Opinion/Commentary/Letters

Presidential hide-and-seek not needed

David S. Broder

PLAINS, Ga. — There is every reason to take seriously Jimmy Carter's desire to escape from the "strange and unnatural world" in which past Presidents have moved.

The quoted phrase is not Carter's. It came from his press secretary, Jody Powell, in describing Carter's desire to avoid being trapped inside the ring of "staff, press and politicians" that surrounds a Chief Executive and bars him from meaningful contact with most citizens.

But if the phrase was Powell's, the sentiments were unmistakably Carter's. Veterans of the Plains press corps can regale newcomers with endless stories of Carter's efforts to outwit the hovering reporters and continue his normal pattern of life in his hometown.

According to these accounts, Carter on occasion has gone so far as to order his Secret Service drivers to keep off the headlights on his car when leaving his house in the dark, in order to gain a precious few minutes' head start on the pursuing press. At other times, the Secret Service using Carter's car has led the press on a high-speed chase in one direction, while he heads off in the opposite direction in a different car.

The stratagems have worked, on occasion. He was able to attend a funeral in nearby Americus, undetected by the press, and to slip away on a few other short trips.

But, inevitably, his evasive tactics have produced counter-measures in the press — monitoring of Secret Service frequencies for clues to Carter's movements, and efforts to outguess his plans and await his arrival at likely destinations.

This almost childish cat-and-mouse game is compounded by the difficulties created for the press by the fact that Carter's staff is not always well-briefed and up-to-date on his plans for activities that unquestionably are of public interest.

Part of this confusion is the inevitable result of operating in the improvised environment of Plains, a town which was surely never designed to serve as a presidential transition headquarters. But part of it stems also from Carter's overly casual attitude toward keeping his own press aides briefed on his plans.

The result has been a largely unnecessary and unhealthy increase in the tensions between Carter and the resident press corps — a snappishness on both sides that seems unjustified.

At the root of the problem are two quite legitimate but conflicting demands. A President is entitled to a private life. And Carter, more than most recent Presidents, really requires frequent contact with the ordinary, everyday world in order to maintain a healthy perspective. The small talk of Main Street, the peanut warehouse and the Baptist Church are important to him.

On a larger scale, regular visits with a variety of citizens are seen by Carter as a safeguard against the traps of the "closed world" of Washington insiders.

But legitimate as that desire is, it does not negate the equally legitimate duty of the press to monitor the activities of a President, And, sadly, the press cannot ignore the possibility of an accident or tragedy involving a President at any moment of public exposure — whether he is quail hunting or chatting on the street.

As a practical matter, a President cannot just wander loose, as most of us can do, uninhibited by a protective circle of security agents and a pack of pursuing reporters and cameramen.

But that does not mean he has to be entirely confined to a "strange and unnatural world." What is needed is some neutral ground, on which the President can visit informally with anyone he wishes, with the press outside but aware of where he is and what he's doing.

Certainly, no one objects to his doing that indoors, at his home here in Plains or, in a couple weeks, at the White House. The guest list for White House dinners or receptions can be made just as democratic as Carter pleases.

But there's also a useful model in a meeting Carter held during the campaign in Scranton, Pa. He arranged with local Democratic and union officials to have an hour-long discussion of unemployment problems with about a dozen jobless workers from the area. The meeting was held in a hotel ballroom, with Carter and his guests seated around a table, and reporters and cameramen at a distance where they could listen and film without being obtrusive.

It struck me at the time that Carter was exceptionally skillful at putting the workers at ease, drawing out their stories and their suggestions, responding directly to them — and helping them ignore the watching press corps.

The exchange was interesting, not momentous. But it seemed to satisfy Carter's own needs and gave some real meaning to his later comment, during the first debate, that unemployment was not a statistical problem but a tragedy for individual lives.

With some imagination, Carter can have that kind of contact with citizens as President, without playing the game of hide-and-seek that has marred the coverage of his activities here.

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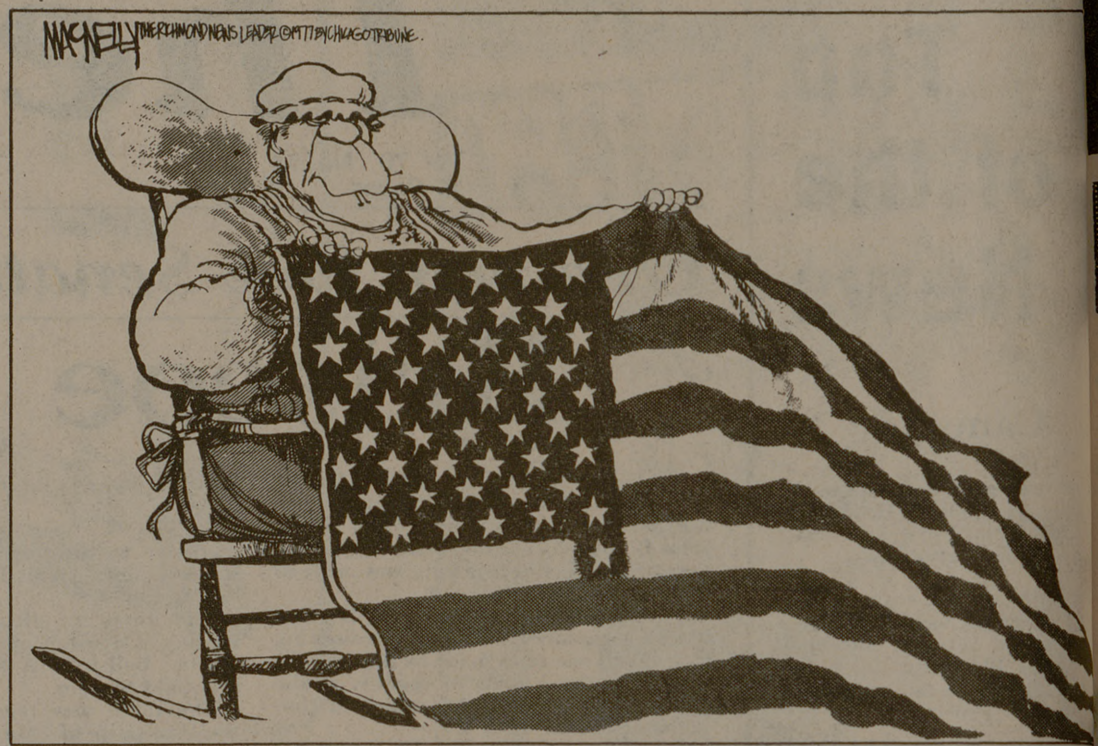

French have administrative continuity

By ANDRE CHAMBRAUD

PARIS — One of the more puzzling aspects of the American political scene, at least in French eyes, is the selection of a new administration. For we cannot quite understand how the U.S. government, with all its complexities, can afford to replace so many of its senior civil servants with fresh and often untested officials whose main qualification is loyalty to the incoming chief executive.

Here in France, the bureaucracy remains intact whichever party takes office, and this has the distinct advantage of providing the country with continuity.

But the French system, it seems to me, also has its drawbacks, since it tends to encourage excessively centralized government and it frequently shuts out the imaginative and original ideas that can only emerge with a periodic turnover of administrative personnel.

Thus the United States may gain benefits by adopting features of the French bureaucratic structure, and perhaps it would be in our interest to borrow something from the American experience.

An apparent difference between American and French civil servants is that the Americans give their allegiance to the government while the French pledge fidelity to the state. As a consequence, bureaucrats in France stay on the job regardless of the regime in power.

This was dramatized in 1940, when France was overrun by the Germans, who set up a puppet government in Vichy under Marshall Philippe Petain. Rather than join the resistance movement, most French officials went along with Petain, on the grounds that he represented "legitimacy."

The same thing happened in 1958, when the Fourth Republic crumbled and General de Gaulle became President of the Republic. Many old politicians disappeared, but the bureaucrats who had formerly served them continued to work for de Gaulle, and he welcomed their support.

The French civil service again threw its weight behind Valery Giscard d'Estaing, when he captured the presidency from the Gaullists in May 1974.

The prospect now is that a leftist coalition of Socialists and Communists may come to power within the next year or so. But this is not likely to change the bureaucratic structure here.

Senior French civil servants are more than a professional group. They are virtually a caste, most of whose members have been trained at the National School of Administration, a state institution especially created to educate top bureaucrats.

These men and women are high calibre figures who have come through rigorous competitive examinations, both to enter and be graduated from the School of Administration. They know each other from their school days, and hence their sense of solidarity is strong. Their ethics are above reproach, their ambition being to exercise authority rather than to earn fat salaries.

They are responsible for many of the innovations that have been introduced here within recent years, such as fiscal reform and the efforts to develop the backward economies of certain French regions.

Most important, they have guaranteed France's stability, particularly during periods when the political situations have been turbulent. The Fourth Republic, which finally collapsed in 1958, could not have held together as long as it did without the solid French bureaucracy.

Lately, however, many civil servants here have begun to move out of the bureaucracy into politics. Giscard himself is a former finance official, and Jacques Chirac, who recently resigned as prime minister, also once was a bureaucrat. Similarly several graduates of the School of Administration are currently working for the Socialist Party.

If this trend continues, France could gradually start to resemble the United States to the extent that the invisible government of bureaucrats, which has functioned so efficiently until now, may become a more visible government of politicians.

Should this occur, France will have lost its impartial administrators, whose skill at keeping the country on an even keel has been useful. At the same time, though, the government may become more sensitive to the attitudes of the people, and this would be a step in the right direction.

Chambraud writes on political affairs for Le Point, the French weekly magazine.

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British seem to be happy despite economic plight

By FRANCES CAIRNCROSS

LONDON — Britain is plagued by unemployment, inflation, growing racial strife, a depreciating currency and the threat of a political crisis. Its standard of living, once the world's highest, has dropped precipitously within recent years.

Yet a Gallup survey conducted in 70 countries not long ago found that, with the exception of the Australians and the Scandinavians, the British regard themselves to be the happiest people on earth. The poll also found the British more satisfied with their economic lot than any other Europeans except the West Germans.

These attitudes betray the statistics, which show the British on the average to be half as affluent as Americans and not much wealthier than Italians. But perhaps we can get a bit closer to real conditions by looking at three of my acquaintances.

One of the best tests of the way a country's income is distributed is reflected in the lives of its senior citizens. Miss Violet Goldsmith, now 70 and retired, has little beyond a pension amounting to $31 per week, most of it from the government and the rest from the grocery store in which she worked.

She owns her home, an 18th century cottage in an Essex village. She presses her own wine and makes her own dresses. She cannot afford a television set, and her brother pays her telephone bills. She eats reasonably well, but her house, which lacks central heating, is chilly in winter.

When Miss Goldsmith is ill, the National Health Service treats her free of charge. Her main complaint is that bus fares have gone up. Otherwise, she says, the quality of her life has barely changed in three years.

Bill Williams, a 35-year-old middle-level executive in a London firm, is having a harder time. He earns nearly $10,000 per year after taxes, and he finds it increasingly difficult to provide for his wife and two children.

Bill suffers from the flat British wage structure. An American executive in a big company earns about 11 times more than the average worker. Here in Britain, an executive earns about five times more. So Bill tries to maintain a managerial life style on a comparatively modest salary, and he has money troubles.

He rents an apartment in London, and he has a vacation place in Wales. In a few years, he would like to send his children to a private school, but that would cost him roughly $2,800 per year. The only way he can make ends meet, he believes, is to persuade his wife to return to work.

The few British who go skiing these days are young singles or older businessmen. My husband and I met Patrick Selkirk while skiing in Austria. The director of a publishing house, he is in his mid-50's and rich. He leads the good life.

Patrick earns the equivalent of $34,000 per year. His company provides him with one of the prime perquisites of top British executives, a chauffeur-driven car. He also has an expense account, and he takes his wife and three daughters on "business" trips to Italy every year.

The Selkirk's home, a lovely Victorian house overlooking the rolling expanse of Hampstead Heath, is probably worth $150,000. They entertain frequently. Patrick estimates that his wife and daughters spend almost $1,000 per year on clothes.

Now, putting these three individuals aside, consider some naked figures that may add to our view of the overall picture.

The typical British family spends one-quarter of its income on food, one-eighth on housing, the same on public transportation or running a car, one-twelfth on alcohol a[nd to]baccó, and about the same o[n ...] thing.

Roughly half the families [in the] country have an automobile or [tele]phone. About 65 per cent h[ave a] washing machine, and 75 per [cent] have refrigerators. Virtually no[ne] has a dishwasher, but 93 pe[r cent of] households have a televisio[n,] Miss Goldsmith being in a d[...] minority.

If this appears to be too mate[rialis]tic an approach, consider some [other] indicators. A third of British [...] spend their vacations at hom[e ...] third of Londoners who work [...] an average of 45 minutes pe[r day] commuting. Infant mortality, [a] guide to health care, is less here [than] it is in either the United Sta[tes or] West Germany.

Adding it up, I would ventu[re to] say that the British enjoy a sta[ndard] of living that may be somewhat [lower] than that of their American co[unter]parts — but certainly not half as [low] as the statistics suggest.

In terms of the actual way the[y live,] rather than the cash income the[y re]ceive, Miss Goldsmith is not [...] different from lonely Ame[rican] grandmothers abandoned in Fl[orida,] while Patrick Selkirk's life s[tyle,] especially the chauffeur-dr[iven] limousine, might be envied [on] Madison Avenue.

The biggest gap, as I see it, i[s be]tween British lawyers, doc[tors,] teachers and middle-level m[ana]gers, and their opposite numbe[rs in] the United States. In short, the Williamses on both sides of the [At]lantic. Here they represent a small fraction of the population; for the rest, Dr. Gallup is pro[bably] correct. They are poor but hap[py.]

Ms. Cairncross writes on s[...] and economic issues for The G[uard]ian, the British daily.

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