WHO IS GOVERNMENT?

THE UNTOLD STORY OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Edited by #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

MICHAEL LEWIS

with essays by MICHAEL LEWIS, CASEY CEP, DAVE EGGERS, JOHN LANCHESTER, GERALDINE BROOKS, SARAH VOWELL, *and* W. KAMAU BELL

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"Let the public service be a proud and lively career. And let every man and woman who works in any area of our national government, in any branch, at any level, be able to say with pride and with honor in future years: 'I served the United States Government in that hour of our nation's need.' "

—PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

INTRODUCTION

DIRECTIONS TO A JOURNALISTIC GOLD MINE

Michael Lewis

After Donald Trump won his first presidential election, I had one of the strangest experiences I've ever had as a writer. The federal government had set aside a big pot of money for the candidates of both parties to staff their presidential transition teams. Trump and Hillary Clinton had both built massive teams of people ready to enter the 15 big federal departments and hundreds of smaller federal agencies to learn whatever was happening inside. A thousand or so Obama officials were waiting for them, along with briefings that had taken them six months to prepare. But then, days after the election, Trump simply fired the 500 or so people on his transition team. "Chris, you and I are so smart that we can leave the victory party two hours early and do the transition ourselves," he told a perplexed Chris Christie, who'd assembled the team.

Then he appointed Rick Perry as his secretary of energy. In his own presidential campaign, Perry had called for the Energy Department's elimination—and was forced, at his Senate confirmation hearings, to acknowledge that he'd had no real idea of what went on inside the Energy Department, but now that he'd spent a few days looking into it, he really did not want to eliminate it. At that moment, it became clear that none of these people, newly in charge of the United States government, had the faintest idea what it did. (The Energy Department, among its other critical functions, manages our nuclear weapons.) And they weren't alone! I didn't really have any clue what went on inside the department, either. People capable of ruining panel discussions and dinner parties with their steady stream of opinions about American politics were totally flummoxed by the simplest questions about American

government. Questions like: What do all those civil servants do all day inside the Agriculture Department? (They preserve rural America from extinction, among other things.)

This situation, though sad for the country, struck me as a happy journalistic opportunity. The outgoing Obama people had created what amounted to the most timely and relevant civics class ever, and no one had bothered to enroll. And so I signed up to audit it. I spent some weeks wandering around the Energy Department, where I was (I believe) the first to receive the briefing about (among other things) the nuclear stockpile. I spent some more weeks inside the Commerce Department, where I learned about (among other things) the life-changing improvements in weather prediction achieved by the National Weather Service. I consciously sought out the most obscure and infrequently visited corners of our federal government and yet never found anything less than wonderful characters engaged in work critical to the fate of our country and our species. At some point, I realized that several dozen humans could spend their lifetimes getting the briefings ignored by the incoming Trump administration, and so I stopped and wrote a series of magazine pieces about what I'd seen and heard. I then stapled the pieces together and published them as a book called "The Fifth Risk." The pieces attracted more attention than just about any magazine articles I'd ever written, and the book sold roughly 10 times more copies than I or anyone else imagined it would.

But even that wasn't what was strange about the experience. What was strange was what happened next: nothing. A few times in my writing career, I've experienced the thrill of an unfair edge. Some special access, or insight, that was bound to vanish the minute it was revealed. Every Wall Street trader knows this feeling. You spot what appears to be some mispriced stock or bond or complicated derivative. You figure out why it's mispriced—after all, lots of smart people are looking for free money, so you'd better have some idea why this anomaly exists, so that you can be certain it's an anomaly.

I'd sort of assumed I had the federal bureaucracy more or less to myself, because the government had always seemed less interesting to readers than politics, perhaps because it seemed so stable that nothing could shake it. I further assumed that after a book in which the central character is the Agriculture Department sold more than half a million copies, the market would correct. Clearly there was a readership that hungered to know more about whatever Donald Trump was neglecting. The supply would expand to fill the demand, the curiosity of the American public would be slaked, and I'd need to find something else to write about.

I was wrong. The *Washington Post* series in which many of these pieces first appeared—also titled "Who is Government?"—proves it. This time I was joined in my plundering of our government for stories by six other writers—Casey Cep, Dave Eggers, John Lanchester, Geraldine Brooks, Sarah Vowell and W. Kamau Bell. Their pieces are all great, but more to the point, they were among the most read opinion stories in *The Post* in 2024—averaging about four times the typical readership for the section despite being eight times the average length of its pieces. All six writers now have enjoyed the same experience that I had the first time around. Each has been surprised by how well it pays to write about federal bureaucrats. None required more than about five minutes to find a subject that made their socks go up and down. Each has more or less said to me: *I cannot believe how good this material is—and how overlooked.*

And yet the arb still exists! These stories are still lying around inside our government like ore in a badly plundered mine. And I'm newly open to thoughts about why this might be.

My original investment thesis—that the journalistic marketplace was just a bit slow to pick up on reader interest in this new existential threat to an institution everyone has long taken for granted—no longer really suffices. Everyone can now see the threat. And so some other forces must be at work here. One possibility: Our

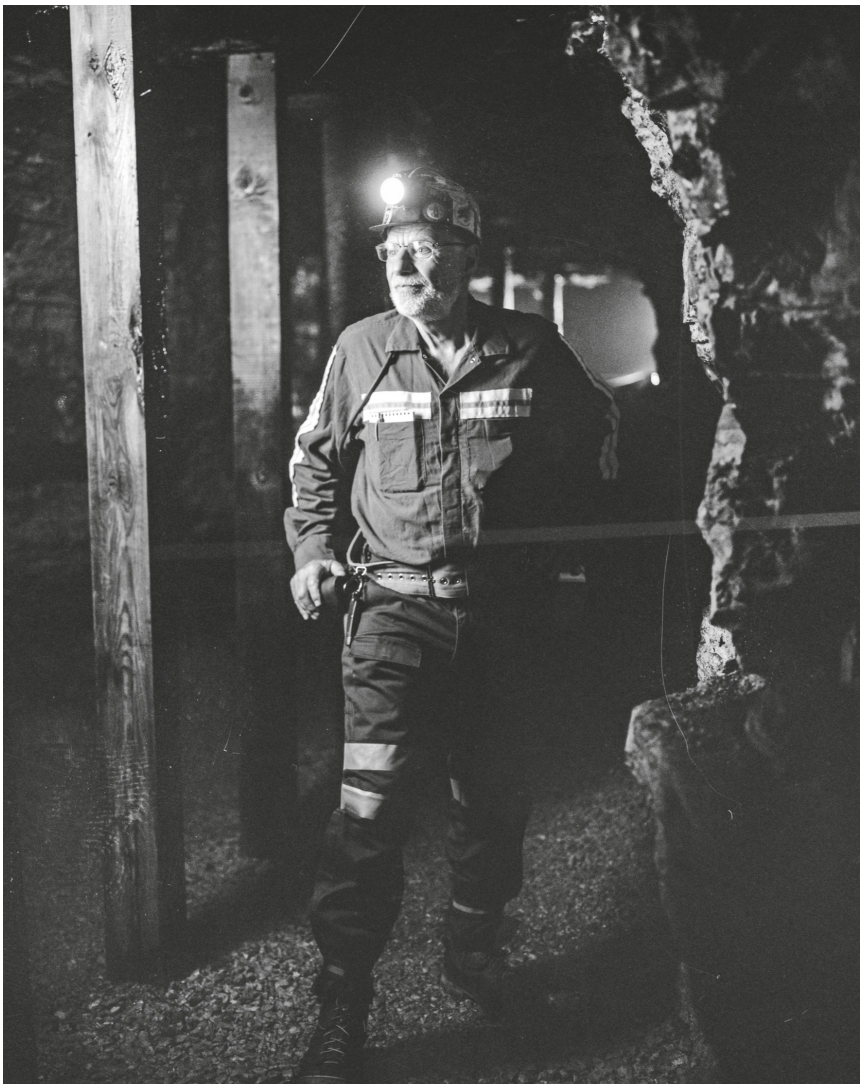
media is less and less able to fund long-form storytelling, and these stories require time, money and space. Another: Our government—as opposed to our elected officials—has no talent for telling its own story. On top of every federal agency sit political operatives whose job is not to reveal and explain the good work happening beneath them but to prevent any of their employees from embarrassing the president. The PR wing of the federal government isn't really allowed to play offense, just a grinding prevent defense. And the sort of people who become civil servants—the characters profiled in this book—tend not to want or seek attention.

And, finally, there is the stereotype of "the government worker." We all have in our heads this intractable picture: The nine-to-fiver living off the taxpayer who adds no value and has no energy and somehow still subverts the public will.

You never know what effect any piece of writing will have. Writers write the words, but readers decide their meaning. My vague sense is that most readers of these stories have come away with feelings both of hope (these civic-minded people are still among us) and dread (we're letting something precious slip away). My own ambition for *The Post* series and this book was that they would subvert the stereotype of the civil servant. The typecasting has always been lazy and stupid, but increasingly, it's deadly. Even as writers grow rich proving it wrong.

THE CANARY

Michael Lewis



Christopher Mark of the Department of Labor

Each spring, the most interesting organization that no one's ever heard of collects nominations for the most important awards that most people will never know were handed out. The organization, called the Partnership for Public Service, created the awards, called the Sammies, in 2002 to call out extraordinary deeds inside the federal government. Founded the year before by an entrepreneur named Samuel Heyman, it set out to attract talented and unusual people to the federal workforce. One big reason talented and unusual people did not gravitate to the government was that the government was often a miserable place for talented and unusual people to work. Civil servants who screwed up were dragged before Congress and into the news. Civil servants who did something great, no one said a word about. There was thus little incentive to do something great, and a lot of incentive to hide. The awards were meant to correct that problem. "There's no culture of recognition in government," said Max Stier, whom Heyman hired to run the Partnership. "We wanted to create a culture of recognition."

This was trickier than they first imagined it would be. Basically no one came forward on their own: Civil servants appeared to lack the ability to be recognized. Stier was reduced to calling up the 15 Cabinet secretaries and begging them to look around and see whether any of their underlings had done anything worth mentioning. Nominations trickled in; some awards got handed out. A pair of FBI agents cracked the cold case of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham and split one of the prizes. Another went to a doctor at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who designed and ran a program that delivered a billion

vaccinations and eradicated polio in India. A third was given to a man inside the Energy Department who had been sent to a massive nuclear waste dump outside Denver, containing enough radioactive gunk to fill 90 miles of railroad cars, and told to clean it up. He finished the project $30 billion under budget and 60 years ahead of schedule—and turned the dump into a park.

All these people had done astonishing things. None had much to say about them. The Partnership called the Colorado guy to see if he wanted to explain the miracle he'd performed. "I just managed the project," he said. End of story. No story.

The Partnership hasn't given up hope, however. Each year, it flushes out a few more nominees than the year before. Each spring, the list that circulates inside the Partnership is a bit longer than the last. I've read through it the past five years or so to remind myself, among other things, how many weird problems the United States government deals with at any one time. On this year's list is a woman at the Agriculture Department who "found ways to create products from misshapen fruits and vegetables unsuitable for market, which reduces food waste, a $400 billion problem for the United States each year." A man inside the Environmental Protection Agency conceived and put in place a service called AirNow that supplies Americans with the best air-quality forecasts in the world. A special agent at the Drug Enforcement Administration led a team that seized (and presumably also counted) 919,088 capsules of especially lethal fentanyl—and prosecuted the people peddling them.

An additional 500 or so entries made it onto this year's list: pages of single-paragraph descriptions of what some civil servant no one has ever heard of has done. In most cases, what they've done is solve some extremely narrow, difficult problem that the U.S. government—in many cases, only the U.S. government—has taken on: locating and disposing chemical weapons in Syria; delivering high-speed internet to rural America; extracting 15,000 Americans

from in and around Gaza on October 8, 2023. The work sometimes rings a bell with me. The people who did it never do.

Each year, I finish reading the list of nominees with the same lingering feeling of futility: Democratic government isn't really designed to highlight the individual achievement of unelected officials. Even the people who win the award will receive it and hustle back to their jobs before anyone has a chance to get to know them—and before elected officials ask for their spotlight back. Even their nominations feel modest. Never I did this, but we did this. Never look at me, but look at this work! Never a word about who these people are or where they come from or why it ever occurred to them to bother. Nothing to change the picture in your head when you hear the word "bureaucrat." Nothing to arouse curiosity about them, or lead you to ask what they do, or why they do it.

They were the carrots in the third-grade play. Our elected officials—the kids who bludgeon the teachers for attention and wind up cast as the play's lead—use them for their own narrow purposes. They take credit for the good they do. They blame them when things go wrong. The rest of us encourage this dubious behavior. We never ask: Why am I spending another minute of my life reading about and yapping about Donald Trump when I know nothing about the 2 million or so federal employees and their possibly lifesaving work that the president is intent on eliminating? Even the Partnership seems to sense the futility in trying to present civil servants as characters with voices needing to be heard.

But this year, someone inside the Partnership messed up. Spotting the error, I thought: *Some intern must have written this one*. It felt like a rookie mistake—to allow a reader of this dutiful list a glimpse of an actual human being. Four little words, at the end of one of the paragraphs.

> Christopher Mark: Led the development of industry-wide standards and practices to prevent roof falls in underground

mines, leading to the first year (2016) of no roof fall fatalities in the United States. A former coal miner.

A former coal miner. Those words raised questions. Not about the work but about the man. They caused a picture to pop into my head. Of a person. Who must have grown up in a coal mining family. In West Virginia, I assumed, because, really, where else? Christopher Mark, I decided, just had to have some deeply personal stake in the problem he solved. His father, or maybe his brother, had been killed by a falling coal mine roof. Grief had spurred him to action, to spare others the same grief. A voice was crying to be heard. The movie wrote itself.

But then I found Christopher Mark's number and called him. Even after I'd explained how I'd plucked his name off a list of 525 nominees, he was genuinely bewildered by my interest. He'd never heard of the Sammies. But he was polite. And he answered my first question. "I grew up in Princeton, New Jersey," he said. "My dad was a professor at the university."

Christopher Mark was born in 1956, the eldest son of a civil engineer named Robert Mark. His mother was a classical pianist, but his mother, for reasons that later became clear, wasn't present in Chris's initial, and somewhat halting, telling of his own story. His father, however, was impossible to hide.

His father had moved the family to Princeton the year Chris was born. Robert Mark had grown up in the Bronx and studied engineering at City College of New York. A few years out of college, he'd made a name for himself with his deft use of photoelastic models to test the effects of physical stress on virtually any object. He was testing fighter jets and nuclear subs for the Defense Department when Princeton hired him to test parts of small but expensive nuclear reactors it was about to build. His work saved

Princeton so much money that the university ignored his lack of graduate education and invited him to be a professor in the engineering department. He accepted. There, his life was biffed onto a radically different course. "A kid asked a question," recalled Chris. "He'd just come from some art history class, where they had these running arguments about Gothic cathedrals—if certain elements in the buildings are there for aesthetic reasons or structural reasons. The kid asks my dad: 'Can you answer the questions using these models you have?' "

The answer was yes. It would be a bit like reopening a cold case using new DNA technology. A 12th-century builder had no concept of gravity and only Roman numerals to work with: He couldn't multiply or divide. And yet an engineering movement that started in roughly 1135 A.D. proceeded to generate structures more improbable and accomplished than anything built anywhere in the world over the next 700 years. As if to further bewilder historians, their architects had left next to no written records. Any tourist who has stumbled into Chartres soon asks the obvious question: What's holding this roof up? By the time the question was put to Robert Mark, scholars had pretty much given up looking for an answer. "An insuperable barrier separates their approach to building from ours," wrote one of the leading historians of Gothic art, before dismissing any hope of figuring it out.

But then Mark deployed his stress-testing gizmos to investigate Gothic cathedrals. "Robert's big thing was showing that this technique that came from aerospace could be used for concrete," says Rob Bork, a former student and current professor of medieval architecture at the University of Iowa. "The work was not only original but essentially unique." Mark began by taking a vertical slice of, say, Chartres and replicating it in a special kind of plastic. He'd then hang fishing weights from various points on the plastic replica, like ornaments on a Christmas tree, to simulate the actual external forces acting upon various parts of the cathedral. There was the

direct load of the overhead stone, of course, but also the winds. (To estimate the winds in the 12th century, he found anemometer readings in rural France going back a century. Not perfect, but good enough.) He placed his fully loaded plastic model in an oven, where it was subjected not just to heat but also light. Warmed, the plastic model revealed its stresses, sort of like the way an MRI reveals damage to soft human tissue.

The models had their own haunting beauty. They turned art history into science. They generated testable hypotheses. They predicted exactly which stones inside Chartres or any other cathedral might be overstressed by their loads. But the power of Mark's methods became clearest when he traveled to France to visit cathedrals. The buildings behaved exactly the way his models suggested they should. "There should be cracking in the mortar here," he would say to some French stonemason at Chartres, and the stonemason would invariably reply, "We repointed that only last year!" For centuries, the damage inside Chartres had been repaired by workers who never understood why certain stones always needed replacing. Now this guy from Princeton could not only tell you why—he could explain the buildings in ways that not even their builders could have done.

Mark founded a program at Princeton that combined architecture and engineering. His plastic models yielded insights beyond the cathedrals' weak spots. They proved that certain Gothic features that art historians assumed essential were mostly decorative and other Gothic features that seemed decorative were structural, preventing the roof from collapsing. An example: The pinnacles on top of the outer piers had been thought to be mainly for show, but they actually pre-stressed the mortar beneath them and thus prevented it from cracking and weakening the entire structure.

Historians already knew that the cathedrals had been erected over decades, one bay at a time, from east to west. Mark's models showed how adjustments in design made by the builders—the slight

differences from one bay to the next—were probably responses to problems they had observed along the way. A crack in an early pillar led to a different approach for a subsequent pillar. This is how people unable to multiply or divide had erected these miraculous structures: by trial and error. This enterprise was the SpaceX of its day.

By the time Chris was aware of what his father did for a living, his father had become a tiny bit famous. He'd been featured in Life magazine and Scientific American and was soon to be the subject of a PBS documentary. Chris was the eldest of three sons and the one whose mind most resembled his father's: Their thoughts rhymed in all sorts of interesting ways. He was usually the smartest boy in the class. Technically gifted, he, too, crossed the usual academic boundaries. He, too, loved art and history. "In kindergarten, I'd ride a tricycle and pull my socks over my pants because it looked like Napoleon in garters." He was naturally self-contained and inclined to see the world for himself rather than how others wished him to see it. His parents encouraged the quality. When he was 5, he asked his mother, how come the rest of the world goes to church and we don't? "She said, 'Well, they're wrong and we're right.' And what I took away from that was that I should be able to make my own decisions about right and wrong, and whatever anyone else thinks doesn't matter."

He had a feeling in him that his father lacked, however, or perhaps he could afford to develop a side of himself that his father couldn't: the side that questioned the structure not just of churches but of society. "I have a very fine nose for elitism," said Chris. "And it bothers me. And I was in Princeton. There's a kind of idea at a place like that: 'We're the smartest and you should just shut up and let us run the world.' And this just really bugs me."

The younger Mark was coming of age in what seemed to him a revolution. His weeping mother had awakened him in the middle of the night, when he was 12 years old, to inform him that the

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. had just been killed. The Vietnam War was roiling the Princeton campus—and it wasn't Ivy League kids being sent to fight and die. One day, flipping through one of his mother's magazines, Chris came across photographs from Vietnam. They showed children killed and wounded by American napalm and shrapnel. Next to them was a piece about an American company that had figured out how to make plastic shrapnel, so that it couldn't be detected by an X-ray. "This sent me off the deep end," said Chris. "Everyone knew what napalm did to kids in villages. This was the same mentality used in a different way."

By the time he reached high school, he was joining campus war protests and entering a running one-way argument with his father. "Chris was very political," recalled his brother Peter Mark. "Very antiestablishment. He used words like 'bourgeois.' " His father, still working for the Defense Department, didn't share his son's taste for politics. "My father didn't like to argue," said Peter Mark. "He'd just listen to Chris and say, 'You got funny ideas.' " The roof of their family home had yet to collapse, but the structure exhibited obvious cracks. One was that Chris identified less with the class his father had ascended to than the class he'd come from. "He always wondered why the police didn't use horses more often to scare demonstrators," said Chris.

After his junior year, his parents divorced—Chris was surprised; they never argued—and any overt power his father held over him vanished. "I said, 'You no longer have the right to tell me what to do with my life,' " said Chris. "You've been giving me a hard time for not doing what I'm supposed to do, and now you're not doing what you're supposed to do." He'd finished high school a year early and a decision presented itself. "The big question for my father was, would I go to Harvard or would I settle for Princeton?" said Chris. "And I told him that I wanted to work in a factory. And he said, 'I'm not paying for you to go to college so you can get a job at an auto