

States of the Union

A JOB-SEEKER'S JOURNAL

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

FOR THE past two months I have been actively pursuing a Federal appointment as director of the Farmers Home Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. (See "The Little Agency that Could," NL, January 3.) "Farmers Home," as we experts call it, makes loans to rural residents for housing, agriculture and small-town facilities. Its administrator is supposed to preside over the work of some 3,000 employees and the distribution of some \$7 billion.

As of this writing my candidacy remains "viable," at least according to a friend of a friend who knows a Congressional aide who has talked on the phone with someone who works for Robert Bergland, the new Secretary of Agriculture. In Washington these days, such a source easily passes for "unimpeachable." Karl Marx—unfairly, I believe—wrote of the "idiocies of rural life." What might he have said about rural politics?

As the nondrama unfolds, I keep jotting down my impressions in a job-seeker's journal, and I find that

they accurately reflect the day-to-day confusions of the chase. Essentially, these notations represent the experience of a stranger in the Land of Oz; other job-seekers, who may be better acquainted with the Wizard, will have a different story to tell.

TUESDAY: Mike Feinsilber, a UPI reporter in Washington, has picked up the story of my candidacy and sent it out on the wire. "Rather than write Carter a letter," he notes, "Margolis wrote his application as an article in . . . *The New Leader*, a small, 53-year-old liberal magazine. . . . His application for the \$39,000-a-year job hasn't drawn a nibble from the Carterites, but Sen. Lee Metcalf, D-Mont., and Reps. Donald Fraser, D-Minn., and Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., told Margolis they've asked the new Administration to take a look. So have some farm groups."

The story cheered me, until a world-weary friend called from Washington. "Too bad about that UPI feature," he said.

"Why too bad?"

"All it'll do," he assured me, "is

unify your opposition. They'll see you now as the man to beat—and they'll beat you." I had an early lunch: calories and solace.

WEDNESDAY: The phone keeps ringing. There was a call from CBS Radio in New York asking if I wanted to comment, on tape, about the UPI story. "It speaks for itself," I said with admirable caution.

"Sir," I was told, "you're being recorded now. Tell me, just what is the Farmers Home Administration? Did it have anything to do with the Russian wheat deal?"

"Not a blessed thing."

"Oh. Thanks anyway." Click.

Next, a supporter from Minnesota (Bergland's home state, and mine, too) called to say that the Bergland staff member who had granted me an hour-long job interview was no longer working for the Secretary. Apparently the interview was wasted effort, but in this strange business, what isn't? A Washington job applicant sees dozens of people—Congressmen, transitional workers, anyone whose title suggests a shred of political influence—but he never knows for certain if he is talking to The Right Person, nor does he have an inkling of who will make The Final Decision. In short, he is blindfolded, a condition he probably deserves for trying to pin a tail on the Democratic donkey.

Because power is seldom spelled out, one must proceed on the assumption that everybody has some, including secretaries and receptionists. To do otherwise is to court trouble. The other day a fellow job-seeker told me that after finally getting an appointment with a Monday aid, she had been compelled to wait three hours in his anteroom while the receptionist admitted a succession of late arrivers.

"What was the receptionist's name?" I asked.

"I wouldn't know" was the answer, and perhaps also the problem. "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life"—at least in Washington.

THURSDAY: Today it was my turn to do the telephoning, chiefly to senators and representatives. The number of the big switchboard on the Hill is 224-3121—little digits that take less time to dial. Every hour in Washington is rush-hour.

I may as well get in practice as a telephone addict. From what I've been reading, that's been the fate of quite a few of the administrators I'm trying to follow—C. B. Baldwin, for instance, who in the late '30s and early '40s headed the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a progenitor of Farmers Home. "Baldwin," writes one historian, "spent an enormous amount of time on the telephone and in confidential sessions with individual friends 'on the Hill.' For this, he was sometimes accused of 'private politicking' and a 'conspiratorial approach' . . ."

"Beanie" Baldwin (his middle name is Benham) was a commoner from Radford, Virginia, the son of a flour miller, who tried to succeed in the electric supply business but went bust in the Depression. As an FSA administrator he was tough, patient and idealistic; that last adjective was not a sneer-word in New Deal days. Recently I heard second-hand that a senator, in endorsing me, had expressed the hope I would be "another Beanie Baldwin." Maybe history doesn't repeat itself, but it sure keeps egging us on.

One of the Congressional aides I talked to today gave me a hard time. "Your resumé," he said, "is strong on writing and editing but weak on administration. Not much of a record, considering the job you're going after."

I could only repeat to him what the humorist Bill Nye once said about Wagner's music: "It's a helluva lot better than it sounds."

FRIDAY: Couldn't sleep last night, so I got up, poured myself a nightcap and read a chapter from *The Castle*. Kafka really knew his bureaucracy. The

ordeal of K., the wretched but gutsy land surveyor who is summoned by the Castle for work, only to be told on arrival that the summons was "a small mistake," reoccurs every day in all the civilized capitals of the world. And K.'s subsequent struggle to win the job is also familiar. At first, matters seem to go well for K. From a village telephone he calls "above" to the Castle (one thinks of it as resembling the Rayburn building), and learns that a land surveyor is indeed expected. But later the Mayor explains to K. the facts of village life:

"You haven't once up to now come into real contact with our authorities . . . In the Castle the telephone works beautifully of course; I've been told it's being used there all the time . . . We can hear this continual telephoning in our telephones down here as a humming and singing; you must have heard it too. But there's no fixed connection with the Castle, no central exchange that transmits our calls farther. When anybody calls up the Castle from here, the instruments of all the subordinate departments ring, or rather they would ring if practically all the departments . . . didn't have their receivers off. Now and then, however, a fatigued official may feel the need of a little distraction . . . and may hang the receiver up. Then we get an answer, but an answer of course that's merely a practical joke."

"I didn't know it was like that," says K. "I couldn't know of all these peculiarities . . ."

I dropped off to sleep with a humming and singing in my ears.

This morning I talked to a man who is reputed to be very close to Bob Bergland. ("You haven't once up to now come into real contact with our authorities . . .") "I can tell you tentatively that you are definitely still being considered," he said.

"What would you advise?" I asked.

"The squeaky wheel principle ap-

plies here. Sooner or later class will tell."

"That's nice to know."

"There's a feeling here," he went on, "that we want a tough financial man in the job. I hope I've been of help to you."

It was definitely Delphic, in a tentative kind of way.

SATURDAY: In the mail today came an application for a job with Farmers Home from a fellow in Arizona now working for HUD. Has he sent an application to *all* the candidates, or is he simply betting on me? As Dr. Johnson discovered, choosing one's patron is a gamble.

Other items of interest in the morning's mail: A letter from a Midwest senator saying he has endorsed me because I live in his state (I don't); a copy of a laudatory epistle to Bergland written by a political science professor in Pennsylvania, in which he claims that my nomination "might well come to be regarded as one of President Carter's most astute appointments"; and a note from a friend inquiring whether there is any truth to the rumor that I have lost my sanity and am seeking a government job. All these letters seem based on misapprehension about my status and reputation; no doubt the decision on my appointment, whichever way it finally goes, will be similarly misguided.

A call just now brings the unverified word that I am one of three candidates still being considered. That's encouraging; now that I've stumbled this far I wouldn't mind going the whole distance. A naïve aspirant may enter the lists like a puppy, leaping and cavorting, but he stays to fight like a bulldog. As K. tells the Mayor, "I'll enumerate for your benefit a few of the things that keep me here: the sacrifice I made . . . the long and difficult journey, the well-grounded hopes I built on my engagement here . . ."

"I know," the Mayor replies, "if a decision should be reached, I'll send for you."