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## Who *Could* Buy the Government?

**W**anna buy a used government agency?

You may be able to in 1986.

The president has in mind the "privatizing" of the government, which means selling it, and as a first step the administration talked about putting the Federal Housing Administration up for bid.

According to a budget draft proposal, the buyer would get the whole thing, "including assets and liabilities."

Maybe that's just the beginning.

A lot of us would like to get our hands on a big government department and straighten it out or get it off our backs.

Trouble is, who can afford one? The Saudis, the defense contractors and an odd lottery winner or two are about the only people rich enough to swing a hostile takeover of the Pentagon. Will other nationalities be eligible buyers? These are details that have to be worked out.

We mustn't be petty. Imagine how this could simplify Christmas giving. For the man who has everything: 10,000 bureaucrats and a building big enough for a Grateful Dead concert.

The farmers are too poor to capture the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which they probably wish to do now more than ever since they heard on New Year's Day that it is about to start notifying delinquent farmers that they must try to get their finances in order or face foreclosure. Maybe they could pay in surplus grain.

Ask yourself the asking price for the IRS, which of all departments might tempt the average taxpayer to take a flier. It might go for a bargain price. Its computers are worthless—they mangled millions of returns last year. A number of rich people would like to buy it just to close it down.

Others might settle for an installation of a "multiple-choice" return, allowing taxpayers to pick and choose what items their money is to be used for. For instance, you check schools, roads and streetlights and put an X in the box next to aid to the contras or loans to Chile.

Such a system could lead to a more contented citizenry. It might also kill off some bad policies. The corporations

who don't pay any taxes are perhaps the people wealthy enough to buy the whole package. Still they might be willing to rent out various departments to less affluent, but equally vengeful elements. It's worth thinking about.

I would think the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency would go for a song, or maybe nothing, on the basis of its performance rating. Anyone around here seen any arms control and disarmament in the past five years?

I assume that Congress would be put on the block, too, although, come to think of it, it may have been bought and paid for already. The PACS, you know. They spend big bucks, and they get a good return on their investment.

The Energy Department could produce spirited bidding. It does some nuclear weapons work. Maybe some outfit like Beyond War, the richest and toniest of peace groups, could pass the hat and buy the nukes—for dumping purposes only, of course.

I don't see much action around the Department of Health and Human Services. It's just not a winner for the likely investor. Its clientele is terribly draining: the old (Social Security), the poor (welfare), the unwashed (the homeless). No, HHS might not make it in the marketplace. On the other hand, if those souls who keep telling us about the parasites, welfare cheats and willfully unemployed had a fund-raiser, Ronald Reagan might go and rake in a few billion for the cause of making the dispossessed Pull Up Their Socks.

The Justice Department might set hands reaching for wallets. There are those who would take out a second mortgage or their life savings for the pleasure of sacking the attorney general. Many a Harvard Law professor is probably even now fantasizing the farewell interview: "Mr. Meese, why don't you resign and spend more time with the Constitution? That was our original intent in buying this heap."

The same impulse might start a drive to buy the Education Department. Public school system devotees would die to pink-slip Secretary William J. Bennett, who rattles the tambourine for private schools. On the other hand, the

people with the bucks may think "Tom Sawyer" is a dirty book and want to ice the hot stuff in "Romeo and Juliet."

I think the CIA would get a good price. Polygraph-fanciers and invisible ink-collectors would covet it. So would the wimps who want to shut it down.

Again, though, there are the new patriots who would like to bring back the rack and thumbscrews for leakers and lob grenades into the Kremlin men's room.

Maybe, on second thought, we should not sell the government. You can't be sure who would want to buy it.