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Nice Work if You Can Get It

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Rep. Mark Meadows (R-NC) recently re-introduced a bill that might be the best indicator of government dysfunction in recent memory. The Eliminating Pornography from Agencies Act (H.R. 901) seeks to “prohibit accessing pornographic web sites from Federal computers, and for other purposes.” Why is such a bill necessary? Because government bureaucrats are just that good at accountability.

An employee with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who confessed to downloading more than 7,000 files of pornography to a government computer and watching them two to six hours a day remained on the government payroll at least through September – despite having his “work habit” revealed at a congressional hearing last May. Enraged, lawmakers wondered why the employee hadn’t been terminated, since he admitted he’d been watching porn since 2010. EPA second-in-command Bob Perciasepe gave them a weak response: “We need to wait for the inspector general’s report. I don’t know if they’re going to send him a criminal notice.”

Fast forward to September, and the inertia becomes apparent. “This employee continues to be investigated by the [Office of the Inspector General] and U.S. Attorney’s Office, and we are working with these offices to obtain information necessary to move forward with administrative action,” said EPA spokeswoman Liz Purchia. It remains unclear whether the individual still remains employed today, a full nine months after the initial discovery – and despite confessing to the allegation.

Adding insult to injury, the employee, who was placed on administrative leave, not only continued to collect his salary of approximately \$120,000 per year, he was actually given “performance rewards” for working hard.

Such levels of remuneration should surprise no one. A 2014 report released by the Cato Institute reveals that, in 2013, the average compensation for federal civilian workers, including wages and benefits, was \$115,524. Private sector workers? Only \$66,357, or a whopping 74% less.

And our EPA porn-watcher isn’t alone. A Treasury Department employee viewed approximately 13,000 porn images in a six-week period, and a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) worker watched pornography for up to eight hours per week, because he was “bored” due to a

lack of work. The Washington Times reveals that the lack-of-work excuse “has emerged time and again in federal investigations.”

The paper also revealed the crux of the problem after illuminating another case where paralegals working for U.S. Patent Trial and Appeal Board watched TV, shopped online, exercised and played around on their tablet computers, accounting for about \$4 million of getting paid for not working. They insisted the reason they wasted the time was because their supervisors didn’t give any assignments. Why not?

“Some supervisors were reluctant to give paralegals special projects out of fear that the assignments could antagonize the labor union,” the Times explained.

Leftist icon Franklin Delano Roosevelt was wise to that problem back in 1937. “All Government employees should realize that the process of collective bargaining, as usually understood, cannot be transplanted into the public service,” he wrote.

Unfortunately, another liberal icon, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, failed to heed that warning. On Jan. 17, 1962, he signed Executive Order 10988 granting collective bargaining rights to federal workers. And while pay and benefits are set by Congress, workers can still bargain regarding conditions of employment. Conditions which apparently include making it next to impossible to fire miscreants who watch hours of pornography on the taxpayers' dime.

And while abuse like that is relatively inconsequential, it is worth remembering that in other arenas it can literally be deadly. Last Tuesday, the Veterans Affairs Department (VA) was forced to back away from assertions by VA Secretary Bob McDonald that 60 employees who falsified patient data – falsifications that resulted in vets dying while waiting to be seen – had been fired since he took over last July. As Military.com more accurately reports, “10 employees were fired, four were permitted to resign or retire in lieu of being terminated, four had their probationary employment terminated, three were demoted, eight suspended for periods ranging from less than two weeks to 50 days, a dozen given admonishments and five were reprimanded.”

Why were some officials permitted to resign in lieu of termination? The Wall Street Journal spells it out: “The VA retirees follow the example set by Lois Lerner, who retired from the IRS before she could be dismissed for her role in targeting conservative groups seeking tax-exempt status. They will all presumably suffer no reduction in federal retirement benefits.”

And let’s not forget bonuses. During congressional hearings on the VA scandal held last June, the agency admitted that approximately 65% of senior VA executives were paid a total of \$2.7 million in bonuses in 2013, a number that doesn’t include tens of millions of additional bonuses awarded to doctors and other VA medical providers. Lerner collected \$42,531 in bonuses between 2009 and 2011, and according to the National Taxpayers Union her pension could be as much as \$102,600 per year.

And so, as far as deadbeat porno-watching federal workers go, it's going to take an actual law to codify even the most basic standards of decorum and professionalism – assuming it passes.

“There is absolutely no excuse for federal employees to be viewing and downloading pornographic materials on the taxpayers' dime,” said Meadows. Oh yes there is. People who are virtually impossible to fire, who don't have enough work to do, and who are often rewarded for their incompetence – even when it's deadly – might just assume they're invincible. And as long as federal workers remain unionized, they might be right.