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From the Archives: Battling the Bureaucracy

Parameters Editors

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From the Archives

Battling the Bureaucracy

However necessary the process may be, is there a more enduring, frustrating feature of any human endeavor than dealing with the administrative accountability of it all? The following letter may be apocryphal or genuine, but in any case it will strike a chord with those in military or government service. It is attributed to the Duke of Wellington, allegedly written by him to the British War Office during the Peninsular War (1808-1814).

Gentlemen:

Whilst marching to Portugal to a position which commands the approach to Madrid and the French forces, my officers have been diligently complying with your request which has been sent to H.M. ship from London to Lisbon and then by dispatch rider to our headquarters.

We have enumerated our saddles, bridles, tents and tent poles, and all manner of sundry items for which His Majesty's Government holds me accountable. I have dispatched reports on the character, wit, and spleen of every officer. Each item and every farthing has been accounted for, with two regrettable exceptions for which I beg your indulgence.

Unfortunately, the sum of one shilling and ninepence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion's petty cash, and there has been a hideous confusion as to the number of jars of raspberry jam issued to one cavalry regiment during a sandstorm in western Spain. This reprehensive carelessness may be related to the pressure of circumstances since we are at war with France, a fact which may have come as a bit of a surprise to you gentlemen in Whitehall.

This brings me to my present purpose, which is to request elucidation of my instructions from His Majesty's Government so that I may better understand why I am dragging an army over these barren plains. I construe that perforce it must be one of two alternative duties, as given below. I shall pursue one with the best of my ability, but I cannot do both.

1. To train an army of uniformed British clerks in Spain for the benefit of the accountants and copy-boys in London, or, perchance,
2. To see to it that the forces of Napoleon are driven out of Spain.

Your most obedient servant,

Wellington

Sources: Peter G. Tsouras, ed., *The Greenhill Dictionary of Military Quotations* (London, Eng., and Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Greenhill Books, Stackpole Books, 2000), pp. 62-63; also quoted in Joseph W. Koletar, "Corporate Security in the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries: Who Are Those Guys?" in *Proceedings of the 1999 Academic/Practitioner Symposium* of the American Society for Industrial Security, <http://www.asisonline.org/careercenter/1995SymposiumBook.pdf>, p. 42.