



View from the Inside

Harvard economist Robert Reich left the halls of academia in 1993 to begin a term as secretary of labor in the first Clinton administration. Reich's diary of his two-year stint in Washington nicely illustrates the difficulties faced by a newcomer to Washington who is forced to find his way—both literally and figuratively—through the labyrinths of the government bureaucracy.

11.4 Locked in the Cabinet (1997)

Robert B. Reich

March 2 [1993] Washington

This afternoon, I mount a small revolution at the Labor Department. The result is chaos.

Background: My cavernous office is becoming one of those hermetically sealed, germ-free bubbles they place around children born with immune deficiencies. Whatever gets through to me is carefully sanitized. Telephone calls are pre-screened, letters are filtered, memos are reviewed. Those that don't get through

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are diverted elsewhere. Only Tom, Kitty, and my secretary walk into the office whenever they want. All others seeking access must first be scheduled, and have a sufficient reason to take my precious germ-free time.

I'm scheduled to the teeth. Here, for example, is today's timetable:

- 6:45 A.M.—Leave apartment
- 7:10 A.M.—Arrive office
- 7:15 A.M.—Breakfast with MB from the *Post*
- 8:00 A.M.—Conference call with Rubin
- 8:30 A.M.—Daily meeting with senior staff
- 9:15 A.M.—Depart for Washington Hilton
- 9:40 A.M.—Speech to National Association of Private Industry Councils
- 10:15 A.M.—Meet with Joe Dear (OSHA enforcement)
- 11:15 A.M.—Meet with Darla Letourneau (DOL budget)
- 12:00 —Lunch with JG from National League of Cities
- 1:00 P.M.—CNN interview (taped)
- 1:30 P.M.—Congressional leadership panel
- 2:15 P.M.—Congressman Ford
- 3:00 P.M.—NEC budget meeting at White House
- 4:00 P.M.—Welfare meeting at White House
- 5:00 P.M.—National Public Radio interview (taped)
- 5:45 P.M.—Conference call with mayors
- 6:15 P.M.—Telephone time
- 7:00 P.M.—Meet with Maria Echeveste (Wage and Hour)
- 8:00 P.M.—Kitty and Tom daily briefing
- 8:30 P.M.—National Alliance of Business reception
- 9:00 P.M.—Return to apartment

I remain in the bubble even when I'm outside the building—ushered from place to place by someone who stays in contact with the front office by cellular phone. I stay in the bubble after business hours. If I dine out, I'm driven to the destination and escorted to the front door. After dinner, I'm escorted back to the car, driven to my apartment, and escorted from the car, into the apartment building, into the elevator, and to my apartment door.

No one gives me a bath, tastes my food, or wipes my bottom—at least not yet. But in all other respects I feel like a goddamn two-year-old. Tom and Kitty insist it has to be this way. Otherwise I'd be deluged with calls, letters, meetings, other demands on my time, coming from all directions. People would force themselves on me, harass me, maybe even threaten me. The bubble protects me.

Tom and Kitty have hired three people to handle my daily schedule (respond to invitations, cull the ones that seem most promising, and squeeze all the current obligations into the time available), one person to ready my briefing book each evening so I can prepare for the next day's schedule, and two people to "advance" me by making sure I get where I'm supposed to be and depart on time. All of them now join Tom and Kitty as guardians of the bubble.

"How do you decide what I do and what gets through to me?" I ask Kitty.

"We have you do and see what you'd choose if you had time to examine all the options yourself—sifting through all the phone calls, letters, memos, and meeting invitations," she says simply.

"But how can you possibly *know* what I'd choose for myself?"

"Don't worry," Kitty says patiently. "We know."

They have no way of knowing. We've worked together only a few weeks. Clare and I have lived together for a quarter century and even she wouldn't know.

I trust Tom and Kitty. They share my values. I hired them because I sensed this, and everything they've done since then has confirmed it. But it's not a matter of trust.

The *real* criterion Tom and Kitty use (whether or not they know it or admit it) is their own experienced view of what a secretary of labor with my values and aspirations *should* choose to see and hear. They transmit to me through the bubble only those letters, phone calls, memoranda, people, meetings, and events which they believe *someone like me* ought to have. But if I see and hear only what "someone like me" should see and hear, no original or out-of-the-ordinary thought will ever permeate the bubble. I'll never be surprised or shocked. I'll never be forced to rethink or reevaluate anything. I'll just lumber along, blissfully ignorant of what I *really* need to see and hear—which are things that don't merely confirm my preconceptions about the world.

I make a list of what I want them to transmit through the bubble henceforth:

1. The angriest, meanest ass-kicking letters we get from the public every week.
2. Complaints from department employees about anything.
3. Bad news about fuck-ups, large and small.
4. Ideas, ideas, ideas: from department employees, from outside academics and researchers, from average citizens. Anything that even resembles a good idea about what we should do better or differently. Don't screen out the wacky ones.
5. Anything from the President or members of Congress.
6. A random sample of calls or letters from real people outside Washington, outside government—people who aren't lawyers, investment bankers, politicians, or business consultants; people who aren't professionals; people without college degrees.
7. "Town meetings" with department employees here at headquarters and in the regions. "Town meetings" in working-class and poor areas of the country. "Town meetings" in community colleges, with adult students.
8. Calls and letters from business executives, including those who hate my guts. Set up meetings with some of them.
9. Lunch meetings with small groups of department employees, randomly chosen from all ranks.
10. Meetings with conservative Republicans in Congress.

I send the memo to Tom and Kitty. Then, still feeling rebellious and with nothing on my schedule for the next hour (the NEC meeting scheduled for 3:00 was canceled) I simply walk out of the bubble. I sneak out of my big office by the back entrance and start down the corridor.

I take the elevator to floors I've never visited. I wander to places in the department I've never been. I have spontaneous conversations with employees I'd never otherwise see. *Free at last.*

Kitty discovers I'm missing. It's as if the warden had discovered an escape from the state pen. The alarm is sounded: Secretary loose! Secretary escapes from bubble! Find the Secretary! Security guards are dispatched.

By now I've wandered to the farthest reaches of the building, to corridors never before walked by anyone ranking higher than GS-12. I visit the mailroom, the printshop, the basement workshop.

The hour is almost up. Time to head back. But which way? I'm at the northernmost outpost of the building, in bureaucratic Siberia. I try to retrace my steps but keep coming back to the same point in the wilderness.

I'm lost.

In the end, of course a security guard finds me and takes me back to the bubble. Kitty isn't pleased. "You shouldn't do that," she says sternly. "We were worried."

"It was good for me." I'm defiant.

"We need to know where you *are*." She sounds like the mother of a young juvenile delinquent.

"Next time give me a beeper, and I'll call home to see if you need me."

"You *must* have someone with you. It's not safe."

"This is the Labor Department, not Bosnia."

"You might get lost."

"That's *ridiculous*. How in hell could someone get *lost* in this building?"

She knows she has me. "You'd be surprised." She smiles knowingly and heads back to her office.

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April 15 [1994] Washington

Joe Dear, the assistant secretary for OSHA, whose thankless job is to manage the crossfire between business and labor on the passionate issue of workplace safety, relates the following story.

Last October, Robert Julian, a fifty-three-year-old employee at Bridgestone's tire plant in Oklahoma City, died when his head was crushed in an assembly machine that was supposed to have been shut off before he tried to reset it. In January, another employee's arm was severely mangled and broken in the same factory when he tried to unjam another machine that also was supposed to have been shut off. A month ago, a third employee was bashed on the head and badly burned by dye that was supposed to have been secured. And that's just the last seven months. Bridgestone's Oklahoma City factory has had a long history of gruesome deaths and injuries. The company's other plants have similar problems. Last week, a worker's head was caught in an assembly machine in its Morrison, Tennessee, factory. Co-workers pulled him out, but not before his face was badly mangled.

OSHA investigators have tried to coax Bridgestone into taking a simple precaution to make sure machines are turned off before employees reset or unjam or clean them—the same precaution that every factory in America is supposed to take. It's a lock that cuts the power off, which costs only about six dollars per machine to buy and install. But Bridgestone's executives won't budge. Joe thinks it's because they don't want to give employees the power to shut down the assembly

line. The Rubber Workers local might use it for potential bargaining leverage in upcoming contract negotiations.

"We're proposing a seven-and-a-half-million-dollar fine, the maximum," Joe says in a monotone. I can tell he doesn't relish this fight. Bridgestone is a big company, the second-largest tire maker in the world. It'll drag the case through the courts for years unless we eventually settle for a fraction of that. And when we do settle, OSHA will come under heavy criticism for knuckling under. Worse, the final settlement may not be enough to get Bridgestone to mend its ways: The company may figure it's cheaper to pay up and continue risking employees' lives and limbs. It won't be the first time a company has made that kind of calculation.

I'm indignant. "We've got to stop this. Maybe they could get away with this kind of thing under the Republicans, but I'll be damned if we're going to let them do this on *our* watch." I can feel righteousness coursing through my veins.

Joe looks skeptical. "We can't go any higher with a fine. We might be able to go to court in Oklahoma City and get an emergency order forcing them to comply there. It's dicey."

"But workers are getting killed and maimed. Why not use all our ammunition?" I'm putting on my holster. "Let's also mobilize *public opinion*."

"Public opinion?" Joe's skepticism deepens.

I explain my theory: "Big companies like Bridgestone spend millions on advertising to boost their public image. If we get this story on television we'll embarrass the hell out of them and strike fear in the hearts of every other corporation that's screwing its workers." I strike the table with my index finger, trying to imitate Lloyd Bentsen (on a subject distinctly unlikely to bestir Bentsen's index finger).

Joe hadn't planned on my fury. He doesn't know how to manage it.

"I want to go out there," I say, simply. "I'll deliver the legal papers in *person*. We'll fly out Sunday night and do it Monday morning. We'll alert the media so they can be on hand. Afterward we'll hold a press conference, maybe with some of the injured workers, even the widows of workers who were killed."

"Widows?" Joe is incredulous. This is no longer a legal matter. It's become an issue of morality and public relations. He warms to the idea. "I'm sure Mrs. Julian will help us."

"Joe," I ask, "is this situation at Bridgestone as outrageous as it seems?"

"Yeah. It's bad, chief."

"Will the employees be with us on this?"

"No question. You'll be a hero."

"Okay, then. We go to Oklahoma City."

I imagine myself galloping into town on a large white stallion, a sheriff's badge pinned to my vest. Few feelings in public office are more exhilarating than self-righteous indignation—or as dangerous.

April 18 Oklahoma City

Late last night, we met in the federal building in downtown Oklahoma City to plan the final details of today's sting operation. With me are Joe Dear, Tom Williamson, who is the department's top lawyer, two security agents, and a press

aide. We talk in whispers, although there's no apparent need. The building is nearly empty.

We plan the route that our two vans will follow to the company headquarters, the precise time of departure, when we'll alert the press so that they can set up cameras outside the gate and film us as we enter, when we'll alert the company president so that he has enough time to direct company officials to receive us but not enough to unleash his lawyers and publicists, what I tell the executives inside, and the time and place of the press conference afterward. Mrs. Julian has agreed to appear. The head of the Rubber Workers local is informed. He's thrilled we're here, and guarantees strong support from the workers.

Early this morning I place a call to Bridgestone's president at his home, near the company's Nashville headquarters. The company is Japanese-owned, and its president of North American operations is Matatoshi Ono. Mr. Ono's command of English is not all it might be.

"Hello, this is the Secretary of Labor. Is this the president of Bridgestone Tire and Rubber?"

"Yes. My name Ono."

"I'm sorry to trouble you at home, Mr. Ono, but this is a very important matter and I wanted to be sure to reach you."

"Home? Okay."

"Mr. Ono, the United States government is imposing a heavy fine on your company for failing to protect the safety of its workers, and is filing legal papers today to force the company to use a simple safety device."

"Wha'?"

I repeat the sentence.

"Okay. Okay."

"Do you understand me, Mr. Ono?"

"Understand? Okay."

"Would you like me to arrange for an interpreter?"

"Interpreter? Wha' interpreter? No. Okay."

"Mr. Ono, I'm visiting the Oklahoma City plant later this morning to deliver the legal papers in person. Please make sure your people receive me."

"Ready? Okay."

"Do you have any questions, Mr. Ono?"

"Question? No. Okay."

The morning is misty. Joe Dear, Tom Williamson, and I, along with two security agents, ride in silence across the flat countryside. I'm nervous. What if they don't let us through the gate?

A half-dozen TV cameras are waiting at the gate to record the spectacle. The guard allows us through. We park.

"We've hit the beach, captain," says Joe.

"Walk slowly and keep your ammo dry," I say.

We walk across the lot to the plant entrance. I imagine the scene on the evening news: barely visible through the mist, the silhouettes of America's runty but courageous Secretary of Labor leading his small battalion of gallant men to their fates, as they take on Industrial Evil.

Once we're inside, a nervous receptionist asks us to follow her. We walk down a narrow corridor and into a linoleum-floored room with a Formica table in the center, encircled by several chrome-and-plastic chairs. She says that two gentlemen will be with us shortly, then rushes off. *Is this an ambush?*

Two grim-faced men enter the room and ask us to sit. One is a top executive from company headquarters. The other is the plant manager.

I introduce myself and the others, trying to prevent my voice from betraying my nervousness. "We have come here to present you with court papers alleging that this plant presents an imminent hazard to the safety of its employees," I tell them gravely. Joe removes a half-inch-thick pile of legal papers from his briefcase and places them in the center of the Formica table. The two men stare at the pile, expressionless.

I continue, more forcefully. "We have urged you to correct these hazards in the past, but they have not been corrected. We have no choice but to seek an emergency order which will require you to equip employees on the assembly line with simple devices to turn off the power when they have to clean or unjam the machines. We're also imposing a seven-and-a-half-million-dollar fine."

I look intently at the two men. They stare back. They say nothing.

What *now*? We haven't rehearsed this part. Is this *it*? Are we *done*? At a minimum, I had expected them to try to defend themselves. This would have given me the chance to express outrage. I would berate them for failing to buy six-dollar locks that could have saved lives and limbs. They might have yelled back about government interference in the free market. At this point I'd coolly explain that the government exists to protect American workers from precisely the kind of callous, contemptuous bottom-line indifference to human life and suffering which they and their company represent. Having verbally vanquished them, I would then rise from my chair and, dripping with disdain, abruptly leave the room, followed by my stalwart team.

But neither of them utters a word. I look to Joe for guidance. Joe returns my gaze. Finally, I stand. The two men stand. Joe and the security agents stand. I extend my hand to one of the men. "Good-bye," is all I can think of saying. "Good-bye," is all he says. I shake hands with the other. "Good-bye." "Good-bye."

We march back out of the building and across the parking lot. The camera crews are still lingering outside the gate. I try to look determined, like someone who has just summoned the full force of the United States government.

A half hour later, the press has gathered for a news conference at a downtown hotel to hear of the great battle we have engaged. Mrs. Robert Julian, the widow, stands beside me on a raised platform, a frail woman in her late fifties. Around us are several of the employees who have been injured or maimed in the plant, and gathered around them are thirty or so members of the Rubber Workers local.

I'm at the microphone, explaining why I have come in person to Oklahoma City, describing the mayhem that the company has caused and what actions the department will take. I crank up to full throttle, doing a weak imitation of William Jennings Bryan: "We will *not* allow workers to risk death and dismemberment simply because a company refuses to buy a *six-dollar* piece of safety

equipment. American workers are *not* going to be sacrificed on the altar of profits. We're *not* going to allow a competitive race to the bottom when it comes to the lives and limbs of American workers."

The workers around me applaud. Mrs. Julian's eyes fill with tears. There are a few questions from reporters.

Then, having cleaned up Oklahoma City, I ride off into the sunset on the next commercial flight back to Washington. I feel triumphant.

April 19 Washington

The triumph is short-lived.

Soon after I left Oklahoma, Bridgestone's vice president for public affairs held a news conference to rebut the Labor Department's allegations. He claimed the company's own procedures for servicing machinery were fully adequate. They don't need the Labor Department in Washington to tell them how to run their business, he says. The recent deaths and injuries were simply unfortunate accidents.

Then he delivers the bombshell: Bridgestone is closing its Oklahoma City tire factory, effective immediately. All 1,100 workers are out of jobs. He blames the federal government. Bridgestone is unable to comply with federal safety standards, he says.

Today's *Daily Oklahoman* uses my expedition as an illustration of the worst sort of meddling from Washington. In a bitter editorial, it accuses me of grandstanding for political purposes. Its front-page story quotes angry tire workers—now unemployed—saying I should never have come. One asserts that safety was never a problem at the plant: Assembly machines have to be kept running in order to be serviced properly. Checkmate.

Joe Dear and Tom Glynn are at my round table.

"It's not going quite as well as we might have wished," I say, hoping a touch of irony will lighten the mood. They don't smile.

Joe shakes his head. "I can't believe they closed the factory on us."

"So much for public opinion," says Tom. "If it's a choice between a dangerous job and no job, the dangerous job wins."

Kitty enters the room nervously, holding a wire story. "The federal judge in Oklahoma City just refused our request for an emergency order. Bridgestone announced it's reopening the factory *tomorrow*. But it won't reopen if we appeal the ruling."

"They're got us by the short hairs," says Joe.

Tom Glynn asks Joe if he'd considered, before embarking on the expedition, that the *Daily Oklahoman* was rabidly right-wing and that the district judge out there had been a Republican state senator before being appointed to the bench by George Bush. The answer is self-evident. Joe is silent. "It might be a good idea to check out these kinds of things before we do anything like this again," says Tom slowly. He's livid. He hates sloppiness. Tom's approach to public management centers on careful planning. Every option, every alternative, every possible outcome, should be considered in advance. The Oklahoma expedition was a case study in impetuosity.

"It's my fault, Tom," I say glumly. "It was my idea."

Self-righteousness blinded me to the pitfalls—not just the politics and ideology of the newspaper and the judge, but the larger political reality. Companies like Bridgestone have access to the best lawyers and public-relations people anywhere. They know how to play hardball when they need to. And they understand how to use to their advantage the deepest fear that haunts blue-collar America today: the fear of losing a decent job.

All I'd considered was the moral superiority of our position, and the thrill of mounting my white horse and galloping into town with guns blazing. I didn't figure that my stallion was old and limped and that the other side was equipped with surface-to-air missiles. It didn't occur to me that public opinion might turn so easily against us.

The meeting breaks up. Joe Dear lingers after Tom and Kitty have left. "Sorry, chief."

"Don't worry about it, Joe."

"Bastards."

"We won't give up," I say. "Even if we can't get the emergency order, we'll pursue the fine. It's big enough to make Bridgestone stop and think."

But I'm haunted by the idea that the company's green-eyeshade executives and lawyers have concluded that it's still cheaper to pay the fine than to give workers the power to stop the machinery when necessary in order to fix it. ■

