

# Games Government Officials Play — And the rules they play by

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by Deil S. Wright\*

The special world which public officials inhabit is often poorly understood. In the past 10-15 years the impact of federal grants, revenue sharing, guidelines, reporting requirements, etc., have produced an even more complex and arcane world. This particular "world" has taken on its own special name — intergovernmental relations (or IGR).

Despite its complexity and low visibility, the arena of IGR can still be understood if it is approached properly. One useful approach for the average person seeking to understand IGR is to see it as a series of "games" which are played according to certain "rules." To illustrate this approach there is listed below several IGR games played by National and by State/Local officials. In addition, several rules for playing the "grantsmanship" game are identified in a subsequent section.

This presentation of IGR games and rules is excerpted from a larger article scheduled to appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Southern Review of Public Administration*.

## IGR Games

More than two decades ago Norton Long (Long, 1958) argued that local and metropolitan communities could best be understood as "an ecology of games." Long made three points pertinent to this discussion of IGR games. First, he contended that any actor might be involved in two, three, or several games. Second, he noted that while particular games might show clarity of goals and conscious rational striving, there was a lack of aggregate or overriding purpose(s); any system-wide coordination and direction occurred partly by chance and partly by ecological forces beyond the control of one or a few actors. Third,

Long asserted that actors with system-wide perspectives were few in number and were weak in managerial skills and political clout. The protagonists of things in general tended to lose to the proponents of particularistic programs.

Comments from observers of and participants in IGR indicate that these points about the ecology of games ring true, at least on an impressionistic basis. This article cannot cover wide-ranging applications of game-directed and rule-oriented behavior in IGR nor can it test the validity of such patterns. But it is possible to pursue a preliminary exploration of a game-based approach to IGR. If such an exploration seems to have a "reality fit" to both practitioners and observers alike, then there may be value in further pursuit of game-directed and rule-oriented inquiries in IGR.

At this stage our aims are modest, even minimal. We identify few notable IGR games and offer short explanations of each game. Space limits preclude the inclusion of illustrations of the games. The games are grouped in two broad categories of IGR participants: (1) state-local officials and (2) officials of the national government.

## IGR Games Played by State and Local Officials

### 1. Grantsmanship

This "hustle the buck" game involves locating and securing federal funds from many sources — usually as many as possible. (This may be the most widely-played IGR game; it is one for which we offer some commonly accepted rules for playing the "grantsmanship" game.)

### 2. Liberty

Prevent or minimize the extent of federal-level control over spending federal funds. This is sometimes paraphrased succinctly as: "Don't you tell us how to spend your money."

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### 3. Equality

Press for equitable or "fair" distribution of federal funds. This is also known as the "formula game" in which state-local participants push for specific and advantageous factors in the formulas by which federal funds are distributed.

### 4. Fraternity

Form alliances among like-minded or similarly situated officials. There are two erstwhile alliances in IGR. One is the "vertical functional autocracies" tying programmatic specialists from all levels together under such mottos as: "Program professionals stick together," and "Remember the Picket Fence." The latter reference is to Picket Fence Federalism — the shared loyalties and/or alliances of program professionals across and beyond the boundaries of particular political jurisdictions.

The second longstanding but more fragile fraternal alliance in IGR is among political administrative generalists at all levels. This alliance has enjoyed various designations: the "executive coalition," the "Big Seven," and the "PIGs." The last two appellations refer to the seven so-called Public Interest Groups composed of the following:

1. Council of State Governments
2. National Governor's Association
3. National Conference of State Legislators
4. National Association of County Officials
5. National League of Cities
6. United States Conference of Mayors
7. International City Management Association

The weakness as well as the optimism about the coalition among the PIGs has given rise to an IGR beatitude: "The meek shall inherit federal money."

### 5. Beggar Thy Neighbor

This refers to state or local officials' attempts to outbid or undercut jurisdictional neighbors or competitors in an effort to attract business and industrial firms to their own jurisdiction. The attractions or inducements may vary from tax breaks to the provision of public services — sometimes at reduced rates. Other names for this game include, "Lure the big one," and, disparagingly, "Smokestack Chasing."

### 6. End Run

This game is played by local officials, especially big-city mayors. It consists of the simple strategy of bypassing the states and establishing (as well as expanding) the flow of federal funds directly from the national government to the cities.

### 7. Covet Your Brother's Birthright

This game describes the effort made, particularly by local government officials, to secure a fixed or earmarked portion of the proceeds of state or federal tax revenues.

### 8. Build Potomac Pipelines

This game is also known as "The Washington Connection." The lines established as a result of playing this game are conduits for carrying two types of contents: (1) information and (2) money. The information flow is invariably a two-way process.

Knowledge about funds, regulations, legislation, formula distributions, etc., are secured through information channels usually established and maintained through cooperation between national and state-local officials. In some cases state-local officials must assume the full responsibility for initiating and continuing the information-related contacts. This pattern or process has resulted in large numbers of states and localities having their own Man-in-Washington representative (twenty-five states and fifty cities at last count). New York appears to have carried the "pipelines" strategy to the *n*th degree with in-Washington representatives from: New York City, New York City Board of Education, Governor's Office, Board of Regents, State Senate, and State House. There is, of course, a Washington-directed flow of information such as grant proposals, reports, etc.

The two way information flow usually culminates in the flow of *money* through these Potomac Pipelines. Often the dollar-based character of this game can be described with the paraphrase of Vince Lombardi's well-known saying: "Money isn't everything; it's the *only* thing!"

## IGR Games Played by National Officials

### 1. Turf Protectionism

This game consists of defending the agency's jurisdiction or program(s) against attacks by "outsiders," whether they be competing federal agencies and personnel or state and local generalist officials pursuing policy control or coordination aims. One expression of this orientation came from an exasperated mid-level federal program administrator who said: "Don't bother me with all these IGR *policy* matters, I've got a *program* to administer."

### 2. Project Perfectionism

This game is played by defining a project grant or IGR program requirements so strictly and precisely that only "angels" can qualify. The restrictive requirements give the

federal administrators the advantage of making exceptions, i.e., deciding who qualifies as "angels."

### 3. Bump-and-Run

This is a relatively new game and one that is played in an arena and with rules far different than Turf Protectionism and Project Perfectionism. The Bump-and-Run game consists of the national government giving state-local jurisdictions a nudge (bump) with an amount of money but avoiding (running from) the responsibility of specifying how the funds should be used. Funds from General Revenue Sharing perhaps best illustrate this game although funding under the anti-recession fiscal assistance program and some block grants also approximate this game.

### 4. Medicine Ball

The General Accounting Office audits a grant project or program. To those knowledgeable about the GAO no further explanation is required. To the uninitiated, the GAO is capable of inflicting a damaging and even mortal blow to a program's solar plexus.

### 5. Golden Rule

He who controls the gold makes the rules. This is also often expressed as: "He who pays the piper calls the tune." It reflects the natural and often mandated expectations that when federal funds are granted to support a program, activity, or project, there should be requirements which guarantee that the funds are spent by recipients for the intended purpose.

### 6. Einstein's Law of IGR Relativity

This game is an extension of the Golden Rule whereby the regulations associated with a grant may be calculated according to the formula  $E=MC^2$  where:

E= energy invested in writing the rules and regulations,

M= mass of dollars available for expenditure,

C= conservative attitude and cautious speed of the officials writing the regulations.

Pursuing the analogy one step further, it might be expected that grant administration might therefore proceed at the reciprocal of the speed of light.

Some participants and observers of IGR contend that Einstein's law is not universal and that there exists a special theory of rule-relativity. The special theory asserts that: The number and specificity of grant regulations are *inversely* proportional to the size of the grant.

### 7. It Isn't Big Enough

This refers to the "threshold level" phenomenon. Unless a grant request, policy

change, or program problem is sufficiently large it will not command the attention of federal officials. Where an idea or proposal does seem innovative or promising, however, the federal official may suggest to the applicant/proposer to enlarge the scope of the project.

### 8. We Can't Take It Back

Once a grant is made the federal officials expect the recipients to spend *all* the money rather than turning back "surplus" or unspent funds. To avoid such awkwardness and embarrassment the federal officials may engage in a sub-game called "reprogramming." This merely extends the time (and sometimes the purpose) under which the original funds may be used.

These games are not to be confused with the Year-End Rush game. In this game an agency has unobligated funds remaining as the end of the fiscal year approaches. The agency hurries to commit the available unobligated balances. To play the Year-End Rush game, however, it is normally a prerequisite that the agency previously engaged in a Build-the-Backlog game.

This game assures a backlog or on-the-shelf set of grant proposals that the federal agency can draw upon to deplete its year-end unobligated funds. There is, of course, another highly advantageous pay-off from the Build-the-Backlog game. An agency with a large or even massive list of meritorious but unfunded requests can show superiors and appropriate congressional committees strong justifications for (a) program need and (b) larger appropriations.

### 9. Share the Wealth — Strategically

Grant funds, especially project grants, should be allocated to states or cities where the benefits will do the most good *politically* as well as programmatically. The chairpersons of key congressional committees are persons whose constituencies deserve special attention whenever and wherever administrative discretion will permit it.

### 10. Include Us in the Ribbon Cutting

This might be called a ceremonial game, one that is played chiefly by members of the Congress and top-level political appointees. It consists of knowing about and being present when a major and highly-visible grant project (or program) has been successfully completed. When a new federally-assisted water supply system is opened, for example, senators and the congressmen (from that district) may insist on being present at the dedication ceremonies. It is predictable that speeches at such events will extoll the virtues of IGR cooperation and the values of federal

assistance for constructive community progress.

Modifications and variations on this game are the Grant Announcement game and the Bump-and-Run game. Under the Grant Announcement game a federal administrative agency is under a mandate to inform a congressman or senator within whose constituency a grant is about to be awarded.

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Based on this prior clearance the congressional member may then personally announce in a press release the fact that the grant award is being made to *X* jurisdiction for *Y* purpose. The purpose of this procedure of course, is to enhance the political visibility of the member of congress.

The Bump-and-Run game, as exemplified by General Revenue Sharing, has noticeably altered the Ribbon-Cutting game. Since mayors, councils, city managers, governors, and other state-local officials decide on and preside over the use of these funds they are unlikely to think about or include members of congress in "successful festivities." Indeed, one congressman critical of revenue sharing charged that, "When state and local officials build projects with these funds, they won't even invite us to the ribbon cutting!"

### **Rules of the Grantsmanship Game**

Very few of the rules by which many IGR games are played have been identified or codified. Various reasons may explain this lack of specified rules. One may be that the players are so occupied in playing some (or several) games that they cannot afford the time to codify the rules they follow. It is also possible that IGR players' behavior is so highly patterned, ingrained, and standardized that they may be unaware of the identifiable and relatively fixed rules they follow.

A third condition may contribute to the lack of explicitly specified rules for IGR games — the absence of *referees*. The dispersal of power and influence among numerous jurisdictions and IGR actors leads to the well-noted phenomenon of mild chaos, the absence of system-wide purposes, and the lack of clear accountability. A commonly asked question in IGR games is: "Who's in charge?" A standard response is: "Nobody!" These oft-cited conditions support a hypothesis that no one is in

charge of most IGR games; there are no referees!

Other reasons may explain the absence of rule-makers and rule-enforcers in IGR games. Those other reasons should neither detain nor deter us from attempting to fill part of the void which exists in one of the more extensively played IGR games — grantsmanship. The statements listed below represent an effort to provide a set of rules by which the grantsmanship game is played by state and local officials. The rules derive from the author's own experience, from frequent contact with state-local officials involved in grantsmanship, and from various published sources on IGR.

There is a rationale for classifying grantsmanship rules in two separate sets. The first set, *pervasive rules*, appears to be followed by a majority of officials most of the time. The second set, *particularistic rules*, guide grantsmanship behavior under special or exceptional circumstances. For purposes of simplified presentation the two sets of rules are specified as if they guided *local* officials only.

### **Pervasive Grantsmanship Rules for Local Officials**

#### **1. Maximize federal and state dollars and minimize local taxes.**

This action rule is similar to the Law of Fiscal Appropriateness: the level of government most appropriate to finance a governmental program is a level other than the one the official currently serves.

#### **2. Maximize local flexibility and discretion while minimizing federal/state controls, regulations, and guidelines.**

This rule is closely approximated by the Law of Administrative Appropriateness: the level of government by which one is currently employed is the one most appropriate to administer a program.

#### **3. Accept the Intergovernmental Law of Gravity.**

This rule states: "The Buck Drops *Down* to Local Officials." This is also known as the Law of Program Sedimentation: operational responsibility for a program is delegated downward to local officials, beyond whom no delegation can take place.

#### **4. Maximize public participation and satisfaction while implementing an efficient and effective grant program.**

This rule is sometimes known as "Get everyone in on the action but get *Action*."

#### **5. Maximize the respect and confidence of other intergovernmental participants.**

This is accomplished by using the following sub-rules:

- a. demonstrate honorable and decent intentions,
- b. develop evidence of capable personnel and quality program performance, and
- c. package and sell agency (or unit) accomplishments.

#### 6. Mobilize marginal resources.

Marginal resources are those which:

- a. provide the highest returns for the energy and effort committed to securing them,
- b. allow the greatest flexibility of usage, and
- c. can be preserved as slack or money in the bank to meet emergencies and future uncertainties.

#### 7. Retain and enhance political/organizational clout.

This is achieved by:

- a. using favorable constituencies and contacts,
- b. neutralizing hostile interests,
- c. avoid appearing greedy, and
- d. husbanding power as if it were expendable "green stamps," confident that modest clout used today will leave more for future use.

The *particularistic* rules of grantsmanship are ones that apply to specific and discrete operational circumstances. These rules can be subdivided into two groups: (A) rules involved in the search for grant funds — learning how to play the game or learning what bases must be touched, and (B) rules involving the acquisition of grant funds — knowing how to score.

### Particularistic Grantsmanship Rules

#### A. Grant Search Rules — Learn How to Play the Game.

- 1. Know the regulations (rules of the specific grant program).
- 2. Know the application deadlines. (This is like knowing it's your turn at bat.)
- 3. Know what the grantors want to hear. (This is frequently referred to as "knowing the language and its various dialects.")
- 4. Know where the dollars are. (This is sometimes compared to hunting for buried treasure except that the map is the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*.)
- 5. Know who knows where the dollars are. (This is equivalent to hiring a guide with a good, detailed map or in more common parlance, "Hire a consultant, preferably an experienced one.")
- 6. Know the best matching ratios and formulas. (One local dollar, cash or in-kind, can produce from 1-9 federal dollars. This rule is also called the

"Elastic Dollar Principle" and "Getting the Biggest Bang for the Local Buck.")

Once these six rules have been followed a formal grant application is likely to result. That application brings into "play" a set of grant acquisition rules. These might be subtitled "Boy Scout" rules since each one should be preceded by the motto: "Be prepared . . ."

#### B. Grant Acquisition Rules — Know How to Score. Be prepared to:

- 1. Have the grant rejected.
- 2. Learn that the grant regulations have been changed.
- 3. Learn that program priorities have been shifted.
- 4. Resubmit the grant in a revised form.
- 5. Lobby with the grantor agency using legislative, executive, and professional contacts. (This is frequently termed "Having friends call." A more effective but rare strategy is called "Having a God-father.")
- 6. Call in your own experts. (If the grantor agency raises questions or has doubts about the grant proposal, produce character witnesses.)
- 7. Show past, present, or future results that look good. (This rule is probably preferable to #6 but is more demanding; local officials must do the nitty-gritty work rather than merely pay for an expert's opinion.)
- 8. Work on a short fuse! (Like fighting fires, rapid response times are critical to grantsmanship. Developing a 100-page proposal for a \$100,000 grant in one month, including all local clearances and sign-offs, is a suitable dry-run test for assessing the adequacy of local response time.) □