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Florence P. Dwyer

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# REPORT TO THE PEOPLE FROM YOUR CONGRESSWOMAN

FLORENCE P. DWYER - 6th District, New Jersey



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Thursday, August 2, 1962

The investigation of Billie Sol Estes' relations with the U.S. Department of Agriculture -- as incomplete, frustrating, and slow-moving as it is -- has already revealed a great deal about the Agriculture Department, about the Congress, and about the nature of big government in the United States, if not about the details of the Estes operation itself.

As you may recall, I first requested a Congressional investigation of the Estes case by my House Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations on April 16. We began public hearings on May 28 and since then the subcommittee has met 19 times and has taken testimony from 21 witnesses, most of whom are present or former Agriculture Department officials below the policy-making level.

In terms of discovering new and really significant information concerning the way in which Estes exploited agricultural programs to his own special advantage, the net effect of the first two months of the investigation has been disappointing. Not because the information doesn't exist. Not because Agriculture Department officials have satisfactorily answered the questions put to them. Not because charges of political influence and favoritism have been proved unfounded. Not at all. On the contrary, there are dozens of unexplored leads, isolated facts, unanswered questions, intriguing speculations, and undigested quantities of important data -- all of which need to be worked on, thought about and somehow placed in proper relationship with other information.

## The Reasons Why

Why this hasn't yet been accomplished reveals a lot about Congress. First of all, Congress got a late start. Much of the Estes story was already public knowledge when our investigation began, due principally to the efforts of Texas Attorney General Will Wilson and the dogged and skillful reporting of a number of newspapers.

A second factor is the inadequacy of our subcommittee's staff. For an investigation of the scope, complexity and importance of this one, a large and able staff is essential. Subcommittee members simply do not have the time to devote themselves singlemindedly to a single investigation. Legislation, other committee responsibilities, and the problems of constituents must continue to occupy a substantial amount of their resources. Yet, when the investigation started, we had only one counsel from another subcommittee and two investigators from the General Accounting Office. And my minority colleague, Congressman Langen, and I consider ourselves fortunate to have been authorized to employ a minority counsel. Five men, however, simply cannot do the extremely detailed job that needs to be done. The 40 or 50 or more staff members of the Senate's McClellan Committee, which is also investigating the Estes case, emphasizes how shorthanded we are.

The decision of the subcommittee majority to concentrate on Estes' grain storage activities, to the practical exclusion of other even more important aspects of the case, has further limited the subcommittee's effectiveness. And even in this restricted area, the subcommittee has so far failed to call many of the potentially most important witnesses, including Attorney General Wilson, who probably knows more about the Estes affair than anyone else, policy-making officials of the Agriculture Department, and members of the Estes organization who were most directly involved.

## Lack of Enthusiasm

The fourth and final reason may be the most important of all. Since the majority party in Congress, the party responsible for conducting the investigation, is also the party in control of the Administration, there is a noticeable lack of

enthusiasm for pursuing a probe which might implicate some of their most prominent officials. I have the highest respect for the personal integrity of the subcommittee chairman and the other majority members, but it may be unrealistic to expect them to have much taste for investigating, in effect, their own party. One of the major advantages of a strong two-party system is the ability of one party to check and counteract the extravagances of the other.

Despite these handicaps, however, the subcommittee's findings to date have established beyond doubt that the Department of Agriculture has been virtually unmanageable. The largest of the non-defense agencies, the Department is also one of the oldest, most cumbersome and heavily bureaucratic in the entire government. At the very time when the revolution in agriculture has brought a reduction in the number of farms and farmers and greatly increased the efficiency and volume of farm production, the Department has grown more unwieldy, incapable of meeting the need for trim, decisive, well-coordinated administration.

Evidence of this unhappy situation is everywhere. For instance, the people in charge of licensing and bonding storage facilities had little or no contact with the people responsible for placing government-owned grain in those facilities. Each of the several investigative groups in the Department worked autonomously, and so no one office or official ever brought together all the scattered information available about Estes, information which could have brought a halt to his activities well in advance of his downfall. Orders and rulings from Department officials in Washington were misunderstood or completely ignored by the time they reached the field. And major decisions involving million-dollar operations were made by middle-level officials without coordination with other responsible officials and without proper supervision by those in charge of the Department.

#### Dilemma of Big Government

This is the minimum charge against the Department. Whether Estes benefitted improperly from the extensive political influence he undoubtedly possessed, whether there was collusion, corruption or favoritism, has not yet been proved or disproved.

The Agriculture Department's sad experience, however, is symptomatic of the dilemma of big government. In an age when everything is big and complex, big government is inevitable. But big government doesn't have to be wasteful government, or inefficient or overly bureaucratic -- although it will be all these things and more unless Congress exercises effective control.

As the branch of government most directly responsible to the people, Congress has the obligation to assure that government truly serves the needs and best interests of the people. And through its control of revenues and expenditures and its power to investigate as well as to legislate, Congress has the means to carry out this obligation.

This is not enough, however. There must be the will to do this, the independence to be constructively critical of the executive branch, the perseverance to master the intricacies of government administration, the integrity to resist the special pressures of special interests.

Government is like an amoeba -- constantly growing, perpetuating itself, developing a clientele of vested interests. To control it, to keep it responsive to the common welfare, Congress must insist that all government programs meet real public needs, that administration of the programs be maintained at a high level, and that obsolete activities be changed or eliminated.

This is the fundamental purpose of our Estes investigation, and nothing should stand in the way of seeing it through.

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