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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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Dear Mr. Griffin:

With your letter of June 8, 1971, you enclosed a copy of an article which appeared recently in The Northside Sun, a Jackson, Mississippi, weekly. The article cites the large volume of mail that the paper receives from Federal and State agencies, most of which is of no value to the paper, and concludes that, if this condition exists at over 28,000 other news-dispensing media in the country, there is a substantial waste of Government funds. You asked that the General Accounting Office look into this matter and provide you with its opinion thereon. You asked also if any study had ever been undertaken to determine the amount of Federal money wasted in this manner.

The General Accounting Office has made no studies to determine whether the condition mentioned by The Northside Sun exists throughout the country and is unaware of any Federal agency studies in this area. We agree that, should the condition exist, Federal funds are being wasted. Regarding the costs involved, in 1969 the Post Office Department and the General Services Administration transmitted mail-improvement guidelines to all Federal agencies. The objectives of the guidelines were to minimize mailing costs and to improve service. Since that time various training courses and training aids have been developed and implemented by the Post Office Department and the General Services Administration.

The General Accounting Office from time to time has done some work in related areas, such as public information operations, public affairs programs, and hometown news centers, in the Department of Defense.

Several years ago we undertook a review of press release operations in the civilian executive agencies. We conducted surveys at the offices of the Washington newspapers and wire services and newspapers in selected other cities. Our principal findings, at some but not all the agencies, were that (1) the self-mailer technique of printing postage indicia and addresses directly on printed materials, rather than using separate envelopes for mailing, was not used in all suitable cases, (2) news releases announcing the issuance of agency publications were sent to recipients with a copy of the publication attached, although the publications had not been requested, (3) daily mailings of news releases were made in separate envelopes rather than consolidated in one envelope to each recipient, and (4) mailing lists were not circularized and updated on a timely basis.

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Our findings and suggestions for reducing costs were brought to the attention of the agencies who generally took, or agreed to take, action to adopt our suggestions.

The matter of reaching judgments as to who should receive news releases is a difficult problem which does not lend itself to easy solution. The factors which determine whether a news release is newsworthy are many. An editor's decision on using news releases is dependent on such things as geographic location of his area, social and economic status of his audience, and the impact of the agency's activities on his audience.

The Government Printing and Binding Regulations published by the Joint Committee on Printing, Congress of the United States, provide that all departments make necessary revisions in their mailing lists at least once each year, to eliminate waste in Government funds caused by publications' being improperly addressed or mailed to persons no longer desiring them. This may be a means of avoiding distribution of news releases to those no longer interested, if the departments properly follow the regulation.

In our work in both the civilian agencies and the Department of Defense, we have found that public affairs activities and public information programs are conducted at all levels of the organizations down to and including the local level. Because of the many levels of Government that may engage in public affairs activities and public information programs and because of the dispersal of the many locations maintaining records of this information, it would be a tremendous undertaking to determine the extent of expenditures of Government funds for such purposes. We believe that there would be many problems involved in identifying all the organizations which may engage in such activities. This also applies, it seems, to the matter of news releases.

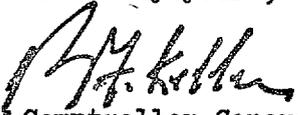
We have no plans at this time to make any studies relating specifically to the problems identified in the newspaper article you furnished. No doubt we will be doing further work from time to time on public information and public affairs programs and will consider your interest in this matter in planning that work. For more detailed information as to the nature of our work in those areas, we are enclosing copies of two of our reports, as follows:

B-156248

--Report to the Congress entitled "Excessive Costs Resulting From the Operation of Separate Departmental Public Information Offices, Department of Defense" (B-146880, Apr. 3, 1964).

--Report to the Secretary of Defense on the practices followed by the hometown news centers of the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force (B-146830, May 27, 1971).

Sincerely yours,


[Deputy] Comptroller General
of the United States

Enclosures - 2

The Honorable Charles H. Griffin
House of Representatives