

what their life will look like. And knowing what life would look like, after all, was always the point.

And when their lives change, this region, with a \$27 billion federal payroll in 2003, will change with them. The afternoon rush hour may no longer begin at 3:30. The malls may not clog on Presidents' Day. The institutions of community -- the PTA, the soccer teams, the Scout programs, the civic groups -- may go begging for volunteers because it's harder to find someone who can make it to a 4:30 practice or a 7 p.m. planning session.

If the world is divided into two types of people, those restless for risk and those repulsed by it, government work attracts the latter. If you are not one of them, they are the people waiting patiently in the slug lines to go home as the late-afternoon sun slants across the concrete canyons of federal Washington. They are the ones riding Metro happily immersed in paperback novels rather than BlackBerrys, not bothering to tuck away their ID cards on chains. If they are particularly proud of their jobs, the ladies upgrade to more decorative lanyards, studded with pretty glass beads.

They speak in a jargon all their own. They nod wisely when the ads on WTOP tell them "to save 30 to 80 percent on your FEGLD option B" or trust VeriSign for "HPSD 12 solutions and FISMA compliance." They are content with code. It orders their world. Their day ends at a regular time, and they leave their work behind.

"In the beginning, it was good," says Joyce Raeford, who got into government work nearly 20 years ago, working in the day-care center on the Army base where her husband was stationed. It paid better than her first job at Fort Dix, in a Head Start pilot program in the '60s, where she started out at 90 cents an hour, and, "girl, when we got that raise to \$1.10 we were jumping up and down. I will never forget it," she says. "We had a party."

Now a widow in her late fifties, Raeford is making about \$19 an hour as a lead education aide at one of the child development centers at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. She works 8 to 5, Monday through Friday. Her ID card hangs from a WWJD lanyard, and she is a matriarch: four children, 13 grands, and, she says, with a big smile, "three greats." The work is fine, and she is still proud of teaching "my babies."

But?

"Change is scary," says Raeford. "Coming to work one day, and not having a job for sure, that you could be gone with a wave of the hand?" She shakes her head. You could get a boss who just didn't like the way you presented yourself. "Mmm mmm mmm."

It seems unthinkable to many that the government, a model, progressive, benevolent employer, could come to resemble the private sector, with its layoffs and loss of loyalty to long-term employees.

In the spring of 1973, Colleen Kelly was getting ready to graduate from Drexel University with an accounting degree. She was figuring she'd join one of the big public accounting firms or go into private industry. "And the IRS came to campus," she recalls. "I really would not have thought to look at the federal government. But they talked about their training program on tax law and the career opportunities, and the salary grade in the GS system. They showed us the promotion opportunities, and the health insurance and the retirement."

She became a revenue agent, auditing corporate tax returns. She went to graduate school at night. She specialized in making sure that companies with foreign subsidiaries had not improperly shifted their income offshore, where it would be taxed at a lower rate. Your tax dollars at work to get more tax dollars! It might seem like tedious, squint-eyed work, but she says, "I really liked what I was doing. There were times in the first years when I would look outside to see what was available." She would hear the siren call of higher salaries and bonuses, but caution always prevailed. "When I weighed that against the system I knew and understood, and that if I did what I was supposed to do, if I excelled, well, I valued" more the deal with the government.

Kelly did eventually go outside, but not to one of the big accounting firms. She is now president of the National Treasury Employees Union, which represents more than 150,000 employees in 30 governmental agencies, and is one of the leaders of an effort to ask the courts to stop implementation of the new personnel rules.

She hears her members' worries every day. "They signed up for the long haul," says Kelly. "So many of them have 10 or 15 years [to go until retirement], and there is no question it was their intent to have a career and retire from the federal government, from a work environment that had rules that provided balance and fairness. And now there are a lot of questions about the future."

Payback Time

The 1.8 million federal workers owe their jobs to Charles Guiteau.

An attorney and failed journalist, he became a fanatical supporter of James Garfield for president. Usually, he stood outside Republican headquarters on Fifth Avenue in New York, speechifying and haranguing anyone who passed by.

When Garfield was elected in 1880, Guiteau moved to Washington, assuming his fierce support would earn him an appointment in government. He bombarded Secretary of State James G. Blaine with letters demanding a job, a standard practice.

At that time, newspaper advertising swelled after elections. "WANTED -- A GOVERNMENT CLERKSHIP at a salary of not less than \$1,000 per annum. Will give \$100 to anyone securing me such a position," read a typical ad. According to one government archive, Garfield found "hungry office-seekers lying in wait for him like vultures for a wounded bison."

Guiteau was so disappointed to be rebuffed that he killed the president.

The shock waves propelled the Pendleton Act through Congress. Signed into law in 1883, it removed jobs from the patronage ranks and reestablished the Civil Service

POLITICS TRIVIA

Monday's Question:

Who was president during the first cherry blossom ceremony?

Grover Cleveland

Theodore Roosevelt

William H. Taft

Harry Truman

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Commission to administer a system based on merit instead of connections. The civil service examination weeded out the hacks who merely wanted indoor work with no heavy lifting. It built the miracle of a meritocracy out of a corrupt world of political favors.

It built Washington, helping to transform a swampy, mosquito-infested river town into a colossus of power. People streamed here for government work, building an educated, skilled middle class that plowed under farms in Maryland and Virginia and replaced them with hundreds of thousands of acres of brick Colonials, garages attached.

Over the decades, a government job became a destination, rather than a fallback position. Attracted to a philosophy of government as protector that began with the New Deal and built through President John F. Kennedy's call to Americans to ask "what you can do for your country," college graduates with political science degrees poured into public service. During the 1970s and early '80s, says Paul Light, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and a civil service expert, "if you would ask graduates about their intent, most would say government." By the late '80s, only a third would answer that way.

And young people today, he says, have little to no interest in the federal government as an employer. "The reputation couldn't be worse," he says. "Young people think it's difficult to get a job, the hiring process is slow and confusing, a substantial minority figure it's unfair."

The government's capacity to create tidy, orderly lives has no appeal for twenty-somethings. With some surveys showing they will hold an average of nine different jobs by the time they're 32, they have no expectation of loyalty to or from an employer.

Although there are 15 GS levels (with 10 steps within each one), there are really only two categories of workers: professionals and support staff. What they share is a preference for an orderly life. The federal system, with its rigid personnel rules, can breed a culture where workers prefer being told what to do, rather than taking individual initiative. "There is a kernel of truth in the reputation," says Light. "A lot of workers did take their job for the security and benefits. It is also a lot better workforce than the politicians like to admit."

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, President Bush argued that the old work rules and regulations hampered government's ability to respond quickly to crises. He easily won congressional approval to change the system. In January of 2003, the bipartisan National Commission on the Public Service, chaired by Paul Volcker, called for the abolishment of the general schedule. The new rules will replace the half-century-old GS schedule with a pay-for-performance system, as recommended in 2003 by a bipartisan commission on public service, and will also limit the unions' ability to intervene on behalf of their members.

"We think those flexibilities make it possible for agencies to better focus on results and to hold the people and managers accountable," Clay Johnson, deputy director for management at the Office for Management and Budget, said at a briefing to unveil the new rules.

Some sort of change is certainly necessary, says Pat McGinniss, the executive director of the nonpartisan Council for Excellence in Government.

"Government has not been as innovative as the private sector," she says. "How can we get to a more flexible, more nimble, more results-oriented government?"

Easy Targets

Rep. Steny Hoyer, the No. 2 Democrat in the House, acknowledges that the current system needs to be "less cumbersome" when poorly performing workers need to be removed.

But both Kelly, the union president, and Hoyer raise the specter of political favoritism creeping into the system. "One of the reasons we have a civil service system was to get away from patronage," says Hoyer. Before, "if a person was seen as politically incorrect they would suffer in terms of salary or responsibility. There could be a stability and nonpartisanship to the process." The changes, he says, are going to undermine that.

What particularly sticks in the Maryland congressman's craw is the hostility he hears toward the 55,000 people who stream each day into the U.S. Census Bureau in Suitland, the National Archives in College Park, the Goddard Space Center in Beltsville, the Food and Drug Administration laboratories in White Oak.

"For years in Washington there has been a group [in power] that essentially believes the public service is not as important as the private service, the smaller the government the better it is," he says. "It is easy to whip up disrespect and antipathy toward a big bureaucracy that is sucking your taxes and not giving anything in return."

And yet, he points out, "these are the people we are talking about: They're going to work every day to find a cure for cancer or heart disease or Alzheimer's. Or the guy on the border to protect us against terrorists. Or the person down at the space center who is working to put a satellite up to better analyze the weather to give you greater warning of a hurricane coming. Or at the FDA trying to make sure that the drugs and the food are safe."

Or keeping the allergy clinic on Fort Belvoir running smoothly.

That is what Renee Garris does. She is 45. GS-5, step 5. Makes about \$28,000 a year.

She likes to wear suits to work, and eyeglasses that are hip but mean business. She grew up in the District, had a baby at 16, got married, finished school, had another baby. Her husband, Jerome, is out of the Marines after 22 years and works for Sodexo as a manager. Her girls are 23 and 29 now. Over the years, she has gone back to school so she can earn more money and also, she says, "because I had girls watching me." When her husband was stationed at Camp Pendleton in California, she worked as a cashier at the post exchange and took college classes in medical administration. Without additional training, she says, "you can only go so far."

Once, for about 30 days, she ventured into the private sector. That was enough. What she enjoys about working for the Department of Defense and her current bosses, she says, is "they don't mind you doing new things, helping with different training to help you meet your goals."

And her goal is to be able to get out, if the day comes when her workplace changes on her. Her daughters have no interest in working for their mother's employer. The elder is a teacher. The younger works in day care. Both her sons-in-law are in the military and have been stationed in Iraq. "We say a lot of prayers," says Garris.

The deal she has made has her life looking like this: Up every morning at her Spotsylvania home at 3:45 to catch the van pool at 5, which gets her into work by 6 or 6:15 a.m. The clinic doesn't open until 7:45, but that's when the van pool comes, so she's early every day. But there's always something to do. Her husband goes in the opposite direction, to his job in Richmond.

She leaves at 3:45 p.m. With traffic, Garris might not get home until 5:45. After years of living in apartments and base housing, she and Jerome own their own brick-and-stone split-level in a quiet, pretty neighborhood. Most nights, her husband makes dinner. Most nights, between 7 and 9:30, they play dominoes, often with another couple, "young neighbors we mentor," says Garris.

Her days are long, but they have a certainty to them. She knows where she'll stand this time next year, and maybe the year after that. The system has its patterns, and she's come to understand its rules.

You sign on with Uncle Sam, and it's mostly a good deal.

Until it isn't anymore.

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