



Biography of an Ideal: A History of the Federal Civil Service

By Kay Cole James



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This is the current edition of *Biography of an Ideal*, which is a concise history of the United States civil service and the remarkable employees who have helped make our country great. It is a unique work, prepared by those who have been given the honor and privilege of protecting and administering our merit-based system, first at the Civil Service Commission and now at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. Originally published in conjunction with the 75th anniversary of the landmark Civil Service Act of 1883 and updated in 1973, the current edition adds important chapters that memorialize the critical developments in the civil service in the last three decades. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 brought fundamental structural changes that gave birth to OPM, the Merit Systems Protection Board, and a new Senior Executive Service. The election of the first American President with an advanced degree in business at the beginning of the 21st century brings new emphasis on results-oriented management of the Federal Government and a maturing role for OPM as central personnel agent. In his 2001 inaugural address, President Bush spoke of the grand and enduring ideals that unite Americans across the generations. The grandest of these, the "unfolding American promise that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born." That grand ideal lies at the core of the American civil service, as do so many of our laws and institutions. It is embodied in the remarkably timeless merit system principles, the firm foundation on which our civil service has been built and on which we will continue to build as we write the next chapters in the history of the civil service in the United States. These principles have served our Nation well during times of war and peace, and since September 11th, we have again turned to the merit principles as the basis for the Federal workforce that will help us prevail in our efforts against those who seek to destroy our system of governance. The challenges are many as we work to perfect our ideal and create an even better, fairer system based on the merit principles, a system that will attract and motivate the best and the brightest of the rising generation to heed the call to public service. This 120th anniversary edition of *Biography of an Ideal* is dedicated to the countless public servants in whose footsteps the next generation will follow; men and women who, throughout the years, have applied their talent, skills, and energy on behalf of our country. Thanks to their contributions, the ideals of our founders serve today as an inspiration for the world.

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