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## Risky Work at the State Department

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**O**n the days when the bureaucracy is really feeling surly and combative, it's probably best not to come to work. Just ask George Lister, who made the mistake of working too much and not getting paid for it.

Lister is a retired foreign service officer who since 1982 has served as an unpaid consultant in the State Department's Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. No one disputes that he knows as much about human rights as anyone in the country.

He's been at the bureau since it began during the Carter administration, knows everybody in the human rights business, is trusted by both the left and the right, and can separate true human rights activists from political pretenders.

The State Department's inspector general, however, was not impressed.

This summer, in an interim report on the bureau, he fingered Lister because he worked for free and for twice as many days per year as was "authorized." As a solution, the inspector suggested implementing "Recommendation 18," which means the department should "terminate" Lister.

Well, when they start trying to bust you for doing something for nothing instead of doing nothing for something, you know they want your head.

Fortunately for Lister, however, "terminate" did not mean the same thing at State as it does in spy movies. So he hung in, and he survived. As of this writing, all is forgiven and Lister is still working in human rights.

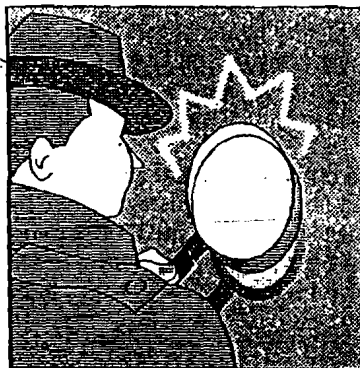
It is not known to outsiders exactly how he pulled this off. One suspects, however, that he did what people often do in the State Department—he called his friends.

Like historian Arthur M.

Schlesinger Jr., the Kennedy administration adviser who first met Lister in the early 1960s and described him to a reporter as "Mr. Human Rights."

Or conservative former humanitarian affairs assistant secretary Elliott Abrams, who praised Lister's "balanced commitment—he was concerned about [Communist governments in] Cuba and Poland as well as [right-wing governments in] Chile and El Salvador."

Or Rep. Bill Richardson (D-N.M.), the House's chief deputy majority whip, who thought Lister was "outstanding," said so for



the Congressional Record, and wrote a letter urging State Department counselor Timothy E. Wirth to "make good use of George's unique talents and experience."

Public endorsements like these are heavy artillery in the ob-diplomatic, "on-background" way State conducts its intramural squabbles.

The big guns aided Lister's in-house defenders, who—on background—simply belabored the obvious: How twit-like is it to fire an expert of Lister's stature just because his presence is bureaucratically confusing?

Detractors, led by the inspector general, had a case, but it was more difficult to make. They acknowledged—also on background—that Lister was good, but he was acting like a foreign service officer, making speeches (Chile's democratic government

gave him an award last year) and generally overstepping his job description. The fact that he wasn't being paid made him even more difficult to control.

The *Listeristas*—on background—suggested that John Shattuck, the Clinton administration's new assistant secretary for human rights, wanted to dump Lister because Lister made him feel insecure. The *contras*—on background—said Lister and Shattuck "didn't hit it off." Naturally, neither Shattuck nor Lister would talk about it, either on or off the record. That's just not done.

The inspector general's office said its interim draft report was not available and told a reporter who asked to wait for the final version, which would be ready later this year, and might be considerably different from the draft.

But, of course, the interim report was available. Everybody talked about it—on background—and eventually someone passed part of it along—also on background. A quick look suggests it will indeed be sanitized before it is offered for public consumption.

In decidedly undiplomatic tones, the report sneered that Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs "has come to resemble a bureau of solo performers" (Lister presumably among them) beyond "management control." It accused "one unpaid consultant" (Lister) for a multitude of sins (working too much, working for free, making speeches, attending meetings at which he "purported" to represent the bureau).

And that wasn't all. "One source," the report said, "described HA as a 'parking orbit for unassigned senior officers, political proteges and human rights junkies.'"

You mean they actually fill the Humanitarian Affairs Bureau with people who know about human rights? Can socialism be far behind?