

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When the President Appointed Me

by Karen Pryor

In November of 1984 President Reagan, or rather, a faceless organization called The White House, appointed me as a commissioner on the Marine Mammal Commission. The Marine Mammal Commission is a federal agency which oversees the safety and well-being of American marine mammals, from the biggest blue whale in the Bering Straits to the smallest sea lion pup in the Central Park Zoo. The Marine Mammal Commission is itself probably the smallest agency in the Federal government, with a budget of less than a million dollars a year, a staff of twelve, three part-time commissioners who meet once a year and make policy, and a board of scientific advisors.

Appointing Marine Mammal Commissioners was not high on the White House list of urgent matters. When I was nominated two positions on the Commission had been sitting empty for a year or more. I found out I was nominated when the Marine Mammal Commission Chairman, Bill Evans, the only existing commissioner at the time, called me up and told me so.

Bill Evans and I have both been involved in dolphin research and have known each other for years. But when he asked me if I'd like to be on the Marine Mammal Commission I was surprised. I thought I was probably qualified, but surely there were

candidates available with much more status. Who put me up for this job?

Later Bill gallantly implied that he himself had recommended me, but my impression at the time was that he was just as mystified as I was. "You must have some important friends in Washington," he said. Who? My college roommate? My Aunt Dorothy? In fact I have never learned who put my name on the list; and I suspect now that my leading attraction to The White House was that I was suitable and a woman.

You would think The White House nominates someone for the Commission, the person says yes, Congress says oh, why not, and the person becomes an appointee and starts deciding stuff, right? No. First came a questionnaire from the Senate. They already had my resumé, since Bill Evans had told me to send it in; but now they wanted much more detail, including an essay on why I thought I would be a good commissioner. I swallowed my self-respect and created the required puffery and mailed it.

Then came a request for information from the F.B.I. They were going to do a full-scale investigation of me. What they wanted was the names of thirty people who know me well in North Bend, the town near Seattle where I live. I had recently remarried, and had moved from New York to North Bend just a few months earlier. I told them I couldn't think of five people in North Bend who would even recognize me on the street. If they wanted thirty names they'd have to settle for people in New York. All right they said, give us what you can in both places; so I made two lists.

The F.B.I. went around and interviewed the North Bend list — the postmistress, my secretary, and a few others. They all said No, they'd never seen me drunk, No, I'd never passed a bad check, No, I had no criminal record as far as they knew. The F.B.I. visited everyone on the New York list, too, paying particular attention to the doormen in my old apartment building; but they still weren't satisfied. The local Seattle agent finally threw caution to the winds and came to our house to see for himself what I was up to. He was a young man of Chinese extraction. I liked him. When he came to understand that I am a writer he bought a copy of my most recent book and had me autograph it to his wife.

Then The White House sent me the government's Financial Disclosure Form, Form 278, a bulky pad of legal-sized pages, arranged horizontally, printed in blue. On this form you are supposed to explain every source of income you or your spouse have earned in the past year. Also you must list and give a value to every piece of property that either of you own, other than your house and your clothes. If you bought or sold anything in the past year, from stocks and bonds to one copy of your last book, you have to tell all about that, so The White House can see if you took advantage of your government position to do so; and if you took any lecture fees or other gifts or honoraria you have to say from whom, and how much.

The instructions alone filled many pages. I found them both complicated and oddly inappropriate. The instructions addressed a reporting individual—"You"—who was implicitly male, salaried, propertied, and a businessman, with a spouse who was none of the above. The single example of spousal earnings in the instruction described a "practicing psychologist" (why not just "psychologist?") who earned \$10,500 a year—not much of a practice. The sort of wifely, poorly paid, part-time job spouses of presidential appointees were expected to have.

This was the form that got Geraldine Ferraro in trouble, and I could see why. Filling it out for myself was cumbersome; filling it out for my husband Jon, whose business affairs are much more extensive than mine, was nearly impossible, given the complex instructions. For example it took many hours to resurrect the details we were required to report concerning Jon's speaking dates for the previous year. We knew what the Richmond Women's Club, say, had paid Jon to be their luncheon speaker, because we'd told that to the I.R.S. But what was the value of the Club lunch? You were supposed to report free meals. And if Jon spent the night with my Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Margaret, who live in Richmond, was that a reportable "gift of lodging?"

Filling out Form 278 took two full weeks of work. Nobody was paying me for that, either. And one could not just turn it over to an accountant; what would the accountant know about, say, Richmond and Uncle Jimmy? A horrid job.

About a month after I sent in that first 278, The White House called and chewed me out. First, I had filled the forms out by hand. Wrong. "This is going to the *Senate*," the man said oppressively. I was amused at this glimpse of The White House brushing the crumbs from its vest for the Senate, and I laughed. Bad. The man was cross now. He said irritably that furthermore I was not supposed to number the many pages of my submittal where I saw fit, but *in the boxes provided* for page numbers. I guess I failed to respond with sufficient chagrin, because then The White House started really scolding me, accusing me of "trying to get away with something," and threatening me with the law.

I pointed out that the forms were very complicated; that I was doing the best I could; and that I hadn't asked for this job, anyway. The man on the phone remembered his manners. He needed woman appointees, I suppose. He explained more courteously, if not cordially, what needed correcting, and I agreed to type the corrected version. I took mental revenge by envisioning this representative of The White House as being blond, hard-eyed, expensively dressed, and just the teeniest bit overweight.

While various government agencies mulled over my completed 278 I enjoyed a nice three-month hiatus from the business of being a nominee. Then I got one more angry phone call, this time, I think, from the C.I.A. An unpleasant male voice asked me to identify myself, and then said "It's about your resumé. There's a four-year gap in your resumé. You'll have to explain that."

"There is not!" I said hotly; I know my resumé well, and it's quite complete.

"Oh?" drawled the voice, in a "gotcha" tone. "You graduated from Cornell in 1954, right?"

"Right."

"And then in 1958 you started going to graduate school at the University of Hawaii, right?"

"Right."

"That leaves four years unaccounted for," he said triumphantly. Then he barked, "Where were you and what were you doing in those four years?"

I was flabbergasted. I bit back an impulse to say I was behind the Iron Curtain learning Chinese. Instead I explained.

"If you look a little further down the first page of that resumé, you will see that I got married in 1954, and had three children in the next five years. During that four-year 'gap,' as you call it, I was at home, taking care of infants, and usually either pregnant or lactating. Or both."

Interesting: I'd never *heard* someone blush over the phone before. But I wondered. How come I get to go through all this—and the procedure took many months, all told—while any number of bankers and lawyers have become presidential appointees in a matter of days or weeks? Were their resumé's more plausible? How did they fill out their 278s?

Eventually the investigation was complete, and I became a Commissioner. I got a very large document from The White House, suitable for framing if you had a big wall, beginning "Know all men by these presents..." and signed "Ronald Reagan" at the bottom in a clear, almost childish hand. It was still not official, because the Senate had to approve my appointment, and Marine Mammal Commissioners were not high on the Senate's urgent list, either. But I was allowed to start working without their go-ahead. Eventually the Senate summoned me to a subcommittee hearing in Washington, and in five minutes of formalities approved my appointment. I had not expected controversy. Still, I did my hair carefully and wore new clothes.

Most of what I did for the Commission I did at home, reading reports and proposals and commenting on them over the phone. I thought the work of the Marine Mammal Commission was valuable. The staff was dedicated and so was the scientific advisory committee. I learned a lot from them all. I felt quite dedicated myself.

After I'd served about eighteen months another missive from The White House came to my house, consisting of several pages of advice on how to be a good and tactful appointee in your new position. Alas, it came too late. Most of the things one was advised against doing I had already at least tried. Studying the document I decided that the person who followed all this sound counsel

would be, in the eyes of a civil service staff, a perfect appointee: one who did nothing at all.

However I expect I made a contribution during the three years that I served. There were areas where I did have expertise. Sometimes a permit holder or a research organization found my suggestions useful. I know I accomplished one thing: during my tenure, documents issuing from the Commission offices were no longer riddled with split infinitives.

One day the Commission's Executive Director, John Twiss, phoned me to say a new commissioner had been appointed, and I'd been replaced. The annual meeting was a week off and a continent away. Now someone else would sit on the dais for five days instead of me. I canceled my plane reservations. I thankfully drove an entire stationwagon load of Marine Mammal Commission papers to the dump.

There was no official notice of termination, nor expression of gratitude for my services, from The White House or anyone else. However, like a retired general or ambassador I was entitled to keep my title, and could insist on being introduced as Commissioner and having my mail addressed to The Honorable Karen Pryor if I wished.

The Commission and its multitudinous courier-delivered documents and reports disappeared from my life like a turned-off television. However, about a year after my duties were over, I got a letter from the Commission informing me that I was required to fill out one more form: a "termination" Form 278. This time the form was printed in green ink instead of blue. This time I was much more experienced; filling out the 278 took only two days.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act...

The Marine Mammal Protection Act is a remarkable piece of legislation which has had a powerful impact on our national environmental policy, not just in conservation of marine mammals, but of the oceans in general. The Marine Mammal Commission, which oversees the management of the Act, has been extraordinarily effective, due largely, in my opinion, to the skills of the director, John Twiss, who for decades now has guided his staff, his scientific board, and his ever-changing commissioners as they juggled the conflicting needs of science, the environmental community, other government agencies, and the law itself. Guidance and input from the MMC has helped to set *effective* policies and programs in place again and again.

My duties as a Commissioner included reading every permit request and research report, which gave me a detailed overview of current marine mammal research. It was fun reading about people landing helicopters on tippy pieces of sea ice to put radio collars on anesthetized polar bears; or people watching over the safety of baby monk seals on sun-blasted beaches in French Frigate Shoals.

It was also fascinating, for those three years, to watch the threads of problems and solutions weaving together in the papers that crossed my desk. Here came an ingenious way to collect convincing data in Florida, so that the Floridians themselves developed programs to protect the manatees—and with them, whole chunks of fragile coastal ecosystems. Another program surfaced, developed person by person and bit by bit, to reduce

sea otter mortality in drift nets off California, at the same time eliminating a horrendous level of sea bird mortality. A world-wide annual beach survey, conceived of and carried out by amateurs with seed money and organizational support from the Commission, produced such graphic evidence of the abundance of manmade ocean trash that it led to new international laws prohibiting all ships everywhere from dumping garbage at sea.

I liked the annual meetings, where one had a chance to meet a lot of people and ask questions. I didn't like the male chauvinism I tripped over now and then, nor the hidden resentments and surprise attacks that are a natural part of any bureaucracy. As I said in this piece, I know I helped some people, and solved some problems. I was glad to have served in the Government. I do hope I won't ever have to do it again.