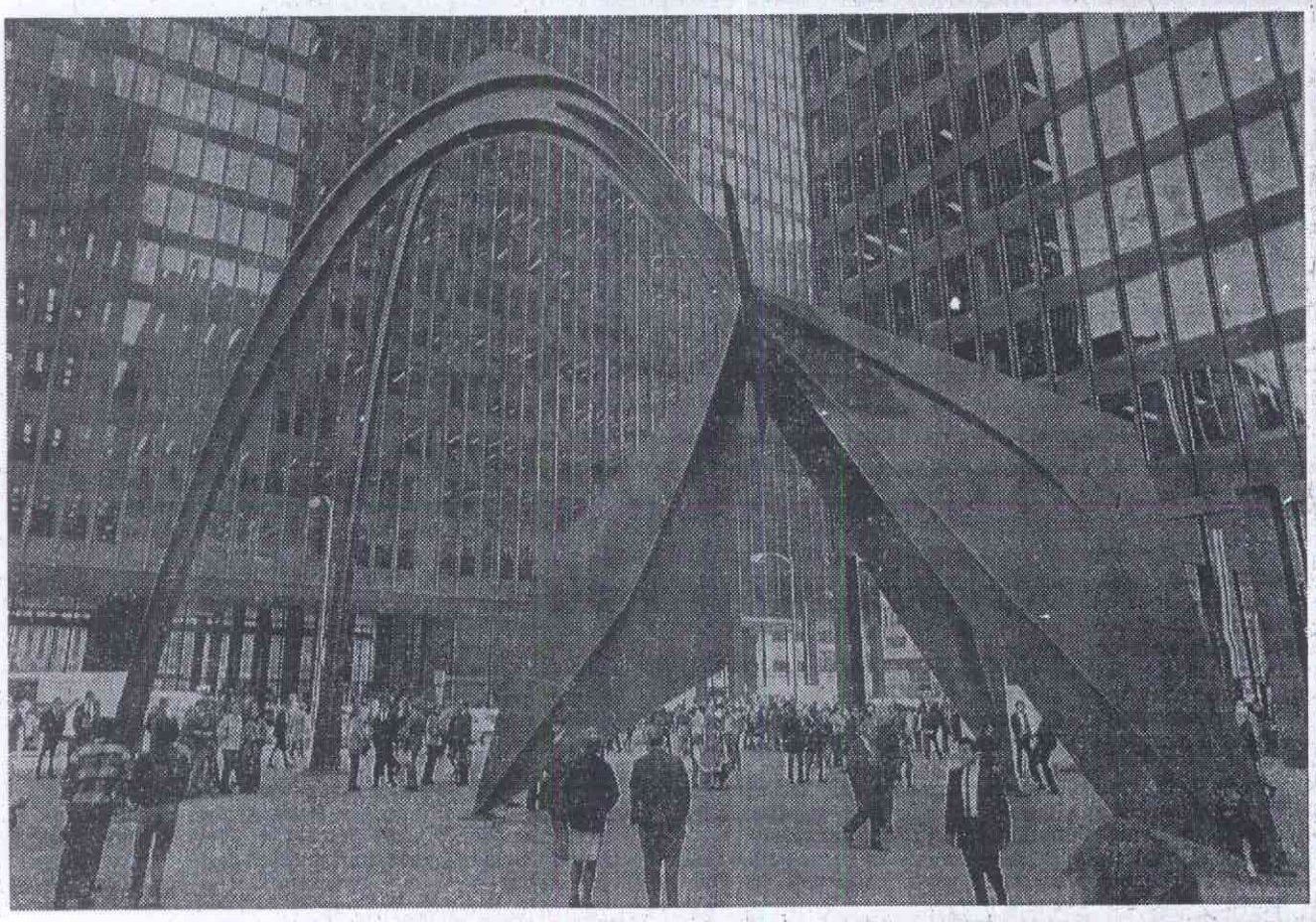
Though its image has often been low, GSA—like any organization that annually spends more than $4.5 billion—has had both successes and failures.

One of GSA's more embarrassing projects these days is a 22-story structure nearing completion next to Philadelphia's Independence Hall that is part of an $87 million federal courthouse and office building project. The new skyscraper is sinking and will cost from $2 to $7 million to stabilize, a GSA spokesman said.

The spokesman confirmed that the building's foundation was constructed 10 to 45 feet short of the architects' specifications, despite warnings by a group of GSA employees to Sampson, then head of the agency's Public Buildings Service, that the specifications were being ignored.

Sampson said recently, "In constructing this building, like constructing other buildings, they used a method which is accepted, and sometimes it worked and sometimes it doesn't. There is no way to make a perfect building. So there's a degree of error that exists in every building you construct. And there was a degree of error in this one."

See SAMPSON, A2, Col. 1



United Press International

Spectators view Alexander Calder's bright red stabile at GSA's new Federal Center Plaza in Chicago.

SAMPSON, From A1

GSA has hired a consultant to advise it what to do. Meanwhile, the FBI is investigating.

GSA officials would prefer to talk about another of the agency's projects, the new Federal Center in Chicago, which is highlighted by "Flamingo," a 53-foot-high, bright red stabile by Alexander Calder.

The gigantic art work has received a lot of favorable attention and shows how GSA's policy of setting aside 0.5 per cent of a federal project's construction cost for art work is making government buildings more attractive.

A tiny copy of "Flamingo" is on a coffee table in Sampson's office because the GSA administrator particularly likes its dramatic impact. Sampson strives for his own special impact. For example, he signs his letters merely "Sampson" and often in green ink, noting that this makes his signature more noticeable.

Sampson, 48, is a native of Warren, R.I., who was a General Electric Co. executive for a dozen years before serving in the cabinets of Pennsylvania Govs. William Scranton and Raymond Shafer.

Coming to Harrisburg from Erie, Sampson was one of a group of Republicans in the state capital facetiously known as "the Erie Mafia.' Sampson wore two important hats under Shafer, being both his budget secretary and secretary for administration.

Sampson was not popular with the predominantly Democratic legislature. A former subordinate recalled, "He could be very abrupt and he stepped on toes, but he demanded a lot of respect and he got it."

Sampson came to GSA at the beginning of the Nixon administration, serving first as commissioner of GSA's Federal Supply Service and then as commissioner of its Public Buildings Service. In 1972, Sampson became acting GSA administrator and almost a year later President Nixon appointed him administrator.

While Sampson has headed GSA, the agency has been assigned the Office of Emergency Preparedness and the Office of Federal Management Policy, which develops government-wide management policies. Also under Sampson, GSA has begun a controversial program that aims to inspire more efficient office space utilization by charging all federal agencies rent.

Sampson has extraordinary energy. He usually sleeps less than five hours a night, often plays tennis at 6 a.m., is in his office by 7:30 a.m., works a full day then often will stay out quite late going to parties.

"I work hard and I play hard. When I go to a party I have a good time," Sampson said.

GSA officials have learned the hard way that no matter how late they may be out partying with Sampson, he'll be on the job early the next morning working at full speed. After he was the only GSA official to arrive on time for an 8 a.m. staff meeting following one post-midnight party, Sampson warned the latecomers, "There's a time to party and a time to work."

Sampson travels extensively. Last year he took 44 trips, including one around the world, costing the government $14,452. Currently he is on a two-week visit to Latin America, heading a U.S. trade mission. Shortly after he returns, Sampson is scheduled to go to London for a construction conference.

A GSA spokesman said most of Sampson's first-class flights are necessary to review operations around the nation in the agency's 10 regional districts and are anything but vacations.

Mary T. Foster, a special assistant, also flew first-class with Sampson on 12 trips last year, costing the government $5,613. Asked about Miss Foster's travels, the GSA spokesman said Sampson often needs an aide to accompany him and "feels very strongly that women should be given an opportunity in government."

Sampson is regarded by his deputies as a tough, tireless administrator with a good grasp of the nuts and bolts of their highly varied operations. "You can't snow him," said one. "He's gutsy," commented another.

However, the GSA administrator has gotten himself in trouble at times for moving too fast without enough consideration. For example, GSA last year dropped plans to create a massive data bank called FEDNET that was to have combined computer systems of GSA and the Agriculture Department and could have been expanded to include other federal agencies.

GSA dropped its FEDNET plans following protests by then Vice President Ford and others over the potential for invasion of citizens' privacy.

'We blew one," Sampson said recently when asked about FEDNET. He said that he and other GSA officials were so attracted by "the fantastic economies" possible through FEDNET that they "never considered the issue of privacy. We made an error."

Another example: Last May, U.S. District Court Judge Albert V. Bryan accused Sampson of "improper interference with the judiciary" for having writen to him on behalf of Louis Pomponio Jr., a local developer then awaiting sentencing for mail fraud and bribery. A GSA spokesman later said of Sampson's letter, "Apparently it was a mistake."

Sampson has been accused of disregarding government regulations to help private businesses, a charge he denies.

One such dispute, which is awaiting a federal judge's decision, is over GSA's sale last year of a former naval facility at Charlestown, R.I., to the Narragansett Electric Co. for $3.3 million, although the Interior Department sought the 550-acre coastal tract for a wildlife refuge.

GSA contends that a directive from President Nixon urging federal agencies to do what they can to promote energy production permitted the sale of the

government surplus tract to the utility for a nuclear power plant site.

However, the environmental group fighting the sale charges that under the law GSA was obligated to first make the tract available to the Interior Department, another federal agency, and that GSA failed to prepare the required enrivonmental impact statement.

In another legal battle, four members of Congress are suing GSA for having in 1973 sold a former Air Force facility in Burbank, Calif., to Lockheed Aircraft Corp. GSA has said it was only carrying out a Defense Department decision to dispose of the property and sold it to Lockheed for $30 million, more than the facility's appraised value.

One of the original plaintiffs charged: "Whatever their motivation, it appears GSA was determined to let Lockheed have this property and it was not deterred by such minor trifles as its own rules and regulations, the law, the opinions of the Justice Department or the Constitution."

Sampson and GSA have received the most bad publicity in regard to the agency's expenditure of $3.7 million at former President Nixon's San Clemente and Key Biscayne home and office compounds. GSA officials have said their agency was only providing protective and administrative support to the Secret Service as required by law and only a small portion of the money was spent directly on Nixon's homes.

However, the images of Sampson and his agency were hardly raised by occasions such as a 1973 news conference. The GSA administrator was asked about reports that most of the San Clemente property on which GSA had spent funds was not owned by Nixon, but by his friend, millionaire inventor Robert H. Abplanalp.

"Who owns the property now?" a reporter asked.

"I don't know who owns it now," said Sampson.

"Would you like to know that?" the reporter continued.

"Not r e a l l y," Sampson said with a smile.

Sampson's relations with Congress have, as one Senate aide noted, been "volatile to say the least." The Democratic Congress does not appear to be all that impressed with Sampson. For example, after he pleaded for $850,000 for Nixon during the former President's first year out of office, Congress appropriated $200,000.

However, Sampson gets some sympathy on Capitol Hill. Sen. Joseph M. Montoya (D-N.M.), chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees GSA, called Sampson "very effective in his job ... One must take into consideration that he has to carry out orders from the White House."

Rep. Frank Horton (R-N.Y.), ranking minority member of the House Government Operations subcommittee that oversees GSA, called Sampson "an excellent administrator. If he believes something is right, he fights for it. Sometimes he shoots from the hip. That creates some problems for him."

At a recent rehearsal of GSA officials for the agency's forthcoming congressional budget hearings, Sampson took the role of interrogator and critic, warning about 20 aides, "We still have a deep credibility problem. We better be ready."

As Walter A. Meisen, commissioner of GSA's Public Buildings Service, tried out his proposed presentation to Congress, Sampson interrupted to say, "The moment you mention 'lease' a red flag goes up. They hate leasing."

With Meisen working his way through his budgetary presentation, Sampson coached, "It's all right to generalize, but support everything with numbers."

As Meisen began to answer one of the GSA administrator's test questions at length, Sampson cut him short, advising instead, "The answer to that is that the President wants to keep the federal budget down."

None of Sampson's critics accuses him of loafing on the job. The GSA administrator was working weekends recently along with other GSA employees to put out a report to Congress on time.

The report proposes that GSA will make public "virtually all" of former President Nixon's Watergate tape recordings and papers within three years from the start of processing by its National Archives and Records Service. However, GSA has proposed potentially broad exceptions that would prevent release of Nixon materials found to "embarrass, damage or harass living persons" or "jeopardize the nation's security."

After producing the thick report Congress had required within 90 days, Sampson invited about 100 of his fellow GSA workers on the project, employees at all levels, to celebrate with him in his executive suite with Bloddy Marys and sandwiches.

The Civil Service Commission has charged that the GSA under Sampson operated an illegal "special referral system" to give preference in hiring to job applicants sponsored by politicians.

Sampson has denied GSA illegally favored anyone and has accused the commission of hypocrisy. However, he also has said, "the civil service rewards mediocrity."

GSA's top executives are younger than average for federal agencies, reflecting Sampson's selection of many under-35 executives from private enterprise to fill key GSA slots.

Sampson has said younger executives "keep me young" and "you can't get middle-aged executives to come to work for $35,000 a year." However, GSA's youth movement has had its problems, as evidenced by the departure in the past half-year of three of Sampson's top young assistants who left government service for a variety of reasons.

GSA has been criticized for resisting the "mixed use" concepts for federal buildings, in which shops and restaurants are located under offices to make huge government structures, like the mammoth FBI headquarters here, less impersonal and monolithic.

However, Sampson and GSA generally have been praised for promoting innovations in the design and construction of federal buildings. In recent years GSA has reduced the average time it takes from the starting of planning for a new building to its completion from 8 to 3 years, Meisen said.

Sampson and GSA are particularly proud of the 37-story Seattle Federal Office Building. GSA officials say the new Seattle skyscraper is the first government building to incorporate "a total fire safety system" designed to prevent a high-rise disaster by creating fire safety zones and operating an emergency control center.

Asked about the charge that he has loaded GSA with his fellow Pennsylvanians, Sampson quickly replied, "That's accurate. I took the cream of the crop from Pennsylvania." However, he later minimized the extent of GSA's Pennsylvania influx.

Sampson denied the frequent allegation that under him and Robert L. Kunzig, his predecessor as administrator, GSA has been at the beck and call of Sen. Hugh Scott (R-Pa.), who is widely regarded as their chief political sponsor. "I probably see Sen. Scott twice a year. I have never talked to him on the telephone," Sampson maintained.

Sampson has four sons, one in law school, one attending college and two enrolled in a Pennsylvania parochial high school. Mrs. Sampson and the couple's two youngest sons live in a Harrisburg suburb.

Sampson said he lives in a Southwest Washington townhouse he shares with Kunzig, now a judge on the U.S. Court of Claims. Before coming to Washington in 1969, the two men worked closely in the Pennsylvania state government and in Republican politics there.

Sampson has shown interest in running for public office. Last year he made moves toward running for governor of Pennsylvania, but his campiagn never got off the ground.

This year Sampson has quietly gone back to Erie, where he worked as a General Electric Co. executive, to take soundings on a possible run for Congress.

Asked about his plans, Sampson said recently, "I plan to leave government in 1976." He gave no indication of what he would do then, but a close associate predicted that Sampson will probably take a high-paying job in business, recalling him saying, "All this hard work (at GSA) is going to pay off."

Sampson maintains he is much more interested in challenges than in reimbursement, saying, "I have never taken a job for the money."