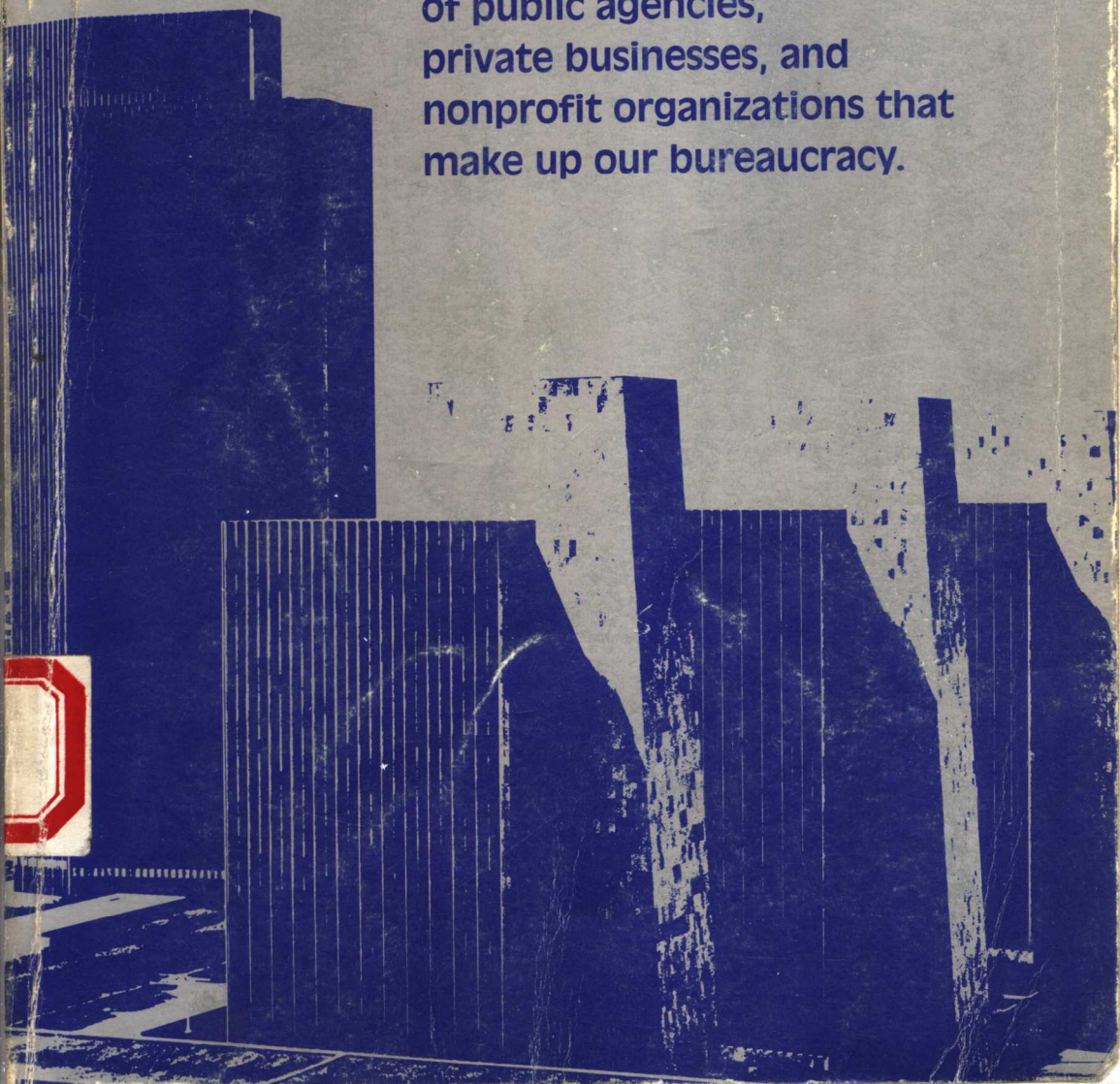


THE AMERICAN BUREAUCRACY

RICHARD J. STILLMAN II

An in-depth
look at the vast network
of public agencies,
private businesses, and
nonprofit organizations that
make up our bureaucracy.



The American Bureaucracy

Nelson-Hall  Chicago

For
Kathleen,
my wife

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Stillman, Richard Joseph, II, 1943-
The American bureaucracy.

Includes bibliographies and index.

1. Administrative agencies--United States.

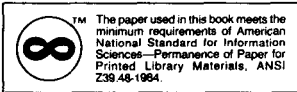
2. Bureaucracy--United States. I. Title.
JK421.S75 1987 353'.01 86-23923
ISBN 0-8304-1052-X

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Reprinted 1993

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4



"I would remark how rarely additions to the public sector have been initiated by the demands of voters or the advocacy of pressure groups or platforms of political parties. On the contrary in the fields of health, housing, urban renewal, transportation, welfare, education, poverty, and energy, it has been, in very great measure, people in government service, or closely associated with it, acting on the basis of their specialized and technical knowledge, who first perceived the problem, conceived the program, initially urged it on the president and Congress, went on to help lobby it through to enactment, and then saw to its administration."

Samuel Beer, Presidential Address before the American Political Science Association, "Federalism, Nationalism, and Democracy in America," *American Political Science Review*, vol. LXXII, no. 1 (March 1978).

"The modern state is operated by technicians according to the hierarchical model of administrative management, rather than by equal participants according to a model of deliberation and persuasion."

Sheldon Wolin, "Reagan Country," *New York Review of Books* (December 18, 1980), p. 9.

"For better or worse—or better and worse—much of our government is now in the hands of professionals. . . ."

Frederick C. Mosher, *Democracy and the Public Service*, 2nd ed., chapter five (1982).

"... public administration exists, massively, centrally, and often decisively for our individual and collective lives."

Dwight Waldo, "A Conversation with Dwight Waldo," in *Public Administration Review*, vol. 35, no. 4 (July/Aug. 1985), p. 465.

"The work of government will henceforth be too vast and varied, the sum of money too great, the details with which it will have to deal too complicated to render it possible to perform without a staff of trained officials, furnished with the usual motives to behave well and make the public service the whole and sole business of their lives."

Senator Charles Sumner (R, MA.) in offering the first civil service proposal to Congress in 1864 as quoted in the *New York Times* (May 10, 1864) p. four.

Preface

In the recent decades Americans ironically have exhibited intense hostility towards public bureaucracy and, at the same time, increasing dependence upon its services. Certainly government bureaucracy is unloved and unwanted but it also is very much a fact of contemporary life. American government, the society, and its citizens are now dependent upon vast, interconnecting webs of complicated administrative systems, processes, and procedures. In the routine visit to the county hospital and the simple delivery of a personal letter, in NASA's projects putting men and women in space and the National Institutes of Health's long-term projects for discovering a cure for cancer, public bureaucracies are at work. Large, complex administrative machinery, often hidden from public view, carries out these tasks through formal and informal hierarchies of experts using advanced technologies and diverse skills. Public agencies are decisively reshaping our lives, for today and into the distant future, through the public policies they implement, the services they perform (or fail to perform), and the regulations and research they develop. The exercise of this authority over the public and private sectors comes from diverse sources of power, both granted and acquired by public bureaucracies.

The following pages introduce students and general readers to public bureaucracy in the United States and seek to answer such questions as: what is the nature of modern public bureaucracy? How has it grown and acquired such influence over our lives? What are its formal elements? Informal elements? Internal dynamics? External sources of power? The tasks it performs? The impacts on our lives? The ways these outputs are fashioned and made to happen? The major trends in public bureaucracy in the 1980s? And its future?

First and foremost, this book provides an introductory overview of public bureaucracy in the United States for general readers and students new to the field. It assumes no prior background or understanding of the topic. As in any introductory text, some details are omitted in order to paint a broad picture of the whole. Since the topic is large and the literature is vast, further readings are suggested at the end of each chapter.

Second, the book argues throughout that public bureaucracy is now *the core* of modern U.S. government. Although no mention of bureaucracy is made in the U.S. Constitution, the heart of every public function, at every level of government today, depends largely upon the work of public bureaucracies and bureaucrats. For better or worse—or better *and* worse—it is the

way public business gets accomplished. Examining how bureaucracy works and influences the directions of public policies will be the principal focus of this book. To use Harold Lasswell's famous phrase, this text looks at how bureaucracy determines "who gets what, when, how." In brief, a study of the whys and hows of bureaucracy as our modern central means of making political choices.

Third, this book approaches the institutions of public bureaucracy as open, dynamic *systems* with the essential elements of inputs, outputs, formal structures, internal dynamics, feedback mechanisms, and environmental influences. Successive chapters are organized around an explanation of the systems' essential features and explore the nature of the bureaucratic system, its components, and their interrelationship with the whole. Review questions and listings of key terms at the end of each chapter further serve to underscore its key points. What a bureaucratic system is and how it can be understood as a dynamic whole will be discussed in the opening chapter.

Finally, this book studies the subject of public bureaucracy from an analytical and descriptive point of view, rather than from an advocacy or prescriptive standpoint. It makes no case *for* bureaucracy, or *against* bureaucracy. The text is written primarily to help students and the general public understand this important and central governing institution and how it affects their everyday lives. Therefore, the author aims to describe public bureaucracy as it is, not as it ought to be. Obviously, this task can be difficult because of the derogatory connotations of the term, "bureaucracy." The reader should be cautioned from the outset that this word is used throughout the text in its neutral, descriptive, and analytical meaning, i.e., as an institution of government. Furthermore, "bureaucracy" is used, to avoid boring repetition, interchangeably in this text with other terms such as "public agency," "executive branch," "government organization," "bureau" and "public enterprise," even though the author realizes all too well that these words do not denote precisely the same meanings.

One last point: this writer might reasonably be asked why he spent the past five years laboring over this book on a subject that many regard at best as "dull" and at worst as "noxious." My reply is to remind the reader of a delightful scene in the *Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy and her companions glimpse the wizard behind a curtain. He is busy running the gears, wheels, and machinery that create the steam clouds and awesome illusions of the magician. Dorothy scolds, "You are a very bad man," to which the wizard replies, "Oh, no, my dear, I'm really a very good man; but I'm a very bad wizard." The underlying premise of this text is very much the same: bureaucracies are not the results of some inherent evil or of "bad men," but perhaps only of *our own* ineffective wizardry. It is hoped that this text will make a small step in the direction of improving our understanding about public bureaucracy—and maybe even our wizardry in dealing with them.

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1

U.S. Public Bureaucracy

Introduction	How This Text Approaches U.S. Public Bureaucracy
Public Bureaucracy Defined	Summary of Key Points
Some of Our Negative Ideas About Bureaucracy	Key Terms
Some Myths and Realities about U.S. Public Bureaucracy	Review Questions
What Is U.S. Public Bureaucracy?	Notes
Why Study U.S. Public Bureaucracy?	Further Readings

Introduction

On January 28, 1986 booster rockets carrying NASA's Space Shuttle Challenger exploded. Its crew members, teacher Christa McAuliffe and six other astronauts, were instantly killed. The immediate cause of the accident, according to reports from the investigation of the disaster, was eventually traced to faulty O-Rings, washer-like seals between segments of the solid rocket boosters that few experts thought could become a major safety problem. O-Rings had been used for years on rockets to seal all kinds of rocket joints. They had successfully carried 24 prior Shuttle launches with their crews and payloads into orbit. So why would O-Rings fail on the 25th launch?

As the Rogers Commission investigating the accident would discover, the cause of the tragedy would be well beyond the specific technical problem of a faulty O-Ring. Human managerial dilemmas of the entire NASA organization itself were to blame: i.e., improper inspection of workmanship on Shuttle parts; inattention to the details of installation and maintenance of equipment; lack of adequate control over major contractors who built the boosters; ineffective communications between the farflung NASA operations at the Johnson, Kennedy and Marshall Space Flight Centers; emphasis upon "cost-cutting" over "safety" factors; pressures to maintain flight schedules and "a good PR image." In other words, the NASA *organization as a whole and the way it operated*, as much as the technical flaw of a single part, led to the disaster. In short, a public bureaucracy was flawed.

For better or worse, or better *and* worse, we as a society, like the members of the Challenger crew, are dependent upon various public bureaucracies at times for our lives and livelihoods.

Today no institution is more vital to our daily existence and well-being as a nation, a community, a neighborhood, or as individuals. Though we cannot often see it or touch it, public bureaucracy plays a major role, perhaps even a life and death role, in deciding such questions as:

What is the quality of the air we breathe?
 How safe are our city streets?
 Is the water we drink and the food we eat pure?
 Are highways planned and maintained properly?
 Will there be parks, playgrounds, and recreation for our leisure time?
 How well will the next generation be educated?
 Do the aged, infirm, poor, and unemployed receive public assistance?
 Are our communities well designed for living?
 Where should research next explore—the frontiers of space, the oceans, the land, or the human body?
 Will a first-class letter we mail arrive promptly?
 Is the U.S. nuclear arsenal controlled and commanded properly?
 How safe and healthy are the job sites we work at?
 Are doctors, nurses, and hospitals capable of healing the sick?
 Or, for that matter, is the hairstylist, tradesperson, or any professional certified to perform work for his or her customers?
 Can we be sure the house we live in or the car we drive is well constructed?
 Will the U.S. economy—its currency, trade, and fiscal matters—be managed fairly and efficiently?

Public bureaucrats not only perform such jobs but also help to make other critical policy decisions. Indeed, our fate as a nation and people depends upon complicated networks of a vast and pervasive bureaucratic system that, though largely unseen, is central to our lives. Yet these very attributes—pervasiveness, invisibility, and centrality—make public bureaucracy exceedingly difficult to define as a phenomenon. What is “it,” if “it” is everywhere?

Public Bureaucracy Defined

No precise definition of public bureaucracy exists, but for the purposes of this text it is defined as *the structure and personnel of organizations, rooted in law, that collectively function as the core system of U.S. government and that both determine and carry out public policies using a high degree of specialized expertise.*

Note that this definition of public bureaucracy contains several elements:

- *structure and personnel of organizations* refers to both the formal and informal attributes of public agencies and the people who are employed in them;
- *rooted in law* means that bureaucracies are ultimately based on written laws, codes and statutes;

- *core system* is a set of elements that together function as the central network for operating the U.S. government;
- *U.S. government* involves the three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) as well as the three levels (federal, state, and local);
- *determine and carry out public policies* means that the organizations both decide and implement choices in governmental affairs;
- *high degree of specialized expertise* concerns specific professional skills, knowledge, and advanced training to perform bureaucratic work.

The definition above is an analytical, descriptive, and neutral one that identifies public bureaucracy as a central institution in U.S. government. This text explores the topic of public bureaucracy from the standpoint of that definition. However, the word *bureaucracy* often has a highly emotional, negative, *prescriptive* meaning. And here lies the source of much confusion. The word has a double meaning that defines essentially the same phenomenon as something that is *both good and bad*. The double meaning implied in the word *bureaucracy* leads to a number of popular myths and misconceptions about it. This chapter will begin by outlining some attitudes toward bureaucracy and bureaucrats. It will next sketch aspects of the realities of modern U.S. bureaucracy that frequently stand in sharp contrast to our popular beliefs and ideas about U.S. bureaucracy. The rationale and design for this book will emerge from discussion about the myths and realities of U.S. public bureaucracy.

Some of Our Negative Ideas about Bureaucracy

Few things are more disliked in our modern society than bureaucracy; hardly an occupation is held in lower esteem than that of a bureaucrat. Both bureaucracy and bureaucrats are subject to contempt and criticism in both the press and private conversation. "Inefficient," "full of red tape," "big," "unresponsive," "unproductive," "inhumane," and "inept" are frequently among the emotionally charged criticisms regularly leveled at bureaucracy and bureaucrats.

Maybe we hold bureaucracy in such low esteem because of firsthand experiences. Most of us are familiar with standing in long lines at a post office waiting to mail a letter and with filling out long forms for motor vehicle registrations, or for God knows what purposes. Every April 15 we gripe at paying what may seem higher taxes to Uncle Sam in return for fewer and fewer visible public services.

Whatever the cause or source of our perpetual criticisms of those nameless, faceless bureaucrats, these views have become part and parcel of our American folklore. It is no wonder that popular dictionary definitions echo our profound dislike of bureaucracy. *The American Heritage Dictionary's* definition of bureaucracy reads in part: "numerous offices and adherence to

inflexible rules of operation; . . . any unwieldy administration." According to *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, "bureaucracy is governmental officialism or inflexible routine." *Roget's Thesaurus* gives equally demeaning synonyms for *bureaucracy*: "officialism," "officialousness," and "red tape."

Scholars have likewise damned it. Max Weber, the great German scholar of bureaucracy, was horrified by what he saw as the irreversible trend of "bureaucratization" in human affairs, and he mourned the concomitant loss of human dignity and freedom: "It is horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones. . . . This passion for bureaucracy is enough to drive one to despair."¹ The contemporary French scholar Michel Crozier, in *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, argues that "the vulgar and frequent sense of the word 'bureaucracy' . . . evokes the slowness, the ponderousness, the routine, the complication of procedures, and the maladapted response of 'bureaucratic' organizations to the needs which they should satisfy, and the frustrations which their members, clients or subjects consequently endure."² The English scholar C. N. Parkinson gained an international reputation by developing his "laws" of bureaucratic practice; such as, "Work expands to fill the time allotted."³

American scholars have been little kinder over the years. E. Pendleton Herring saw bureaucracies as rigid and run by "special interests."⁴ In his *Bureaucratization of the World*,⁵ Henry Jacoby dismally pictures bureaucracy's worldwide spread as the central cause of decline in democratic values. Many of the writings of sociologist Robert Merton focus on the "dysfunctions" of bureaucracy⁶ by cataloguing its various shortcomings and inadequacies in modern life. In *Bureaucratic Government USA*,⁷ David Nachmias and David Rosenbloom paint an equally unhappy portrait of the spreading of bureaucratic control over most aspects of life in the United States and the subsequent loss of control by Americans over bureaucracy.

For the most part, politicians echo our critical sentiments about bureaucracy. Both Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Republican candidate Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 ran against "bureaucracy." Both candidates' victories were due, at least in part, to their promises to "cut it," "trim it," "reform it," and "clean it up." In future elections, no doubt, similar campaign slogans for the reform of bureaucracy are likely to appear. Politicians mirror our popular disgust. From left to right in the political spectrum, bureaucracy is a target, as reflected by the following popular opinions expressed by the man on the street—"it's the problem with government"; "it's too big"; "full of lame-brained, overpaid pencil-pushers"; "it's where everyone stays on for life"; "it's out of touch with the grass roots"; "it grows relentlessly"; "it produces only red tape"; "it's all-powerful"; "it's inefficient." Table 1.1 sums up popular views of the federal bureaucracy—no other institution in society is considered "less well run."

TABLE 1.1
In which of the following people in government
do you have the most trust and confidence?

<i>Public Responses</i>	<i>% (1987) of Population</i>
Those running the federal government	19%
Those running state government	22%
Those running local government	37%
Don't know	22%

Source: Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (Jan. 1987).

In a nutshell, these statements reflect the hostile ideas many people, from august scholars to the man on the street *believe* about bureaucracy. Charles Goodsell summed it up well when he observed: "The employee of bureaucracy, that lowly bureaucrat, is seen as lazy or snarling or both. The office occupied by this pariah is viewed as bungling or inhuman or both. The overall edifice of bureaucracy is pictured as overstuffed, inflexible, unresponsive, and power-hungry, all at once."⁸

But there is another side to the discussion, namely the reality—what is U.S. public bureaucracy actually like? Let's examine some popular myths a little more closely in order to gain a clearer and more accurate understanding of U.S. public bureaucracy. Let's begin our discussion by separating the facts from fiction about bureaucracy. Now, will the *real* bureaucracy please stand up (or step forward)?

Some Myths and Realities about U.S. Public Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is criticized on television shows, by presidents, the press, the public, and academics. Indeed, almost everyone takes a shot at bureaucracy. It is blamed for a variety of social ills from causing "red tape" to failing to cure cancer. Again, in the words of Charles Goodsell, "Bureaucracy stands as a splendid hate object."⁹

What is bureaucracy in the United States really like? What are its forms and elements? There are, as previously outlined, many popular beliefs concerning bureaucracy, and we might begin this discussion by clearing the air, so to speak, by examining some popular notions about bureaucracy.

Myth 1: "Bureaucracy is the problem with U.S. government" Ask almost anyone about bureaucracy, and the response "It's THE PROBLEM with U.S. government!" comes almost automatically. The presidency, the Supreme Court, and Congress often receive far greater, and more charitable, press coverage than the bureaucracy (though they too have received hard knocks in recent years). Presidents, courts, and Congress are generally associated with what U.S. government *is and* does. These institutions are seen as the places where the *real* decisions and actions of government take place, often for

the good of all citizens. But the president is merely one individual; the Supreme Court, simply nine judges; and Congress, only 535 individuals, compared with governmental bureaucracy, which is composed of roughly 16 million federal, state, and local employees. In the words of Carl Friedrich, these people and their organizations form "the core of modern government," for it is here where the bulk of government work gets done—"where the rubber meets the road," so to speak.¹⁰

Public bureaucracies educate 46 million public school children every day, pass out 3.048 million unemployment checks every week, deliver 10.767 million social security retirement checks every month, maintain 300,456 miles of interstate highways (and another 4 million miles of public roads), run 172 veterans hospitals, serve in 142 embassies and delegations overseas, put astronauts on the moon, handle 110 billion letters and packages every year, register and license 12 million autos, and much more. Whether this work is done efficiently, wisely, or well—or whether it should be done at all—is open to argument. These questions aside, public bureaucracies carry out most of the work of government and so are central to the operations of the U.S. government. Therefore, bureaucracy is not only THE PROBLEM with government; it makes government possible. Bureaucracy is how most things get done in government, and so it is "the core" of governmental operations. It is the way society carries out the purposes of government; the way much of government actually governs and acts in *both* "good" and "bad" ways. Thus bureaucracy creates *both* problems and possibilities for change and improvements in U.S. government as well as for society as a whole. Its effects and influences are profound and two-sided.

At the heart of bureaucracy's influence upon everyday life is its ability to make political choices—sometimes critical life and death choices—for society *and* for all its citizens—to determine, in Harold Lasswell's view of politics, "who gets what, when, how."¹¹ Government bureaucracies exercise important administrative choices—to decide and act in ways that affect all of us—through essentially four routes, according to Theodore Lowi;¹² i.e., by regulatory activities, redistributive policies, distributive policies, and constituent services.

Regulatory activities concern the making and enforcing of rules and regulations. There is a broad array of regulatory agencies involved with rule-making and rule-enforcing activities such as the Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulates interstate transportation and business practices; the Security Exchange Commission, which regulates securities and stock exchange activities; and the Food and Drug Administration, which ensures the purity of foods and the safeness of drug and medical practices.

Redistributive functions involve the transfer of tax benefits from one group of citizens to another: the Social Security Administration annually transfers billions of dollars from working citizens to retired persons; and state

and local welfare agencies transfer billions of dollars from the general population to the poor.

Distributive policies are performed by public agencies that use general revenues to provide goods and services to entire populations, regardless of class or group: police, public schools, and the U.S. Postal Service "distribute" services to everyone.

Constituent services involve the work of those agencies and departments that service government as a whole. A municipal budget office's decision can affect the whole of city government; or the State Department's foreign policy choices can influence the entire nation. These are "constituent-type" bureaucracies.

More will be said in chapter 2 about the nature and scope of these different types of bureaucratic policies and how they affect our lives in the United States. The important point for now is that bureaucracy plays a huge role in the way government works and in determining how society is governed. Hence, bureaucracy creates *both* problems and progress. It can be the source of much good and much ill. It is always a two-edged sword.

Myth 2: "Government bureaucracy is overwhelmingly large and monolithic" Much of the criticism directed at U.S. public bureaucracy involves its size. "It's overwhelming." "It's too big." "It's overpowering." Statistics are frequently cited to shore up this argument: data that indicate that U.S. bureaucracy is the largest employer in the country, consuming a quarter of the Gross National Product, and that it is the fourth-largest bureaucracy in the world—behind only the U.S.S.R., China, and India in numbers of employees. United States public bureaucracy spends more than a trillion dollars annually. All such data are accurate—but only partly.

United States bureaucracy is not one massive organization but numerous small units, mostly very small ones situated at the grass roots. Actually, as table 1.2 points out, there are over 80,000 U.S. bureaucracies—or, more precisely, 1 federal government, 50 state bureaucracies, and 82,290 local public bureaucracies. As table 1.2 shows, the bulk of public employees work in local bureaucracies with 19,076 municipalities; 16,734 townships; 28,588 special districts; 3,041 counties; and 14,851 school districts. Of these, 30,913 public organizations have *no* full-time employees. And only 1,159 have more than 1,000 employees—and nearly one-third or 493 of these are school districts, which means that the bulk of "big" bureaucracy is in reality made up of very small organizational units located at the grass roots. Many of the big public organizations on the local level are school systems.

But what about the federal level? Approximately two million civilian employees and nearly the same number of military add up to a large and impressive figure, but here, too, as table 1.3 points out, these are scattered throughout 45,431 units with 57.2% of them employing fewer than 4 people. Only twenty-two or .06% employ more than 10,000 personnel. Contra-

TABLE 1.2
Number of U.S. Governments by Type in 1982

Federal Government	1
State Governments	50
County Governments	3,041
Municipalities	19,076
Towns	16,734
School Districts	14,851
Special Districts	28,588
Total	82,341

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 1986, p.285.

TABLE 1.3
Number of Employees per Unit in Federal Agencies in 1980.

<i>Number of Employees</i>	<i>Total Number Units</i>	<i>Percent of Units in This Size Range</i>
1-4	25,992	57.2
5-9 (P.O. 5-10)	7,017	15.4
10-24 (P.O. 11-25)	5,789	12.7
25-49 (P.O. 26-50)	2,634	5.8
50-99 (P.O. 51-99)	1,502	3.3
100-199	977	2.2
200-299	372	.8
300-499	331	.7
500-999	338	.7
1,000-1,999	218	.5
2,000-4,999	189	.4
5,000-9,999	47	.1
10,000 and up	25	.06
Totals	45,431	99.9

Source: U.S. Office of Personnel Management, and Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy* (N.J.: Chatham House, 1983) p.112.

dicting Max Weber's view of bureaucracy as "overtowering," data show that even the federal level is composed mostly of small, fragmented organizations. Chapter 2 will deal with the variety and types of bureaucratic structures in the United States.

Myth 3: "Bureaucrats are all alike" We hear talk of the typical bureaucrat, as if bureaucrats were a homogeneous mass of green-eye-shaded under-achievers or nonachievers. The evidence, however, points to considerable diversity in public bureaucrats; it is impossible to speak of "a typical bureaucrat." Bureaucrats do many jobs, and so there are many varieties of public employees. There are over 10,000 government job categories describing tasks such as the policing of roads, the flying of space shuttles, and the delivering of mail. People engaged in these occupations are individually and collectively far from being "lame-brains." As figure 1.1 points out, more