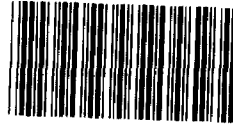




UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

25178
121720

PROCUREMENT, LOGISTICS,
AND READINESS DIVISION



121720

B-211787

MAY 19, 1983

The Honorable William V. Roth, Jr.
Chairman, Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Subject: Comments on the Establishment of a Central
Photographic Bureau (GAO/PLRD-83-83)

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This is in response to your October 7, 1983, request concerning the establishment of a central photographic bureau within the Federal Government. A private photography professional asked you (1) if the idea had been considered and (2) whether it had potential merit.

In preparing this report, we performed a literature search and could not find any studies on the subject. In addition, we discussed the central bureau concept with professionals both within and outside Government. Some said the idea had come up in the past but had been given little serious consideration.

As to the potential merit of such a proposal, most professionals we interviewed believed a central bureau would be more efficient but pointed out that under such an arrangement, mission responsiveness and quality could deteriorate. In preparing sophisticated custom work to satisfy program needs, they said, the personal relationships between technical and program functions is very important. Close communication is vitally important for a thorough understanding of needs. We were told that such an understanding is required to help ensure quality and responsiveness, especially on quick turnaround assignments.

One agency we contacted was the United States Information Agency (USIA), whose mission depends, in part, upon photo-journalism; its photography laboratory technicians are responsible to the editorial staff. The editorial staff claimed this interaction made the laboratory more responsive to program needs and was reluctant to change the situation.

Interviewees also expressed the concern that a new bureau would eventually take on its own mission and not be responsive to the agencies it was established to serve. Even under the

(942284)

121720
525618

best of conditions, they said, a separate central laboratory could not be responsible to and effectively serve all customers and balance competing priorities. According to USIA and Department of Agriculture officials we spoke with, no central unit could properly adjust priorities among all the agency customers and assure delivery in time to meet rush assignments.

An alternative to establishing a new Government-wide photographic laboratory might be a lead agency approach. Under this type approach, some agency resources could be collectively used to provide a laboratory with the latest equipment. At least one agency we spoke with had no capital budget to purchase equipment and had to rely on that declared surplus by other agencies. A lead agency laboratory could be used by various agencies to meet their photographic needs. While it could not serve all agencies, such as the Central Intelligence and Defense agencies, other agencies could use it for nonsensitive civilian work. Because the lead agency laboratory would be located within an existing agency, its mission would merely be widened to serve other agencies.

Photography professionals had some reservations with such an approach but thought it might be more feasible than a central bureau. While one agency felt that consolidation might save money and found the prospect of new equipment exciting, it noted that any measurable decline in personal interaction would be detrimental to its mission in terms of timeliness and quality.

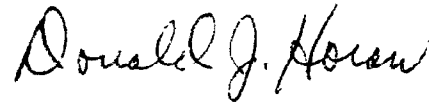
The lead agency approach might be worth pursuing. However, before making any determinations, an in-depth study would be required by professionals in this field. Such a study could be sponsored through the Office of Management and Budget and be done by an interagency group of photography professionals with private sector representation. Any study on the subject would have to address issues far greater than the possibility of mere dollar savings. It would need to consider, for example:

- The interaction with agency program personnel necessary to understand agencies' missions and needs.
- Responsiveness, including quick turnaround, and prioritization of competing requests.
- Willingness of civilian agencies to use the lead agency.
- Type of management needed.

B-211787

As arranged with your Office, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of this report. At that time copies will be made available to the Office of Management and Budget and to other interested parties upon request.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Donald J. Horan".

Donald J. Horan
Director