

Taking a Kick

In the HUD

A Commentary 10-4-72

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Al Louis Ripskis, a child of the work ethic, says that the other day he was peddling his paper by the entrance to the HUD building when he got run off. The paper Al was peddling is one of his own publishing. It is called IMPACT, and it concerns the internal doings at the Department of Housing and Urban Development where Ripskis works as an FHA program analyst. According to Al, George Romney, the big boss at HUD, came by and Ripskis gave him a complementary copy of IMPACT. It was a couple of minutes after that the program analyst was told by a cop to move it.

Conceivably, the puritanical Romney, might have been angered about a story in IMPACT charging that one of his "very high HUD officials had been cavorting with a female 'assistant' all over the country at the tax payers' expense." Ripskis says this partying was going on under the guise of helping with the emergency rebuilding after hurricane Camille. If that's so, we can now understand why the Pennsylvania flood victims are apoplectic over Romney's and HUD's failure to help them. The rest of us, who are lucky enough not to need help from this most incompetent of all government departments, ought to be pleased that there are two people in that organization who are capable of planning, coordinating and executing an assignation.

The same issue of IMPACT carries a story about little children being poisoned by eating lead-based paint and what HUD hasn't done about it. In January, 1971, Congress passed a law instructing HUD to go after the problem and report back within a year. Still no report.

At the hearings on this bill an administration spokesman conceded that, "This man-made disease exists in epidemic proportions in many cities . . . silently, almost unnoticed, it causes the needless death of many children and leaves many more with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, convulsive seizures, blindness, learning defects, behavioral disorders, kidney diseases and perhaps other handicaps."

It's children aged 1 through 3 who eat most of the leaden paint chips, in their tenement homes, and die at about the rate of 200 a year. Another estimated 12,000 to 16,000 are poisoned, half of whom are left mentally retarded. These will need something in the order of a quarter of a million dollars in special medical services during their lifetimes. So it could be argued that lead poisoning indirectly stimulates the economy, creates jobs and should, therefore, be encouraged, as IMPACT seems to think HUD is doing.

Another explanation is that Romney himself may be a victim of lead poisoning. Not that his Democratic predecessor was any great shakes. The history of this department is a succession of scandals, pilot projects, corruption and demonstration grants. There is, however, something particularly pathetic and impotently circular about HUD's nonfeasance on lead poisoning.

HUD commissioned the Bureau of Standards to do a half-million-dollar study on how to get rid of the lead paint in the old slum buildings which HUD was supposed to have torn down years ago. "The work the Bureau did was embodied in 18 manuals," says a depressed HUD paint expert, "and it was well done if we are looking for wordage, but not if we're looking for a practical way to remove lead-based paints."

But another HUD expert says that going in and stripping the paint off would be enormously expensive. "You see, it's really not just the paint," he said, "what are you going to do about the plumbing? The plumbing's leaking and that makes the paint peel and then the children eat the chips." On the bright side is the fact that most of the children aren't killed by the lead; they are merely brain-damaged, thus fitting them for the dull, repetitive and dirty jobs we're told most people won't take today. It may be that lead poisoning will keep America supplied with short-order cooks and HUD officials.

Meanwhile, Al Ripskis and the HUD work-ethic underground continue the fight to force their bosses to get something done. It's chancy. The man who had been putting out a HUD expose sheet before Al was dispatched to do a study of the Alaska State Housing Authority. It was this act of banishment that prompted Ripskis to break with official HUD policy and try to get some work done.

IMPACT is hardly a professionally done job but it does give you a rare look at the inside of a demoralized, leaderless and corrupted department of government. (Subscriptions are \$5 care of IMPACT, Suite 303, 2605 39th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20009, and they'll keep your name secret if you work for the government.) How long Al will be with HUD is a guessing matter, but as he says, "There haven't been any reprisals yet, and if they do send me to Guam, it won't be 'till after the elections."

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D.W. King and Scripps by J.S.W.A.