

No Concessions To the Blind

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

A new power group is crowbarring its way into dominance in Washington. Union leaders and government officials say this new outfit is as nasty and selfish as has ever tried to scrape the gold leaf off the Capitol dome.

The threat comes from the blind people in the lobbies of federal government buildings who sell papers, chewing gum, coffee, hot soup and hot dogs.

The blind are there thanks to a 1936 law which gives them a preference in owning and operating the concessions. The federal government in cooperation with the states trains the blind to manage their small businesses and grubstakes them to a start by providing them with stands and such.

It doesn't cost the taxpayer any money, however, since a certain percentage of what the blind make is set aside to pay for this assistance. (See "Stealing from the Blind" by Marjorie Boyd, in the December issue of *The Washington Monthly* for an excellent account of this whole affair.) Indeed this may be the only welfare program which requires no appropriated funds from Congress.

Marjorie Boyd says that the Department of Agriculture employees' association in Washington alone had gross receipts of nearly \$2 million for one year; the State Department had nearly \$1 million. Rep. John Brademas (D-Ind.), who has been working on getting a law passed to protect the blind from these predatory civil servants, says he's found it impossible to learn how many millions of dollars are being pocketed in the innumerable federal installations across the country.

The national totals are studiously left uncomputed although the big national government employees' unions are fighting the blind for every last nickel. "We've had welfare funds for 30 to 35 years so this has created a problem for us with the blind trying to take over total control," says Patrick J. Nilan, the visionary legislative director of the American Postal Workers Union, "They want the whole thing so we've had to fight them legislatively . . . We don't agree that they should get the income from the machines in work areas where they're not allowed to go and the public can't go either . . . Our members feel if these guys (the blind) are coming in and taking over the operation we'll throw the damn machines out. If they insist on everything, they'll get nothing. We'll boycott their stands in the lobbies."

So why should the blind get any better treatment than the public in general? Smash the Christmas packages. Ignore people who dare to come into the post

office to buy a stamp. Don't deliver the Christmas cards till after Epiphany. And don't let the sightless Mafia take over.

It is comforting to note that the representative of the National Association of Internal Revenue Employees sided with the blind. Appearing before a committee chaired by Sen. Jennings Randolph (D-W.Va.) who introduced the original 1936 legislation, the IRS man said, "To talk about scholarship funds or flu shots or whatever (else the employees spend this money on) and deprive people who suffer severe disability from employment is just abominable in my judgment."

But not in the judgment of Carl Sadler, the legislative director of the American Federation of Government Employees, who says, "We don't want them to have carte-blanche authority to have a topsy-turvy change . . . It doesn't make sense to give some group lock, stock and barrel. We met with the blind, but it was futile. They wouldn't concede anything."

But don't get Mr. Sadler wrong. He'll tell ya, "We don't belong to the President's Committee for the Handicapped for nothin'."

But it's not just the unions that are fighting blind greed. Although there are only about 900 stands operated by blind people on federal property, General Services Administration, the agency that runs federal real estate, is trying to restrict the items they can sell because the GSA says its competing with the concessionaires who run the cafeterias in government buildings.

Rich Vawter, the GSA public information officer, protests, "The inference we're trying to cut the blind out is simply ridiculous. We try to provide well-balanced meals to federal employees to keep up morale, but you can't make money on carrots and peas. You do on coffee and doughnuts (the kinds of items the GSA is pressuring the blind to stop selling), but it has nothing to do with trying to screw the blind."

So kick a cripple for Christmas.