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Evolution of a Wartime Procedure Manual

I

On March 19, 1942, the War Relocation Authority was one day old. The Director, who had himself been appointed the day before and been given responsibility for carrying out the relocation program, made the first eight appointments to his staff. This commenced the building of an organization to help him do the job.

The new WRA was charged with helping people who were forced by military considerations to move from their homes in strategic military areas. So far as WRA was concerned this meant almost exclusively persons of Japanese ancestry who were evacuated as a group from a strip along the Pacific Coast. The assistance to be given came in two stages, maintenance in temporary camps or centers following the mass evacuation, and then help on an individual basis in moving on from the centers to normal homes outside the prohibited zone.

The problem had plenty of complications. Over 100,000 persons were evacuated. Ten centers were hastily set up in out-of-the-way places. The community institutions and services which grow gradually in normal cities had to be thrown together as hastily as the wooden barracks, and then the whole kept running. Services which the Government had to furnish were not confined to police, fire protection, utilities operation and schools, for which municipal experience has developed patterns. Farming, merchandising, recreation, newspapers, hospitals and drug stores--even the serving of family meals--were all direct Government responsibility in the beginning. Since the centers were not jails or even internment camps, it was desirable to enlist the help of the residents in furnishing these services, arrange for them to take over responsibility for operating some and to cooperate with respect to others.

The fact that the evacuees did respond, and furnished all or most of the staff for the various activities at wages of \$16 to \$19 per month, saved the situation. The WRA appropriation could not have furnished more than a small fraction of the staff at Civil Service rates, even if outside manpower could have been recruited. Furthermore, evacuee participation in administration meant that it was easier to shape the services to the population's needs. However, a center of 10,000 strangers thrown together was not automatically a community; anthropologists discovered that the centers went through several stages of jelling before anything like a stable community evolved.

Finally, the task of aiding each family plan its relocation from the center was equally difficult. Such possibilities as housing shortage, employment limitations, community rejection or discrimination, newspaper and other "anti-Jap" campaigns and even physical violence were in the mind of each prospective resettler.

WRA's program difficulties, of which the above were only a few, are not the theme of this article. They are cited to show that the Director of the agency had a very difficult administrative job; that for many of the problems there was no pat answer and no corps of experts to recruit from. The techniques of administration were thus of first importance.

Each center functioned under a Center Director, who was responsible for all aspects of the work. Himself an administrator, the Center Director appointed specialists in the fields of medicine, agriculture, mess operations, etc., to supervise these specialized services. This structure was duplicated at Washington, where the National Director had a staff of specialists in the same fields. For a short time while centers were being organized there was a third, intermediate, layer in the form of regions. After the centers were functioning the regions were discontinued and the centers supervised directly from the Washington office. After resettlement got under way a network of small offices was set up in the principal cities where the evacuees found homes, to assist them in becoming established.

For a number of reasons it was desirable to have the head office of WRA in Washington, and so it was established there. At the same time Washington was far from the centers, all of which were west of the Mississippi. The national office, at first only 50 souls and never over 300, felt like a very small head for such a large and remote body.

Nevertheless, Washington had to give guidance and supervision to the field. It was not feasible to have 10 WRA's, one set up in each center according to the best guess of the Center Director. The National Director's staff was anxious to help with center supervision, and they conceived of their role as being threefold: (1) advising the Director on the establishment of policy and procedure in their respective technical fields; (2) advising the field on the application of this policy and procedure; and (3) reporting to the Director on field conformance and progress.

During the first weeks the Washington staff spent most of their time in the San Francisco regional office or at the new centers helping to get things started. Such policy as had by then been evolved was of the most general nature. The first tasks were to get people fed, take care of the sick, and start clearing land for eventual cropping -- and even before that, to recruit personnel to man the activities. But before long the day came when the center work was at least partially staffed; the program had started rolling and was gathering momentum. Center personnel moved into direct the tasks of one day and to plan what they would do on the next. The need for clearly established overall policy had been apparent before. Now the lack was for standard operating procedure, so that techniques and results would be uniform at all centers, and so that those methods considered best might be the ones in general use.

In carrying out their responsibilities as staff advisers to the Director, the Washington activity heads continued to spend considerable time in the field. This was of course necessary if they were to fulfill their third function. It was also necessary if they were to give maximum aid to the Director in establishing policy and procedure. They needed first hand field experience before they could recognize and evaluate operating problems peculiar to WRA; they needed to test out their ideas and solutions in direct discussion with field people, before they were ready to sit down with the Director. For function number two, that is, advising the field on the application of procedure, these personal visits were essential but not by themselves adequate.

It is true that often Washington people were invaluable in helping installation of a new process. But they could not be on hand for much follow-up. In order to be most helpful, a traveler from Washington had to spend at least two weeks on a center. Add to this the time required to hold down the desk at headquarters--keeping abreast of overall policy, working out activity policy with the Director and other staff, helping straighten out special problems referred in from the field. When the Washington Chief of Agriculture left a center after a two weeks' visit, it was likely a year before he returned. If he tried to solve the dilemma by shortening his visits, he risked making them ineffective, and of earning the field nickname of "paratrooper." More than once the field charged that a Washington employee stayed just long enough to get everything up in the air, and when the time came to settle the problem, pulled out.

A more serious difficulty lay in the fact that Washington staff members necessarily had no authority of their own. Center Directors gave all the orders at the centers, including directions to the technical activity heads, and were answerable only to the National Director. So long as the Washington visitor confined his help to advice to his center counterpart, and the center man freely accepted it, and the Center Director approved, all went well. But very early the Center Directors made it clear they could not tolerate Washington experts giving orders to their staffs. If the Director himself wished to give instructions, well and good, but let them come down the regular channel from Director to Center Director and thence to the center activity heads.

This then was the way the problem boiled down. The Washington staff were hired to help the Director give supervision to specialized activities in the field. Because of their technical training they were eminently qualified to give that supervision. Yet they were unable to give it in person satisfactorily. The obvious solution lay in the issuance of written instructions, prepared by Washington staff advisers, approved and promulgated by the National Director, and carried out in the field with technical help from the Washington staff.

This was the solution arrived at. More than any other one person, it was Leland Barrows, Assistant Director for Administrative Management, who blueprinted and sold the idea to the agency. Before any action was taken he had talked over the problem with the picked staff members or had office endorsement of his suggestions. The written instructions stayed at the center 12 months in the year, were always reasonably up-to-date, and carried conclusive weight of authority. The Washington visitor had only to point to the text and say, "Here is what the Director prescribes. I can tell you what I think it means (I wrote it), and how I think you can carry it out, but I am not in a position to order. You may if you choose disregard the Director's instructions, but if so I will be obliged to report your non-compliance to him." There remained only to add two points. The written procedure had had adequate study and clearance by the Washington staff as a group, and by the Director. The field had the right to appeal any procedure as unworkable or undesirable, or to suggest amendment, either through official channels via the Center Director, or informally through the Washington staff member.

W. S. Harris of Farm Credit Administration classifies written instructions into three categories: ordinary letter, serial or circular letter, and manual. WRA went through all

three stages, arriving at the second stage very early, nine weeks after the agency was founded. The need for systematic written instructions was so generally recognized that the series of numbered WRA Administrative Instructions was taken as a matter of course by the staff, most of whom had already had considerable Government experience. In fact, during the vacuum of nine weeks without Washington issuances, the field started spontaneously with its own. The San Francisco regional series of Circular Letters appeared five days before the Washington Administrative Instructions. Other regions and several of the centers also instituted their own series.

After a year's experience with serial Instructions, WRA converted them into an Administrative Manual. The reasons were no doubt the same as those valid for many another agency: better organization of material and more efficient revision. The manual had been discussed a year earlier, and the second stage might have been skipped entirely. However, with no body of written procedure and very little operational experience it would have been difficult to set up a Manual outline. Also, the staff were familiar with the letter type of document and were prepared to commence writing directly in the Administrative Instruction form.

II

On the whole, WRA's written procedures may be pronounced successful. With their aid the Director and 4 or 5 dozen specialists supervised operations in 10 centers and 60 cities, employing at the peak 2,000 Civil Service and 30,000 evacuee workers. It might be worthwhile here to mention briefly a few of the major problems that arose while the procedures were being developed.

1. The Washington staff had to learn how to use them. While the staff were convinced in the abstract of the need for complete, unified and authoritative statements to cover every major problem, there was still an unconscious tendency to regard the big binder of instructions as a thing apart from day-to-day administrative life. This tendency had two manifestations, by-passing official procedure in getting out instructions and again by-passing it in contacts with the field. Often when a procedural problem came in to Washington, the first thought was to answer by letter, with carbon copies to other centers, or to draw up a wire, or to get on the telephone. This was perfectly justifiable as the initial step when and if the field needed a quick answer, but by itself it was not enough.

Quick action is administrative virtue, but it is better suited for line operations than for staff operations. From the above we might deduce that line work comes by instinct but that good staff work is an acquired characteristic.

The Washington staff member should not feel that his job was done until the letter or wire had been followed up by an official procedure release. Furthermore, the original letter or wire needed careful thought and clearance just as much as if it were the procedure release. More than once these latter considerations led the staff member to realize that it was not so much the necessity for speed that led him to think of a rush letter, as his own desire to get the matter off his desk and off his conscience. Actually there was no time saved in giving a center one tenth carbon, on flimsy paper, two or three days in advance of 45 mimeographed copies of an Administrative Instruction for the center staff's official binders. It was not good administration to dash off a letter and rush it up to the Director without proper clearance; even less so, to send out a letter establishing procedure over the signature of a Washington activity head. The solution to this problem lay partly in the creation of an agency Procedures unit to handle the chores of follow-up and clearance.

The second problem has already been touched upon, namely use of written procedure by the Washington staff as an instrument of field supervision. Even after the procedures were written and promulgated, it required some practise before Washington men referred to the Director's instructions in their center visits, and supplemented these visits with development and revision of the instructions. For example, when the field complained, it was always a temptation to wave away the binder and authorize a local variation on the spot, rather than to carry back or wire back a recommended revision of the Instruction.

Both of the above problems were solved, and were solved early in the life of the agency. One important reason was the conscious and intensive campaign of salesmanship and indoctrination at the time the Administrative Instructions were established.

2. Even more vital was the fact that the field had to learn how to use procedures. Most of the field men started with, "I did thus and so when I was with Farm Security or the Indian Office." In certain fields like Finance it was relatively easy to change over and set up on the basis of the

written instruction that arrived from Washington. In other fields it was harder. After Washington emphasized that the field would be held accountable for conformance to the official method, there was more study of the documents, which by this time were arriving almost daily. Some of the highlights in connection with this problem were:

In one center bundles of procedure were delivered unopened to the warehouse and stacked there like cordwood. In one field office the boss's secretary thought the documents looked pretty important. She stored them carefully in a locked file without entrusting them to the staff.

In many places the issuances were stored in bottom desk drawers, against the day that the employee would have time to read them. Over and over again, pointing to long overtime hours, the field complained that they were too busy with their jobs to read the stuff from Washington. Eventually they realized that the instructions told them how to do their own jobs.

Especially after the Manual came out, the field felt helpless as regards binder maintenance. The written directions were inadequate, and there was no one at the field establishments to tell them how. A common phenomenon was the filing of the Manual, and without unstapling the pages. This corresponded with the way they had filed Administrative Instructions.

3. The field needed to learn, not only how to use procedures, but also how to make them usable. It was perfectly true that many of the Washington releases had bugs in them. But that was not justification for disregarding them entirely. Operating people were not primarily responsible for writing the initial documents; that was the job of Washington. They were responsible for testing, criticizing, suggesting, and improving the procedure as laid down. This concept was a long time soaking in, both in Washington and in the field. Washington at first felt that the ideal was pre-clearance of every release with all field establishments. This was not attempted because of the need for hurrying. But when one or two draft documents were sent out, field response was late and scattered. Some of the reaction was, "It looks all right, but we'll try whatever you decide on. It's your job to tell us what to do." Or the obverse, "this procedure is unworkable" (i.e., different from what we are now doing), without attempting to say why. Washington was much more successful in getting comments on specific details after the procedures were in operation. It was some time, however, before these comments could be channelled as amendments to Instructions. The field's tendency, like

Washington's, was to disregard the binder and ask Directorial dispensation for one local variation. In a few instances these variations were based on an organizational peculiarity of one establishment, but often they were valid for all other establishments as well.

4. The role of Field Instructions also developed by trial and error. The first center instructions were written in the absence of any guides from Washington; outlined an entire process for the benefit of brand new clerks. Later, centers wrote instructions as "supplements" to the Washington issuances. Some of these not only supplemented; they superseded, and re-oriented the whole activity. When copies eventually got to Washington and resulted in the center's being set straight, one reaction was to discontinue all written instructions except for local announcements. This was no solution if an unauthorized procedure was retained, without publicity.

Another experiment that did not work was the requirement of pre-clearance for all field procedures and forms in Washington. After one or two attempts, the field's frustration was so evident that the scheme was dropped in favor of post-audit. This worked much better.

Eventually WRA began to sense that in every procedure there is a horizontal line. Above the line belongs to Washington and should be spelled out clearly and completely. Below the line belongs to the field, and the field must work out its own adaptation best suited to achieve the result that headquarters wants. As one staff member put it, "It is entirely proper to instruct a man to report to a building across the river not later than 8 a.m. But it is unreasonable to add that he is to arise at 6 a.m., dress and eat breakfast, proceed by a certain path, utilize a certain rowboat, etc." In some fields such as accounting, contract purchasing, or personnel actions the horizontal line was pretty low, and not much could be left to field discretion. In other fields such as Community Government the line was high, just below the policy level. Wherever this concept of the "horizontal line" was current, field procedures had a good chance of being successful. There remained only the mechanical problems of writing, clearance, promulgation and post-audit.

5. Coordination and control of instructions at the Washington or issuing end was early sought by establishment of a Procedures Unit. It was some time, however, before the field counterparts evolved. The first attempt to set up field procedures officers failed because it authorized additional full-

time personnel at a time when neither work load nor budget limitations would justify them. The later solution was to ask the head of each field establishment to designate an existing member of his staff Procedures Officer, with the recommendation that it be the Administrative Officer or his representative. In general, successful field procedures officers solved the problems in 2, 3, and 4 above. They saw that the agenda of staff meetings included discussion of important new releases. They took the initiative when a procedure required cooperation of two or more units, or required local implementation. They helped to formulate suggestions and got them to Washington. They supervised writing, clearance and issuance of local procedures and forms. They kept master copies of Manuals and assisted others in maintaining their binders. This is not to say that all field procedures officers did all of the above, but the "successful" ones did. Possibly the greatest weakness in the WRA procedures system was the failure to appoint and train field procedures officers earlier.

6. Follow-up to test field conformance to the official instructions was made in several ways. It has already been mentioned that all Washington staff members visiting the field performed a kind of audit. Early in 1944 a Field Examination Section was established. The Field Examiners not only went over the accounts but also inquired into the administrative methods of nearly all activities. These men gave a potent impetus toward procedures study when they said, "all we have to go by is the black book, the same one you have or should have on your desk." After that the procedures binder was frequently referred to as "the Bible." Examiners provided another channel for suggested modification or amendment.

III

When Administrative Instructions were instituted in May, 1942, an Administrative Assistant in the Personnel Section was given responsibility for control, clearance, editing and where necessary writing. In July a position of Administrative Analyst for procedures control was established in Personnel. For some time it was a part-time job and the incumbent had certain personnel duties as well. A Procedures Unit was formed in June, 1943, charged with issuance of the agency Manual. The unit was bracketed with Classification in the Personnel Section, and the Procedures Officer was authorized to read all new job descriptions as a device for coordinating personnel organization with procedural organization. About this

time there was considerable discussion in the agency about correlation of the four functions of procedures, classification, budget control and administrative analysis. In December, 1943, consolidation of three functions was projected -- budget, procedures and administrative analysis. The unit finally set up combined only the first two; it was called "Budget and Procedures Unit" rather than "Budget and Planning Unit." The partnership was dissolved in 1944, and a Procedures and Analysis Section was formed. As a matter of fact, assignments in the field of administrative analysis had been given to the Procedures Officer, or the Classification Officer, or to anyone else in the Administrative Management Division who was free at the moment. Since WRA had a strong Administrative Management Division, the four functions were coordinated by the Division Chief, hence the issue of formal combination in particular units was never very important. The essential thing was that the inter-relationship was recognized, and the Division staff who were performing the functions worked in harmony.

The product of two years filled five binders -- a Manual of policy and basic procedure, three binders of activity Handbooks, plus a Manual for administration of a Refugee Shelter (a separate responsibility of WRA). There was also a sixth binder of Administrative Notices, which included announcements and temporary procedures. During most of the life of the agency the Procedures staff consisted of an analyst, a control clerk and two typists. Later a second analyst was added, partly to service the field procedures set up. Most of the work was thus done by persons not in the Procedures unit. However, it was staff people rather than operating people who did the job; otherwise, very little would ever have appeared. After the staff were persuaded that one of the ways they could efficiently function was through formulation of written procedures, there was very little of the reaction, "I'm too busy." Several of the Washington Divisions focussed procedures work through one Divisional employee, who served as contact with the Procedures unit. During the year that one of the biggest jobs was undertaken, the Relocation Handbook, the Relocation Division established its own Procedures Section. This device helped to get out a large and pioneering document in record time. In general, it may be said that the entire Washington staff threw themselves whole-heartedly into the project and used WRA procedures as one of their principal tools of administration.