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Nixon's Political Spoils System

The last of the Watergate investigations, an exhaustive, year-long probe of Richard M. Nixon's efforts to circumvent the federal merit system, has just been completed.

According to the confidential findings, the Nixon White House set up a political clearance system, which checked the political philosophies and connections of hundreds of applicants for government jobs.

The applications were processed by a special White House Personnel Operation, established to tighten the Nixon grip on the federal bureaucracy. The politically favored applicants would be ranked, depending on how influential their backers were.

Then the White House would plant them in key, career jobs that, under the law, were supposed to be awarded according to merit. The hiring was arranged through a network of centrally controlled "special referral units," which operated quietly inside various government agencies.

Even more shocking, top officials of the Civil Service Commission condoned and even participated in the political manipulations. They not only were aware of the illegal patronage system, but used it. Yet they are responsible for safeguarding the merit system.

These startling findings, perhaps the last echo of the Watergate years, are contained in a report by the House Manpower and Civil Service Subcommittee. The painstaking study, which hasn't yet been released to the public, outlined how the Nixon administration tried to restore the discredited political spoils system, which was abolished 94 years ago.

According to the study, political favoritism in the civil service system reached a peak during the Nixon years, 1969 through 1973. Here's how it worked:

Patronage units were set up within each federal agency to find positions for individuals who were given a "preferred" status by the White House Personnel Operation.

The applications had to be forwarded to the Civil Service Commission, of course, for approval. But top CSC officials, instead of policing the illegal preferential hiring, aided and abetted it. Using their own "pink tag" system to segregate the favored applications, they helped to expedite them.

The subcommittee report charges that Commissioner Ludwig J. Andolsek was personally responsible for expediting 100 to 300 special, pink tag cases. In one case, Chairman Robert Hampton intervened at the request of former Rep. Robert Price (R-Tex.) to find a career job for one of the ex-congressman's relatives.

As an example of how the patronage system operated, the study cites the General Services Administration, which hired more than 300 employees through the patronage system.

One GSA official gave an affidavit that he had been instructed by his superiors to hire a driver for former Attorney General John N. Mitchell during a hiring freeze.

The official said he was also directed to hire the sons of two former Nixon cohorts, ex-Attorney General Richard S. Kleindienst and former budget director George Shultz. In the latter case, testified the GSA aide, "we estab-

lished a job we did not need and at a location of his choosing."

Yet six weeks earlier, the GSA had dropped a custodial laborer with nine children from the payroll because there was no money to pay his salary.

Nixon's first GSA chief, Robert Kunzig, came out of the Pennsylvania Republican organization. He allegedly established a special "Pennsylvania Connection" through which Pennsylvanians received preferential treatment.

According to the report, Pennsylvania's powerful senators, Hugh Scott and Richard S. Schweiker, sent 95 and 134 job referrals, respectively, to GSA. One applicant recommended by Schweiker, Jack LeMay, played an active role in the patronage operation.

At the Health, Education and Welfare Department, patronage placements were made by the Office of Special Projects. This was a special political office that was set up, according to a confidential memo, to serve "as a central point of contact on all politically sensitive matters which ought not be broached through regular department channels."

Footnote: A CSC spokesman told our associate Larry Kraftowitz that neither Hampton nor Andolsek had ever "exerted pressure on anyone" to procure jobs for favored individuals, although Hampton acknowledged that referrals he made before 1974 "might well have had the appearance of impropriety." A spokesman for Schweiker insisted it was "proper and legitimate" to help constituents find government jobs. We were unable to reach Scott for his comment.

REPORTS

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