

Death Be Not Anonymous: The 20-Year Saga of Jane Doe • By William Triplett [16]

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## Washington's Worst Jobs

Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You could be a first-year associate at Arnold & Porter, a member of Rep. Gary Franks' staff, or working directly under Ralph Nader. BY DAVID SEGAL [22]

“What do you do?”

Washington's mantra. To live in the District is to hear this query ad nauseam. Conversations inevitably converge on the question, and the only way to reliably avoid it is to make conscious efforts to block the subject, which only make it oppressive in a subtler way.

The ubiquity of the “profession question” might lead one to think the town is lousy with great jobs, but the opposite is true: It's great with lousy jobs. As the last resort of the college grad who's confused and the first resort of the college grad who's careerist, Washington is a personnel traffic jam of transient laborers in coat and tie, a hive of resumé-clutchers eager for exploitation, with a supply-driven abundance of organizations just as eager to exploit them.

Many Washington newcomers end up in the non-profit realm, congressional offices, or the federal bureaucracy. Then there are the lawyers, 29,397 at last count. Even if they like their jobs—and most seem not to—it must be miserable to have to confess, day in, day out, “I am a lawyer,” especially in a town where the profession attracts unparalleled derision. But never mind the lawyers for a moment: Every workplace has a boss, and in Washington, a town where the only thing more prevalent than power is the illusion of power, being appointed boss is enough to transform the most genteel out-of-towner into a Beltway fascist.

Hence, there are unpleasant jobs in numbers too vast to count. What follows is not an exhaustive list—in fact, it's not intended as a list at all. It is more of an exercise in psychological boosting, an open invitation to an “I-don't-have-it-that-bad” shiver of *Schadenfreude*. And has there ever been a greater need for a collective pick-me-up? The recession keeps throttling the economy, Soviet nukes are up for grabs, the New World Order is looking more and more like chaos, and the hole in the ozone layer is getting bigger.

Things could be worse. You could work at one of these places.

### *Representative, The U.S. Vehicle Registration Service*

The most loathsome aspect of living in Washington is making the pilgrimage to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). Most of us need only go once a year. Employees of the U.S. Vehicle Registration Ser-

vice (USVRS) earn a living by going there every day.

Their business is registering and titling cars for customers without the time or inclination to deal with DMV personally and to run vehicles through the gauntlet at the DMV inspection facility at Half Street SW.

“It's a nasty, brain-dead job,” says Nick Montgomery, who started the operation after graduating from Georgetown five years ago. He and his two partners can be found standing in lines at 301 C St. NW for up to five hours a day, five days a week.

For an \$80 service charge, USVRS will fetch your out-of-state plate car from home or office, present you with the necessary papers to sign (including one that transfers some power of attorney), and have the vehicle rebaptized by the District's DMV. For \$33, they'll renew registrations. They also handle parking-ticket appeals. By the way, USVRS's services are legal. Only applications for operator's permits cannot be farmed out.

The horrors of this job only start with the brusque and indifferent clerks who staff DMV, many of whom are surprisingly accommodating to Montgomery and his colleagues.

“You'd think they might see my work as an indictment of their performance,” he says. “The only reason my business is possible is because of the inefficiencies of the place. But no one is ever rude to me about it.”

The stress comes not from the slowness of the DMV, which is a certitude, but from the unforeseeables that rattle the day's schedule. USVRS keeps operations running smoothly with two-way radios, computers, and fax machines, but inevitably something goes wrong; a customer forgets a document, a pickup is missed. For a business whose only product is service, making the customer's experience hassle-free is essential. The foot-tapping anxiety of standing in line is excruciating for civilians, but imagine how you'd feel if the wait was going to cause you to lose customers?

Then there's the ever-present worry that some jerk is going to broadside the customer's \$50,000 chariot. Montgomery says it has happened only once, when a Ford truck ran a red light and front-ended a USVRS-driven Thunderbird. By some unhappy twist of fate, Montgomery happened to witness the pileup.

“I thought to myself, ‘That's it. I've had enough,’” he says.

Because the USVRS driver was not at fault, the company's insurance premiums remained stable. But it would take only one accident to end it all for them.

USVRS boasts 2,000 regular clients and an on-time record to rival Delta Airlines. Business will be good for as long as there is human gridlock at DMV. Every year or so, however, District politicians give Montgom-

ery a scare by announcing reforms to the system.

“When the new mayor was elected, she made some noises about fixing DMV,” says Montgomery. “But all she did was hire some more clerks and invited the press down to see how short the lines were. But things are still pretty bad.”

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## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DOING TIME IN A MAXIMUM- SECURITY PRISON AND WORKING A WASHINGTON JOB? EVENTUALLY THEY LET YOU OUT OF PRISON.

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As a student of DMV systems in the District and the two in Maryland and Virginia, Montgomery says he could reform the District's DMV at no cost to taxpayers. He draws many of his ideas from state vehicle bureaucracies, which because they are relatively efficient and user-friendly account for only 10 percent of his work.

“[The DMV] is the one bureaucracy that everyone in D.C. has to deal with. I've never understood why a politician doesn't overhaul the place and say, ‘What I did for DMV I can do for the rest of the place.’ It would be so easy.”

This, of course, would put Montgomery straight out of his terrible business. Which wouldn't be such a bad thing. Montgomery's doctor recently told him he's got an ulcer.

### *Any Job Working for Rep. Gary Franks*

Congress is inherently a tough place to work. Pressure is high, egos are big, butt must be kissed, and the essence of staff work is making a man or woman of limited intelligence and skills look not-so-limited. And because Capitol Hill's legislators exempt themselves from most all employment