

Statistics had its origin in politics--in the broad sense of the term. Historically considered they were "state-istics" and statisticians were once "statists." But "politics" in the title of this essay is used in the narrow sense--in the narrow usage associated with the way in which this nation conducts its system of governance on the federal, state and local level. That is, examined here is the relationship between the politician in office and the collection, compilation and analyses of quantitative data which are derived from government records or censuses and sample surveys conducted by government. In the broad sense this involves the consideration of the role of statistics and of the statistician in government and use of the statistical product by policy officials in government, elected and appointed.

More specifically, what is examined is the extent to which statistics and statisticians are subjected to pressures to make a given administration, administrator or agency "look good," "make a case" or support a decision already taken on other than factual grounds.

First, it is well to state at least some of the basic assumptions on which this discussion rests. Among them are:

1. Statistics are quantitative facts collected, aggregated and analyzed to provide intelligence, to facilitate understanding and to serve as a foundation for formulation of policy, development and administration of programs and evaluation of the impact of programs.
2. The statistician is the professional specialist whose function it is to design, produce and analyze statistics and to present his findings in an objective manner with probity and integrity for use by policy makers, administrators, researchers and consumers in general.
3. The consumers of statistics constitute the audience for whom statistical intelligence is produced and who, it is assumed, want to "know the facts."
4. Although the relationship between consumers and producers of statistics must be a close one so that the information produced is relevant to the problems which confront consumers, this relationship should not in any way have the effect of impairing the integrity of the statistical undertaking as a fact finding enterprise or requiring the equivalent of a "directed verdict."

The Present Situation

Developments over the past several years have raised serious questions about the extent

to which political pressures are being exerted on government statisticians so as to compromise the integrity of their product; and about the way in which the statistical product is being used in the interest of the Administration or the administrator of an agency, rather than in the interest of the general public. The political smoke which has risen from developments in the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Bureau of the Census, and smolderings in a number of other statistical agencies, including those in the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and the Statistical Policy Division of the Office of Management and Budget, have incited many, including statisticians, politicians, businessmen, labor leaders, reporters and editorial writers, to look for statistical fires. After all, it is part of our folk wisdom to assume that "where there is smoke there must be fire."

The widespread suspicion that unwholesome pressures have been placed by the present Administration on statistics and statisticians and much public airing of the matter in the mass media have, thus far, produced no clear-cut evidence pro or con. Even to those of us close to the production and analysis of government statistics the situation is a complex one with, at best, mixed or conflicting information about even the most publicized cases.

As a statistician, with now more than 42 years of continuing contact with government statisticians and statistics, I have, of course, become aware of the statistical "smoke." Specific instances which have occasioned suspicions of undue political pressure include:

1. The sequence of events which led to the premature retirement of the Deputy Director of the Census, the Chief of the Population Division, the Chief of the Construction Statistics Division, and a number of other senior statisticians in that Bureau.
2. The sequence of events which led to termination of the monthly press conference by the Assistant Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics in re the Monthly Report on the Labor Force, his reassignment and, eventually, his premature retirement.
3. The contemplated reorganization of statistical activities within the Office of Management and Budget, fortunately rescinded, which would have made the old Division of Statistical Standards an arm of that Bureau's management personnel and which did remove the title of Assistant Director of the Office from the head of statistical activities in that Office.
4. The reported political pressures from

the Secretary's office in the Department of Agriculture on the statistical activities within that Department.

5. The conflict within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in regard to the conduct of a survey on nutritional deficiencies of children in this nation.
6. The order to the Bureau of the Census to stop using "Poverty" in the title of its annual report on the poor in the United States. (This was almost an ingenious and quick way to abolish poverty in this nation.)
7. The reprimand of the Census staff associated with the release of the 1971 poverty report.
8. The cancellation of the Urban Employment Survey during this election year 1972, which since 1969 had been providing labor force and other information about residents in "poverty areas" in much of urban America.
9. The imposition of political clearance procedures for members of statistical as well as other advisory committees. This has initiated a widespread search for Republican statisticians, demographers, and other scientists. (Perhaps there can now be developed new fields of Republican mathematical statistics, Republican demography, Republican physics, Republican medicine and so on.)
10. The placement within the Bureau of the Census of five persons who are not inaccurately described as "political commissars" whose function it was to oversee statistical operations and analyses. In one flagrant situation the Assistant Chief of one of the Census divisions was peremptorily removed from for the convenience of the political functionary who was then provided with amenities not previously afforded assistant division chiefs. (I have the names of the five political functionaries now reduced to two by reason of pressures brought to bear.)
11. The collapse of morale among statisticians in a number of agencies by reason of the "reign of terror" generated by the presence of political functionaries placed at the statistical operating and analytical levels. This, of course, was one reason for the premature retirement of many able career service statisticians.
12. The tendency to delay or withhold statistical reports deemed adverse to the interests of the Administration.

I am sure that many other instances could be added to this list which would further bolster the suspicion that statistics and statisticians are being subjected to unprecedented political pressures. I say unprecedented having in mind the scale of events generating suspicion. On the basis of my own experience with government statistics I know of no administration in which some zealous politician or politically minded press relations "eager beaver" did not, at some point, try to impair the integrity of statistical reports; but never have I witnessed as widespread and insistent efforts to politicize the statistical enterprise.

Furthermore, in the midst of the clamor about possible political contamination of statistics, the President's Commission on Statistics in the Federal Government issued its report without even a reference to the importance of safeguarding the integrity of the Government's statistical output. The Commission included statisticians of unquestionable competence. I do not challenge either their integrity or their competence. But I do think that they can legitimately be faulted for their collective insensitivity to the political issue.

Another piece of possible evidence of protecting the Administration, even if this were not the explicit intent, is to be found in the Commission's position on the proposed quinquennial census of population. Despite the fact that this issue has been before the nation for a century, during which time a quinquennial census has been recommended repeatedly and, most recently, by the Decennial Census Review Committee of the Secretary of Commerce (of this Administration) in the Spring of 1971, the Commission stated that the evidence on behalf of a quinquennial census was neither positive nor negative and suggested that the Bureau of the Census, which has been on record for it for many years, make still another study of the matter to see if one was needed in 1975. The fact that the Administration opposed such an undertaking as an element in its Budget policy may well have had an impact on the Commission--deliberate or unconscious.

In most of the instances cited above there is not as yet clear-cut evidence that the Administration acted only and entirely out of political motives. In placing political appointees in statistical agencies below the level of Presidential appointees the political motive is clear and perhaps can be defended, at best (or worst?), as examples of patronage not unknown on the American scene. Similarly, the insistence on political clearance of members of advisory committees is certainly politically motivated and may similarly be defended as another instance, even if carried to an extreme, of political patronage. There is reason to conclude, however, that these actions constitute a deliberate effort to place into statistical agencies an ideological point of view comparable to the placement of "conservatives" and "strict constructionists" on the Supreme Court. Some Administration supporters have explicitly stated that in their judgment

too many "New Dealers" and "liberals" have been frozen into civil service status in the statistical agencies; and that, consequently, this Administration must protect its own ideology and political interests. It would seem reasonable to take the position that the burden of proof for this assertion rests upon this Administration, a burden which certainly it has not yet assumed.

In the other instances listed there is no case in which the Administration has not given reasons, other than political, for the actions taken. For example, in the case of the Deputy Director of the Census it was true that the time schedule on the production and release of 1970 Census information was not kept; and that the Deputy Director was not always responsive to the wishes of his political superiors. Furthermore, it is also true that he was offered a position of the same civil service grade in another agency which he declined. In the case of the reprimands to census staff associated with the 1971 Poverty report it was alleged that release procedures were violated and that some elements of the press were given a priority over others. In the case of the Assistant Commissioner of Labor, it had been previously decided that a civil servant should not be asked to hold a press conference on the employment and unemployment statistics because he would necessarily be subjected to political questions and placed "on the spot." Furthermore, his reassignment was the result of a reorganization of the entire statistical system set in motion before the conflict in the interpretations of the labor force report of the Assistant Commissioner and the Secretary of Labor. The proposed reorganization of the Office of Management and Budget in which the Division of Statistical Standards would be abolished and merged with a management function could be defended in terms of some prevailing concepts of management structure and function. The abolition of the word "poverty" and substitution of "low income" for the term can be defended as insistence on a more neutral designation than that adopted by the previous administration for its political purposes. The abolition of the Urban Employment Survey can be justified by the need to revise the sample of "poverty areas" in the light of the 1970 Census returns.

Examples of pure political pressure uncontaminated by other factors are difficult, if not impossible, to find. Yet the total picture, if not any one specific instance, certainly justifies suspicion and action to assure that the integrity of Federal Statistics is not impaired.

Reaction and Outlook

Fortunately, the statistical and social science fraternity, both within and without government, is endowed with professional elan and political independence. In their professional capacities statisticians can often be browbeaten but never subdued. Fortunately,

also, the Government is not a monolithic structure and not all Republicans, nor all Democrats, are subservient to political pressures from their respective political parties. In consequence, it should not be surprising to learn that forces within as well as without this Administration are resisting and are determined to resist any political contamination of the government statistical product. Resistance and reaction to the types of pressures described are mounting even among the ranks of those in high office appointed by this Administration. In general, it may be said that both statistical and non-statistical personnel with professional backgrounds are resisting attacks on the probity of statistics and exerting pressures of their own against their Republican colleagues playing the pro-Administration political and public relations game. Evidence of such resistance is to be found even within the Executive Office of the President, for the Chief Statistician and head of the new Division of Statistical Policy within the Office of Management and Budget, supported at least by the former Director of that Office (now the Secretary of the Treasury) have pursued courses to maintain the probity of Federal statistics. (The Chief Statistician, before reorganization, was an Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget and head of the Division of Statistical Standards.)

For example, a significant step has been taken to protect the integrity of government statistics in Circular No. A-91, originally issued in February, 1969 and revised on April 26, 1972, which calls for the "prompt compilation and release of statistical information." This Circular, addressed to "Heads of Executive Departments and Establishments," requires that "the shortest practicable interval should exist between the date or period to which the data refer and the date when compilation is completed." Moreover, it states that "prompt public release of the figures should be made after compilation." The Circular applies to "the principal statistical series...issued by agencies to the public annually or more frequently...and that the publication dates...are made publicly available in advance." In accordance with the objectives of the Circular, release dates for principal economic indicators appear each month in the OMB Statistical Reporter and agencies are required to submit reports to OMB on the release of statistical series.

Although Circular A-91 constitutes a significant step in the right direction, its enforcement is beset with problems, especially in respect to statistical reports that are intermittent and not usually on a rigid time schedule. Obviously, the action taken by OMB is designed to prevent deferring or advancing the release of statistics better to serve political interests. It cannot but help to protect statistics against, at least, one form of political interference.

Perhaps the most significant feature of this Circular is that requiring a "one-hour separation between the issuance of the release by the

statistical agency and related commentary." This provision clearly separates the professional statistical product from subsequent "interpretations" which may be politicized. Each administration certainly has the prerogative of interpreting the data as it sees fit at its own risk; but it is important to distinguish such interpretations from the original statistical report.

Another example of efforts to protect the integrity of statistics within the Administration is afforded by the pressures brought to bear by OMB upon the Department of Commerce and the Director of the Census to eliminate three of the five political functionaries placed within the Census Bureau. Of the two that remain one, I understand, achieved civil service status and in this new role, hopefully, this person will serve the Government as a professional rather than as a political overseer.

The Committee on Statistical Policy, which is advisory to the OMB and which is appointed by the OMB in consultation with the ASA, has also been active on behalf of the integrity of statistics. This Advisory Committee comprises mainly past presidents of the American Statistical Association. It exerted pressure upon the OMB to restore the independence of the Division of Statistical Policy, an action that was taken; and it recommended to the Association the creation of a Committee to investigate any possible political interference with statistics or statisticians. Other organizations joined in this recommendation. In consequence, as reported in the American Statistician (Vol. 26, No. 3, June 1972, p. 2) the Board and Council of the Association on January 28th authorized the President to appoint a Committee on Integrity of Federal Statistics to work with a similar committee from the Federal Statistical Users' Conference, which had expressed similar concerns. This Committee, which is holding its first meeting at this Annual Meeting of the Association, includes: Daniel H. Brill, Commercial Credit Corp.; A. Ross Eckler, a former President of the Association and former Director of the Census; Robert S. Schultz, New York State Council of Economic Advisers; and De Ver Sholes, Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry. The Population Association of America and the American Sociological Association have been invited to send observers to the meeting. A Committee of the Conference on Income and Wealth has also asked to be kept informed of the new Committee's work. Other professional societies will undoubtedly follow the work of the Committee with interest and may join in its work.

Another instrumentality that may be expected to exert increasing influence on behalf of statistical integrity is the newly created Committee on National Statistics of the National Academy of Science. This Committee, of which William Kruskal, a member of the now defunct President's Commission on Statistics, is Chairman, has as its terms of reference a continuing review and evaluation of the national statistical output. It is, in effect, a semi-private mechanism for,

among other things, monitoring the probity of government statistics.

Pressures in behalf of preserving the integrity of government statistics are to be found in many other significant places; but the ability to resist political interference is not always successful even when such resistance is offered by Bureau heads who, in the last analysis, must serve their political superiors or exercise their option to resign.

Concluding Observations

The American Statistical Association and related interest professional associations can, of course, expect an impartial and competent report from its Committee on the Integrity of Federal Statistics. I am sure that its major work will come after the confusion of this election year and that it will have implications and impact transcending the tenure of this Administration. In the meantime, it is essential that all statisticians be alerted to the possibility of political pressures and make such information as they may acquire available to the Association's Committee.

With the increasing complexity and interdependence of our society requiring increasing government interventionism, statistics are becoming ever more important in providing a basis for policy and action, both in the government and private sectors. In consequence, the temptation to use statistics for administration, agency or other interest, as distinguished from public interest, will increase.

Although the politician may be able adversely to influence statistics in the short run, there can be no doubt that his cause is a hopeless one in the long run. This Association and the other professional associations are aware that just as "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," similar vigilance is required to defend statistics and statisticians from political contamination. If necessary, the professional fraternity can appoint statistical "truth squads" that can hold their own press conferences to counter political distortions or falsifications, delays or withholdings of the data. In defending the probity and integrity of statistics, statisticians and related professional personnel are not only exercising an important professional and citizenship right and obligation but, also, in the long run they are defending the politician from himself; for nothing could undermine the politician as much as accumulated and intense public distrust and the generation of both a credibility and incredibility gap.