CHAPTER 3

Circumstances

TO A BUSINESS EXECUTIVE, the importance of tasks and mission is old hat. Figuring out how best to define tasks and motivate workers to perform those tasks is often described as creating the right organizational culture. The voluminous literature about effective firms repeatedly stresses these matters, urging business executives to emulate "the one hundred best firms" or "the Japanese" or "Theory Z" or whatever is currently the fashionable model of well-run enterprises. The literature on public administration, however, rarely mentions these matters. Save for a few celebrated exceptions, books on government agencies hardly refer to organizational culture at all. There will be chapters on structure, planning, decision making, and congressional oversight—all important matters, to be sure—but none on what the organization *does* or the problem of getting people to *want* to do it.

The omission of much discussion of tasks and incentives in these books may partly reflect the academic interests of their authors, but to a large degree it accurately captures the world of the government executive. In the United States, high-level government executives are preoccupied with maintaining their agencies in a complex, conflict-ridden, and unpredictable political environment, and middle-level government managers are immersed in the effort to cope with the myriad constraints that this environment has imposed on their agencies.

Government executives spend much more of their time and energy on handling, face to face, external constituencies than do business executives. One example: The chief executive officer of the New England Electric System (NEES), a firm with assets of nearly $4 billion, revenues of almost $1.5 billion per year, and a work force of over five thousand persons, meets with his board of directors for three or four hours about six times a year;

much of the business is routine, the meetings are invariably amicable, and the CEO almost always gets what he wants. During one period studied by the author, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, an agency with about 22,400 employees and a budget of $1.4 billion, met with his "board of directors"—the several congressional committees having authority over the FBI—more than eighteen times a year.[1] The meetings were often long and acrimonious and the director frequently did not get what he wanted. To finance its projects, NEES could use retained earnings or borrow funds in the bond market; to finance its projects, the FBI could neither retain nor borrow money but had to get appropriations from Congress. The money borrowed by NEES was its own to use for the term of the loan (usually many years); the money obtained by the FBI was available only for one year and then had to be reappropriated. The press rarely investigated NEES but often investigated the FBI.

Government executives must spend so much time coping with their agencies' external environment that they have relatively little time to shape its internal life. Moreover, the typical presidential appointee is only in office for 2.5 years (2.2 years if you exclude regulatory commissioners).[2] As a result, the tasks of a government agency are more likely than those of a firm to be defined by factors other than the preferences of the executive.

Tasks versus Goals

You might think that these limits on leadership are not very important; after all, cannot we infer what an agency will do by looking at its stated goals? If you believe that, open the *United States Government Manual* to almost any page. There you will find statements such as the following:

- Promote the long-range security and well-being of the United States [Department of State]
- Facilitate the full development of the human and natural resource potential of Indian and Alaska Native people [Bureau of Indian Affairs]
- Organize, train, and equip active duty and reserve forces for the preservation of peace, security, and the defense of our nation [Department of the Army]
- Develop viable urban communities by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment [Office of the Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development of the Department of Housing and Urban Development]

- Foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States [Department of Labor]
- [Achieve] the orderly development and operation of broadcast services [Federal Communications Commission]

All these goals are unclear because reasonable people will differ as to the meaning of such words as "well-being," "potential," "security," "viable," "decent," "suitable," "welfare," "orderly," and "development." Moreover, even if they should agree on the meaning of one goal, they will disagree as to what other goals should be sacrificed to attain them. Should the "full" development of Indians be pursued even if it means the destruction of the native culture of a given tribe? Should "decent" housing be supplied without regard to cost? What balance should be struck between the interests of over-the-air broadcasters, cable broadcasters, and satellite operators in "developing" broadcast services? Should the reserve forces of the army be trained to the extent of calling up reservists for active duty without regard to their civilian occupations and personal preferences?

Many private bureaucracies also have goals that are just as vague and hard to attain as those of public agencies. What is the goal of Harvard College? To educate youth? To preserve and enhance culture? What do these words mean, and how do we achieve whatever state of affairs they supposedly describe? If you cannot answer these questions, how can you decide what professors at Harvard should do? Since nobody can infer professorial tasks from collegiate goals, who defines these tasks, and how? Private colleges, as well as most other private organizations, may not do any better than government agencies in defining their tasks, but being private, they are competitive enterprises supported by the voluntary payments of clients and benefactors. These contributors are free to reward the colleges that please them and shun those that displease them. A government agency, by contrast, is usually a monopoly provider of some service and is supported by a legislative appropriation that is paid for by taxes extracted from citizens who may or may not benefit from that agency. The tasks of operators in private organizations with vague goals become defined through a process of trial and error and internal negotiation that is then tested by competitive natural selection. Some organizations prosper, others merely survive, still others fail. The tasks of operators in government agencies with vague goals are probably set in much the same way, but without a regular test of the fitness of the solution.

To understand a government bureaucracy one must understand how its front-line workers learn what to do. Let us call those workers the operators. (Just who is an operator is not always easy to know, but in general it is a person who does the work that justifies the existence of the organization—teachers in a school, guards in a prison, doctors and nurses in a hospital, patrol officers and detectives in a police department, combat soldiers in an army, check-writers in a disbursing agency, letter sorters and carriers in the Postal Service, grant-givers in a funding agency, diplomats in the State Department, and so on.) The work of the operators is the place to begin because it is their efforts that determine whether the agencies' clients (that is, we the people) are satisfied. Moreover, one cannot say many interesting things about the structure, incentives, and leadership of an agency without first knowing what behaviors are supposed to be organized by those structures, motivated by those incentives, and directed by those leaders.

This is not usually the way government agencies are viewed. As mentioned in the last chapter, there is a tendency among us all to complain about how far the performance of an agency differs from its goals and to speculate about the bureaucratic "pathologies" that may account for this inadequate performance. But that only makes sense if the goals are sufficiently clear that reasonable people can agree on what they mean, and whether the agency has the freedom of action (the authority and resources) necessary to achieve them. A clear goal is an "operational goal."*

Some government agencies do have clear (or operational) goals, and what the front-line workers do can be inferred from them. In the next section, we shall look at some examples. When the agencies have vague or inconsistent goals (as is usually the case), what the workers do will be shaped by the circumstances they encounter at the job, the beliefs and experiences they bring to the job, or the external pressures on the job. Much of this chapter will consider circumstances, especially what I call "imperatives" and peer-group expectations. In the next chapter, we shall look at four factors that are brought to the organization by its members—prior experiences, professional norms, personality, and ideology. In chapter 5 we shall look at forces that are part of the organization's environment—the demands of interest groups.

Defining Tasks: Goals

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has operational goals, at least with respect to the retirement program it administers, and has the freedom and resources with which to pursue them. It is required by law to

*By goal I mean an image of a desired future state of affairs. If that image can be compared unambiguously to an actual state of affairs, it is an operational goal. If it cannot be so compared, and thus we cannot make verifiable statements about whether the goal has been attained, it is a general goal. "Tax adjusted gross incomes at the rate of 28 percent" is an operational goal; "award broadcast licenses so as to serve the public interest, convenience, and necessity" is a general goal. Public agencies rarely have single, clear goals. Their ends are often general and always multiple. For a fuller discussion of these distinctions, see

send a check each month to every eligible retired person in the nation. The amount of the check is determined by an elaborate but exact formula, the eligibility of the recipient by well-understood laws and regulations. The SSA performs this task with remarkable precision, considering that it pays out claims of one kind or another to 35 million people and collects taxes from 110 million more.[3]

Matters are much more complex with respect to its goal of aiding disabled persons because the law is ambiguous as to what constitutes a disability. As a result, there has been more controversy about how the SSA defines its task of helping the disabled than about its task of helping the elderly.[4]

There are, of course, conflicts in the goals of the Social Security *program*. Some think payroll taxes should be set so that each person receives in benefits an amount that reflects how much he or she paid in; if that is done, the rich will get bigger retirement checks than the poor. Others think that taxes should be set so as to put a floor under the benefits of the poor; if that is done, then benefits no longer will be related to what recipients paid in taxes. People disagree over whether benefits should be indexed to inflation and whether people should be entitled to full benefits at ages 62 or 65 or 68. But these policy questions do not of themselves create organizational difficulties in the retirement program: SSA can define its tasks by inferring them from its goals, whichever of these goals is selected.

That SSA can define its tasks by knowing its goals does not mean it will suffer no bureaucratic problems. As we shall see in later chapters, the agency has had a lot of trouble in acquiring and using efficient computers and has been torn asunder by various reorganization schemes. But these problems arise, not from ambiguity about its goals, but from political constraints. These constraints determine how much money is allocated for administration, the salaries it offers to attract key personnel, the identity of the administrator, and the process by which it is allowed to acquire new equipment. The constraints do not affect how it defines its tasks (though in a different political environment they could). In short, SSA is able logically and free politically to define its tasks by reference to (most of) its goals.

That definition traditionally has been this: "Our central task is to pay benefits on time and accurately." Around this simple view has arisen an organizational culture, at least in the field offices of SSA, that emphasizes service. A study by the General Accounting Office (GAO) described "SSA's culture" as involving "face-to-face public service." This culture, in turn,

Edward C. Banfield, "Note on Conceptual Scheme," in M. Meyerson and E. C. Banfield, eds., *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest* (New York: Free Press, 1955), 303ff. Scholars will recognize my heavy indebtedness to Banfield.

implies the maintenance of many field offices each with high staffing levels (even when consolidation and staff reduction might result in substantial savings in administrative costs).[5] A top-level SSA administrator confirmed this to me in an interview in 1987: "Out in the field, the service ethic is very strong," though he added that "consistency" (that is, following the eligibility rules) was as important as "service." This culture is reinforced by congressional insistence that field offices not be reduced in number (there are 1,300 of them, in addition to approximately 4,000 smaller "contact stations"). The service ethic is sufficiently strong that when a new SSA administrator announced that she wanted more field offices to be open during the evening and on weekends and to allow beneficiaries to make appointments (rather than show up and wait in line), the field offices by and large welcomed what many other government agencies would have viewed as an objectionable burden.

The United States Post Office, before it was transformed into the semi-independent United States Postal Service, also had relatively clear goals. Deliver the mail as quickly, cheaply, and accurately as possible. Of course, how much one is willing to sacrifice in cheapness or accuracy to maximize speed of delivery was a matter of dispute. But the goals at least permitted the postmaster general to specify the tasks the Post Office would perform: collect, sort, and deliver mail. But unlike the Social Security Administration, the Post Office did not have the political freedom to define those tasks on its own. Letter carriers had enough power to influence how their jobs were defined, members of Congress had more than enough power to decide how many post offices there would be and where they would be located, the White House would decide when to ask for a rate increase, and organizations representing interested users (publishers, greeting-card manufacturers, direct-mail advertisers) would pressure Congress to keep rates down.[6] Even after the reorganization that produced the Postal Service, some of these constraints on the postmaster general remained in ways that have impeded (though not as much as formerly) the creation of a culture appropriate to achieving the organization's goals.

Defining Tasks: Situational Imperatives

When goals are vague, circumstances become important. Chief among those circumstances are the situations with which operators must cope on a daily basis. Suppose you take a job as a police officer, prison guard, school teacher, State Department desk officer, or inspector in the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. When you report for work the behavior of your clients and the technology available to you will powerfully shape what you do, no matter what the stated goals of the organization may be.

Rookie cops are told this the first day on patrol. "Forget what you learned in the police academy," veteran partners or sergeants will tell them. "I'll show you what police work is really all about." Energetic police administrators often try to prevent this street-corner socialization, but they only succeed within narrow limits, if at all, because the patrol officer, working alone or with one partner, must impose authority on people who are unpredictable, apprehensive, and often hostile. Most of the time when an officer on patrol is summoned, by radio call or passing citizen, he or she can expect to encounter a situation in which great discretion must be exercised over matters of the utmost importance (life and death, honor and dishonor) involving frightened, drunk, quarrelsome, confused, angry, injured, evasive, or violent people.[7] The officer in this situation must exert his or her authority—must "take charge." At least in large American cities (and I suspect elsewhere as well), the uniform and badge do not automatically signify authority to which people will defer. The officer's behavior must supplement and extend such authority as the law may confer. This is especially important when the clients are involved in a quarrel—a domestic dispute, a street-corner brawl, or an argument between landlord and tenant, shopowner and teenagers, etcetera. These circumstances require that order be restored or maintained. But as we have seen, order is a matter of opinion and the methods of maintaining it a matter of art, not science. Though it is the officer's most difficult task, it is also the most common. In one study, nearly a third of all calls for service involved order maintenance, and if accidents (which often involve quarreling motorists) are added to the total, these situations accounted for well over 40 percent of the officer's calls.[8] By contrast, only 10 percent of the calls were matters that clearly involved stopping or solving a crime.

Even when a serious crime has occurred and the goal of the organization is thus reasonably clear ("find and bring to justice the perpetrator"), the circumstances surrounding the investigation are often confused and even chaotic. The officer soon learns that not all victims give a complete or honest account of their losses: The "stolen T.V." may have been taken back by its owner from a "victim" who earlier had "borrowed" it, the "stolen car" may never have existed, or the "assault" may have been started by the victim who then lost the fight.[9] The officer quickly discovers the value of being wary and skeptical. When a suspect is found (and that is not often) he or she will often lie and sometimes try to escape.

All of these circumstances lead the street cop to define the job not in terms of "enforcing the law" but in terms of "handling the situation." To handle the situation, one must first "take charge." Out of the need to take charge, supplemented by a sense of the physical danger inherent in the occupation, the officers develop what Jerome Skolnick has called a "working personality."[10] William Muir has shown that this personality is not always the same: In his superb study of the Oakland Police Department, he found that the officers had different ways (some better, some worse) of taking charge.[11] But take charge they all did, for that was the essence of their task.

Now, it may be objected that a situational imperative such as "take charge" is not much of a job description, especially if there are many different ways of taking charge. That is true. What these difficult, face-to-face situations produce might be described more accurately as an overriding concern with which the operator must somehow cope. The situation defines the outer limits of his or her freedom of action, and thus the outer limits of what will be determined by organizational goals or individual personality. For reasons set forth in chapter 11, the heads of government agencies often ignore these situational factors and thus either allow operators to manage them by instinct or induce the operators to manage them in ways that lead to ineffectiveness, disorder, or corruption. In chapters 11 and 12, a few examples—they are all too few!—will be given of executives who have not only understood situational imperatives but provided a way of handling them which reconciles the operators' desire for survival with the executive's desire for effectiveness.

The employees of prisons and mental hospitals, like police officers, encounter situational factors so powerful as to make formal organizational goals all but meaningless. The stated goals of a prison may include deterring crime and rehabilitating criminals, but the reality of prison life, more than these goals, determines the job of a correctional officer. These realities have been well stated by, among others, Gresham Sykes: Prisoners are typically young, energetic men who have, on the average, committed several crimes before they enter prison for the first time, and many are serving their second or third sentence. They outnumber the guards. In many prisons they have little difficulty fashioning weapons out of shop tools and dining-hall cutlery. From time to time there is a riot, occasionally one of extraordinary savagery (as in New Mexico in 1980). Sometimes there is an escape.

You are a correctional officer. Whatever the administrators may say is the goal of your institution, to you the central imperative is to stay alive and unharmed. If there is a riot or an escape, you will be at best criticized and at worst killed. To avoid that you must control the inmates. *Control*—not deterrence, not rehabilitation—becomes the defining focus of your energies.[12] Precisely how you go about achieving and maintaining control will vary with your personality and the administration of the prison. You could practice terror. You could turn prison management over to powerful con bosses who by force, extortion, and guile manage the inmates in ways that keep them from threatening you. (The con bosses will expect favors

from you in exchange for their valuable services—contraband, privileges, power. You will have to pay.) You could give the inmates more rights and freedoms in hopes that this will pacify them. You could attempt to regulate their daily lives by the systematic administration of rewards and penalties. *How* you perform your task will vary depending on how you, in turn, are supervised, but the central problem will be defined, whatever that supervision may be, by the imperatives of the situation you confront daily.

For a long time, attendants in mental hospitals faced a similar imperative. The goals of the hospital might be to cure mental illness or promote mental health, but the institution typically did not have at its disposal the means to produce mental health even assuming its administrators could give a coherent and unambiguous definition of what constituted it. Doctors, psychiatrists, and social workers might do their best to treat the patients in their care, but for you, the ward attendant, the central fact of daily life was that you were in charge of people who engaged in erratic, sometimes bizarre behavior, who did not follow orders as healthy people might, and who were sometimes incoherent, incontinent, and violent. Your task was to manage these people so as to minimize the threats and inconveniences they posed for you. This could be accomplished by restraint, sedation, isolation, electroshock therapy, or the granting and withholding of privileges. The precise means used would be set by hospital policy (albeit with some evasions), but the end toward which these means were directed was determined more by the situation in the wards than by the stated goals of the institution.[13] In this respect, you as an attendant were in much the same position as a prison guard or patrol officer—asserting and maintaining control, even though legally the persons in your charge were not suspects or convicts.

Mental hospitals have changed. The advent of tranquilizing drugs has made it possible to reduce the number of people in these institutions and to control those who remain with more benign, chemical means. This has no doubt improved the quality of life in many hospitals. Whether it has changed fundamentally the task of the attendant is unclear. A mental hospital is different from a general hospital because patients in the latter are ordinarily welcomed back to their homes by their families and friends, and thus it is not necessary to have a core staff of operators whose task it is to control the behavior of people who do not want to be there and whom their families do not wish to take back.

Schoolteachers ordinarily do not have to deal with criminals, convicts, or mental patients, and the goal of their organization, to educate the young, is less ambiguous than that of other client-serving institutions. Though we may argue about what constitutes education, we can agree on certain components of it; learning to read and write, for example, are in almost everybody's view an essential part of education. A teacher is achieving the goal of the organization when he or she teaches these skills and failing to achieve it when he or she does not.

But if learning is, to a degree, an understandable goal, it is not the only concern of the classroom teacher. As Willard Waller pointed out over half a century ago, the teacher faces two tasks: focus student energies to produce learning and control student energies to maintain order.[14] In principle the two tasks are complementary: For learning to occur, order must exist. But in practice the two tasks can diverge sharply. In some circumstances, the preoccupation with order dominates the concern for learning. There is some evidence, for example, that schools in lower-status communities display a greater concern for order than do those in upper-status ones.[15] That relationship might exist because either community expectations or pupil behavior (or both) shape the way teachers define their tasks.

Situational imperatives may seem to have their greatest effect on how operators define their tasks when the organization must deal with uncooperative or threatening clients face-to-face. But the situation may shape tasks even in organizations that are not, in Michael Lipsky's term, "street-level bureaucracies."[16] The United States Department of State does not derive its tasks from some clearly understood goal. Indeed, some critics claim that the men and women who work in State engage in no meaningful tasks at all. Diplomats are caricatured as "cookie pushers," "equivocaters," or "partygoers in striped pants." Needless to say, the foreign service officers who comprise the core of the professional personnel at State do not see themselves in this light. To them, their activities involve work toward a goal of great importance—representing and advancing the interests of the United States abroad. They are engaged in producing "foreign policy." The agency does other things as well—it issues passports and visas and runs educational exchange programs with other nations—but its central activity is to help define foreign policy.[17]

But what is foreign policy? What are the legitimate interests of the United States? No one can answer these questions with any clarity, partly because people disagree about what our interests are and partly because even those who can agree realize that those interests change in unpredictable ways with changing circumstances. Even supposing we can agree on a definition of interests, how do we know what course of action will achieve them? The State Department has goals, but they are so general that no executive can derive from them a clear definition of the department's tasks.

Despite all this ambiguity and conflict, thousands of foreign service officers go to work every day and do something. What is it they do? Why is it they do these things rather than others? What they do is in large measure defined for them by the environment in which they find them-

selves. Daily they confront a torrent of paper and delegations from other nations. Each piece of paper, every delegation, involves an act of foreign policy. These officers must develop a daily routine by which to manage this torrent in a way that is, arguably, related to the attainment of that vague goal, to "represent and defend national interests." As Donald P. Warwick argues in his insightful study of the State Department, the production of foreign policy involves tasks that occur at all levels and in response to even minor actions within the department. "A consular official's decision to refuse a visa to a student activist in Latin America is as much an expression of U.S. foreign policy as formal proclamations opposing student radicalism."[18] There is no distinction between "policy" and "administration"; almost every administrative act has policy implications and may, indeed, *be* policy whether intended or not.

Foreign service officers "maintain relationships" by the careful exchange of written memoranda with each other and the representatives of foreign powers. "Boiled down to specific tasks, the most direct expression of policy is a written report," Warwick observes. "Words and paper take on enormous importance in the life of the State Department."[19] The central task of diplomats is determined by the need to deliver, respond to, and comment on written reports. A self-evaluation conducted by the department in 1970 confirmed this in language that cannot be improved upon:

> The Service has prized drafting ability above almost all other skills. We emphasize this skill in recruitment and reward it generously in our promotion system. The prize jobs in the service are the reporting jobs. Foreign Service Inspectors habitually examine reporting officers "chron" [i.e., chronological] files to determine whether there has been an adequate volume of production. Little wonder that our ablest and most energetic officers literally seek out opportunities to report, whether the need is urgent or not.[20]

When any action may have policy implications and thus be subject to political criticism after the fact, people taking those actions will have a natural tendency toward caution. Police officers know this and thus, despite a popular impression of over-zealousness fostered by occasional reports of misused authority, tend to proceed cautiously in most instances and, if anything, to underenforce the law.[21] But police work does not invariably leave a paper trail, and so patrol officers are relatively free to use their discretion without worrying that each and every act will be reviewed by people who have regular access to the documents produced by the exercise of that discretion.

The central constraint on those diplomats who perform the reporting task is the constant awareness that the written word *is* policy and thus is subject to close and often hostile scrutiny. As we shall see in later chapters, this task shapes the management system of the State Department and leads to many of the criticisms made of the Department from the outside—criticisms that are often based on a misunderstanding of what diplomats can and cannot reasonably be expected to do. A task defined by situational imperatives leads to the development of an organizational culture that emphasizes caution.

Even when goals are relatively clear, the situation can define the tasks if one way of doing the job seems easier or more attractive. In that case, we say that technology (used broadly to refer to any set of tactics) determines tasks. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is charged by law with promulgating rules designed to improve worker safety and health. The organizations that pressed for this law were pretty much in agreement that industrial hazards presented a greater threat to worker health than to safety. From time to time workers may be injured by a machine lacking a safety feature or by a poorly designed ladder, but these risks, serious as they are, are not as grave as the prospect of thousands of workers becoming ill or dying as a result of exposure to toxic chemicals. Moreover, both workers and factory managers already have incentives to reduce accidents—such a reduction spares employees obvious pain and suffering, increases productivity, decreases sick leave, and cuts the cost of insurance. By contrast, neither workers nor managers may be aware of health hazards or, if they are aware, they may discount the importance of hazards that will exact their uncertain toll at some distant date.

Given these circumstances, one would expect that most of the regulations issued by OSHA in its formative years would address health hazards. Not so. As John Mendeloff has shown, OSHA has done more to address safety than health concerns.[22] The reason has nothing to do with insidious interest-group pressures or distorted personal values.[23] Regulation-writers find it much easier to address safety than health hazards. The former are technically easier to find, describe, assess, and control than the latter. A worker falls from a platform. The cause is clear—no railing. The effect is clear—a broken leg. The cost is easily calculated—so many days in the hospital, so many days of lost wages, so much to build a railing. The directive is easy to write: "Install railings on platforms." But if a worker develops cancer fifteen years after starting work in a chemical plant, the cause of the cancer will be uncertain and controversial. The cost of the disease will be hard to calculate. The solution will be hard to specify: One can write a directive that says "reduce exposure to chemical X," but medical science will provide only imperfect and controversial guidance to such questions as these: "Reduce by how much?" "Over what length of time?" "With what likely benefits?" As a result of these difficulties, OSHA

has been criticized ever since its creation for how slowly it has issued health standards and those that have been issued have been hotly contested.[24]

Wars provide perhaps the most compelling examples of technology determining tasks. An army may allow the existence of a new weapon to determine how it defines and manages the tasks of combat soldiers. Generals are often accused of preparing to fight the last war. That is not a fair criticism. Since no general, at least in modern times, can know with any certainty what the next war will be like, all he has to draw upon in making his preparations are experience and conjecture. Since conjecture is, after all, conjectural, experience inevitably will play a large and proper role in guiding his plans. Successful generals do not ignore the lessons of the past. No one knows in advance what the lessons will be, but some people guess better than others.

As we saw in chapters 1 and 2, French and German generals drew different lessons from World War I. The French believed that artillery and machine guns would dominate the battlefield in the future as they had in the past, and so designed the tasks of infantry around these weapons. The squad was organized to service the machine gun and fixed fortifications were built to protect the infantry. The Germans drew a different lesson: the advantages of artillery and the machine gun could be overcome by maneuver and mobility. The squad was organized to find and exploit, by independent action, weaknesses in the enemy front. The French plans were driven by close attention to technology; the German plans, brilliantly successful, were based on an effort to outwit technology. The command system implied by this distinction in the way tasks were defined led, in the case of the French, to an organization so centralized and inflexible as to be unable to adapt quickly and effectively to the unexpected German tactics. In the case of the Germans, the command system was relatively decentralized and improvisational, and so was able to adapt to almost anything that might transpire.

Some observers believe that the American army might have been more effective in Vietnam had it not been organized around technological innovations that turned out to be inappropriate to the circumstances of the war. The availability of the helicopter, the computer, and sophisticated communications systems made it dangerously easy to centralize control of the war in the hands of distant headquarters. Jobs once performed by sergeants, captains, and majors on the battlefield were now being performed by colonels, generals, and politicians observing the battle from helicopters, hearing about it on radios, or getting data about it from computers.[25]

The critical environment challenge was not simply to defeat the North Vietnamese regular army, but to wrest control of the South Vietnamese villages from the Viet Cong guerrillas. For most of the war, the American army not only did not do this, it did not try very hard. Village defense required sending small detachments to remote places where they would live and work with the natives. In such situations, there was little advantage (and possibly considerable risk) in having massive firepower or advanced technologies.

The critical tasks of the army had been defined previously by the overriding army goal of defending Western Europe against a Soviet armored attack. Most of the units sent to Vietnam had been organized and trained with this in mind. What might work on the plains of Bavaria would not necessarily work in the remote highlands of Vietnam. Interestingly, the one American armed service that tried hard to develop a village defense program was the Marine Corps, a force not organized and trained to fight massive armored battles in Europe. Lightly equipped and with a history of fighting in small wars, the marines in Vietnam quickly developed a village-oriented tactic (the Combined Action Platoons) whereby small units would move into a South Vietnamese village and stay there, committed to defending it against enemy attacks while helping the natives to develop the ability to defend themselves. By all accounts, the marines succeeded in providing greater security to Vietnamese villages at lower casualty rates than did the army.

The army's reaction, according to Andrew F. Krepinevich, was "ill-disguised disappointment, if not outright disapproval."[26] It made only halfhearted efforts to emulate the marines' tactics, preferring (at least until General Creighton Abrams assumed command late in the war) to rely on search-and-destroy missions involving massive attacks by large units against such Vietnamese forces as could be lured into major battles. Scholars disagree as to why army doctrine did not change in response to the realities of war in Southeast Asia. The initial doctrinal emphasis clearly came from having the tasks and structure of the army determined by the need to defend Western Europe and to do so by deploying heavy firepower and advanced technologies that would minimize human losses. In Vietnam that emphasis was probably reinforced by political constraints at home—the perceived need to win battles, inflict heavy (and measurable) losses on the enemy, and generally follow a strategy that might produce a quick victory (and thus avoid the slow erosion of political support). Defenders of the army doctrine argue that the U.S. did not have the forces to follow a village strategy, at least while large units from the North Vietnamese regular army were operating in the south. Critics claim that there were sufficient forces to fight both a village and a large-unit war. What is clear is that for whatever reason tasks were defined more by available technology and prior experiences than by a clear understanding of what kinds of tasks were appropriate to the conditions of war in Vietnam.

Defining Tasks: Peer Expectations

War is the greatest test of a bureaucratic organization. A government agency recruits a large number of poorly paid young men, sends them to some distant and hostile land, and exposes them to the murderous attacks of an unknown foe. It is hard to decide which kind of combat is the most terrorizing—standing erect in drill formation while musket fire rips through your ranks, huddling in a foul and soggy trench while artillery shells drop down upon you, walking through dense jungle not knowing when you will fall into a fatal ambush, or charging across an open field in the face of devastating machine-gun fire. Those who argue that the behavior of an organization is nothing more than the sum of the behaviors of its rationally self-interested members cannot account for an army at war. By almost any standard, the rationally self-interested behavior for a soldier facing the prospect of imminent death or injury is to break and run. As the great military historian John Keegan puts it, "inside every army is a crowd struggling to get out."[27]

There are, of course, rewards and penalties that can be used to induce an army to stand and fight. A soldier who deserts under fire can be caught, court-martialed, and punished. But if soldiers desert en masse, there will be no one to catch them. And even if many were caught and punished, any given soldier might decide rationally that the uncertain prospect of a delayed penalty is less fearsome than the immediate prospect of a painful death. Sergeants and captains can threaten to shoot deserters on the spot, and on occasion they have done just that. But what then keeps the sergeants and officers from running? It is not likely to be the prospect of being shot by colonels and generals who are few in number and (often) distant from the battle scene. In past times, the prospect of loot gave soldiers an interest in winning the battle. But like a court-martial, the prospect of loot is distant and uncertain while the enemy's fire is immediate and palpable. Moreover, while loot may have been important in past battles when small armies fought for dynastic and material objectives, it is of little significance in modern wars in which mass armies struggle for political goals. In 1916, no British soldier could have imagined that there was any loot in Bapaume that was worth his marching into the German machine-gun fire at the battle of the Somme. To some extent, the rational instinct to run, or at least hide, may be overcome with drugs: Keegan notes that at Waterloo and at the Somme, many soldiers got drunk just before the battle, but anyone so drunk as to not know the dangers he faced was probably also so drunk as to be unable to stand and fight. Yet stand and fight they did.[28]

Nor can the willingness to fight be explained by general beliefs about one's nation, the war as a whole, or one's place in the army. During the Second World War, many observers supposed that soldiers with low morale (that is, they didn't like being soldiers in general or being in this war in particular) would be less effective in combat than those with high morale. In fact, as Samuel Stouffer and his colleagues showed in their classic study, *The American Soldier*, there was during World War II no correlation between morale and combat effectiveness.[29]

What does matter are the rewards a soldier receives from other soldiers. At the battle of Waterloo, soldiers who flinched in the face of the enemy were reproved by other soldiers. This was facilitated by deploying the troops in formations that made each man constantly aware of the men on either side of him. To desert meant to disgrace oneself in the eyes of a comrade. Moreover, the tight formations had the paradoxical effect of making each man *feel* safer though in fact he was not. After all, if he left the formation, the enemy was not likely to waste a shot at him, whereas if he remained in the formation he was certain to be the object of concerted fire. It was group solidarity that was decisive in keeping the ranks intact.[30]

This solidarity was reinforced by the leadership, example, and coercive powers of the officers. But what kept the officers fighting? They were not drawn up in tight formations and there were no pistols at their backs. At Waterloo, the answer was honor. "Officers . . . were most concerned about the figure they cut in their brother officers' eyes. Honor was paramount."[31] A century later, at the battle of the Somme, when soldiers no longer fought standing in close ranks and officers were no longer drawn from the nobility, the same factors—a degree of coercion, greatly supplemented by group solidarity and a sense of honor and reputation—kept the British Army intact in the face of fearful losses.[32]

Soldiers fight when the men next to them expect them to fight. Soldiers fight well when they are members of cohesive small groups and led by officers they trust; they fight poorly when the group lacks cohesion and the officers cannot inspire trust. Their generalized attitudes and political views—how they feel as individuals about soldiering, patriotism, or the war—seem much less important.

Making peer expectations serve organizational needs is difficult at best and requires at a minimum that peers stay together for long periods. If the membership of the small group frequently changes, there will be a decline in the value individuals assign to the opinion of others; the new people will be emotionally less important than the old ones. Many critics have argued that the policy of replacing American combat soldiers on an individual rather than on a group basis weakens the cohesion of the group to which the individual replacements are assigned.[33] In Vietnam, small-group cohesion often broke down almost completely, as evidenced by the abnormally high rates of desertion, grenade attacks on officers ("fraggings"), and refusals to go into battle.[34] Though reasons for this crisis in discipline are complex, frequent personnel rotations appears to have contributed to it. Soldiers had less confidence in their oft replaced peers and leaders. This social instability became especially acute just before an individual soldier was scheduled to return to the United States; having weak ties to his comrades in any event, he was especially loath to take risks when in a month or two he would be on his way home. The evidence suggests that a soldier's discipline was especially weak during the period just preceding his departure for the States.[35]

When an organization that exposes its members to mortal dangers does a poor job of managing small-group cohesion, those groups will start to define tasks independently of the organization. The U.S. Army in Vietnam pursued a search-and-destroy strategy, but platoons and companies in which group cohesion had broken down would often informally pursue a "search-and-evade" strategy: nominally going out to engage the enemy, actually going out to avoid him.[36] The phenomenon is not limited to armies. In Alvin Gouldner's classic study of a gypsum plant, one group of workers, the miners, would sometimes defy the company's managers because their jobs involved physical dangers so acute that they would refuse to accept certain orders. "Down here we are our own bosses," the miners would say, and accordingly they would refuse to work in places where they believed the risks were too high.[37] Note, however, that great as the dangers were, peer-group solidarity was sufficient to get men to work in the mines. Peer expectations are both a source of motivation and a force defining what are acceptable and unacceptable tasks.

If the expectations of peers can be so important in the desperate conditions of combat or lurking hazards of mining, we should expect them to have some effect under ordinary circumstances as well. Take narcotics investigators. The goal of reducing the availability of dangerous drugs does not unambiguously imply a clear set of tasks. If dangerous drugs are imported and distributed by large criminal organizations, then the best strategy would seem to be to identify and investigate those organizations until a legally sound case can be brought against them. But to establish that a dangerous drug is being illegally sold, it is first necessary for an undercover officer to buy that drug from an illegal dealer. One way to build a case against the criminal organization is to arrest the dealer, persuade him to become an informant in exchange for dropping the charges, and then use his information to identify and arrest higher-level dealers, thereby working one's way up to "Mr. Big." But another way is to use intelligence leads to identify higher-ups in the organization and investigate them by means of surveillance, wire taps, and the collation of documentary evidence.

The leaders of the Drug Enforcement Administration (and its predecessors, the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics) from time to time have emphasized one or the other of these two strategies, but the operators—the street agents—have tended to define their jobs as one of making undercover buys and lower-level busts. The reason for their resistance to defining their jobs as intelligence gatherers and document readers is that the culture of the street agent rewards officers who are skilled at making buys and busts. As one administrator put it, they feel that "there is something wrong with a guy who will pass up the buy tonight."[38] Undercover work is dangerous and requires strong nerves and considerable skill. To sustain themselves in these tasks, the agents depend on the respect of their fellow agents. But that respect comes in time to form a set of expectations that resists change, and so it is no easy matter to convert street agents into document readers.

That peer groups affect task performance will hardly be news to anyone familiar with the classic studies done at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company. There, as every student of organization knows, men who wired together the electrical connections in telephone equipment restricted their output to conform to a group norm, thereby producing less than the amount of work that would have maximized their wages.[39] To a degree, peer rewards were sufficiently important to offset money rewards.

I am making a somewhat different point: Peer expectations not only affect how hard people work at their jobs, they can affect what they decide the job *is*. Soldiers will stand and fight rather than cut and run (here peer expectations induce rather than limit performance); miners will dig in dangerous—but not too dangerous—places; narcotics agents will buy and bust rather than watch and wait; police officers will decide when and how to use force and make arrests.

Conclusions

Given these great differences in how the work of government agencies actually gets defined, it is foolish to speak about bureaucracy as if it were a single phenomenon. When tasks can be inferred freely and unambiguously from the stated goals of a government agency, they can be defined by the agency's executive and, given proper leadership, can become the basis of a strong organizational culture. The Social Security Administration is an example. When goals are relatively unambiguous but the agency lacks the political freedom to convert those goals into tasks, the formation of a suitable culture becomes much harder. The Post Office was an example. When the goals are too vague or ambiguous to permit them to become a ready basis of task definition, the tasks often will be shaped not by executive preferences but by the incentives valued by the operators. This is especially true in government, where the need to acquire and

maintain external support for an agency is so great as to divert all but the ablest and most energetic executives from careful task definition. Moreover, for reasons to be explained in chapter 8, government executives have limited influence over subordinates because the incentives controlled by managers are weak and hard to manipulate. Thus in a public bureaucracy the tasks of its key operators are likely to be defined by naturally occurring rather than by agency-supplied incentives.

Among these naturally occurring incentives are the imperatives of the situation (especially important when clients are subjected to unwanted controls in low-visibility circumstances, as with the police, mental hospital attendants, and schoolteachers, or when the organization has embraced a dominant technology, as has been the case with some military organizations) and the expectations of peers (especially important when the organization exposes its members to dangerous circumstances, as is the case with miners, narcotics investigators, and combat soldiers).

These incentives emerge from within the organization. A skillful executive can sometimes shape them in ways that lead the workers to define their tasks as the executive wishes, a matter that will be explored in chapter 6. But workers may bring to the organization attitudes, predispositions, and preferences that will make them responsive to incentives over which the organization has relatively little control. That is the subject of the next chapter.