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CIVICS IN THE CLASSROOM

Those of you who have been rearticles covered the nature of our form of government in the United States (decentralized with checks/balances); the great variety and number of public sector (local, state and national) jobs and occupations; and the reasons for our having a federal (rather than centralized) form of government and for a persisting general anti-government feeling. These Part I articles can be reviewed on the Internet (www.theroundtable.org).

Now in Part II we are exploring reasons why public/government employment is not considered the prestigious and sought-after career as it is in other Western society countries. Our article 6, the first in Part II of the series, concerned perhaps the most significant of the four factors underlying this poor public image of government employment; the geographic spaciousness of our country, which reinforced a culture of individual independence and reliance primarily on oneself rather than on any kind of government. There were few opportunities or reason for the public to develop any kind of image of government employment--and certainly no favorable one.

We are now ready to explore a second important factor accounting for this peculiarly American feeling (generally negative) regarding public sector employment: the absence in our country's history of the centuries-long development of political/governmental institutions featuring a personal sovereign blessed and supported by an established religion. Such a development was the norm in the European countries (e.g. England, Scotland, France, Spain, Germany) from which the immigrants to America came--and from which these settlers generally wanted to escape. Governments in the "Old World" developed over centuries into institutionalized, hierarchical, class-ridden states with each political sovereign serving as the head of this state's established religion.

Not only was the United States not a participant in this historical development, but it was to a large extent actually established as a result of the antipathy of the general population to this type of political/governmental intrusiveness with its demand for rigid conformity to the social/economic/religious conditions into which one was born. Instead of looking up to and respecting those in authority above one--in the political, social and religious institutions, as the general population in European countries did--the settlers in America relished being comparatively free from this "Old World" environment of centralized government with ubiquitous agents in all sectors and sections of economic and religious life.

As mentioned in the last article, each of the four factors we are exploring which account for the historical poor image in America of public sector employment is related to each of the others. Thus it seems quite obvious that the geographic factor (spaciousness) treated in article six was intimately connected to this historical/political situation described in this article. Without the former, it is doubtful if the settlers would have been able to found a society upon principles almost diametrically opposite to those prevailing in Europe. Space was available to grow something new, and with it an image of government (and its employees) developed as (at best) a necessary evil. Prestige and respect was hardly a part of this image.

Our next article will discuss the economic factor as a third important reason for the persistence of the poor public image of government employment.

(Dr. Paul Lorentzen, Public Employees Roundtable Program Committee Chair provides a bi-monthly article series.)