

6 March 1952

PERSONNEL DIRECTOR MEMORANDUM NO. 15-52

SUBJECT: SIX STEPS TO AN IMPROVED CIVIL SERVICE

The following brief of an address by Commissioner James M. Mitchell of the United States Civil Service Commission is published as a matter of interest to members of the Personnel Office.

In an address delivered before the Society for Personnel Administration on 26 February 1952, Mr. Mitchell turned the spotlight on 165,000 Federal jobs which are still outside the Civil Service system and called for action to "sweep the clinging cobwebs of the spoils system out of our public life." He stated that all of these jobs should be brought fully under the competitive civil service except where it can be shown clearly that a job is of a policy-determining character or is logically a part of some other personnel system which is managed on a strictly merit basis.

Mr. Mitchell stated that "Many improvements have been made in recent years and many more are in the mill. But we cannot be content with less than the best and we cannot afford to procrastinate. We must have, in being, a Federal personnel system that will give us a public service of unquestioned efficiency and integrity, managed entirely on a merit basis." He went on to discuss the following steps to an improved civil service:

"First, we must give direction and force to the present move in Congress bringing more Federal jobs under the civil service system.

"Second, we must measure not only the ability but also the character and integrity of those who aspire to careers in public life.

"Third, in filling jobs by promotion we must have effective means of searching out the best man, whether he is in our bureau or our agency or even, in the case of top jobs, in some totally different agency of government.

"Fourth, we must train Federal workers, as industry does, not only on the job but in plants, laboratories and universities as needs require.

"Fifth, we must provide incentives for the weeding out of unneeded or unsatisfactory employees, at the same time retaining safeguards to protect the good employee from arbitrary dismissal.

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"And Sixth, but by no means least in importance, we must enlist the understanding and support of our fair-minded American public in the cause of better management of our government--the biggest business on earth."

"We cannot permit the civil service system to be used as a cloak to cover selections which basically have a political intent and motivation. If we do so, we are risking a tide of public sentiment which may sweep away the good with the bad. There must be no political clearance required in any purely administrative appointment.....And while we are sweeping the cobwebs of political patronage out one door of our civil service structure, we must beware of the stealthy entrance of 'personal patronage' through another door." Mr. Mitchell went on to say that the appointment authorities extended to the Federal agencies as a result of the Korean emergency brought about far too many appointments outside civil service lists of eligibles. He pointed out that the various agencies could require, through Civil Service Boards of Examiners, that their appointees do meet open, competitive standards and commented that, "Agencies must do more competitive testing of job applicants--applying standards set by the Commission--if they are to guard themselves against charges of 'personal patronage.'" It is not enough that appointees meet the minimum civil service requirements. There must be open competition to insure that jobs are filled with the best available applicants."

"Furthermore, our concept of competitive selection must be broadened to place greater emphasis on personal qualities. For positions that require public contact, we must choose those persons who have demonstrated their ability to get along well with others."

Mr. Mitchell also discussed the need for competitive promotion. He stated that this principle had an obviously direct effect on efficiency and added that it had an indirect effect in boosting employee morale.

"When we talk about layoffs and removals, we must come to grips with the supervisor's natural human reluctance to take action that will throw a subordinate out of work. To begin with, a good supervisor knows the personal problems of his employees. He hesitates to aggravate those problems by cutting off an employee's pay check. Therefore, incentives must be found to offset the supervisor's reluctance to declare personnel surplus when the workload dwindles."

"Such incentives would be full effective only if a well-administered placement service--bureau-wide, agency-wide and even government-wide--were in operation."

In his final remarks, Mr. Mitchell stated that in addition to the "six steps" there were many other suggestions for improvement in matters such as flexibility of pay policy and in overseas personnel administration. In conclusion, he stated that, "All of us in America, and especially those of us who carry part of the responsibility for Federal personnel management, have a great obligation to do our utmost to see that the public service is the best that we in America can possibly create."

/s/

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