

The Inhumanity of Government Bureaucracies

— ◆ —

HANS SHERRER

The media attention focused on elected officials leads many people to think of them as “the government.” Such thinking diverts us from the recognition of a critical truth: politically articulated agendas are transformed into reality only by bureaucratic systems. Bureaucracies are the dominant means by which governments control and influence the daily lives of people throughout the world.

If only because of the prominent position that government bureaucracies occupy in society, we need to understand the forces bearing upon the execution of their functions. This need is heightened by the common observation that government bureaucrats routinely treat people in ways that would be decried as inhumane if that treatment were meted out by anyone else.

The human devastation wreaked by past and present political regimes has not been inflicted personally by leaders such as Joseph Stalin, Saddam Hussein, and Pol Pot, but by rank-and-file members of bureaucracies or people acting with their approval. Whoever they may be or whatever position they may hold, political leaders merely issue directives or establish general policies (Ellul 1965, 147). Those policies are executed by bureaucrats and, to some extent, acquiesced to by the general public.

Adolf Hitler himself, for example, did not bring about the Final Solution. It became a reality only because of the independently chosen decisions of tens of millions of Europeans, including bureaucrats and professional people, either to participate in it actively or to do nothing to stop it (Ellul 1965, 147–62). Although a price

Hans Sherrer is an author living in Auburn, Washington.

The Independent Review, v.V, n.2, Fall 2000, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2000, pp. 249–264

may have to be paid, anyone whose conscience is shocked by the inhumanity of a bureaucratic program has the option of choosing not to participate in its implementation (Bettelheim 1960, 267–300; Mayer 1966, 168–73). The successful 1943 Rosenstrasse protest in Berlin by German women, which persuaded the Gestapo to release their Jewish husbands and boyfriends from custody, illustrates that acting in accordance with one’s conscience can have positive effects even in the most totalitarian of regimes during a time of war (Stoltzfus 1996).

Although the central role of government bureaucracies in ensuring the success of political policies is often overlooked, interrelated aspects contributing to the inhumanity of these bureaucracies have been exposed in numerous books, journals, and magazines. In *The Trial* ([1925] 1988), Franz Kafka immortalized the essence of bureaucratic inhumanity from the standpoint of those who experience it. Relating the plight of Josef K., *The Trial* symbolizes a person’s immersion in a bureaucratic process he can neither understand nor influence. Treated as a pawn on a chessboard, Josef K. is in a state of confusion and despair after being arrested, questioned, tried, and found guilty without ever seeing his judge, without being told who his accusers are or knowing what crime he has allegedly committed. Although first published in 1925, *The Trial* eerily presaged the atmosphere of unreality that pervaded the Moscow show trials of 1936–38 (Koestler 1941).

The intense negative feelings government bureaucracies evoke in the people caught in their web not only spring from their imposing structures, impersonality, and the murky rules that guide them, but are reinforced by the sheer magnitude of the apparatus: in the United States alone, more than twenty million people have chosen employment in one of the multitude of government bureaucracies.¹ Moreover, each of those organizations is a part of a greater functioning entity. Directly or indirectly, each bureaucrat relies on the awesome power of government enforcement agencies, which undertake to ensure that the bureaucrats are funded by taxpayers, that their regulations are obeyed, that their activities go forward unimpeded. In a sense, the bureaucrats resemble the members of a shrouded society; they constitute what one might call a “bureaucratic brotherhood.”

The exercise of latent bureaucratic power is a theme of Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* ([1963] 1994). Arendt uses the backdrop of Adolf Eichmann’s 1961 trial in Israel to explore how bureaucratic systems facilitate unconscionably inhumane behavior by the apparently “normal” people typically associated with them. Although Eichmann was only a midlevel SS bureaucrat, his Israeli prosecutors and the world press portrayed him as Satan for his role in the Nazi regime. This media image, however, conflicted with Eichmann’s single most distinguishing characteristic: he was an ordinary man who didn’t exhibit any disturbing personal traits (Bettelheim 1963,

1. As of December 1999, in the United States, 20.32 million persons were employed by federal, state, and local governments (U.S. Council of Economic Advisers 2000, 359). This figure does not include the many millions working for “private” companies under the direction or oversight of a government bureaucracy.

23; Kren and Rappoport 1994, 70). During the fifteen years between the end of World War II and his kidnapping in Argentina by Israeli agents, Eichmann lived a simple and quiet life with his loving family, going to work every day as people do throughout the world. His normality was unanimously confirmed by the half-dozen psychiatrists who studied him in prison during the year he awaited his trial and by the minister who regularly visited him (Bettelheim 1963, 23). Arendt subtitled her book *A Report on the Banality of Evil* precisely because Adolf Eichmann was psychologically indistinguishable from people who populate countries throughout the world.

Inhumane behavior by the evidently normal members of a bureaucracy is more in need of understanding today than it was at the time of Nazi rule in Germany. Prior to the Nazis' demonstration of the potential of bureaucracy, the destructiveness of rationally directed government bureaus was largely unappreciated. We now know, however, how easily political expediciencies can mold bureaucracies into mechanisms of human destruction. This potential causes great concern because the panoply of nuclear, biological, chemical, mechanical, and psychological weapons available today provides bureaucrats with the means to act inhumanely toward large numbers of people with relative ease. In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Zygmunt Bauman has explored the inherent capability of bureaucracies as powerful instruments of destruction and control. He shows how modern methods of mass organization and production are applied to the bureaucratic control and processing of human beings as effectively as they are used in making and distributing automobile parts and office supplies (13–18, 104–6; see also Feingold 1983, 399–400).

Normal people acting within the framework of a *bureaucratic system* with access to *modern techniques* of action and control: these are the three elements that combine to enable a bureaucracy to function as a horribly destructive entity whose powers can be directed at any person or group that attracts its attention.

Serious inquiries have been made into various facets of the problem of bureaucratic inhumanity, but no single explanation suffices to explain the phenomenon. In this article, I discuss ten compelling factors, presented in no particular order, as a preliminary guide to understanding this important and menacing aspect of modern life.

Mindless Obedience to Authority

Most people exhibit a nearly mindless obedience to authority. Stanley Milgram's experiments almost forty years ago at Yale University revealed that two-thirds of a representative sampling of Americans would inflict life-threatening high-voltage electric shocks to someone they knew was innocent of any wrongdoing, even when that person was screaming and begging for mercy (Milgram 1975; see also Kelman and Lawrence 1972). Even more disturbing, this large percentage of Americans would inflict pain on innocent people willingly and even enthusiastically upon the mere request of someone whose authority was established by nothing more than his wearing the white coat of a laboratory

technician and speaking in a firm voice. These people readily substitute obedience to authority figures for the dictates of their personal moral code. They have been called “sleepers” because they can slip into and out of a state of moral blindness on command (Bauman 1989, 167).

Apart from innumerable historical examples, the stories in a major newspaper on any given day provide support for the observation that bureaucracies are predominantly if not exclusively composed of persons who belong to the large pool of morally ambiguous and obedient people identified by Milgram’s experiments. Furthermore, this phenomenon is not restricted by language, geography, political system, or era. It exists as much in the United States and other countries today as it did in Germany under the National Socialists and in Russia under Stalin (Kren and Rappoport 1994, 70). The conscienceless attitude of unreflective and amoral obedience exhibited by people in a bureaucratic setting resembles Eric Hoffer’s unflatteringly description of “true believers” in a political or religious mass movement (1951).

Sadistic Behavior

Bureaucratic structures increase sadistic behavior by permitting and even encouraging it.² This effect is produced by the systematic lessening of the moral restraints inherent in personal agency (Kelman 1973, 52). Stanford psychology professor Philip Zimbardo’s “Stanford County Prison” experiment in the early 1970s confirmed this relationship in dramatic fashion (Zimbardo, Haney, and Banks 1973). The experiment revealed that the sadism of people unhealthily obedient to authority can be tapped into and given an expressive outlet by their association with a bureaucratic organization, demonstrating that placing people in an environment in which they can freely exercise their sadistic impulses can have a liberating effect on their doing so.

Zimbardo conducted the experiment by setting up a mock jail in the basement of a building and using participants from the general public who had been selected for their normality. Those chosen to participate were randomly assigned the role of a guard or an inmate. To Zimbardo and his fellow researchers’ surprise, a majority of the guards began to behave sadistically toward the inmates within hours of initiation of the experiment (1973, 87–97). Just as surprising, the inmates meekly accepted their subservient role and mistreatment. In writing about this experiment, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman noted a “sudden transmogrification of likable and decent American boys into near monsters of the kind allegedly to be found only in places like Auschwitz or Treblinka” (Bauman 1989, 167). What began as a make-believe exper-

2. One of Zygmunt Bauman’s themes in *Modernity and the Holocaust* is that the Holocaust was a product of the liberating effect a bureaucratic structure can have on inhibitions against cruel behavior (1989, 12–18). Herbert Kelman has explored areas of this theme and refers to the “processes of authorization, routinization, and dehumanization of the victim” (52) as contributing to the amoral behavior of persons acting within an authoritarian environment (1973, 38–52).

iment soon degenerated into an all too real microcosm of the interpersonal dynamics of real jails and prisons.

The universality of Zimbardo's finding is confirmed by the fact that the overwhelming majority of the heinous acts committed in Europe during the Nazi era were not perpetrated by fanatics or deranged people. To the contrary, those acts were performed by ordinary Germans, French, Poles, Czechs, and others who considered themselves to be legally authorized to act in ways that we retrospectively view as inhumane (Browning 1993, 159–89; Kren and Rappoport 1994, 70, 81–83).

The Stanford County Prison experiment had been scheduled to last two weeks, but the reaction of the inmates to their treatment at the hands of the guards forced termination of the experiment after just six days. The guards had become so psychologically immersed in their role of lording over the inmates that their inhumane behavior induced several of the inmates to suffer “acute emotional breakdowns” (Zimbardo, Haney, and Banks 1973, 89, 95). Although never repeated in an academic setting because of its legal and psychological consequences, Zimbardo's experiment is repeated every day in real prisons across America. The operation of these prisons ensures that the bureaucratically approved behavior of the sort conducted by guards at Dachau and Auschwitz is flourishing in the United States today.³

Reinforcement of Behaviorist Attitudes

Bureaucracies reinforce behaviorist attitudes at odds with the idea that people are autonomous beings. Behaviorism promotes the idea that people can be conditioned to respond robotically in a predictable manner to a specific stimulus. Hence, behaviorism justifies the inhumane way in which bureaucrats view and deal with people. The inflexible rules, regulations, and mandates ad nauseam of a bureaucracy are enforced in ways that conform to the proposition that people are as behaviorally pliable as rats and pigeons (McConnell 1970; Koestler 1968, 3–18). In other words, the explicit rejection of human autonomy and the role of consciousness in human behavior is ingrained in bureaucratic systems and in the thinking of those who administer them. One of the foremost proponents of behaviorism, Harvard professor B. F. Skinner, acknowledged this relationship in the title of his 1971 book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

Not by coincidence did the rise of pervasive bureaucratic institutions parallel the rise of the acceptance of behaviorist principles in psychology. In a 1913 article in *Psychology Review* that can be characterized as the manifesto of behaviorism, John B. Watson laid the psychological foundation necessary for the increased bureaucratization of society that followed the outbreak of war in 1914. He wrote, “The time has

3. A recent investigative article in *Seattle Weekly* magazine exposed Washington State's practice of knowingly hiring and retaining racists and Nazi worshipers as prison guards (Vogel 1999).

come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness. . . . Its sole task is the prediction and control of behaviour” (quoted in Koestler 1968, 6). First explicitly embraced by the Soviet bureaucracy that funded Ivan Pavlov’s research, behaviorist techniques of manipulating large populations by selectively extending reward or inflicting punishment have been perfected during the past eighty years (Koestler 1968, 3–18).

Those techniques have been adopted in principle by all Western countries to the extent that behaviorism—and the hidden but very real threat of *constructive force* underlying it—dominates all interactions between members of a bureaucracy and the public. Constructive force operates on the mind and is intended to produce the same physical result and have the same effect on the affected persons as actual force applied to their bodies. When prevailing conditions suggest the potential use of physical force to gain compliance with a verbal, written, or physically or psychologically implied request or demand by a governmental entity or person, a state of constructive force exists. Needless to say, a condition of constructive or actual force exists in every encounter between someone and any form of governmental representation, whether in person by a bureaucrat or in a letter or other message received from one. In other words, in a sense there are no voluntary encounters between the government and the people considered subject to its jurisdiction.

Conformity with Procedure versus Individual Responsibility

Bureaucracies substitute conformity with technical procedures for individual responsibility (Bauman 1989, 98). This substitution expresses a dominant motif of the twentieth century: the replacement of human idiosyncrasies, craftsmanship, and ingenuity by the predictability of technical methods (Ellul 1964, 3–14). Henry Ford perfected the first modern factory assembly line in 1913. It was soon reflected in the assembly-line methods adopted by bureaucracies to induce politically approved human behavior. Not surprisingly, then, the enforcement of bureaucratic techniques of behavior control is carried out by people willing to adjust their own behavior to the requirements of political mandates and technical specifications.

Consequently, bureaucrats can be described as carrying out their duties “in a machine-like fashion” (Bettelheim 1960, 45). This phenomenon, however, extends beyond the bureaucracy itself. The prevalence of people throughout society who exhibit a machinelike attitude has grown as the presence of bureaucracies has increased. Conversely, the people who require the most intensive corrective bureaucratic attention are individualistic, free-spirited, and courageous men, women, and children who resistant outside pressures to conform themselves to fit a politically approved mold. In the domain of a government bureaucracy, people’s uniqueness is trivialized and considered subservient to the depersonalization and anonymity of the systems and procedures of the agency.

The modern world's reduction of people to the status of things by their classification as a conglomeration of their visible and presumed characteristics was first identified in Germany. This condition was called *Karteimensch*, which loosely means someone living a punch-card existence (Bettelheim 1960, 54). Expressed in the United States by the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, this attitude has grown to the point that the survival of vast government bureaucracies depends on the widespread categorization and inhumane treatment of human beings as numbers (Twight 1999, 169–76).⁴

Categorization of People by Their Degree of Conformity

A bureaucracy typically categorizes people outside of it in groups based on how much they conform to its standards. The more nonconforming or deviant a person or group is considered to be from bureaucratic norms, the higher the probability that person or group will be subject to dehumanization by a process known as *distancing* (Bauman 1989, 102–4)—a method of physically or mentally separating selected people from the rest of society. Those people are demonized and turned into strangers even though they may pose no threat to the public. Furthermore, mentally separating selected persons or groups by distancing often serves as a public relations precursor to their eventual physical separation. When practiced on a large scale, distancing typically degenerates into what are retrospectively described as witch hunts (McWilliams 1950, 3–23, 235–340).

One consequence of the distancing process is that it enables what ordinarily appear to be decent people to act barbarically toward those who have been dehumanized. One of the best-known examples of mental separation is the dehumanization of Jews during the 1930s by Nazi propaganda that portrayed them as the human incarnation of rats and lice (Bosmajian 1974). This action was taken to justify a legal differentiation between the Jews and the approved people in German society. The special legal status of Jews made their mistreatment by bureaucrats an activity for the patriotic general public to support.

Similarly, American soldiers in Vietnam did not kill human beings. They killed “gooks,” “dinks,” and “slopes.” And earlier, the Americans who contributed to the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not exterminate hundreds of thousands of women, children, and old people, but a dehumanized and faceless “Jap” enemy (Keen 1991).

Distancing is actively employed in the United States. The most vivid example is the use of criminal prosecutions as a ritualistic procedure to mentally and physically

4. The voluminous record keeping associated with the assignment of federal identifying numbers mandated by Social Security was one of the impetuses to the federal government's support for the development of the electronic computer.

distance men, women, and children labeled as criminals from the rest of American society (Blumberg 1973, 77). Distancing people through the criminalization process also serves the function of justifying the exercise of bureaucratic power as a “necessary evil” in order to assuage people’s fears and insecurities about groups and individuals politically assigned the role of being a domestic enemy (Becker 1975, 96–127).

The End Justifies the Means

Obedience to the mission of a bureaucracy is given precedence by those within it over and above the means used to accomplish it. This principle is true whether the mission is issuing driver’s licenses to people, imprisoning them, or herding them into cattle cars to be transported to a centralized killing ground. The end of a mission is held sacred by those within a bureaucracy. The means employed are important only to the degree that they assist in accomplishing the mission (Ellul 1965, 50–53). The idea that the end justifies the means is the very antithesis of morality, and its institutionalization as a guiding principle is one of the central features of bureaucratic systems.

Furthermore, bureaucracies reflect the image of the political institutions empowering them to act. As outlined in books such as *Amoral Politics* (Scharfstein 1995), thousands of years of experience support the idea that political institutions are fundamentally amoral.

This amorality appeared in the Nazis’ claim after World War II that they couldn’t be held personally responsible for their actions because they had a legal duty to achieve their politically empowered bureaucratic missions regardless of the methods they used to do so. At the Nuremberg trials, Nazis offered the following three primary defenses to justify their preoccupation with achieving the end of a bureaucratic mission to the exclusion of a concern with the means employed: I was following orders; I was obeying the law; and I did not know the consequences of my actions. Jacques Ellul observed in *The Political Illusion* that those defenses are based on anonymity and secrecy. He wrote:

The [bureaucratic] decisions taken are anonymous. This was clearly revealed in connection with the great Nazi war crime trial after the war. Nobody had ever made a decision. This happened again in the Eichmann trial. We must not say: “This is a lawyer’s argument, a lie.” On the contrary, it was the exact image of all that takes place in the modern state. All a chief [such as Hitler] can do is to give a general directive, ordinarily not incorporating concrete decisions, and therefore not entailing true responsibility for the concrete acts emerging at the other end. (1965, 147)

American judges and prosecutors involved in the trials at Nuremberg in the late 1940s summarily rejected the Nazi defense that a political end justifies the bureaucratic means used to achieve it (Harris 1954). However, in an ironic twist of fate,

prosecutors, judges, and police in the United States now wholeheartedly endorse the Nazi defense.⁵ These are the very people who direct the awesome power of the law-enforcement bureaucracy and who are most in need of being held legally accountable for their misbehavior.

Given the human devastation and the demands for justice that the routine exercise of their power can cause, it is hardly surprising that bureaucrats everywhere tenaciously cling to the discredited Nazi defense that the end justifies the means. We hear this attitude of nonaccountability expressed every time a bureaucrat utters the chilling phrase, “I am only doing my job.”

Personal Benefit

People expect to benefit personally from their association with a bureaucracy. Consequently, public proclamations by bureaucrats that they are dedicated to serving the interests of the public are little more than thinly veiled public relations ploys. People who have dealt with government agencies for any length of time are acutely aware of this reality. So-called civil servants are typically neither civil toward nor servants of the public.

Instead of serving the mythical entity known as “the people,” bureaucrats are de facto mercenaries serving their own financial and professional interests. Preserving their position typically takes precedence over considerations of the impact their actions may have on people affected by them. This self-service has marked even the most extreme cases of bureaucratic loyalty we know of, such as those provided by the Nazis.

Dr. Josef Mengele committed so many heinous acts during his tenure as the chief physician at Auschwitz that he became known as “the Angel of Death.” In spite of his moniker, Mengele was regarded by friends, family, and colleagues as a thoughtful and considerate man. Rather than acting out of mean-spiritedness, Mengele engaged in diabolical medical experiments on nonconsenting victims because of his desire to advance his career in the Nazi bureaucracy. A doctor who worked with Mengele at Auschwitz was quoted as saying, “He was ambitious up to the point of being completely inhuman. He was mad about genetic engineering. . . . Above all, I believe that he was doing this . . . for his career. In the end I believed that he would have killed his own mother if it would have helped him” (Fischer 1997, 516).

Adolf Eichmann exhibited the same detachment from the human consequences of his actions as Mengele. After attending his trial, Hannah Arendt wrote: “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all” (Arendt 1994, 287). The amoral blindness exemplified by devoted and

5. See, for example, *Imbler v. Pachtman* (1976), which contains an excellent summary of the legal immunities from personal responsibility enjoyed by these “public servants.” For a prosecutor’s candid admission that she relies on a Nuremberg defense to justify performing tasks she may consider morally repugnant but which her superiors have ordered her to do as a part of her job, see Kaminer (1995, 164).

conscientious public servants such as Mengele and Eichmann is not unusual among people involved with a bureaucracy. They hope to benefit personally from going along with a bureaucracy regardless of its inhumane policies. Thus, it is not unusual for bureaucrats to act as if their personal self-interest is intertwined with the exercise of raw power by the bureaucracy they serve.

Absence of Outside Accountability

Bureaucrats are protected by a nearly complete absence of outside accountability. They can do almost anything under the color of acting as a government employee without fear of legal consequences or personal financial accountability to anyone they harm. This risk-free status is expressed by the political doctrine of qualified and absolute immunity, which protects bureaucrats from civil liability or criminal responsibility for their personally injurious and harmful actions no matter how horrible they may be (*Imbler v. Pachtman* 1976). U.S. District Court Judge Edward Lodge affirmed this doctrine in May 1998 when he dismissed criminal charges by the state of Idaho against Lon Horiuchi, an FBI sharpshooter. Horiuchi had been criminally charged for shooting an unarmed woman, Vicki Weaver, in the head while she was holding her infant daughter in her arms during the federal siege at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992. Judge Lodge ruled that under the Supremacy Clause of the U.S. Constitution federal agents cannot be criminally prosecuted by a state for violating a state law while performing their assigned governmental duties.⁶

The legal protections bureaucrats enjoy from being outside accountability place them in a privileged position similar to the one formerly occupied by aristocrats (Ellul 1990, 26). A defining characteristic of the largely self-contained aristocratic world was that its members were shielded from the enforcement of laws applying to the rabble of the general public. Thus, the bureaucrats may be seen to constitute a “new aristocracy.”

Bureaucratic Secrecy and Suppression of Whistleblowers

A de facto code of silence contributes to hiding the illegal and amoral actions committed by members of a bureaucracy. Any sort of crisis that threatens the bureaucracy or its members triggers a closing of ranks to protect it from outside scrutiny, interference, and legal oversight. For example, for six years the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the U.S. Department of Jus-

6. *State of Idaho v. Lon T. Horiuchi*, Case No. CR 97-097-N-EJL, Memorandum Decision and Order dated May 14, 1998 (Federal District Court of Idaho, Boise, Idaho). Judge Lodge’s ruling was appealed by the Boundary County prosecutor to the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and a decision is being awaited as I write. For an account of this episode by Randy Weaver’s lawyer, Gerry Spence, and to see a picture drawn by FBI agent Horiuchi immediately after he shot Vicki Weaver that shows his gun sights aimed at the door behind which she was kneeling with her head visible above the door’s window, see Spence (1995, 40–41).

tice concealed from the public important facts related to possible wrongdoing by those agencies and their agents during the siege and destruction of the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993 (Shapley 1999a, 1999b; Boyer 1999). Countless local examples reveal how the code of silence protects bureaucratic wrongdoers. The Internal Affairs Division of the Seattle Police Department concealed for three years the reported theft by a policeman of more than \$10,000 in cash from a dead man at a crime scene (City 1999).

The veil of bureaucratic secrecy protecting the vile actions of its members from public exposure and scrutiny is pierced only occasionally by a courageous whistleblower (Glazer and Glazer 1990). Frank Serpico was one such whistleblower when he publicly testified in the late 1960s about widespread graft and corruption in the New York City Police Department (Maas 1973). He was rewarded for his honesty by being shot in the face after he testified. An insidious form of retaliation used to silence whistleblowers of internal government corruption or wrongdoing is their superiors' recommendation that they be psychiatrically evaluated (as reported on ABC's *20/20*, October 12, 1998). Some potential whistleblowers may be pressured to remain silent by the threat of being sued or having to pay the opponent's legal fees in an unsuccessful suit against a bureaucracy (Gavin 1999). Whistleblowers are also silenced when they die under mysterious circumstances, such as those surrounding the death of former CIA director William Colby in 1996 shortly before he was scheduled to appear on *60 Minutes*. Still other whistleblowers are punished by being forced to retire or by being transferred, demoted, or fired. An example of this latter retaliation was the IRS's attempt to fire agent Jennifer Long after her revelations during the nationally televised September 1997 Senate Finance Committee hearings on IRS abuses (Johnston 1999). Among other things, her congressional testimony revealed how the IRS selectively preys on the weak, poor, and defenseless, while ignoring people and companies "with either the resources to fight back or with friends in the agency" (P-I 1999). The IRS backtracked from its decision to fire Long only after Senator William Roth, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, personally protested to the commissioner of the IRS (P-I 1999).

Given the risk to the careers, the pocketbooks, and possibly even the personal safety of whistleblowers, it is not surprising that their revelations of wrongdoing in the inner sanctum of a bureaucracy are so rare that special laws have been enacted to create the impression that they are protected from retaliation. In practice, such laws do little more than enable surviving whistleblowers to sue for a cash settlement after they are forced to retire. A prominent recent example involved Frederic Whitehurst's being drummed out of the FBI after he exposed that the FBI crime lab was fabricating lab results in order to help prosecutors convict people legally presumed to be innocent. Whitehurst sued the FBI for its treatment of him, including its violations of his protections under federal privacy laws. The FBI agreed to settle Whitehurst's lawsuit for \$1.16 million, contingent on his resignation. Thus, the FBI's way of dealing with the

problem of operating a sham crime lab was to get rid of the one man with the knowledge and willingness to reveal to the public its unethical and unscientific practices (Cannon 1997, Glazer and Glazer 1990).

The Worst Get on Top

The most amorally flexible people involved in a bureaucracy tend to rise to the top and become its leaders. Some of the reasons for this phenomenon were explored in F. A. Hayek's essay, "Why the Worst Get on Top" (1944, 148–67). Bureaucracies are perfectly suited to helping the unprincipled attain positions of influence and power because a lack of scruples gives them an advantage in advancing their careers. In this sense, bureaucracies are among the most perfect forms of kakistocracy known to man.

Government bureaucracies are agencies of political power, and the accomplishment of their missions typically depends on the unreflective wielding of the power made available to their administrators. Hence, a ruthless willingness to wield an agency's power is an occupational requirement for someone to rise to the upper echelons (Hayek 1944, 159–67). As Frank H. Knight has stated, "the probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an extremely tender-hearted person would get the job of whipping-master in a slave plantation" (quoted in Hayek 1944, 152).

The attraction of power-hungry people to positions of authority in a bureaucracy can have tragic consequences for everyone affected. To some degree, everyone in society is affected when the power-oriented people who influence and control the performance of bureaucracies express their darkest and most inhumane prejudices.⁷ For example, more than one in ten members of Congress as well as many federal judges are former U.S. attorneys. The power of compulsion and punishment available to U.S. attorneys and their prosecuting attorney brethren in the state courts attracts zealous people to seek these bureaucratic positions of minimal accountability. Positions in state legislatures and state courts are filled with former local, county, and state prosecutors, who infect all of the positions they fill, whether legislative or judicial, with their societally corrosive attitudes and prejudices.

Conclusion

Government bureaucracies lack the animating life force of a human conscience. They are the institutional equivalent of a psychopathic individual (Amado 1995), and they contribute to what sociologist Ashley Montagu has called this century's "dehumanization syndrome" (Montagu and Matson 1983).

7. For a two-thousand-year analysis of the political process that concludes that bureaucracy naturally attracts the participation and leadership of amoral people, see Scharfstein 1995.

The Final Solution was a triumph of institutional duty over morality and personal responsibility. As historian Christopher Browning noted in “The German Bureaucracy and the Holocaust” (1983), “The Nazis’ mass murder of the European Jews was not only the technological achievement of an industrial society, but also the organizational achievement of a bureaucratic society. . . . [It was] achieved by a bureaucratic mode of operation, in which depersonalized and dispassionate behavior unprejudiced by human emotions was a fundamental and positive value of the civil service” (148).

It is a mistake, however, to view the Final Solution as an aberrant bureaucratic program. Well-planned and well-coordinated atrocities have been carried out by bureaucracies in many countries, including the United States (Rummel 1994, Courtois and others 1999).

People correctly sense that they have little or no effective defense against government bureaucracies. The most terrifying and predictive aspect of novels such as *Brave New World*, *We*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Trial*, and *The Rise of the Meritocracy* may be their accurate portrayal of the general sense of helplessness people have against all-encompassing bureaucracies. With the continuing projection of the government’s bureaucratic tentacles into ever more aspects of public and private life, it is almost redundant to observe that we now live in the “iron cage” of bureaucratic dictatorship against which sociologist Max Weber warned nearly a hundred years ago (Mitzman 1970, Beetham 1996).

Once in place, a bureaucracy projects onto society an influence peculiar to itself. As a consequence, dehumanized attitudes of conformity that are ingrained in bureaucracies are being transmitted to and absorbed by an increasing proportion of the general population. The most distinguishing characteristic of the affected people is their susceptibility to mimicking the worldview and functioning of the bureaucrats (Leinberger and Tucker 1991, 16–18). Like Pavlov’s trained dogs, the bureaucratically conditioned people obey politically authorized regulations, laws, and orders in near robotic fashion because they have accepted their obligation to do so. They are among the large majority identified in Milgram’s experiments as valuing conformity and obedience to authority more than the possible discomfort of a pang of conscience.

The bureaucratization of modern life is directly linked to the vast politicization of society that has occurred in the past century (Templeton 1979, Higgs 1987), displacing the moderating influences of private, voluntary personal and social relationships. The imposition of political solutions to perceived social and personal problems has become more and more accepted. Because political policies are mere words on paper unless a large group of compliant people stands willing to obey and to enforce them, bureaucratic activities and mentalities have proliferated in step with the ongoing politicization. In the wake of these developments, bureaucratic inhumanity has necessarily grown, and current developments give scant reason to expect a cessation of that growth anytime soon.

References

- Amado, Gilles. 1995. Why Psychoanalytical Knowledge Helps Us Understand Organizations. *Human Relations* 48 (April): 351.
- Arendt, Hannah. [1963] 1994. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Reprint. New York: Penguin.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1989. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Becker, Ernest. 1975. *Escape from Evil*. New York: Free Press.
- Beetham, David. 1996. *Bureaucracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. 1960. *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.
- . 1963. Eichmann; the System; the Victims. *New Republic* (June 15): 23–33.
- Blumberg, Abraham S. 1973. Lawyers with Convictions. In *The Scales of Justice*, edited by Abraham S. Blumberg, 67–83. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- Bosmajian, Haig. 1974. *The Language of Oppression*. Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs.
- Boyer, Peter. 1999. Burned. *New Yorker* (November 1): 62.
- Browning, Christopher R. 1983. The German Bureaucracy and the Holocaust. In *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, edited by Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes, 145–49. Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center.
- . 1993. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Cannon, Angie. 1997. Most Wanted: A Good FBI Lab. *Portland Oregonian*, February 14, A22.
- Courtois, Stephanie, and others. 1999. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ellul, Jacques. 1964. *The Technological Society*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1965. *The Political Illusion*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1990. *The Technological Bluff*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- Feingold, Henry L. 1983. How Unique Is the Holocaust? In *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, edited by Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes, 397–401. Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center.
- Fischer, Klaus P. 1997. *Nazi Germany: A New History*. New York: Continuum.
- Gavin, Robert. 1999. WEA seeks \$1 million for “Frivolous Lawsuit.” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 21, B4.
- Glazer, Myron P., and Penina M. Glazer. 1990. *Whistleblowers: Exposing Corruption in Government and Industry*. New York: Basic.
- Harris, Whitney R. 1954. *Tyranny on Trial: The Evidence At Nuremberg*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press.
- Hayek, Friedrich A. 1944. *The Road to Serfdom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Higgs, Robert. 1987. *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hoffer, Eric. 1951. *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Johnston, David Cay. 1999. IRS Whistleblower Nearly Fired. *South County Journal*, Kent, Wash., April 17, A7.
- Imbler v. Pachtman*. 1976. 424 U.S. 409.
- Kafka, Franz. [1925] 1988. *The Trial*. Reprint. New York: Schocken.
- Kaminer, Wendy. 1995. *It's All the Rage: Crime and Culture*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Keen, Sam. 1991. *Faces of the Enemy*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Kelman, Herbert C. 1973. Violence without Moral Restraints: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers. *Journal of Social Issues* 29 (4): 25–61.
- Kelman, Herbert C., and L. H. Lawrence. 1972. Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey. *Journal of Social Issues* 28 (1): 177–212.
- Koestler, Arthur, 1941. *Darkness at Noon*. New York: Macmillan.
- . 1968. *The Ghost in the Machine*. New York: Macmillan.
- Kren, George M., and Leon Rappoport. 1994. *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior*. New York: Holmes and Meier.
- Leinberger, Paul, and Bruce Tucker. 1991. *The New Individualists: The Generation after the Organization Man*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Maas, Peter. 1973. *Serpico: The Cop Who Defied the System*. New York: Viking.
- Mayer, Milton. 1966. *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933–45*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McConnell, James V. 1970. Criminals Can Be Brainwashed—Now. *Psychology Today* (April): 14.
- McWilliams, Carey. 1950. *Witch Hunt: The Revival of Heresy*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Milgram, Stanley. 1975. *Obedience to Authority*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Mitzman, Arthur. 1970. *The Iron Cage: An Historical Interpretation of Max Weber*. New York: Alfred Knopf.
- Montagu, Ashley, and Floyd Matson. 1983. *The Dehumanization of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- P-I News Service. 1999. Whistle-blower Tax Agent Comes Close to Being Fired. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 17, B3.
- Rummel, Rudolph. 1994. *Death by Government*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. 1995. *Amoral Politics: The Persistent Truth of Machiavellism*. Albany: University of New York Press.

- Shapley, Thomas. 1999a. Storm Clouds Gather above Waco, Texas. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 29, E2.
- . 1999b. FBI's "Waco Boys" Had Role at Ruby Ridge: Same Discredited Officials Ran Both Cases. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 19, G2.
- Skinner, B. F. 1971. *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Knopf.
- Spence, Gerry. 1995. *From Freedom to Slavery: The Rebirth of Tyranny in America*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Stoltzfus, Nathan. 1996. *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Templeton, Kenneth S., Jr., ed. 1979. *The Politicization of Society*. Indianapolis: Liberty.
- Twight, Charlotte. 1999. Watching You: Systematic Federal Surveillance of Ordinary Americans. *The Independent Review* 4 (2): 165–200.
- U.S. Council of Economic Advisers. 2000. *Annual Report*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Vogel, Jennifer. 1999. Nazi Guards: The Department of Corrections Knows How to Deal with Rednecks, Racists, and Neo-Nazis: It Hires Them. *Seattle Weekly*, March 11, 22–28.
- Zimbardo, Philip, Craig Haney, and Curtis Banks. 1973. Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison. *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* 1: 69–97.