

Murray Comarow

First Winton M. Blount Award—November 3, 2006

Smithsonian National Postal Museum

I am truly honored to be the recipient of the first Winton M. Blount award. As I've said and written over the years, Red Blount is a particular hero of mine in the booby-trapped field of sound governance. I especially appreciate the presence of his son, Winton M. Blount III, and of Postmaster General Jack Potter, my good friend.

Allen Kane and Kari Fantasia asked me to identify three things I felt most proud of during my lifetime, not limited to postal matters. I hope that this be done without pomposity. Or worse, without an ostentatious display of humility, an art well practiced in Washington. (Actually, I'm rather proud of my humility, but that's another matter.)

I will assume that Allen and Kari had in mind professional accomplishments. That will excuse me from reviewing my record as a husband, father, and grandfather, in the course of which some things went right, but "mistakes were made." I will also skip my

outstanding record delivering packages of hamburger meat on a bicycle in the heart of Manhattan when I was 17, my laundry job, my heavy lifting in an iron foundry, and lighter duties as a War Department messenger in 1939. Since this is a postal event, I will begin with my appointment as executive director of President Johnson's blue ribbon Commission on Postal Organization in 1967-68.

In good part driven by that Commission's report, advocated with single-minded intensity by Red Blount and supported by Presidents Johnson and Nixon, Congress profoundly transformed the old Post Office Department. Paul Carlin, Red's right hand man, can tell you better than I, how tough it was. The Post Office had been a patronage-saturated, tax-supported cabinet department. Primarily due to Red's efforts, it became a patronage-free, customer-supported government corporation. To contribute to such a result should make anyone feel good. I did and still do. Unfortunately, pressed by mailers, unions, and competitors. Congress inserted unwise provisions that Red strongly resisted in vain. If Congress enacts its dysfunctional postal reform bill when it reconvenes on November 13,

it will further undercut the Postal Service's ability to manage, as its Board of Governors has said. I don't think that will happen, despite contrary assertions by key members of Congress. We'll see.

Secondly, I look back on my appointment by President Nixon as executive director of his Council on Executive Organization. With the entire executive branch as its target, the Council focused on nine specific areas. These included the independent regulatory agencies; the environmental protection functions sprawled across many turf-protecting agencies and congressional committees; and the Executive Office of the President itself.

Not all of the Council's recommendations to the president were implemented. Among those that did was the Environmental Protection Agency. Despite internal White House resistance, overruled by Nixon, and congressional opposition, the EPA was created. As in the case of postal reform, the experts and pontificators confidently predicted failure. Other Council-recommended changes strengthened federal efforts to combat narcotics traffic, drug abuse,

and organized crime. You may have noticed, however, that these evils are still with us.

I think back to my fifteen years at the Pentagon, where I was entrusted with some sensitive assignments. One such job resulted, years later, in having “60 Minutes” on my back, offended by my refusal to be interviewed on a Top Secret contract I had signed. “We can get you,” they assured me, and get me they did, with a telephoto lens through a smeary window when I was teaching at American University.

Another task dealt with a cheating scandal at the Air Force Academy, a wrenching experience that resulted in the discharge of 107 cadets. The committee that I served was charged by Secretary Eugene Zuckert to identify the root causes of that episode. We produced a hard-hitting report that generated many reforms at the Academy, both academic and military. Gene Zuckert and I remained lifelong friends. I told this story at his memorial service. Contrary to my usual go-it-alone practice, I asked if he had any advice in dealing with a hideously complex issue that seemed to defy resolution. He looked

at me and said, “Be smart, Murray, be smart.” My heart lifted, but I replied sarcastically, “Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.” He grinned, and I left. Trust is an essential lubricant and motivator.

At other times, I represented the Air Force, sometimes the United States, in base rights matters with Great Britain, Morocco, Libya, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, Denmark, Iceland, and Greece, as well as in negotiations on the BMEWS and other projects during the Cold War.

Lest you think for a minute that I always succeeded, here are a couple of disappointments. Urged by prominent social activists, I prepared a pro bono study designed to convince the Antioch University Board of Trustees to establish a law school in Washington, and they did. The school was based on a sound, but still-neglected principle of clinical legal training, similar to medical schools, but extreme political views and polarizing management ultimately led to its collapse. Ideas are easy; implementation is hard. I taught law at that school for a year, then taught law-related subjects at American

University for twenty years. I identified myself to my students as a “fake professor.” They thought I was joking.

More recently, as a senior Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, I participated in a study of our much battered intelligence agencies. We recommended, among other changes, that Congress reorganize itself to insure proper oversight, since its dozens of committees and subcommittees and hundreds of hearings and briefings drained management time and impeded the effort. That fell into a black hole; turf trumped good governance.

Here’s my proudest achievement: I was the quarterback of the Air Force Secretary’s touch football team until I was 46 and enticed away by my long-time friend Lee White, who chaired the Federal Power Commission. Long live cronyism. Lee was another great boss, but FPC, to its shame, had no touch football team.

My thanks again to all who made this splendid occasion possible, and to everyone here for your attendance. My connections with the Postal Service have been an important part of my life. I haven’t won

every battle, but I don't regret the effort. I salute Winton Blount, the man who led the charge.