

The \$700,000 Outhouse

BY MIKE SUTTON

It seems that our National Park Service managed to spend more than \$700,000 on an outhouse in Pennsylvania. I was very impressed by this, although not favorably. Now, in all fairness, I must say that their manor outhouse didn't actually cost \$700,000 to build – more than \$300K of that was spent designing it!

When I was growing up in East Texas we didn't have indoor plumbing. My Uncle Bobby designed and constructed our outhouse from scrap lumber. Total cost: approximately \$7, including the mid-50s architectural fee and labor rate.

Of course, Bobby, like the TV character MacGyver, could make a hydrogen bomb out of a tin can, four ounces of potato peels and a teaspoon of baking soda. So it really isn't fair to compare him to the mere mortals at the National Park Service. One thing is for sure, if my uncle knew our government had spent almost three-quarters of a million dollars on a two-holer, he would be spinning in his grave like a blender on purée.

It is my understanding that the Park Service was recently downsized. It is certainly comforting to think that the savings from that activity were spent wisely. Of course, in the category of government waste, this outhouse makes the iceberg that sunk the Titanic look like an ice cube.

Further adding to my concern over this story was the fact that no one in the Park Service would discuss the project. They were not at all anxious to explain why they felt it necessary to import wood from Australia for the exterior benches.

An even more troubling aspect of this story than the money wasted is the Park Service's refusal to justify their actions. Of course, on its best day, the outhouse project is indefensible. Unfortunately, stonewalling has become epidemic in government and even business today.

Why? Because if someone can hold an issue at bay long enough it will usually go away. There are exceptions (e.g., Watergate) but for the most part the public eventually loses interest and shortly thereafter so does the press. Voilà! Home free!

Stonewalling may have some insidious side effects as well. It would appear to me that because there is decreasing accountability in government as a result of the "just say nothing" philosophy, people are getting sloppy. Let me give you an example.

At the beginning of the Clinton administration, a woman named Zoe Baird was nominated to become the Attorney General. During her confirmation hearings it was revealed that Ms. Baird had not paid Social Security taxes for a household employee. Shortly thereafter, her nomination was withdrawn.

Whether or not you are a fan of the Clinton Administration, you have to admit that there are probably very few Americans who haven't purchased some item or service without paying all the necessary taxes on it. So Ms. Baird wasn't unique in that regard.

One might argue that Ms. Baird's background might have been checked more thoroughly before sending her name to Capitol Hill in an effort to avoid embarrassment for all concerned. But, be that as it may, a new candidate for Attorney General was needed.

Enter Ms. Kimba Wood. Unfortunately, her nomination was withdrawn as well for a variety of reasons, including the same ones that derailed Ms. Baird's chances.

It is hard to imagine anyone interviewing a second candidate — after the first had crashed and burned — and not saying: "So, Judge Wood. Let's talk about your household employees." But apparently that didn't happen. So, exit candidate number 2.

Of course, Ms. Janet Reno made the cut, but then "the third time is the charm." However, the background check on one of her assistants, Mr. Webster Hubble, apparently fell a little short.

Maybe the second most disturbing thing about all this is that no White House staff heads rolled. It would be hard to imagine a corporate executive's staff surviving one missed homework assignment like that, much less two, three, four...

The most disturbing issue about the Park Service's outhouse in particular, and our government's lack of accountability in general, is that American citizens put up with it. We seem to have developed a national apathy about politics, politicians and government. And, we accept answers at that level that most of us would never stand for on a personal level.

For instance, how many people would allow their manager to get away with "No comment," after being told by an employee that his/her paycheck had bounced? Why? Because that type of issue affects us individually. The outhouse does too, maybe even more; we just can't feel it yet! 



NaSPA member Mike Sutton's Vietnam novel, *No Survivors* (ISBN 0-8338-0226-7) is available from Marshall Jones Co. at (800) 258-1505. Mike is donating

33 percent of the royalties from his book to the Center for Homeless Veterans.

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