

Washington

On the Art of Quitting and Firing

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, May 23—The art of quitting and firing has almost vanished in Washington. Officials are never "fired" these days: they are merely "called to fields of higher dedication." They never quit on principle: they slip away silently, blaming "family considerations."

Baseball is the last of the professions where losers are booted out publicly. When the Washington Senators lost 10 out of 11 games recently, which is only slightly worse than their average, Mickey Vernon, the manager, was canned on 12 hours' notice. But even he issued a communiqué of unsurpassed sweetness.

"I just feel disappointed," he said. "But I think I've been treated very well."

How John McGraw would have hooted at that! He would have kicked in the clubhouse door. He would have declared that even an act of Congress couldn't get the Senators out of the American League cellar. And, so saying, he would have shoved over the Washington Monument and left town in a blaze of profanity.

Age of Evasion

This, however, is the age of evasion. We haven't had a good slam-bang exit since General MacArthur. Even Sherman Adams, who was supposed to be the curmudgeon's curmudgeon, took his rug and flew softly away, and Allan Dulles, as a reward for Cuba, was all but canonized at the end.

Under President Kennedy the system is remarkably smooth. He is a master of the delayed shift. Chester Bowles is the best illustration of this technique. If the man doesn't measure up as Under Secretary of State, or somebody at the White House thinks he doesn't measure up, he is not called in and asked up to go away, but is shifted to the White House and given a fancy title as adviser to the President on Africa, Asia, Latin America and underdeveloped points East.

In Lonely Splendor

There, then, he sits in lonely splendor, like a deviationist in Siberia until he is sufficiently softened up to want out, at which time he is smuggled off to India without a fuss

Sometimes the direct transfer or consultation prize technique is used

For example, if Admiral George W. Anderson is being stubborn, awkward or too talkative, or all three, as Chief of Naval Operations, he is given the option of retirement or opulent banishment to a new post which, the President explains, "requires a good deal of skill and a good deal of dedication." All men who get this treatment are "dedicated."

From the Administration's point of view the system has certain advantages. Mainly it muffles the struggling on the back stairs and keeps a lot of awkward questions from being debated in public.

What is harder to explain is why the victims go so quietly. Here the expert is former Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson, who after long personal study and experience has a taste for stylish resignations and deft decapitations.

Mr. Acheson believes that officials stay on partly because of the boredom of private life, partly because "making a fuss" has gone out of style, partly because "saving face" has become increasingly important in the Western world, and partly because officials, like other people, like to eat.

Stifled Dissent

One result of all this is that a good deal of informed and dissenting opinion within this Administration is not getting out.

Equally important, the dissenters are hesitating more and more to push their views up to the top in private.

Every President has this problem sooner or later. As time goes on and problems and frustrations build up, officials hesitate to add their own doubts to the President's worries. Meanwhile, Presidents hesitate to provoke dissent, important as it is.

This problem increases in direct proportion to the respect and affection inspired by a President in the members of his staff. The more they admire him and sympathize with his burdens, the more they hesitate to question or challenge him. And this is a real problem for President Kennedy.

For he has both the respect and admiration of his staff.

STATINTL

Back to Topeka

Accordingly, the decline of the volcanic resignation is a loss. This is not to say that tame and deserving bureaucrats, like condemned convicts, do not deserve a good dinner before they go, but an apoplectic dissenter on his way out had a certain therapeutic and educational value.

Anyway, the polite habits of the Government establishment do not have to be transferred to baseball. The opposite might even be preferable.

For the old rule of professional baseball was that losers were either benched, traded or sent back to the minors whence they came. McGraw didn't transfer hitless infielders to the outfield, or tangled-foot outfielders to the infield. He didn't ask them if they were nice guys, either. He just sent them back to Topeka.