

Garfield and the GAO

BY MARNI SOUPCOFF

I understand that government can hardly be counted on to be its own best watchdog. But I recently started foregoing the daily comics and turning to the Government Accountability Office website for my morning smiles. Some of the GAO reports found there are too technical for me to fully understand, but most are simple, universally comprehensible tales of bureaucratic bumbling and failure to learn anything from past mistakes.

Ah, you might say, but how can these dry collections of committee testimony and executive summaries rival *Garfield* for humor potential? Well, consider that many bureaucrats are even lazier than America's favorite fat orange cat — and few have more smarts than his canine foe Odie.

For example, first on my reading list today is a GAO report on the Small Business Administration's Historically Underutilized Business Zone (HUBZone) program. Is the program handing out government contracts to small businesses located in economically distressed areas, as per its mandate? It is. The only problem is that the program also hands out government contracts to blatantly bogus small businesses that list their addresses as the Alamo or a city hall in Texas. And those are on the good days when the program hasn't simply lost its applicants' information altogether.

Of course, this is but one example. I move on to the GAO's latest assessment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The program is supposed to help poor people eat a better diet by giving them food stamps and benefits. Want to guess how it's going?

The GAO says that in 2009, \$2.2 billion in SNAP benefits were "paid in error." This looks pretty bad to me — vague "woops-how-did-that-happen?" mistakes are one thing if they involve a \$10 bill, but quite another when they reach the billion-dollar mark. Yet losing \$2.2 billion turns out to be a vast improvement for SNAP, which had a 56 percent higher oopsy rate in 1999.

Losing the equivalent of the salaries of 40,000 Americans is evidently considered a success.

Need I tell you that there's more? The GAO says that the federal government is doling out billions to states for highway bridge repair (\$7 billion in fiscal 2010) without any linking of

that funding to the recipient states' performance or measuring how it's being spent. The feds have no clue how much additional state or local money is being used on highway bridges. They, therefore, have no idea what kind of an impact their oh-so-generous contribution is having on these structures.

Some other highlights: The State Department is issuing thousands of U.S. passports to registered sex offenders every

year; it is also issuing U.S. passports to people in prison. The IRS has "internal control issues" — as the GAO delicately puts it — including inadequate security of personal taxpayer information, not balancing its accounts, inaccurate records, and errors in taxpayer accounts. Meanwhile, given the laxity of its security, the Department of Veterans Affairs might as well take out a full-page ad displaying all its most sensitive information. And Head Start centers are having problems with staffers lying and

omitting information in order to enroll ineligible people in the government child development program — giving a "head start" to kids who are already partway to the finish line.

I suppose it bears mentioning that, as a government operation itself, the GAO is hardly beyond reproach — or ridicule.

It regularly sticks its nose where it doesn't belong, recently suggesting that the sale of home genetic tests be regulated (lest hapless consumers get confused by their voluntary purchases). And it tied itself in knots over fears that minority children might not have equal access to consumer product safety information — even though there's no evidence that this is actually a problem. There is also an "I could have told you that without an investigation" quality to many of the GAO's findings — such as its conclusion: "International programs face significant challenges reducing the supply of illegal drugs." (Watched *The Wire* lately?) Or its observation on TARP: "Continued attention [is] needed to ensure the transparency and accountability of ongoing programs." Mmm, yes — that's probably worth keeping an eye on.

Still, should you ever have reason to start doubting the old adage that life has three certainties — death, taxes, and government incompetence — the GAO is a very useful resource to have on hand. Every day, its website brings a new story of bureaucratic ineptitude and waste — and as I said, the stories are better than the funny papers. It would almost be worth paying for — if we weren't already being forced to foot the bill. **R**



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