

The GAO--What

Washington

A lot of people wish it would go back to checking expense vouchers. Others grumble that it does not always dig deep enough. But the General Accounting Office just goes on — some call it investigating, the GAO prefers "auditing" and still others say it's prying.

Whatever it is called, the GAO's staff does not talk about it, as befits people who, some believe, know where every skeleton in Washington is buried and who dug the grave and paid for the flowers.

Critics say that the agency's silence often conceals less than one might think, that it too often cannot find the skeleton for trying to piece together the bones.

COMPARISON

It is still so close-mouthed, it is said, that the FBI seems positively chatty by comparison.

But when General Accounting Office reports do become public knowledge, their reports on how federal money is being spent — or more often, misspent — have been the raw material of headlines, particularly during the last five years or so, since Elmer B. Staats became its chief officer.

But it was not until this summer, when its newly established Office of Federal Elections became involved in the complex political hassle surrounding the break-in at Democratic national headquarters, that the agency lost a certain kind of anonymity in the public mind.

ROOM

Now its subdued briefing room, located on the seventh floor of the gray-brown headquarters building in a nowhere section of Washington, is more frequently bleached with television lights, and the telephones ring and ring in the offices of its information officer, Roland Sawyer.

The particular focus of all the fuss is Phillip S. Hughes, a tall, deceptively solemn-faced man who heads the elections office, which has the responsibility for administering the Federal Election Campaign Act.

Hughes, 55, a former top Budget Bureau official and fellow of the Brookings Institution, conceded recently that "it's a different life for me" — being the eye of a political storm.

And Robert F. Keller, the



ROBERT KELLER
Second in command



ELMER STAATS
Head of the agency

assistant comptroller general and as such the GAO's second in command, said in a recent interview that he felt reasonably satisfied the agency was doing a good and nonpartisan job when, in one recent week, both the Democrats and Republicans were accusing it of being politically motivated.

PUBLICITY

Besides, he said, the recent publicity has ended the discouraging business of being asked where he worked and when he replied, being asked again, "What's that?"

There are, as with everything, several answers to the question. The office, as such, was created by Congress in 1921. But in function and responsibility it is a linear descendant of a man named Joseph Anderson, the first comptroller general of the United States, whose dour visage — a portrait found in the basement by Staats' secretary — peers

down from the anteroom wall.

Until World War II, it was a huddle of green eyeshades, preoccupied with checking the nickels and dimes spent by government employees. But as the responsibilities and jurisdiction of the federal government expanded during the war so did those of the GAO and its purview has continued to grow, both by virtue of enabling legislation and less officially, ever since.

WATCHDOG

It is most often referred to as Congress' watchdog agency since it is specifically charged, as an independent agency in the legislative branch of government, with investigating — the official word, again, is auditing, but the GAO's audits increasingly extend beyond bookkeeping into qualitative judgments — the performance, fiscal and otherwise, of government agencies, and departments and their programs. The GAO can go into operation either at the request of a member of Congress or congressional committee or on its own.

It has the right to examine any "books, documents, papers and records" of any department or agency, with certain exceptions. The exceptions, which fill 34 pages of type, include the President's \$50,000 expense allowance, the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service and other agencies concerned with national security and financial matters.

The most notable exempt institution, of course, is the legislative branch itself, the \$500 million annual operation of Congress. It would be, Keller conceded, "kind of hard for us to do an effectiveness study of Congress" — and impossible without a specific request from a committee or one of the body's influential members.

DEGREES

How the money is being spent, and whether Congress and the taxpayers are getting their money's worth, continue to be the GAO's preoccupation. Now almost 500 of the \$90 million-a-year agency's 5000 staff members have degrees in fields other than accounting — law, economics, engineering.

But its own traditional measure of its performance is expressed in terms of how much money the GAO's audits and recommendations saved us all each year.

For the fiscal year 1971,

It Is, What It Does

these "financial savings attributable to the work of the GAO" amounted to \$267,910,000—of which the largest single chunk, \$113,000,000, was attributed to "reduction in procurement of helicopter engines and components made possible by more expeditious repair . . ." The smallest "measurable" saving listed was \$7000 attributed to "more effective utilization of leased family housing" by the air force.

Often the audits turn up incidents that would be wryly amusing if they were not costly. An audit of Medicaid abuses found one man who, without any serious ailment, paid 170 visits to doctors during 14 months — sometimes going twice a day.

Another audit discovered that government procurement agents were buying white cleaning rags instead of colored cleaning rags of the same quality — which would cost \$800,000 a year less.

Few programs are immune. The Commerce Department was found to have wasted \$15 million on two trade fairs — wasted because the principal participants "already exported their products to those markets." The Tennessee Valley Authority was chided for the inadequacy of its strip mining reclamation requirements.

But it is largely in the area of defense that the GAO's audits have been the basis for controversy. Re-

cent agency reports have included one made for the Senate Subcommittee on Refugees concluding that most of a \$10 million relief grant to Pakistan had been used for border fortification.

In May, another congressionally requested report found that "many units" of the strategic Army forces were not "combat-ready." In April the office reported that refugee relief in Laos was being used in part to support paramilitary forces.

N.Y. Times Service