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**September 2008**

# **Principles of Federal Appropriations Law**

## **Third Edition**

### **Volume III**

As of March 10, 2016, GAO, Principles of Federal Appropriations Law, 4th ed., 2016 rev., ch. 1, GAO-16-463SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2016), and GAO, Principles of Federal Appropriations Law, 4th ed., 2016 rev., ch. 2, GAO-16-464SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2016), supersede chapters 1, 2, and 3 of GAO, Principles of Federal Appropriations Law, 3rd ed., GAO-04-261SP (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2004). Chapters 4 through 15 of the third edition of Principles of Federal Appropriations Law, in conjunction with GAO, Principles of Federal Appropriations Law: Annual Update to the Third Edition, GAO-15-303SP (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2015), remain the most currently available material on the topics discussed therein. Both Principles and the Annual Update to the Third Edition are available at [www.gao.gov/legal/red-book/overview](http://www.gao.gov/legal/red-book/overview).

This volume supersedes the Volume IV, Second Edition of the Principles of Federal Appropriations Law, 2001.

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# Foreword

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This is Volume III of *Principles of Federal Appropriations Law*, third edition. Publication of this volume completes our process of revising and updating the second edition of the “Red Book” and reissuing it in a 3-volume looseleaf set with cumulative annual updates. This volume and all other updated volumes of *Principles*, including the annual updates, are available on GAO’s Web site ([www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov)) under “Key References.” The annual updates are only available online. The online updated versions contain hyperlinks to the GAO material cited. Check the GAO Web site for other interesting information, for example, materials from our annual Appropriations Law Forum.

This volume updates chapters found in Volume IV of the second edition. We did not update Volume III of the second edition, which deals with functions that were transferred to the executive branch, including claims against the United States, debt collection, and payment of judgments against the United States. However, since the exercise of these responsibilities has appropriations law consequences, we include in this volume a new Chapter 14 that discusses these responsibilities in that context. Because Volume III of the second edition provides a useful history of case law in these areas, it will remain available on GAO’s Web site. However, inasmuch as it has not been updated and was last revised in 1994, it should not be viewed as a statement of current law. Also, it should not be confused with this Volume III of the third edition, which updates Volume IV of the second edition.

Our objective in *Principles* is to present a basic reference work covering those areas of law in which the Comptroller General issues decisions, using text discussion with specific legal authorities to illustrate the principles discussed, their application, and exceptions. As we noted in our first volume, *Principles* should be used as a general guide and starting point, not as a substitute for original legal research. We measure our success in

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this endeavor by *Principles'* day-to-day utility to its federal and nonfederal audience. In this regard, we appreciate the many comments and suggestions we have received to date, and hope that our publication will continue to serve as a useful reference.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary L. Keplinger". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Gary L. Keplinger  
General Counsel

September 2008

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# Acquisition of Goods and Services

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In the course of performing its lawful duties, a government agency routinely needs to acquire various goods and services from outside sources. These outside sources may include federal entities as well as private parties. The agency may also have to dispose of property or equipment which it no longer needs, or it may be authorized to provide certain goods or services to others as part of its mission. Fiscal aspects of government contracting are dealt with in virtually every chapter of this publication. This chapter addresses several topics not covered elsewhere whose only common thread is that they relate loosely to the general theme of how the government “does business.”

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## A. Acquisition and Disposal of Property for Government Use

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### 1. General Services Administration Schedule Programs

The General Services Administration (GSA) has broad authority over the acquisition of personal property and nonpersonal services for other government agencies. Section 501(b)(1)(A) of title 40, United States Code,<sup>1</sup> provides that GSA—

“shall procure and supply personal property and nonpersonal services for executive agencies to use in the proper discharge of their responsibilities, and perform functions related to procurement and supply including contracting, inspection, storage, issue, property identification and classification, transportation and traffic management, management of public utility services, and repairing and converting.”

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002, title 40 of the United States Code was revised and enacted into positive law. *See* Pub. L. No. 107-217, 116 Stat. 1062 (Aug. 21, 2002). While the references to sections in title 40 throughout this chapter are to the current provisions, many of the decisions and letters cited in this chapter refer to prior sections of title 40. However, the material is still relevant for purposes of the discussions herein.

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Section 501(b)(2)(A) requires GSA to “prescribe policies and methods for executive agencies regarding the procurement and supply of personal property and nonpersonal services and related functions.” These GSA policies and methods are subject to regulations prescribed by the Administrator for Federal Procurement Policy. 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(2)(B).

Section 501(d) requires GSA to “operate, for executive agencies, warehouses, supply centers, repair shops, fuel yards, and other similar facilities” and, after consultation with the affected agencies, to “consolidate, take over, or arrange for executive agencies to operate the facilities.”

Section 502(a) of title 40, United States Code, authorizes GSA to provide the same services, upon request, to a federal agency, mixed-ownership government corporation as defined in 31 U.S.C. § 9101, or the District of Columbia. The term “federal agency” brings in the legislative and judicial branches except for the Senate, House of Representatives, and Architect of the Capitol. *See* 40 U.S.C. § 102(5). GSA published a detailed explanation and listing of who is eligible to use its programs in GSA Order No. ADM 4800.2E, *Eligibility to Use GSA Sources of Supply and Services* (Jan. 3, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

GSA administers the Federal Supply Schedule (FSS) program, also known as the GSA Schedules Program or the Multiple Award Schedule Program (MAS), which is a simplified process for federal agencies to obtain commercial supplies and services at prices associated with volume buying. *See generally* Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), 48 C.F.R. pt. 8.4. Indefinite delivery contracts are awarded to provide supplies and services at stated prices for given periods of time. 48 C.F.R. § 8.402(a). Ordering agencies are authorized to place orders, or to establish blanket purchase agreements, against a vendor’s FSS contract. *Id.* § 8.401. Orders and blanket purchasing agreements are considered to be issued using full and open competition; therefore, when placing orders under FSS contracts or

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<sup>2</sup> This order is available on the GSA Web site at [www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentType=GSA\\_BASIC&contentId=8128&noC=T](http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentType=GSA_BASIC&contentId=8128&noC=T) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008). Our limited coverage here of the more common GSA supply programs authorized primarily in title 40, United States Code, should not be taken to indicate that other authorities do not exist. *See, for example, 62 Comp. Gen. 245 (1983)*, discussing GSA’s barter authority under the Strategic and Critical Materials Stock Piling Act, 50 U.S.C. § 98e(c).

when establishing a blanket purchasing agreement, ordering agencies do not need to seek competition outside the FSS. *Id.* § 8.404(a).

GSA schedule contracts require all FSS contractors to publish an “Authorized Federal Supply Schedule Pricelist,” which contains all supplies and services offered by an FSS vendor, as well as the pricing and terms and conditions pertaining to each Special Item Number that is on the schedule (that is, a group of generically similar, but not identical, supplies or services that are intended to serve the same general purpose or function). 48 C.F.R. §§ 8.401, 8.402(b). GSA for many years included ordering instructions in the Federal Property Management Regulations, but dropped them in 1995. 60 Fed. Reg. 19674 (Apr. 20, 1995). GSA’s Web site contains extensive information on the schedules at [www.gsa.gov/schedules](http://www.gsa.gov/schedules) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

In the early 1980s, GSA developed a system, which GAO approved in [63 Comp. Gen. 129 \(1983\)](#), for entering into MAS contracts on a multiyear basis.<sup>3</sup> This is in accord with the *bona fide* needs rule (*see* Chapter 5) and does not violate the Antideficiency Act (*see* Chapter 6) since there is no obligation of appropriations until a using agency determines that it has a requirement and issues a delivery or task order.<sup>4</sup> *Id.* Of course, the agency must have available appropriations when it does that.

For FSS contracts, GSA has already determined that the vendors’ prices of supplies and fixed-price services and rates for services offered at hourly rates are fair and reasonable. Therefore, ordering agencies are not required to make a separate determination of fair and reasonable pricing, except for a price evaluation as required by section 8.405-2(d) of the FAR. 48 C.F.R. § 8.404(d). By placing an order against an FSS contract using the procedures in section 8.405 of the FAR, the ordering agency has concluded that the order represents the best value (as defined in 48 C.F.R. § 2.101) and

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<sup>3</sup> We use the term “multiyear” here to mean contracts which cross fiscal years. This is not to be confused with the much more specific and prescribed concept of multiyear contracting and ordering procedures as provided in the FAR, 48 C.F.R. subpart 17.1. See especially the definition of a multiyear contract in 48 C.F.R. § 17.103.

<sup>4</sup> *But see* [B-308969, May 31, 2007](#) (the government incurred a legal liability in the amount of the guaranteed minimum in an indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity (IDIQ) contract at the time in which the contract was awarded and the agencies involved should have obligated that amount at that time); [B-302358, Dec. 27, 2004](#) (upon award of an IDIQ contract Customs should have obligated the contract minimum of \$25 million in accordance with the recording statute to ensure the integrity of Customs’s obligational accounts records).

results in the lowest overall cost alternative (considering price, special features, administrative costs, *etc.*) to meet the government's needs. Although GSA has already negotiated fair and reasonable pricing, ordering agencies may seek additional discounts before placing an order. *Id.* §§ 8.404(d), 8.405-4.

Under the FSS program, agencies may place orders using a request for quotations (RFQ). *Id.* § 8.405-1. A quotation is not a submission for acceptance by the government to form a binding contract; rather, vendor quotations are purely informational. In the context of an RFQ, it is the government that makes the offer, albeit generally based on the information provided by the vendor in its quotation, and no binding agreement is created until the vendor accepts the offer. 48 C.F.R. § 13.0004(a). Generally, a vendor submitting a price quotation, therefore, can reject an offer from the government at the vendor's quoted price. [B-292708, Oct. 3, 2003](#).

However, where an agency issues an RFQ under FAR subpart 8.4 and conducts a competition (*see* 48 C.F.R. § 8.405-2), GAO, in a bid protest, will review the record to ensure that the agency's evaluation was fair and reasonable and consistent with the terms of the solicitation. *See* [B-297210, Nov. 28, 2005](#); [B-278343, B-278343.2, Jan. 20, 1998](#). In such a competition, it is the vendor's burden to submit a quotation that is adequately written and establishes the merits of the quotation, or else the vendor runs the risk of the agency rejecting the quotation as technically unacceptable. [B-293527, Mar. 26, 2004](#); [B-290291, June 17, 2002](#).

The FSS program applies to services (priced at either hourly rates or at a fixed price for performance of a specific task) as well as supplies (listed at fixed prices). For example, GSA is acting within its authority in establishing a mandatory supply schedule for debt collection services. The using agency's authority in 31 U.S.C. § 3718 to contract for debt collection services does not override GSA's authority to determine how the procurement is to be accomplished. [B-259975, Sept. 18, 1995](#).

For administrative convenience, an ordering agency may add items not on the FSS (that is, open market items) to an FSS blanket purchase agreement or to an individual task or delivery order only if all applicable acquisition regulations with respect to non-FSS items have been followed (*e.g.*, publication (48 C.F.R. part 5), competition requirements (48 C.F.R. part 6), acquisition of commercial items (48 C.F.R. part 12), contracting methods (48 C.F.R. parts 13, 14, and 15), and small business programs (48 C.F.R.

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part 19)), and the ordering agency has determined that the price for the non-FSS is fair and reasonable, the items are clearly labeled on the order as non-FSS items, and all applicable clauses with respect to non-FSS items are included in the order. 48 C.F.R. § 8.402(f)(1)–(4). A nonschedule procurement in violation of the regulations is an unauthorized act, but again as with stock items, the agency may pay the vendor if the *quantum meruit/quantum valebant* standards are met. [B-213489, Mar. 13, 1984](#); [B-195123, July 11, 1979](#).

As with any other agency program, there are certain expenses GSA must bear incident to administering the Federal Supply Schedule program. One example is discussed in [42 Comp. Gen. 563 \(1963\)](#), in which GSA directed a supply schedule gasoline contractor to litigate the constitutionality of a state gasoline tax. The cost was simply a cost of carrying out GSA's normal duties and there was no basis for passing it on to user agencies.

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## 2. Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts

In 1996, the Clinger-Cohen Act authorized the creation of Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts (GWAC), which are contracts for information technology (IT) goods and services that are established by one agency for governmentwide use, with deliveries scheduled through orders with the contractor. Pub. L. No. 104-106, div. E, 110 Stat. 186, 679 (Feb. 10, 1996). *See also* GAO, *Contract Management: Interagency Contract Program Fees Need More Oversight*, GAO-02-734 (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2002); *Interagency Contracting: Improved Guidance, Planning, and Oversight Would Enable the Department of Homeland Security to Address Risks*, GAO-06-996 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2006). GWACs are generally indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity (IDIQ) contracts. Chapter 7, section B.1.e discusses requirements for obligating IDIQs. Each GWAC is operated by an executive agency designated by the Office of Management and Budget pursuant to section 5112(e) of the Clinger-Cohen Act, Pub. L. No. 104-106. An agency placing an order under a GWAC incurs an obligation directly against the contract; accordingly, as with MAS contracts, interagency agreements, discussed in section B of this chapter, are not required when placing orders against a GWAC. *See GSA Schedules Frequently Asked Questions*, available at [www.gsa.gov/schedules](http://www.gsa.gov/schedules) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).



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### 3. Stationery and Supplies

Originally enacted in 1868,<sup>5</sup> 41 U.S.C. § 13 provides: “Except as otherwise provided, it shall not be lawful for any of the executive departments to make contracts for stationery or other supplies for a longer term than one year from the time the contract is made.” Our research failed to disclose a definition of “supplies” for purposes of this statute, although the request for decision in one case assumed it meant “supplies which are consumed in the use thereof, such as food, gasoline,” *etc.*, and nothing in the decision contradicted that assumption. 19 Comp. Gen. 980, 981 (1940). The statute was often cited along with other fiscal control laws such as the Antideficiency Act, Adequacy of Appropriations Act, *bona fide* needs statute, *etc.*, and its independent significance received little attention. *E.g.*, 36 Comp. Gen. 683, 684 (1957). Apart from certain indefinite-quantity or requirements contracts (*e.g.*, A-60589, July 12, 1935), it added little to what was already prohibited by the other statutes.

In any event, while the law is still on the books, statutory exemptions have whittled it down to virtually nothing. The Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, ch. 288, 63 Stat. 377 (June 30, 1949) (Property Act), included an exemption for the General Services Administration (GSA) and agencies acting under a GSA delegation, later expanded to what is now the first sentence of 41 U.S.C. § 260: “Sections 5, 8, and 13 of this title shall not apply to the procurement of property or services made by an executive agency pursuant to this subchapter.” Since this provision originated in the Property Act, the definition of “executive agency” in the codified version of title 40 derived from that act, contained in 40 U.S.C. § 102(4), would presumably apply:

“The term ‘executive agency’ means—

“(A) an executive department or independent establishment in the executive branch of the Government; and

“(B) a wholly owned Government corporation.”

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<sup>5</sup> Resolution No. 8, 15 Stat. 246 (Jan. 31, 1868).

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GSA published a detailed explanation and listing of who is eligible to use its supply services in GSA's Order No. ADM 4800.2E,<sup>6</sup> which includes executive, legislative, and judicial branch agencies as well as other federal entities. Section 7.b of the GSA order states:

“Subsection 201(b) of the Property Act authorizes the Administrator [of GSA] to provide GSA sources of supply to these organizations upon request. . .

“(1) Other Federal Agencies. These are Federal agencies defined in subsection 3(b) of the Property Act that are not in the executive branch; *i.e.*, any establishment in the legislative or judicial branch of the Government . . . To the extent that GSA has made such determinations, the organizations qualifying under this authority are listed in app. B.”

Appendix B to the order contains a list of “Other Eligible Users,” which includes legislative branch agencies (*e.g.*, GAO and the Library of Congress); judicial branch agencies (*e.g.*, the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts); and a number of government boards, commissions, and corporate entities.

In addition, 10 U.S.C. § 2314 provides: “Sections 3709 and 3735 of the Revised Statutes (41 U.S.C. [§§] 5 and 13) do not apply to the procurement or sale of property or services by the agencies named in section 2303 of this title [10 U.S.C. § 2303].” Section 2303 lists the Departments of Defense, Army, Navy, Air Force, the Coast Guard, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

GAO has pointed out that these exemptions are just that—exemptions from 41 U.S.C. § 13—and do not by themselves authorize anyone to obligate funds in advance of appropriations. [63 Comp. Gen. 129, 135 \(1983\)](#); [48 Comp. Gen. 497, 500 \(1969\)](#).

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<sup>6</sup> *Eligibility to Use GSA Sources of Supply and Services* (Jan. 3, 2000), available at [www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentType=GSA\\_BASIC&contentId=8128&no\\_c=T](http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/contentView.do?contentType=GSA_BASIC&contentId=8128&no_c=T) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

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#### 4. Exchange/Sale Authority in Acquiring Personal Property

Section 503(a) of title 40, United States Code, provides: “In acquiring personal property, an executive agency may exchange or sell similar items and may apply the exchange allowance or proceeds of sale in whole or in part payment for the property acquired.” Section 503(b) provides that a transaction under 40 U.S.C. § 503(a) must be in writing and carried out in accordance with General Services Administration (GSA) regulations, which in turn are subject to regulations of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy.

The reason for section 503 is that, without it, the acquiring agency would have to charge the full purchase price to its appropriation while depositing the proceeds from the disposition of old material in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts, even though it may have budgeted on the basis of net cost. For an example of this problem, see [21 Comp. Gen. 294 \(1941\)](#). This was true regardless of whether the old material was sold for cash (15 Op. Att’y Gen. 322 (1877)) or traded in for an allowance against the purchase price (5 Comp. Dec. 716 (1899)). GAO had come to the conclusion that there was “no complete and satisfactory solution of the problem except by obtaining necessary legislation.” [21 Comp. Gen. at 297](#). Section 503 was the culmination of legislative attempts that began decades earlier. The first statutes tended to be limited either to a particular agency or to particular types of personal property such as automobiles. *See, e.g.,* [19 Comp. Gen. 906 \(1940\)](#). The origins and history of section 503 (formerly section 201(c) of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, ch. 288, 63 Stat. 377 (June 30, 1949)) are outlined in [B-169903-O.M., Jan. 8, 1973](#). Although the statute uses the term “executive agency,” GAO regards it as applicable to itself by virtue of 31 U.S.C. § 704(a) which makes laws “generally related to administering an agency” applicable to GAO. [B-201082-O.M., Dec. 2, 1980](#).

Implementation of the exchange/sale authority is the primary responsibility of GSA, whose regulations are found in 41 C.F.R. part 102-39, part of the Federal Management Regulation. GAO has considered various aspects of the exchange/sale authority on many occasions, but relies heavily on the GSA regulations and will not interfere with any reasonable application by GSA. *See* [B-189300, May 5, 1978](#) (nondecision letter).

The regulations authorize use of the exchange/sale authority only when the following conditions apply:

- The property sold or exchanged must be “similar to the property acquired.”

- The property sold or exchanged must not be excess or surplus, and the agency must have a continuing need for the property acquired.
- Subject to certain exceptions, “the number of items acquired must equal the number of items exchanged or sold.”
- The property exchanged or sold cannot have been acquired for the principal purpose of exchange or sale.
- There must be documentation that the exchange allowance or sale proceeds will be applied to the acquisition of replacement property.

41 C.F.R. § 102-39.50. If the exchange/sale authority applies, the agency is under no obligation to give precedence to other statutory disposal options, such as donation programs. [B-153771, June 12, 1964.](#)

The first listed condition is simply a restatement of the requirement of the statute that the items be “similar.” GAO has observed that “similar items’ is not a precise term” and that the law “affords [GSA] a flexible standard in the promulgation of regulations.” [41 Comp. Gen. 227, 228–29 \(1961\).](#) GSA regards items as similar for purposes of the exchange/sale statute when—

- the replaced item and the acquired item are identical;
- the acquired and replaced item “are designed and constructed for the same purpose”;
- both items constitute parts or containers for identical or similar end items; or
- the acquired item and the replaced item both fall within a single Federal Supply Classification group of property that is eligible for handling under the exchange/sale authority.

41 C.F.R. § 102-39.20.

Under the second standard, items need not be identical if they are designed and constructed for the same purpose. Thus, ambulances and station wagons adapted for use as ambulances are similar for purposes of the statute. [41 Comp. Gen. 227 \(1961\).](#) Different types of trucks qualify because they are designed and intended to be used for the transportation of property. [B-47592, Feb. 14, 1945.](#) So do vessels designed for hydrographic

surveying, notwithstanding differences in size and capacity which would preclude their operation under the same conditions. [B-127659, June 5, 1956](#).

The statute and regulations are designed to facilitate the legitimate replacement of property and should not be used for what amounts to a new acquisition in the guise of an exchange. In [55 Comp. Gen. 1268 \(1976\)](#), GSA had disapproved an exchange of gold for silver proposed by the Defense Department and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Notwithstanding the assertion that the two were “virtually interchangeable,” an examination of the proposal showed that they would not serve the same specific purpose, and that GSA was therefore correct. *See also* [B-149858-O.M., Feb. 25, 1963](#) (diamonds not similar to rubies). The purpose to be served must be specific. Intermingling dissimilar items for use on a common project—unless they are within the same Federal Supply Classification group—is not enough. Thus, trucks and shovels, for example, are not similar simply because they will be used as “road building equipment.” [27 Comp. Gen. 540 \(1948\)](#). In general, “in the purchase of a truck only a truck may be sold or exchanged, a tractor for a tractor, a boat for a boat, *etc.*” [23 Comp. Gen. 931, 934 \(1944\)](#).

The regulations also treat items as similar if they are parts for similar end items. *See, e.g.*, [34 Comp. Gen. 452 \(1955\)](#) (United States Mint at Philadelphia could sell high-frequency motor-generator set and use proceeds for parts for high-frequency melting units); [B-126544, Feb. 17, 1956](#) (another case involving U.S. Mint equipment). The 1955 decision cautioned that while the proceeds could be applied to the purchase of the new equipment, they could not be used for such things as removal, modification, installation, or assembly. [34 Comp. Gen. at 454](#).

Sales proceeds can be applied to a different program or activity in the same agency as long as they are applied to the purchase of similar items. This follows logically from the requirement under 40 U.S.C. § 524(b)(1) that, as far as practicable, an agency reassign property within the agency before reporting it to GSA as excess. [B-153771, June 12, 1964](#).

There are a number of important exclusions from the exchange/sale authority. One is mandated by the very premise of the statute—it applies only to personal property, not to real property. *E.g.*, [B-128706, Aug. 14, 1956](#) (41 miles of telephone line are not “personal property”). Others are contained in the regulations. Items are not eligible for exchange/sale treatment if they are found in any of the Federal Supply Classification

groups listed in 41 C.F.R. § 102-39.45(a). The groups listed range from hand tools and clothing to weapons and nuclear ordnance. Other provisions specify that the exchange/sale authority may not be used if the acquisition is not otherwise authorized by law or is in contravention of an applicable restriction. 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-39.45(j), (k), 102-39.30. For example, it could not be used to acquire a passenger motor vehicle by an agency which lacks the specific authority required by 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). [27 Comp. Gen. 105 \(1947\)](#). As noted above, the exchange/sale authority may not be used to dispose of excess or surplus property. 41 C.F.R. § 102-39.50(b). *See* [B-163084, Feb. 5, 1979](#); [B-169903, July 27, 1970](#). Nor may it be used to dispose of scrap materials except scrap gold for fine gold. 41 C.F.R. § 102-39.45(e); *see* [B-163084, Feb. 5, 1979](#).

Long before the enactment of 40 U.S.C. § 503, GAO had taken the position that an agency disposing of personal property through competitive bids should solicit cash bids as well as trade-in offers, and should accept whichever was more favorable to the government. *E.g.*, [5 Comp. Gen. 798 \(1926\)](#). This position continued after enactment of section 503. [45 Comp. Gen. 671 \(1966\)](#); [B-150296, Mar. 14, 1963](#).<sup>7</sup> In [64 Comp. Gen. 132 \(1984\)](#), GAO sustained a bid protest where the solicitation failed to include the cash option. The decision stated:

“[W]here an agency contemplates considering offers for the government’s old equipment in conjunction with an acquisition of new equipment, we question whether it is fair or even in the government’s best interest to limit offers for the old equipment to firms also offering to supply the new equipment, if there exists a third-party market for the old equipment that might be willing to offer more on a cash basis than the government could have obtained from any exchange allowance.”

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<sup>7</sup> GSA regulations contain the following requirement:

“How do I determine whether to do an exchange or a sale?”

“You must determine whether an exchange or sale will provide the greater return for the Government. When estimating the return under each method, consider all related administrative and overhead costs.”

41 C.F.R. § 102-39.35.

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64 Comp. Gen. at 134.

GAO has approved issuing a request for quotations for the sole purpose of comparing trade-in offers where the agency contemplated making the actual acquisition by purchase request from the Federal Supply Schedule. [B-181146, Nov. 21, 1974](#). GAO has also concurred with a proposal by GSA to sell used cars, many of which are exchange/sale cars, on consignment through private auction houses. [64 Comp. Gen. 149 \(1984\)](#).

Of course, the main reason for the enactment of 40 U.S.C. § 503 was to permit the proceeds of the exchange or sale to be applied towards acquisition of the new item. Applicable requirements are set forth in GAO's *Policy and Procedures Manual for Guidance of Federal Agencies*, title 7, § 5.5.D (Washington, D.C.: May 18, 1993), some of which have been incorporated into GSA's regulations at 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-39.15(a), 102-39.40(a)(3), and 102-39.70. If the proceeds are received after the obligation for the replacement property has been incurred, they may be credited directly to the appropriation account charged. If the proceeds are received before the obligation for the replacement property has been incurred, they remain available for the purchase during the fiscal year in which the property was sold and for one fiscal year thereafter. 41 C.F.R. § 102-39.70. If an administrative determination to use the proceeds has been made and documented, the money should be credited to the appropriate budget clearing account. When the obligation is incurred, the clearing account is charged and the appropriation account credited. This prevents expiration of the appropriation from thwarting the legitimate exercise of the exchange/sale authority. If the obligation does not occur within the prescribed time period, the money goes to the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts, the theory being that it would no longer be a *bona fide* replacement. *Id.*

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## 5. Disposal of Personal Property

The principles which govern the disposal of government property are, for the most part, the same for real and personal property although they differ in detail. We discuss the disposal of real property in Chapter 13. The principles are:

- Under the Property Clause of the Constitution (art. IV, § 3, cl. 2), disposal of government property requires statutory authority.
- Congress has implemented the Property Clause mainly through provisions of title 40, United States Code. The General Services



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Administration (GSA) has primary responsibility for administering these provisions, and does so in turn through the Federal Management Regulation, 41 C.F.R. chapter 102.

- Disposal is a three-stage process: reassignment within the agency; transfer to other federal agencies (excess property); sale or other authorized disposal outside of the government (surplus property). The definitions of excess and surplus property are the same for real and personal property.

Upon determining that an item of personal property is no longer needed “for the purposes of the appropriation used to make the purchase,” the agency’s first task is to see if it can be reassigned for use elsewhere in the agency. 40 U.S.C. § 524(b)(1); 41 C.F.R. § 102-36.35(a). The statutory language makes clear that this includes activities within the agency financed by different appropriations. [B-139655-O.M., July 20, 1959](#). If the property is not needed elsewhere in the agency, it is declared excess and reported to GSA. GSA can then direct transfer to another agency, a government corporation, or the District of Columbia, or can redistribute the property through its own supply centers. 40 U.S.C. §§ 521–522.

As with real property, the statute requires reimbursement by the receiving agency of the property’s “fair value” if either the transferor or the transferee is the District of Columbia or a government corporation subject to the Government Corporation Control Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 9101–9110, or if the property was acquired by using a revolving or reimbursable fund and the transferor agency requests reimbursement of the net proceeds. In all other cases, the extent of reimbursement is left to the determination of GSA and the Office of Management and Budget. 40 U.S.C. §§ 522(a), (b). The regulations provide that, except for the situations mandated by the statute and a few others, transfers of excess personal property are without reimbursement. 41 C.F.R. § 102-36.75. This “no reimbursement” policy is within GSA’s discretion under the law. [B-101646-O.M., Feb. 11, 1977](#).

A little-known statute is 40 U.S.C. § 528, which prohibits any department or agency of the federal government from using appropriated funds “to purchase furniture if the Administrator of General Services determines that requirements can reasonably be met by transferring excess furniture, including rehabilitated furniture, from other departments or agencies” in accordance with the title 40 provisions.



Excess property in a foreign country is subject to different provisions of the law. Each agency is responsible for disposing of its own foreign excess property. 40 U.S.C. § 701(b)(1). Methods of disposal include sale, exchange, lease, or transfer, or the property can be returned to the United States for handling as domestic excess property. *Id.* §§ 702–704. This broad authority includes transfer to another federal agency without reimbursement. [42 Comp. Gen. 21 \(1962\)](#).

If the property is found to be excess to all federal agencies, GSA declares it to be surplus. GSA has general supervision and direction over the disposition of surplus property. 40 U.S.C. § 541. Another agency can sell surplus property only if it has specific authority which overrides the title 40 provisions or upon delegation from GSA. [56 Comp. Gen. 754 \(1977\)](#). GSA's regulations amount to a blanket delegation by authorizing agencies to either sell their own surplus property or to have GSA, a contractor, or another agency sell it for them. 41 C.F.R. § 102-38.40.

Section 543 of title 40 provides that agencies authorized by GSA to dispose of surplus property—

“may do so by sale, exchange, lease, permit, or transfer, for cash, credit, or other property, with or without warranty, on terms and conditions that the Administrator considers proper. The agency may execute documents to transfer title or other interest in the property and may take other action it considers necessary or proper to dispose of the property under this chapter [chapter 5 of title 40].”

Note that section 543 authorizes sales for credit as well as cash. The regulations permit accepting payment by either credit or debit card. 41 C.F.R. § 102-38.290.

The procedures for disposal are contained in 40 U.S.C. § 545. Section 545 generally requires advertising for bids for disposal and contracts for disposal, although, as discussed below, it includes a number of exceptions to this requirement. The statute further provides that—

“an award shall be made with reasonable promptness by notice to the responsible bidder whose bid, conforming to the invitation for bids, is most advantageous to the Federal Government, price and other factors considered. However,

all bids may be rejected if it is in the public interest to do so.”

40 U.S.C. § 545(a)(4). Generally speaking, this requires award to the highest bidder. 36 *Comp. Gen.* 94 (1956); B-192592, Nov. 16, 1978. The winning bidder must be responsive and responsible. These terms have the same meaning as in the procurement arena. Responsive means that the bid must conform to the advertised terms and conditions (49 *Comp. Gen.* 244, 246 (1969)); responsible refers to ability to perform (B-160179, Dec. 12, 1966).

Section 545(b) sets forth nine situations in which the sale may be negotiated rather than advertised. They include such things as national emergency; estimated fair market value does not exceed \$15,000; and advertisement fails to produce reasonable bids. Another situation is where sale by competitive bidding “would impact an industry to an extent that would adversely affect the national economy,” provided that negotiation will produce the estimated fair market value and other satisfactory terms. 40 U.S.C. § 545(b)(4). This does not authorize an agency to address economic impact by advertising a sale with the condition that the property must be scrapped by the purchaser. 43 *Comp. Gen.* 15 (1963). Another provision of the statute, 40 U.S.C. § 545(d), authorizes GSA to sell surplus personal property by negotiation at fixed prices which reflect estimated fair market value, without regard to section 545(a).

A provision that has generated some attention in judicial and GAO decisions is 40 U.S.C. § 544:

“A deed, bill of sale, lease, or other instrument executed by or on behalf of an executive agency purporting to transfer title or other interest in surplus property under this chapter [chapter 5 of title 40] is conclusive evidence of compliance with the provisions of this chapter concerning title or other interest of a bona fide grantee or transferee for value and without notice of lack of compliance.”

This language originated in a very similar provision in the Surplus Property Act of 1944,<sup>8</sup> designed to protect the good-faith purchaser, in the absence of fraud, against attack based on mistake or lack of authority. *United States v. Jones*, 176 F.2d 278 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1949). *See also East Tennessee Iron & Metal Co. v. United States*, 218 F. Supp. 377 (E.D. Tenn. 1963) (mutual mistake). It will protect an otherwise innocent party who acquires title from a fraudulent vendee. *United States v. Mailet*, 294 F. Supp. 761 (D. Mass. 1968). The provision has also been viewed as a protection for the title of a good-faith purchaser where the property had never been declared surplus and was therefore disposed of in violation of law and regulations. *International Air Response v. United States*, 75 Fed. Cl. 604 (2007); *Pacific Harbor Capital, Inc. v. United States Department of Agriculture*, 845 F. Supp. 1 (D.D.C. 1993). GAO has held that, where the notice of award specifies that title does not pass until the property is removed, section 544 does not apply until the property is removed. [58 Comp. Gen. 240 \(1979\)](#). GAO has also suggested that the statute should not be read as, in effect, permitting disregard of any statutory violation. [B-150468, Dec. 23, 1963](#).

One situation in which 40 U.S.C. § 544 will not prevail is illustrated in *Dubin v. United States*, 289 F.2d 651 (Ct. Cl. 1961). The government had erroneously sold certain defense articles as surplus. A provision of the Espionage Act, 18 U.S.C. § 793(d), gives the government the right to recover the articles in the interests of national security, a right which prevails over the purchaser's claim to title under 40 U.S.C. § 544. In *Dubin*, the person surrendering the property was entitled to recover only his out-of-pocket expenses. *See also* [B-247981, July 24, 1992](#).

Another major method of disposal of surplus personal property is donation to the states, set out in 40 U.S.C. § 549. For decades, federal law has authorized the donation of surplus personal property to states for educational, public health, or civil defense purposes. Congress significantly revised the law in 1976 to expand the range of authorized purposes.<sup>9</sup> In brief, GSA transfers surplus property, without cost, to state agencies designated under state law to receive surplus federal property. GSA is supposed to try to allocate property among the states on a fair and equitable basis. The state agency may then distribute the property—

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<sup>8</sup> Pub. L. No. 78-457, § 25, 58 Stat. 765, 780 (Oct. 3, 1944).

<sup>9</sup> Pub. L. No. 94-519, § 1, 90 Stat. 2451 (Oct. 17, 1976).

“(A) to a public agency for use in carrying out or promoting, for residents of a given political area, a public purpose, including conservation, economic development, education, parks and recreation, public health, and public safety; or

“(B) for purposes of education or public health (including research), to a nonprofit educational or public health institution or organization that is exempt from [federal] taxation . . .”

40 U.S.C. § 549(c)(3). GSA regulations governing the donation program are in 41 C.F.R. part 102-37. According to 41 C.F.R. § 102-37.120, all donations have to go through GSA except those listed in 41 C.F.R. § 102-37.125.

Title to property in the custody of the state receiving agency remains with the United States. 41 C.F.R. § 102-37.205(b). Upon executing the required certifications and taking possession from the state agency, the donee receives “conditional title.” *Id.* According to 41 C.F.R. § 102-37.450(d): “Full title to the property will vest in the donee only after the donee has met all of the requirements of this part.” The donee must return the property if it is not used for the donated purpose within 1 year of donation, or if it ceases being used within 1 year after being placed in use. 40 U.S.C. § 549(e)(3)(D); 41 C.F.R. § 102-37.450(b). In addition, there are recapture provisions for noncompliance. 41 C.F.R. § 102-37.485.

The statute provides no standards as to when property should be sold or when it should be donated. It does not require GSA to consider various policy factors in making the determination. *Northrop University v. Harper*, 580 F. Supp. 959, 963 (C.D. Cal. 1983). It confers “unfettered discretion” on GSA. *Id.* at 964.

In addition to the more general features noted above, provisions in title 40 of the United States Code address many highly specialized situations. For example, 40 U.S.C. § 548 authorizes the Maritime Administration to dispose of surplus vessels determined to be “merchant vessels or capable of conversion to merchant use,” in accordance with the Merchant Marine Act of 1936, as amended, 46 U.S.C. app. §§ 1101–1295g. The procedures of the Merchant Marine Act take precedence over those in title 40. 42 Comp. Gen. 69 (1962). Dredges are apparently not regarded as within the scope of 40 U.S.C. § 548 (B-158429, Apr. 20, 1966), so there is separate authority in 40 U.S.C. § 556 to dispose of dredges.

A situation the statute does not address is the disposal of property held by a commission composed equally of federal and state members. Confronted with one such situation, GAO said there is a choice: divide the property in half with the federal portion of the commission disposing of its half in accordance with the title 40 provisions, or sell it with the United States receiving half the proceeds. Absent statutory guidance, the choice is up to the commission. B-185203, Apr. 8, 1976 (Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission for Alaska).

Unless one of several statutory exceptions applies, the net proceeds from the sale of surplus personal property must be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. 40 U.S.C. § 571;<sup>10</sup> 41 C.F.R. § 102-38.300. *See also* [B-200962, May 26, 1981](#). One exception (40 U.S.C. § 572) is personal property related to real property sold by GSA. Another (40 U.S.C. § 574(a)) is property originally acquired with amounts not appropriated from the general fund of the Treasury or with reimbursable appropriations from the general fund. *E.g.*, B-162337-O.M., Oct. 2, 1967 (“proceeds from the sale of surplus and excess property and from salvage and scrap shall be deposited into the industrial fund when such property is held in the industrial fund”). Another (40 U.S.C. § 574(b)) permits a portion of the proceeds to be deposited in a special account from which to pay refunds or payments for breach of warranty that may become necessary. When property is recovered under the Espionage Act noted earlier, for example, the expenses may be paid from one of these accounts. B-163028, Jan. 8, 1968. Still another (40 U.S.C. § 574(c)) permits proceeds from the sale of property in the custody of a contractor or subcontractor to be applied against the contract price when so provided in the contract. *E.g.*, [B-140689-O.M., Feb. 1, 1980](#); [B-139655-O.M., July 20, 1959](#). When GSA sells surplus personal property, it may deduct from the proceeds its costs of conducting the sale, and may deposit those amounts in the Acquisition Services Fund. 40 U.S.C. § 573.

Finally, while the title 40, United States Code, provisions discussed above govern the vast majority of disposals, other authorities exist in specific contexts. For example:

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<sup>10</sup> Section 571(b) permits the expenses of sale to be deducted, subject to GSA regulations, so that only the net proceeds must be deposited.

- With the approval of the President, the Secretary of the Treasury is authorized to sell gold and silver. 31 U.S.C. § 5116. GSA can conduct the sale as Treasury’s agent. *See* B-87620, Jan. 27, 1976.
- Various statutory provisions summarized in [B-225008, Feb. 24, 1987](#), afford several options for the use and disposition of forfeited property. The provisions still in effect include: 18 U.S.C. § 1963; 19 U.S.C. § 1616a; 21 U.S.C. §§ 853 and 881; and 28 U.S.C. § 524(c).
- Excess and surplus personal property can be donated to Indian tribes and tribal organizations under the Indian Self-Determination Act, 25 U.S.C. § 450j(f). If someone obtains property under this authority to sell to third parties, the government may bring criminal charges. *E.g.*, *United States v. Hacker*, 883 F. Supp. 444 (D.S.D. 1994).

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## B. Interagency Transactions

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### 1. The Economy Act

#### a. Origin, Legislative History, General Requirements

In 1932, as part of a package of measures designed to reduce government spending and help the nation fight its way out of the Great Depression, Congress enacted the first governmentwide statutory authorization for federal agencies to provide work, services, or materials to other federal agencies on a reimbursable basis. Act of June 30, 1932, ch. 314, 47 Stat. 382. The advantages of interagency dealings had long been apparent, but widespread use had been discouraged by the “well established rule that one Government activity may not be reimbursed for services performed for another except to the extent that it is shown that increased costs have been incurred.” A-31040, May 6, 1930.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the early decisions held that

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<sup>11</sup> *See also, e.g.*, 10 Comp. Gen. 193 (1930); 10 Comp. Gen. 131 (1930); 8 Comp. Gen. 600 (1929); 6 Comp. Gen. 81 (1926). Under this rule, the performing agency could not recover costs it would have incurred in any event, a prime example being the salaries of personnel used in providing the service.

statutory authority was necessary if doing work for another agency would require an increase in the plant or personnel of the performing agency.<sup>12</sup> [10 Comp. Gen. 131, 134 \(1930\)](#); [7 Comp. Gen. 709, 710 \(1928\)](#). Furthermore, there was discomfort with the concept of the government contracting with itself. *See, e.g.*, [26 Comp. Dec. 1022, 1023 \(1920\)](#); [22 Comp. Dec. 684, 685 \(1916\)](#).

The 1932 legislation did not hatch fully grown. A general, albeit limited provision, had been enacted in 1920 authorizing ordering agencies to transfer appropriations to performing agencies “for direct expenditure.” Act of May 21, 1920, ch. 194, § 7, 41 Stat. 607, 613.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a number of agency-specific statutes were on the books. For example, a permanent provision in the Navy Department’s 1927 appropriation act, Act of May 21, 1926, ch. 355, 44 Stat. 591, 605, directed agencies ordering services or materials from the Navy to pay the actual cost to the Navy’s working fund, either in advance or by reimbursement. This law, quoted in [10 Comp. Gen. 275, 277 \(1930\)](#), was the source of some of the language used a few years later in the Economy Act.

Against this backdrop, Representative Burton French sponsored legislation in 1930 to provide general authority for reimbursable interagency transactions. The purpose of the legislation, Representative French testified, was “to permit the utilization of facilities and personnel belonging to one department by another department or establishment and to enact a simple and uniform procedure for effecting the appropriation adjustments involved.” *Interdepartmental Work: Hearings on H.R. 10199 Before the Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments*, 71<sup>st</sup> Cong. 3 (1930), *quoted in* [57 Comp. Gen. 674, 678 \(1978\)](#). Representative French explained how the bill conformed with certain fundamental tenets of appropriations law:

“It is also a requirement of law, in using appropriations for the support of any activity that the appropriation be expended only for the objects specified therein. . . .

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<sup>12</sup> This rule was based on 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), which limits the use of appropriations to their intended purposes. [7 Comp. Gen. at 711](#); [3 Comp. Gen. 974, 976 \(1924\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> A few of the numerous decisions discussing and applying this provision are [4 Comp. Gen. 674 \(1925\)](#); [27 Comp. Dec. 684 \(1921\)](#); [27 Comp. Dec. 106 \(1920\)](#); [A-31068, Mar. 25, 1930](#).

“This requires that when one department obtains work, materials or services from another department it should pay the full cost of such work, materials or services.

“If full cost is not paid, then such part of the cost as is not reimbursed must fall upon the department doing the work, which is contrary to [31 U.S.C. § 1301(a)] and the appropriation of the department for which the work was done will be illegally augmented because it does not bear all of the cost of the work done for it.”

*Id.* at 4, 57 Comp. Gen. at 678.<sup>14</sup>

The report of the House Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments mirrored the sponsor’s testimony:

“The purpose of this bill is to permit the utilization of the materials, supplies, facilities, and personnel belonging to one department by another department or independent establishment which is not equipped to furnish the materials, work, or services for itself, and to provide a uniform procedure so far as practicable for all departments.

“Your committee also believes that very substantial economies can be realized by one department availing itself of the equipment and services of another department in proper cases. A free interchange of work as contemplated by this bill will enable all bureaus and activities of the Government to be utilized to their fullest and in many cases make it unnecessary for departments to set up duplicating and overlapping activities of [their] own.

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<sup>14</sup> As we will note in our discussion of interagency details of personnel, the reason the accounting officers had not previously espoused this eminently logical application of the purpose statute and augmentation concept was rooted more in history than in law. Certainly in non-Economy Act situations, the proposition that using agency A’s appropriations to do agency B’s work violates the purpose statute is stated largely as dogmatic. *E.g.*, 59 Comp. Gen. 403, 404 (1980).



“Heretofore the cost of such services as have been performed by one department for another has frequently been paid for out of the appropriations for the department furnishing the materials and services. This is unfair to the department doing the work. All materials furnished and work done should be paid for by the department requiring such materials and services. [The bill’s funding provisions] will hold each department to strict accountability for its own expenditures and result in more satisfactory budgeting and accounting.”

H.R. Rep. No. 71-2201, at 2–3 (1931), *quoted in* 57 Comp. Gen. at 674. The bill was not enacted immediately, however. The following year, it was again reported favorably, in the same language as quoted above, by the House Committee on Economy. H.R. Rep. No. 72-1126, at 15–16 (1932). This time it became law as section 601 of the Legislative Branch Appropriation Act for 1933, ch. 314, 47 Stat. 382, 417 (1932), which almost immediately upon enactment became popularly known as the “Economy Act.”<sup>15</sup>

Section 601 has been amended several times, receiving its current structure and designation in the 1982 recodification of title 31, United States Code, and is now found at 31 U.S.C. §§ 1535 and 1536.<sup>16</sup> The basic authority is set out in 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a):

“(a) The head of an agency or major organizational unit within an agency may place an order with a major organizational unit within the same agency or another agency for goods or services if—

“(1) amounts are available;

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<sup>15</sup> Excerpts from H.R. Rep. No. 72-1126 are quoted in 52 Comp. Gen. 128, 131–32 (1972), and the history of section 601 is discussed in more detail in 57 Comp. Gen. 674. Technically, section 601 was cast as an amendment to the 1920 statute noted earlier in the text. Certain documents in the legislative history, one of which is quoted in 57 Comp. Gen. at 679, cite GAO decision A-2272, June 16, 1924. For the benefit of future researchers, there is no such decision. The correct reference is A-2272, June 18, 1924, published at 3 Comp. Gen. 974.

<sup>16</sup> Regulations governing the Economy Act can be found in the Federal Acquisition Regulation at 48 C.F.R. subpart 17.5.

“(2) the head of the ordering agency or unit decides the order is in the best interest of the United States government;

“(3) the agency or unit to fill the order is able to provide or get by contract the ordered goods or services; and

“(4) the head of the agency decides ordered goods or services cannot be provided by contract as conveniently or cheaply by a commercial enterprise.”

The introductory portion of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a) tells you who can use the authority and what they can use it for. Both points will be explored later in more detail. The numbered subsections establish four basic conditions on use of the authority.

(1) Funds available

The first condition is that “amounts are available” or, in the original language, “if funds are available therefor” (47 Stat. 417–18). Since nothing in the Economy Act in any way abrogates or diminishes 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), the ordering agency must have funds which are available for the contemplated purpose, or, in other words, the purpose of the transaction must be something the ordering agency is authorized to do. 26 Comp. Gen. 545, 548 (1947); 16 Comp. Gen. 3, 4 (1936); 15 Comp. Gen. 704 (1936); 15 Comp. Gen. 5 (1935); B-259499, Aug. 22, 1995. The ordering agency does not need specific authority in its appropriation language to use the Economy Act, but of course must adhere to any monetary limits Congress may choose to impose. 19 Comp. Gen. 585 (1939).

In brief, the Economy Act does not authorize an agency to use another agency to do anything it could not lawfully do itself. This is merely a continuation of the rule in effect under the Economy Act’s 1920 predecessor. *E.g.*, 5 Comp. Gen. 757 (1926). This point—that transfer of funds to another agency cannot be used to circumvent 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a)—is not limited to Economy Act transactions but applies to all transfers, whether in advance or by reimbursement, to working funds or otherwise, unless authorized under a statute which expressly provides differently. *See, e.g., Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Hurwitz*, 384 F. Supp. 2d 1039 (S.D. Tex. 2005) (reimbursable agreement under which the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) transferred funds to the Office of Thrift Supervision (OTS) violated the Economy Act because FDIC had transferred resources to OTS to bring claims that FDIC could not);

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[7 Comp. Gen. 524, 526 \(1928\)](#) (emphasizing that since the appropriation in question “is not available for direct expenditure for such purpose . . . it can not be made available for such purpose by transfer” to another agency). *See also* [30 Comp. Gen. 453 \(1951\)](#); [28 Comp. Gen. 365 \(1948\)](#); [22 Comp. Gen. 462 \(1942\)](#), *overruled on other grounds*, [56 Comp. Gen. 928 \(1977\)](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 774 \(1940\)](#).

(2) Interest of the government

The second condition is that the head of the ordering agency must determine that the order is in the best interests of the government. This appears to offer little impediment, and our research has disclosed no case law applying this provision.<sup>17</sup>

(3) Performing agency’s “position”

The third condition—agency is “able to provide” the goods or services—is best understood by again referring to the original language: the performing agency must be “in a position to supply or equipped to render” the materials or services in question (Act of June 30, 1932, ch. 314, 47 Stat. 382, 418). (The “get by contract” part was added by amendments starting in 1942, and will be addressed later in our discussion.) This requirement goes to the essence of the Economy Act. The objective of the statute is to permit an agency to take advantage of another agency’s experience or expertise, not merely to “dump” either work or funds or to avoid legislative restrictions. A good example of one agency taking advantage of another agency’s expertise is [13 Comp. Gen. 138 \(1933\)](#), in which a government corporation issuing its own securities sought Economy Act assistance quite logically from the forerunner of the Bureau of the Public Debt.

The “in a position” requirement does not mean that the performing agency must have all required equipment and personnel already on hand before it may validly accept an Economy Act order. If necessary, the agency may, as long as the work or service is within the scope of activities it normally performs, procure additional supplies or equipment or add additional temporary personnel. [B-197686, Dec. 18, 1980](#). For example, the agreement in [13 Comp. Gen. 138](#) was not objectionable merely because the

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<sup>17</sup> This of course does not mean that an issue has never arisen regarding a determination that the order is in the best interest of the government. The issue might involve an internal debate and might not surface outside of the agency.

Public Debt Service had to take on some additional personnel in order to handle the increased workload. Similarly, GAO found a proposed transfer of funds to enable the performing agency to hire additional personnel authorized in [14 Comp. Gen. 526 \(1935\)](#). GAO noted in [B-119846, Sept. 8, 1955](#), that this authority is not unlimited; however, no case thus far has defined precisely what those limits might be.

Property purchased incident to an Economy Act transaction is, upon completion of the work, “an asset of the agency bearing the cost of its acquisition.” [33 Comp. Gen. 565, 567 \(1954\)](#). If the ordering agency has paid for the entire asset through an advance of funds to the performing agency, then whatever remains when performance is done should be returned to the ordering agency for use or disposal as appropriate. *Id.* If several agencies have advanced funds to cover the cost, the property is regarded as “owned” by all of the agencies on a *pro rata* basis. [38 Comp. Gen. 36 \(1958\)](#). However, if the ordering agency does not pay in advance but pays upon completion of its order, and the performing agency acquires property with its own funds, the property remains under the control of the performing agency and only the amount of depreciation of the property during its work for the ordering agency should be charged to such agency. *Id.*

It is one thing to acquire property incident to performing an Economy Act order. It is entirely different, and far more questionable, to acquire substantial equipment—or to solicit funds from potential customer agencies to do so—solely to put yourself “in a position” to perform Economy Act services. [B-119846, July 23, 1954](#). And, of course, in order to be “in a position” to do anything under the Economy Act, the performing agency must be in existence. [B-37273, Oct. 16, 1943](#).

Whether an agency is in a position to do Economy Act work is primarily the agency’s own determination, one which merits substantial weight. [23 Comp. Gen. 935, 937 \(1944\)](#). However, the agency’s status includes legal as well as factual considerations. The legal part of the formula is the absence of any statutory prohibitions or restrictions which would obstruct performance. *Id.* at 937–38. The Economy Act does not give a performing agency any authority which it would not otherwise have. [18 Comp. Gen. 262, 266 \(1938\)](#).

(4) Lower cost

The Economy Act was never intended to foster an incestuous relationship in lieu of normal contracting with private business concerns. Hence the fourth condition of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a)—the ordering agency must determine that it cannot obtain the goods or services “as conveniently or cheaply” from a private contractor.<sup>18</sup> It should be apparent that this refers to services which are “lawfully procurable” from private sources in the first place and not to “regular governmental functions.” [19 Comp. Gen. 941 \(1940\)](#).

In making the lower cost determination, it is permissible to solicit bids and then reject all bids if they exceed the cost of dealing with another agency. [37 Comp. Gen. 16 \(1957\)](#).<sup>19</sup> Even if the determination is made, however, the authority to use the Economy Act is permissive rather than mandatory. *Id.* If the agency cannot make the determination, although the title 31 recodified language is less explicit in this regard (compare the original language, Act of June 30, 1932, ch. 314, 47 Stat. 382, 418), use of the Economy Act is improper.

The Economy Act itself does not require that agencies document the two determinations called for by 31 U.S.C. §§ 1535(a)(2) and (a)(4) (interest of the government and lower cost). However, GAO regards documenting the determinations as “sound practice” and a desirable internal control. GAO, *Interagency Agreements: Fiscal Year 1988 Agreements at Selected Agencies Were Proper*, GAO/AFMD-88-72 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 1988), at 8. The Federal Acquisition Regulation was amended in 1995 to require that the two determinations be documented in a Determination and Finding. 48 C.F.R. § 17.503(a) (60 Fed. Reg. 49721, Sept. 26, 1995).

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<sup>18</sup> As originally enacted, this requirement explicitly referred to “work or services performed” but not to “materials, supplies, or equipment furnished.” *See, e.g., 12 Comp. Gen. 597, 598 (1933)*. The substitution of the word “goods” came about as part of the 1982 recodification of title 31, United States Code. *See* 31 U.S.C. § 1535 (Rev. Notes). While a recodification is not supposed to make substantive changes, this is nevertheless what the statute now says. Perhaps it simply reflects the deduction that “work” implies a product.

<sup>19</sup> This decision implies that an agency can enter into an Economy Act agreement with a nonappropriated fund instrumentality, and to that extent was modified by 64 Comp. Gen. 110 (1984). It remains valid for the points for which it is cited in the text.

(5) Written agreement

Another important requirement which should be emphasized at the outset is not specified in the statute but finds its authority in common sense and in the recording statute.<sup>20</sup> An Economy Act transaction should be evidenced by a “written order or agreement in advance, signed by the responsible administrative officer of each of the departments or offices concerned.” [13 Comp. Gen. 234, 237 \(1934\)](#).<sup>21</sup> A written agreement is important because, as in any contract situation, the terms to which the parties agree, as reflected in the writing, establish the scope of the undertaking and the rights and obligations of the parties. Also, the written agreement can establish a ceiling on the ordering agency’s financial obligation. [22 Comp. Gen. 74 \(1942\)](#).

While an advance agreement normally “should be regarded as essential . . . the lack of a specific agreement does not necessarily preclude reimbursement” in appropriate cases. [B-39297, Jan. 20, 1944](#). An “appropriate case,” although the decisions do not use this language, generally means one in which the facts are sufficient to establish an implied contract, or an express contract which was not finalized. In [A-85201, Apr. 15, 1937](#), for example, an agreement had been in effect for several prior years and the facts showed an intent to continue the agreement for the year in question. Another appropriate case is where there is a written agreement and the parties subsequently agree to an “adjustment” for some additional amount or item which is otherwise proper but was not included in the original agreement. [22 Comp. Gen. 74; B-31862, Feb. 27, 1943](#).

Apart from common sense, another reason for an advance agreement is that documentation is necessary in order to record an obligation under 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a). *See* [34 Comp. Gen. 418, 421 \(1955\)](#).

GAO recommends that the agreement specify at least the following:

- Legal authority for the agreement;
- Terms and conditions of performance;

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<sup>20</sup> The recording statute, 31 U.S.C. § 1501, is discussed in Chapter 7, section B.

<sup>21</sup> The decision in [64 Comp. Gen. 370 \(1985\)](#) overruled other aspects of [13 Comp. Gen. 234](#).

- The cost of performance, including appropriate ceilings when cost is based on estimates;
- Mode of payment (advance or reimbursement);
- Any applicable special requirements or procedures for assuring compliance; and
- Approvals by authorized officials.

GAO, *Policy and Procedures Manual for Guidance of Federal Agencies*, title 7, § 2.4-C.2(e) (hereafter GAO-PPM). The documentation requirements of the Federal Acquisition Regulation are found in 48 C.F.R. § 17.504(b). In addition, it is extremely useful for the agreement to set forth a requirement and procedures for the performing agency to notify the ordering agency if it appears that performance will exceed estimated costs and to cease or curtail performance as may be necessary. This is an important safeguard to protect the performing agency against Antideficiency Act violations. See 7 GAO-PPM § 2.4-C.2(g); B-234427, Aug. 10, 1989 (nondecision letter).

b. Who Is Covered

The coverage of the Economy Act is broad, and there is no distinction between who can place an order and who can perform one. The statute says that “[t]he head of an agency or major organizational unit within an agency may place an order with a major organizational unit within the same agency or another agency.” 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a). This embraces all three branches of the federal government. Within the legislative branch, for example, one of the earliest Economy Act decisions applied the statute to the Architect of the Capitol. [12 Comp. Gen. 442 \(1932\)](#). Financial audits of legislative branch agencies include the Economy Act as one of the laws tested for compliance. *E.g.*, GAO, *Financial Audit: First Audit of the Library of Congress Discloses Significant Problems*, GAO/AFMD-91-13 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 22, 1991), at 29. And GAO has always viewed the law as applicable to itself. [B-156022-O.M., Jan. 6, 1972](#); [B-130496-O.M., Mar. 13, 1957](#); [B-13988, Jan. 7, 1941](#). See also [A-31068, Mar. 25, 1930](#) (Economy Act’s 1920 predecessor applicable to Botanic Garden). The



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court in *United States v. Mitchell*, 425 F. Supp. 917, 918 (D.D.C. 1976), regarded the law as applicable to the judicial branch.<sup>22</sup>

The Economy Act applies to government corporations. [13 Comp. Gen. 138 \(1933\)](#); [B-116194, Oct. 5, 1953](#); [B-39199, Jan. 19, 1944](#); [B-27842, Aug. 13, 1942](#); [A-46332, Jan. 9, 1933](#). The cited decisions involve a variety of government corporations in the capacity of both ordering agency and performing agency. Although the specific corporations in those cases are now defunct, the point remains valid.

The Act also applies to temporary boards and commissions. *See* [B-157312, Aug. 2, 1965](#) (Public Land Law Review Commission). However, GAO found it inapplicable to the land and timber appraisal committee established by 43 U.S.C. § 1181f-1 even though it was to be federally funded and permanent, because two of its three members could not be employees of the United States. [33 Comp. Gen. 115, 116–17 \(1953\)](#).

The common thread of applicability is that the entity in question must be an agency or instrumentality of the United States government. Accordingly, the Economy Act does not apply to the District of Columbia Government. [50 Comp. Gen. 553, 556 \(1971\)](#); [B-107612, Feb. 8, 1952](#). (As we will see later, there is separate legislation applicable to the District of Columbia.) It also does not apply to the National Guard, except possibly when the Guard is called into federal service. [B-152420, Oct. 3, 1963, \*aff'd on reconsideration\*, B-152420, Feb. 25, 1964](#). Nor does it apply to Indian tribes ([B-44174, Sept. 6, 1944](#)), agencies of the United Nations ([23 Comp. Gen. 564 \(1944\)](#)), American Samoa ([B-194321, Aug. 7, 1979](#)), or a presidential inaugural committee ([62 Comp. Gen. 323, 330 \(1983\)](#)).

There are also a few instances in which entities that clearly are agencies or instrumentalities of the United States, or which are treated as such for other purposes, are not covered. For example, the Postal Service, although clearly an instrumentality of the United States, is subject only to those statutes specifically designated in the Postal Reorganization Act; however, the Economy Act is not one of the statutes designated. [58 Comp.](#)

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<sup>22</sup> The Economy Act originally said “executive department or independent establishment of the Government” (Act of June 30, 1932, ch. 314, 47 Stat. 382, 417). The indefatigable researcher will find one GAO opinion, [B-25199, May 15, 1942](#), holding the Act inapplicable to the legislative branch. While B-25199 has never been overruled, it has never been followed either, and the Revision Note to 31 U.S.C. § 1535 explicitly adopts the broader view of [12 Comp. Gen. 442](#) and the *Mitchell* case.



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Gen. 451, 459 (1979). It also does not apply to nonappropriated fund instrumentalities. 64 Comp. Gen. 110 (1984).<sup>23</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that the Economy Act authorizes intra-agency, as well as interagency, transactions. *E.g.*, 57 Comp. Gen. 674 (1978); 25 Comp. Gen. 322 (1945); B-77791, July 23, 1948. While the decisions had consistently taken this position, this is one instance in which the recodified language of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a) (“major organizational unit within the same agency”) is more precise than the original language. While the two bureaus or offices may be part of the same department or agency, they must be funded under separate appropriations.<sup>24</sup> 38 Comp. Gen. 734, 737–38 (1959); B-60609, Sept. 26, 1946. GAO has stated in the past that the Economy Act does not apply with respect to separate appropriations of a single bureau or office. *See, e.g.*, 38 Comp. Gen. at 737–38. GAO, however, has not addressed such circumstances since 1959.

c. Fiscal Matters

(1) Payment: types and accounting

The payment provision of the Economy Act is 31 U.S.C. § 1535(b):

“Payment shall be made promptly by check on the written request of the agency or unit filling the order. Payment may be in advance or on providing the goods or services ordered and shall be for any part of the estimated or actual cost as determined by the agency or unit filling the order. A bill submitted or a request for payment is not subject to audit or certification in advance of payment. Proper adjustment of amounts paid in advance shall be made as agreed to by the heads of the agencies or units on the basis of the actual cost of goods or services provided.”

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<sup>23</sup> The 1984 decision concerned the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Graduate School, which is a nonappropriated fund instrumentality. In 1990, Congress granted the school specific authority to enter into Economy Act agreements to provide training and services to federal agencies, 7 U.S.C. § 5922(a), but subsequently repealed this authority in 2002. Pub. L. No. 107-171, § 10705, 116 Stat. 134, 519 (May 13, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> The concept of the Economy Act simply does not “fit” where the two units are funded under the same appropriation. Presumably, although we have found no cases, an agency could administratively apply similar principles since it needs no statutory authority to shift funds within a lump-sum appropriation. See Chapter 2, section B.3.b, for a discussion of reprogramming.

This provision authorizes two types of payment, advance and reimbursement. The decision is up to the performing agency.<sup>25</sup> Payment may be in a lump sum or in installments. Audit or certification in advance of payment is not required. The Federal Acquisition Regulation restates this. 48 C.F.R. § 17.505(c) (bills rendered or requests for advance payment shall not be subject to audit or certification in advance of payment).

Payments made in advance will often necessarily be based on estimates, in which event the amounts should be adjusted, up or down as the case may be, when the actual cost is known. Any excess (the amount by which the advance exceeds actual cost) should be returned to the ordering agency. Retention of the excess amount by the performing agency is an improper augmentation of its funds. [72 Comp. Gen. 120 \(1993\)](#). If the account to which the excess would otherwise be returned has been closed, the money should be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. 31 U.S.C. § 1552(b).

If the excess is determined while the appropriation charged with the advance is still available for obligation, the performing agency should pay special attention to returning the funds in time for the ordering agency to be able to use them. GAO, *Policy and Procedures Manual for Guidance of Federal Agencies*, title 7, § 2.4-C.2(d) (Washington, D.C.: May 18, 1993).

The authority to pay by reimbursement amounts to an exception to 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a) by implicitly authorizing the performing agency to temporarily use its own funds to do the ordering agency's work. See [B-6124-O.M., Oct. 11, 1939](#); [B-234427, Aug. 10, 1989](#) (nondecision letter). The statute requires that payment be made "promptly."

Accounting for payments is addressed in 31 U.S.C. § 1536. Section 1536(a) sets forth general requirements; section 1536(b) deals with goods provided from stock. Section 1536(a) provides:

"An advance payment made on an order under section 1535 of this title is credited to a special working fund that the Secretary of the Treasury considers necessary to be

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<sup>25</sup> The Federal Acquisition Regulation provides that "the [performing] agency may ask the [ordering] agency, in writing, for advance payment for all or part of the estimated cost or furnishing the supplies or services." 48 C.F.R. § 17.505(a). Also, as a practical matter, if the performing agency is not in a position to use its own funds initially, or simply does not wish to do so, it does not have to accept the order.

established. Except as provided in this section, any other payment is credited to the appropriation or fund against which charges were made to fill the order.”

This provision amounts to an exception—albeit a necessary one if the Economy Act is to succeed—to the “miscellaneous receipts” statute, 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). [56 Comp. Gen. 275, 278 \(1977\)](#).

Advance payments are to be credited to special working funds created for that purpose. 31 U.S.C. § 1536(a).<sup>26</sup> The House report accompanying the original legislation stated that the Secretary of the Treasury was required to establish a working fund when requested by the performing agency. H.R. Rep. No. 72-1126, at 16 (1932). The language of the Act itself would appear to give Treasury the final decision on the need to create such a fund. When the work is completed, the amount of the advance is adjusted as noted above.

Payments made as reimbursements are credited to the appropriation(s) of the performing agency “against which charges were made” in effecting performance. This means that the reimbursement must be credited to the fiscal year in which it was “earned,” that is, the fiscal year actually charged by the performing agency, without regard to when the reimbursement is made. If the appropriation which earned the reimbursement is still available for obligation at the time of reimbursement, the money may be used for any authorized purposes of that appropriation. 31 U.S.C. § 1536(b). (This would be true as a matter of general appropriations law even if the statute were silent.) If the appropriation is no longer available for new obligations, the reimbursement must be credited to the appropriate expired account or, if the account has been closed, to miscellaneous receipts. 31 U.S.C. § 1552(b); [B-260993, June 26, 1996](#). See also [B-211953, Dec. 7, 1984, n.8](#); [B-194711-O.M., Jan. 15, 1980](#).

If this causes problems for the performing agency, its choices are to (1) seek advance payment, (2) bill the ordering agency promptly as soon as the work is completed, or (3) bill periodically as portions of the work are done. See GAO, *Program to Improve Federal Records Management*

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<sup>26</sup> A working fund is simply an account established to receive advance payments from other agencies or accounts. [14 Comp. Gen. 25 \(1934\)](#). Working fund accounts are not used to finance the work directly but only to reimburse the appropriation or fund account that will finance the work to be performed.

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*Practices Should Be Funded by Direct Appropriations*, LCD-80-68 (Washington, D.C.: June 23, 1980), at 12.

Although not expressly provided in the Economy Act, an agency, if it chooses, may deposit reimbursements in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. [57 Comp. Gen. 674, 685](#) (1978) (direct costs); [56 Comp. Gen. 275, 278–79](#) (1977) (applying same conclusion to indirect costs). The decision in [57 Comp. Gen. 674](#) pointed out that crediting a reimbursement to an appropriation against which no charges had been made would amount to an improper augmentation. Thus, there could be situations—the closed account being one example—where the performing agency has no choice but to deposit the reimbursement as miscellaneous receipts. [57 Comp. Gen. at 685–86](#).

A significant exception to 31 U.S.C. § 1536(b) exists for the Department of Defense. By virtue of 10 U.S.C. §§ 2205(a) and 2210(a), if an appropriation has expired, Defense, at its option, may credit Economy Act reimbursements to the expired appropriation which earned the reimbursement or to the appropriation current at the time of collection. *See* [B-179708-O.M., Dec. 1, 1975](#), at 16.

With respect to items provided from stock, 31 U.S.C. § 1536(b) provides in part:

“Where goods are provided from stocks on hand, the amount received in payment is credited so as to be available to replace the goods unless—

“(1) another law authorizes the amount to be credited to some other appropriation or fund; or

“(2) the head of the executive agency filling the order decides that replacement is not necessary, in which case the amount received is deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts.”<sup>27</sup>

This provision, which limits the performing agency’s authority to retain payment to cases where replacement is necessary, illustrates the Economy Act’s approach of structuring the transaction so that the performing agency neither profits nor is penalized. It does not say merely that payments are available for replacement, but limits their availability to cases where replacement is necessary. [B-36541, Sept. 9, 1943](#). The apparent theory is that retaining payment when replacement is not necessary would amount to a form of profit. [41 Comp. Gen. 671, 674 \(1962\)](#) (purpose of provision is “to preclude augmentation of the appropriations involved”).

While the replacement items need not be identical, the Economy Act does not authorize exchange of dissimilar items. [41 Comp. Gen. 671 \(1962\)](#). That case involved a proposal by the Public Health Service and the Defense Supply Agency to exchange lists of medical goods and equipment in long supply or available for rotation and, in effect, to swap supplies and equipment not presently needed, making necessary appropriation adjustments periodically. GAO recognized that the proposal had merit and suggested that the agencies seek legislative authority, but was forced to conclude that 31 U.S.C. § 1536(b) does not authorize what amounts to “program replacements,” that is, replacements of excess materials with other materials within the general area covered by the appropriation.

(2) “Actual cost”: meaning and application

Payment under the Economy Act, whether by advance with subsequent adjustment or by reimbursement, must be based on “the actual cost of goods or services provided.” 31 U.S.C. § 1535(b). This applies to both intra- and interagency transactions under the Act. [57 Comp. Gen. 674, 684 \(1978\)](#). Unfortunately, as the decisions have pointed out, neither the statute nor its legislative history address the meaning of the term “actual cost.” *Id.* at 681.

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<sup>27</sup> Retention of the word “executive” in 31 U.S.C. § 1536(b)(2) in the 1982 recodification of title 31, United States Code, appears to have been inadvertent because resort to the source provision makes clear that “agency” as used in 31 U.S.C. § 1536(b) is the same as “agency” in 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a).

In setting out an analytical framework, it is useful to start by recalling that agencies using the Economy Act must avoid the unauthorized augmentation of their appropriations. B-250377, Jan. 28, 1993. Charging too much augments the appropriations of the performing agency. B-45108, B-48124, Feb. 3, 1955; B-101911-O.M., Apr. 4, 1951. Charging too little augments the appropriations of the ordering agency. 57 Comp. Gen. at 682. In connection with this latter proposition, GAO quickly recognized that the Economy Act legislatively abolished the prior decisional rule that limited the performing agency's recovery to additional costs. 12 Comp. Gen. 442 (1932).<sup>28</sup> Once this is accepted, the approach then becomes a matter of seeking to apply the concept of actual cost consistent with the statutory objectives and such guidance as the legislative history does provide.

The following passage from 57 Comp. Gen. at 681, describes this approach:

“While the law and its legislative history are silent as to what was meant by the term ‘actual cost’ . . . the legislative history does indicate that . . . Congress intended to effect savings for the Government as a whole by: (1) generally authorizing the performance of work or services or the furnishing of materials pursuant to inter- and intra-agency orders by an agency of Government in a position to perform the work or service; (2) diminishing the reluctance of other Government agencies to accept such orders by removing the limitation upon reimbursements imposed by prior [GAO] decisions [footnote omitted]; and (3) authorizing inter- and intra-departmental orders only when the work could be as cheaply or more conveniently performed within the Government as by a private source. Thus in determining the elements of actual cost under the Economy Act, it would seem that the only elements of cost that the Act requires to be included in computing reimbursements are those which accomplish these identified congressional goals. Whether any additional elements of cost should be included would depend upon the circumstances surrounding the transaction.”

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<sup>28</sup> Loathe to summarily throw out the old rule, some early Economy Act decisions treated the actual cost prescription as discretionary, holding that agencies could agree to operate under the old rule. *E.g.*, 13 Comp. Gen. 150, 153 (1933). This “option approach” has long since been discarded.

Thus, the universe of costs may be divided into required costs and what we may term “situational” costs.

Required costs consist in large measure of direct costs—expenditures incurred by the performing agency which are specifically identifiable and attributable to performing the transaction in question. As stated in 57 Comp. Gen. at 682: “The Economy Act clearly requires the inclusion as actual cost of all direct costs attributable to the performance of a service or the furnishing of materials, regardless of whether expenditures by the performing agency were thereby increased.”

One element of direct cost is the salary of employees engaged in doing the work. 12 Comp. Gen. 442 (1932). This means gross compensation. 14 Comp. Gen. 452 (1934). It includes, for example, the accrual of annual leave. 32 Comp. Gen. 521 (1953); 17 Comp. Gen. 571 (1938).

Another common element is the cost of materials or equipment furnished to the ordering agency or consumed in the course of performance. Actual cost in this context means historical cost and not current replacement or production cost. B-130007, Dec. 7, 1956. See also 58 Comp. Gen. 9, 14 (1978). This does not necessarily have to be the original acquisition cost, however, but may be the most recent acquisition cost of the specific kind of item provided to the requesting agency. B-250377, Jan. 28, 1993. Related transportation costs are another reimbursable direct cost item. *Id.*

Not every identifiable direct cost is reimbursable under the actual cost formulation. An illustration is 39 Comp. Gen. 650 (1960). The Maritime Administration was activating several tankers for use by the Navy. In the course of performing this activity, an employee of the Maritime Administration’s contractor was injured, sued the United States under the Suits in Admiralty Act, and recovered a judgment which the Maritime Administration paid from an available revolving fund. While certainly a very real cost actually incurred in the course of performance, the judgment was not “necessary or required in order to condition the tanker for use by the Navy” (*id.* at 653), and therefore was properly payable as a judgment and not as a reimbursable cost which could be billed to Navy.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Properly payable as a judgment” means payable from the permanent judgment appropriation (31 U.S.C. § 1304) unless, as was the case here, the agency has an available appropriation or fund.



In addition to direct costs, it has long been recognized that actual cost for Economy Act purposes includes as well certain indirect costs (overhead) proportionately allocable to the transaction. *E.g.*, B-301714, Jan. 30, 2004; 22 Comp. Gen. 74 (1942). Indirect costs are “items which commonly are recognized as elements of cost notwithstanding such items may not have resulted in direct expenditures.” 56 Comp. Gen. 275 (1977); 22 Comp. Gen. 74. Indirect costs which (1) are funded out of currently available appropriations, and (2) bear a significant relationship to the service or work performed or the materials furnished, are recoverable in an Economy Act transaction the same as direct costs. 56 Comp. Gen. 275 (1977), as modified by 57 Comp. Gen. 674 (1978), as modified in turn by B-211953, Dec. 7, 1984. Examples of indirect costs include administrative overhead applicable to supervision (56 Comp. Gen. 275); billable time not directly chargeable to any particular customer (B-257823, Jan. 22, 1998); and rent paid to the General Services Administration attributable to space used in the course of performing Economy Act work (B-211953, Dec. 7, 1984).

The costs discussed thus far are those which the Economy Act can fairly be said to require. In addition, there may be others, so-called situational costs. The discussion in 57 Comp. Gen. 674 goes on to say:

“[The Economy Act] is not so rigid and inflexible as to require a blanket rule for costing throughout the Government . . . . Certainly neither the language of the Economy Act nor its legislative history requires uniform costing beyond what is practicable under the circumstances. This is not to say that costing is expected to be different in a substantial number of circumstances. We are merely recognizing that in some circumstances, other competing congressional goals, policies or interests might require recoveries beyond that necessary to effectuate the purposes of the Economy Act.

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“[T]he term [‘actual costs’] has a flexible meaning and recognizes distinctions or differences in the nature of the performing agency, and the purposes or goals intended to be accomplished.”

*Id.* at 683, 685. For example, under the rules stated above, depreciation is normally not recoverable, however, because it is not funded out of



currently available appropriations. [72 Comp. Gen. 159, 162 \(1993\)](#); [57 Comp. Gen. 674](#).<sup>30</sup> However, in [57 Comp. Gen. 674](#), in view of the congressionally established goal that the performing agency (the government entity which operated Washington National and Dulles International Airports) be self-sustaining and recover its operating costs and a fair return on the government's investment, it was appropriate to include depreciation and interest as indirect costs. The performing agency chose to deposit the amounts so recovered in the general fund of the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. *Id.* at 685–86.

Another example of permissible situational costs is where the performing agency is funded by a statutorily authorized stock, industrial, or similar fund which provides for full cost recovery, that is, beyond what the Economy Act would otherwise require, and the fund's Economy Act work is an insignificant portion of its overall work. In such a situation, there might be sound reasons for charging all customers alike. [B-250377, Jan. 28, 1993](#).

While particular circumstances might authorize some indirect costs beyond what the Economy Act requires, their inclusion in the performing agency's charges is not required but is discretionary. Failure to recover them is not legally objectionable, except in the unlikely event it could be shown to be an abuse of discretion. [B-198531, Sept. 25, 1980](#).

The Economy Act was intended to promote interagency cooperation, not interagency bickering over billings. Hence, the statutory scheme emphasizes the role of agreement. It contemplates that application of the actual cost standard in a given case should be “primarily for administrative consideration, to be determined by agreement between the agencies concerned.” [22 Comp. Gen. 74, 78 \(1942\)](#). In the interest of intragovernmental harmony, it has been held that the Economy Act does not require the ordering agency to conduct an audit or certification in advance of payment. [39 Comp. Gen. 548, 549–50 \(1960\)](#); [32 Comp. Gen. 479 \(1953\)](#). Nor does it require the performing agency to provide a detailed breakdown unless the agreement provides otherwise. [B-116194, Oct. 5, 1953](#). Payment is authorized “at rates established by the servicing agency

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<sup>30</sup> Under prior decisions, actual cost could include depreciation. *E.g.*, [38 Comp. Gen. 734 \(1959\)](#). This is one of the aspects of the earlier cases superseded by the [57 Comp. Gen. 674](#) “family.”

so long as they are reported to be based upon the cost of rendition of the service and do not appear to be excessive.” 32 Comp. Gen. at 481.

While at times actual cost can be computed with precision, the Economy Act does not require that the determination be an exact science. Cases on reimbursable work even before the Economy Act recognized the acceptability of a reasonable and appropriate methodology over “absolutely accurate ascertainment” which might entail considerable burden and expense. 3 Comp. Gen. 974 (1924). As stated in B-133913, Jan. 21, 1958, “[a]s long as the amount agreed upon results from a *bona fide* attempt to determine the actual cost and, in fact, reasonably approximates the actual cost,” the Economy Act is satisfied. One methodology GAO has found to be reasonable and “consistent with the minimum legal requirements of the Economy Act” is billing on the basis of standard costs derived from documented costs of the last acquisition or production. B-250377, Jan. 28, 1993 (containing a detailed discussion); GAO, *Iran Arms Sales: DOD’s Transfer of Arms to the Central Intelligence Agency*, GAO/NSIAD-87-114 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 13, 1987), at 8.

There are limits, however, and the “methodology” cannot be totally divorced from the determination or reasonable approximation of actual costs. Thus, a cost allocation in which some customers are paying excessive amounts and effectively subsidizing others is improper. 70 Comp. Gen. 592 (1991). So is an allocation based on the availability of appropriations (B-114821-O.M., Nov. 12, 1958), or a *per capita* funding arrangement not related to the goods or services actually received (67 Comp. Gen. 254, 258 (1988)).

Agencies may waive the recovery of small amounts where processing would be uneconomical. An agency wishing to do this should set a minimum billing figure based on a cost study. B-156022, Apr. 28, 1966. The case for waiver is even stronger when the account to be credited with the payment is no longer available for obligation. See B-120978-O.M., Oct. 19, 1954.

Finally, while the statute talks about the “actual cost of goods or services provided,” there is one situation in which payment of actual costs will have no relationship to anything “provided.” For various reasons, an agency may find it necessary to terminate an Economy Act contract before it is completed. It can terminate the contract “for convenience,” the same as it could with a commercial contract, in which event the performing agency should not have to bear the loss for any expenses it has already incurred.

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The Comptroller General addressed the situation as follows in [B-61814, Jan. 3, 1947](#), at 3:

“[W]here an order issued pursuant to [the Economy Act] is terminated after the establishment receiving said order has incurred expenses incident thereto the amount of such expenses or costs is for determination and adjustment by agreement between such agencies . . . . [T]here would appear to be ample authority for an agreement between the agencies . . . to effect an adjustment of the appropriations and/or funds of said agencies on the basis of the actual amount of the costs or expenses incurred.”

(3) Obligation and deobligation

The obligational treatment of Economy Act transactions is addressed in 31 U.S.C. § 1535(d) (emphasis added):

“An order placed or agreement made under this section obligates an appropriation of the ordering agency or unit. The amount obligated is deobligated to the extent that the agency or unit filling the order has not incurred obligations, *before the end of the period of availability of the appropriation*, in—

“(1) providing goods or services; or

“(2) making an authorized contract with another person to provide the requested goods or services.”

The first sentence of section 1535(d) establishes that an Economy Act agreement is sufficient to obligate the ordering agency’s appropriations even though the agency’s liability is not subject to enforcement the same as a contract with a private party. This sentence must be read in conjunction with 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a)(1), which recognizes interagency agreements and prescribes the requirements for a valid obligation. Under section 1501(a)(1) (emphasis added), an obligation is recordable when supported by documentary evidence of—

“(1) a binding agreement between an agency and another person (*including an agency*) that is—

“(A) in writing, in a way and form, and for a purpose authorized by law; and

“(B) executed before the end of the period of availability for obligation of the appropriation or fund used for specific goods to be delivered, real property to be bought or leased, or work or service to be provided[.]”

Thus, an Economy Act agreement is recordable as an obligation under 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a)(1) if it meets the requirements specified in that section. [39 Comp. Gen. 317, 318–19 \(1959\)](#); [34 Comp. Gen. 418, 421 \(1955\)](#). It must, for example, involve a definite commitment for specific equipment, work, or services. *See, e.g.*, [15 Comp. Gen. 863 \(1936\)](#). Also, the recording statute reinforces a point in the Economy Act itself which we noted earlier, that the order or agreement must be for a purpose the ordering agency is authorized to accomplish.

In addition, a valid Economy Act obligation must satisfy the basic fiscal requirements applicable to obligations in general. Specifically, it must comply with the *bona fide* needs rule. *E.g.*, [58 Comp. Gen. 471 \(1979\)](#); [B-195432, July 19, 1979](#). And, of course, the ordering agency must have sufficient budget authority to satisfy the Antideficiency Act.

The second sentence of section 1535(d) lays out the requirement that the performing agency must incur obligations to fill the order within the period of availability of the appropriation being used. Otherwise the funds must be deobligated. In the case of a contract with a private party, as discussed in Chapter 5, obligated funds remain available to fund work performed in a subsequent fiscal year as long as the obligation met *bona fide* need concerns when it was incurred. Some statutes authorizing interagency transactions specifically provide for obligations to be treated the same as obligations with private contractors. *E.g.*, 41 U.S.C. § 23.<sup>31</sup> The original Economy Act contained similar language (Act of June 30, 1932, ch. 314, 47 Stat. 382, 418). However, a concern soon arose that the Economy Act was being used to effectively extend the obligational life of appropriations beyond that which Congress had provided. Legislative resolution came

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<sup>31</sup> This statute applies to transactions between the military departments and establishments owned by the Department of Defense for work related to military projects. See Chapter 7, section B.1.i(5), for a further discussion of this statute.

about in stages. A 1936 statute restricted the period of availability of advance payments under the Economy Act to that provided in the source appropriation.<sup>32</sup> See [16 Comp. Gen. 752, 754 \(1937\)](#); [16 Comp. Gen. 575, 577 \(1936\)](#); [15 Comp. Gen. 1125 \(1936\)](#).

A more comprehensive provision was enacted as part of the General Appropriation Act for 1951, ch. 896, § 1210, 64 Stat. 595, 765 (Sept. 6, 1950). This provision, the origin of what is now the second sentence of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(d), restricted the availability of any funds “withdrawn and credited” under the Economy Act to the period provided in the act which appropriated them. The obvious purpose, as reflected in pertinent committee reports, was to prevent use of the Economy Act as a subterfuge to continue the availability of appropriations beyond the period provided in the appropriating act. See [31 Comp. Gen. 83, 85 \(1951\)](#); [B-95760, June 27, 1950](#). Thus, funds obligated under the Economy Act must be deobligated at the end of their period of availability (fiscal year or multiple year period, as applicable) to the extent the performing agency has not performed or itself incurred valid obligations as part of its performance. [34 Comp. Gen. 418, 421–22 \(1955\)](#). The 1982 recodification of title 31 of the United States Code restated the provision as a positive requirement to deobligate.

The deobligation requirement is not limited to advance payments but applies as well to payment by way of reimbursement. [31 Comp. Gen. 83 \(1951\)](#). Accordingly, as stated in 31 Comp. Gen. at 86, “where work is performed or services rendered on a reimbursable basis by one agency for another over a period covering more than one fiscal year, the respective annual appropriations of the serviced agency must be charged *pro tanto* with the work performed or services rendered in the particular fiscal year.” See also [B-301561, June 14, 2004](#). The deobligation requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(d) does not apply where the appropriation originally obligated is a no-year appropriation. [39 Comp. Gen. 317 \(1959\)](#).

If it is determined, after an Economy Act agreement is completed and the ordering agency’s appropriation has closed pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 1552, that the ordering agency owes the performing agency additional amounts, current appropriations available for the same purpose should be used to

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<sup>32</sup> Act making deficiency appropriations for 1936, June 22, 1936, ch. 689, § 8, 49 Stat. 1597, 1648. The Act of June 26, 1943, ch. 150, 57 Stat. 219, amended the Economy Act itself to reflect the 1936 legislation.

reimburse the performing agency. 31 U.S.C. § 1553(b); B-301561, June 14, 2004; B-260993, June 26, 1996.

A concrete example will illustrate the difference between a commercial contract and an Economy Act agreement. Suppose that, towards the end of fiscal year 2006, an agency develops the need for some sort of statistical study. It enters into a contract with a private party a few days before the end of the fiscal year, obligating fiscal year 2006 appropriations, knowing full well that most of the work will be done in the following year. Assuming the need was legitimate, the obligated funds remain available to pay for the work. Now take the same situation except the contract is with another government agency under the Economy Act and the work is to be done by personnel of the performing agency. The 2006 funds may be used only for work actually done in the remaining days of that fiscal year. The remainder must be deobligated and reobligated against fiscal year 2007 appropriations. See B-223833, Nov. 5, 1987; B-134099, Dec. 13, 1957.

The deobligation requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(d) applies only to obligations under the Economy Act and has no effect on obligations for interagency transactions under other statutory authorities.<sup>33</sup> *E.g.*, B-302760, May 17, 2004; B-289380, July 31, 2002; B-286929, Apr. 25, 2001; 55 Comp. Gen. 1497 (1976).

#### (4) Applicability of limitations and restrictions

Every agency is subject to a variety of authorities, limitations, restrictions, and exemptions. Some are governmentwide. Others are agency-specific. Still others may be bureau- or even program-specific. In analyzing the relationship of such provisions to an Economy Act transaction, it is important to start with an understanding of what the Economy Act is and is not supposed to do. As we have noted previously, the law is designed to permit an agency to accomplish some authorized task more simply and economically by using another agency's experience and/or expertise. It is not intended to permit an agency to avoid legislative restrictions on the use of its funds, nor is it intended to permit an agency running short of money to dip into the pocket of another vulnerable and more budgetarily secure agency.

The rule, as stated in 18 Comp. Gen. 489, 490–91 (1938), is as follows:

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<sup>33</sup> See sections B.2 and C.4.e of this chapter for further elaboration and case summaries.

“Funds transferred from the appropriations under one department to another department for the performance of work or services under authority of [the Economy Act], or similar statutory authority, are available for the purposes for which the appropriation from which transferred are available, and also subject to the same limitations fixed in the appropriations from which the funds are transferred.”

Under the first part of this rule, the purpose availability of the funds is determined by reference to the purpose availability of the source appropriation. This is closely related to the rule discussed earlier in section B.1.a(1) of this chapter, that an Economy Act transfer cannot expand that purpose availability.

The second part of the rule is easier to state than to apply. Transferred funds remain subject to limitations and restrictions applicable to the transferring agency, as a general rule. One example is expenditure limitations applicable to the source appropriation. [17 Comp. Gen. 900 \(1938\)](#); [17 Comp. Gen. 73 \(1937\)](#); [16 Comp. Gen. 545 \(1936\)](#).<sup>34</sup> A 1951 decision, [31 Comp. Gen. 109](#), held that an appropriation rider which limited the filling of vacancies arising during the fiscal year followed an advance of funds to a working fund. A decision just 2 months later found the result equally applicable to payment by reimbursement. [B-106101, Nov. 15, 1951](#).

The same rule applies to exemptions from general prohibitions. For example, a statute long since repealed prohibited what GAO’s decisions referred to as “the employment of personal services” in the District of Columbia without express authority. The Navy had a statutory exemption. The Army had one too, but it was much more limited. In a case where the Army was doing Economy Act work for the Navy, GAO held that the exemption applicable to the Navy controlled. Therefore, the Army could proceed without regard to the restriction it would have had to follow when making direct expenditures for its own work. [18 Comp. Gen. 489](#). In a similar case, the Commerce Department needed to procure supplies for use in Economy Act work it was doing for the Army. Both agencies had exemptions from the advertising requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 5 for small dollar amounts—\$500 for the Army but only \$25 for Commerce. The

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<sup>34</sup> The rule quoted in the text from [18 Comp. Gen. 489](#) refers to the Economy Act “or similar statutory authority.” Hence, the cases cited in the text commingle Economy Act and non-Economy Act applications without distinction.



Comptroller General advised that even though Commerce was doing the purchasing, it could do so under the Army's more liberal exemption because it would be using Army money to make the purchase. [21 Comp. Gen. 254 \(1941\)](#). *See also* [B-54171, Dec. 6, 1945](#).

There have been a number of exceptions to the rule that Economy Act transfers are subject to the limitations of the source appropriation. The substantive aspects of the exceptions are less important than their rationale. One case, [B-106002, Oct. 30, 1951](#), concluded that funds advanced or reimbursed in Economy Act transactions were not subject to a monetary limit on personal services contained in the ordering agency's appropriation, because it could be clearly demonstrated that the ceiling was based on the cost of employees on the agency's payroll and did not include the estimated cost of Economy Act services either performed by the agency or reimbursed to it.

A similar limitation for the Bureau of Reclamation was the subject of another exception in [B-79709, Oct. 1, 1948](#). Legislative history revealed that the limitation stemmed from a congressional concern over an excessive number of administrative and supervisory personnel employed by the Bureau. The limitation was more on the Bureau than on the funds in the sense that it was apparently not intended to limit funds which could be transferred to some other agency, and spent by it to pay its own personnel used in performing Economy Act work requested by the Bureau. Thus, the Bureau could pay for Economy Act work without regard to the ceiling. However, work the Bureau did for other agencies had to be charged against the ceiling because, unlike the situation in [B-106002](#) noted above, the figures upon which the ceiling in [B-79709](#) was based did include transfers from other agencies.

Still another group of exceptions involved the authority to employ (and pay) personnel without regard to certain of the civil service laws. The issue first arose in [21 Comp. Gen. 749 \(1942\)](#), in connection with Economy Act work being performed by the Bureau of the Census for various national defense agencies. The question was whether the Census Bureau was bound by limitations in the source appropriations. The decision noted the line of cases applying the general rule, such as [18 Comp. Gen. 489](#) and [21 Comp. Gen. 254](#), summarizing them as follows:

“[S]uch decisions involved cases in which it was sought to employ transferred funds for purposes for which the funds would not have been available in the transferring agency; or



where it was sought to use transferred funds to employ personal services when such services could not have been employed (regardless of the method of appointment or the rates of pay) by the transferring agency; or where the transferred funds were directly subject to restrictions regarding the amount expendable therefrom for passenger-carrying automobiles, or for procurements without advertising, *etc.*”

*Id.* at 752. The decision then went on to distinguish the prior cases on the following grounds:

“What is involved in the instant matter is essentially different, being the accomplishment of certain objects for which the funds of the transferring agency are available and which the agency to which the transfer is made is equipped to accomplish by the use of personnel and equipment it already has or is otherwise authorized to procure. Under such circumstances, the charge to be made by the performing agency against the funds of the agency desiring the services—whether under a reimbursement or advance-of-funds procedure—should be on the basis of the rates of compensation which the performing agency is otherwise authorized by law to pay to its personnel used in the performance of the services.”

*Id.* Later cases applying this holding are [B-38515, Dec. 22, 1943](#), [B-43377, Aug. 14, 1944](#), and [B-76808, July 29, 1948](#). A similar rationale is found in [B-259499, Aug. 22, 1995](#), advising the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on the extent to which it could use its own personal services contractors in performing Economy Act orders where the ordering agency lacks authority to contract for personal services. Where the CIA is merely using the contractors along with its own employees to perform otherwise authorized work, there is no violation. This is merely “a means to an otherwise authorized end, and not an end in itself.” *Id.* at 8. However, [B-259459](#) noted, the Economy Act would be violated by placing the contractors under the direct supervision and control of the ordering agency, or by procuring the contractors solely in response to the ordering agency’s needs. The latter two situations would amount to using the Economy Act to circumvent limitations on the ordering agency’s authority.

We have noted that one of the Economy Act's objectives is to avoid improper augmentations. An Economy Act transaction carried out in accordance with law serves this purpose. It has been stated that Economy Act agreements "do not increase or decrease the appropriation of the requisitioned agency." [A-99125, Nov. 21, 1938](#). That case held that Economy Act transactions would not violate an appropriation proviso which limited the amounts available to a particular agency to the funds appropriated in that act. Similarly, absent some indication of a contrary intent, a monetary limit on general transfer authority is aimed at transfers which supplement the appropriation in question, and does not apply to credits to that appropriation incident to otherwise proper Economy Act transactions. [B-120414, June 17, 1954](#). Variations in discernible intent may change the result. *See* [B-30084, Nov. 18, 1942](#).

In [31 Comp. Gen. 190 \(1951\)](#), an agency whose appropriation contained a monetary ceiling on personal services asked whether the ceiling applied to services provided to others under the Economy Act or, more precisely, whether reimbursements received from ordering agencies counted against the ceiling. Viewing the limitation as applicable to expenses incurred for the agency itself, and noting the point from [A-99125, Nov. 21, 1938](#), that Economy Act transactions do not serve to increase or decrease the performing agency's appropriation, the decision said no. Absent evidence of a contrary intent, the rationale of 31 Comp. Gen. 190 would presumably apply as well to other types of limitations on the performing agency.

(5) Accountability issues

A payment to another federal agency differs from a payment to a private party in that an overpayment or erroneous payment to another agency does not result in an actual loss of funds to the United States. [24 Comp. Gen. 851, 853 \(1945\)](#); [B-156022, Apr. 28, 1966](#); [B-116194, Oct. 5, 1953](#); [B-44293, Sept. 15, 1944](#). As stated in 24 Comp. Gen. at 853: "The question here presented does not involve the discharge of a Government obligation to a non-Government agency or individual where an excess payment might result in a loss to the United States. In case of an overpayment by one department to another, the matter can be adjusted upon discovery."

Consistent with this, the Economy Act includes in its payment provision the statement that a "bill submitted or a request for payment is not subject to audit or certification in advance of payment." 31 U.S.C. § 1535(b). The language had appeared in various places prior to the Economy Act, one example being the 1926 Navy working fund statute noted in our

introductory comments. While research discloses no attempt to define “certification” for purposes of these statutes, the term does have a plain and well-known meaning in the payment context—the verification and endorsement of a payment voucher by a certifying officer or other authorized official—normally performed in advance of payment. *See* 31 U.S.C. § 3528. As the narrower and more specific provision, the no advance certification language in 31 U.S.C. § 1535(b) would take precedence over the more general certification requirements of 31 U.S.C. § 3528.

Thus, an ordering agency is not required to certify vouchers prior to payment when making payment to another federal entity, whether in advance or by reimbursement, in an Economy Act transaction.<sup>35</sup> However, keeping in mind that the ordering agency “remains accountable to the Congress for activities under appropriations made to it” (46 *Comp. Gen.* 73, 76 (1966)), an agency could presumably, on a voluntary basis, pass vouchers through some form of limited certification process as an internal control device, at least as long as it does not materially delay payment. Certainly the no audit or certification language does not permit the agency to disregard the preconditions set forth in 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a). 16 *Comp. Gen.* 3, 4–5 (1936). Of course, the “no advance certification” language has no application to disbursements by a performing agency.

The preceding paragraphs presuppose a two-step payment process—payment by the ordering agency to the performing agency either preceded or followed by obligation and payment by the performing agency. There is an approach, described and approved in 44 *Comp. Gen.* 100 (1964), that consolidates these into a single step and effectively removes the no advance certification language from consideration. In that case, the former Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) was performing Economy Act services for the Agency for International Development (AID). Under the terms of the arrangement, AID would establish appropriate fund limitations and HEW certifying officers would certify vouchers directly against AID appropriations for direct payment of costs incurred in performing, with HEW being responsible for staying within the established

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<sup>35</sup> To the extent it supports a contrary proposition, the editors view 39 *Comp. Gen.* 548 (1960) as incorrect. It inexplicably fails to consider the no certification language, and is inconsistent with the plain terms of the Economy Act itself (*see* 37 *Op. Att’y Gen.* 559 (1934)), and with applications of similar language in other statutes, such as 44 U.S.C. § 310 (payments for printing and binding). *See also* 56 *Comp. Gen.* 980 (1977); A-30304-O.M. Feb. 10, 1930.

fund limitations. Once it was established that the agencies were agreeable to operating this way, the primary legal obstacle was that certifying officers are normally supposed to be employees of the agency whose funds they are certifying. The solution was a slight bit of legerdemain that could be referred to as “cross-certification.” The ordering agency appoints the performing agency’s certifying officer as an officer or employee of it, the ordering agency, without compensation, and then designates him or her as one of its own certifying officers. *Voila!*

The concept of cross-certification has a number of applications in situations where financial services are themselves the subject of an Economy Act agreement. For example, the General Services Administration (GSA) not infrequently enters into Economy Act “support agreements” with smaller agencies, boards, or commissions to provide administrative support services, including the processing of payment vouchers. In [55 Comp. Gen. 388 \(1975\)](#), GSA inquired as to the potential liability of its certifying officers in such a situation. The answer is that it depends on exactly what has preceded the GSA certifying officer’s actions. Certainly, GSA could provide full certification under the agreement, in which event the GSA certifying officer would be the equivalent of the HEW certifying officer in [44 Comp. Gen. 100](#). However, if an official of the client agency certifies the voucher before it gets to GSA, GSA’s administrative processing is not certification for purposes of the accountable officer laws, and the GSA official will be liable only for errors made during his or her final processing.

For temporary agencies, the support agreement may include the payment of obligations after the agency has gone out of existence. However, the “appointment without compensation” sleight-of-hand cannot possibly be stretched to apply where the agency no longer exists. In such a case, the GSA certifying officer can certify the voucher provided (1) the agencies must have entered into an Economy Act agreement while the client agency was still “alive,” (2) the agreement must expressly authorize GSA to perform this function, and (3) the debt in question must have been incurred prior to the client agency’s expiration. [59 Comp. Gen. 471 \(1980\)](#).

The cross-certification concept has also found overseas applications. For example, State Department officials may perform certifying and disbursing functions for military departments overseas, charging payments directly to the applicable military appropriations. [44 Comp. Gen. 818 \(1965\)](#); [22 Comp. Gen. 48 \(1942\)](#). Similarly, when the Department of Education was created and took over responsibility for the Defense Department’s Overseas

Dependents' Schools, Education wanted to retain Defense's financial support services which had been in place for decades. It could accomplish this with an Economy Act agreement, applying guidance from decisions such as 44 Comp. Gen. 100 and 55 Comp. Gen. 388. [B-200309-O.M., Apr. 3, 1981](#).

Anyone processing payments for the Defense Department will sooner or later run into a confidential "emergency or extraordinary expense" payment. In a 1993 case, a State Department certifying officer in Haiti asked whether he could properly certify a voucher for unspecified "emergency or extraordinary" expenses where nobody would furnish supporting documentation or tell him what the money was for. Under 10 U.S.C. § 127, all that is required is a certification of confidentiality by an authorized military official. The State Department official could not question that certification. Under these circumstances, the State Department certifying officer's "certification"—certifying merely that the payment was being charged to the emergency expense appropriation for that fiscal year—was little more than "subsequent administrative processing" as discussed in cases like 55 Comp. Gen. 388. [72 Comp. Gen. 279 \(1993\)](#).

Fiscal services provided under an Economy Act agreement, in appropriate circumstances, can include disbursing cash from an imprest fund. The fact that the cashier is disbursing another agency's money has no effect on accountability or liability. [65 Comp. Gen. 666, 675–77 \(1986\)](#).

As discussed in section A.4 of this chapter, agencies are increasingly relying on the contracts and contracting services of other agencies. As a result, authority for contract oversight and administration is often delegated among multiple agencies. The ordering agency, however, ultimately remains accountable for the use of its funds. GAO, *Department of Energy, Office of Worker Advocacy: Deficient Controls Led to Millions of Dollars in Improper and Questionable Payments to Contractors*, GAO-06-547 (Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2006). The Department of Energy had entered into an interagency agreement with the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center, New Orleans (SSC NOLA) to obtain a contractor, but had not established adequate controls over payments to the contractors, which led to millions of dollars in improper and questionable payments. GAO stated that while responsibility for review and approval of invoices rested with the performing agency, Energy, as the ordering agency, must ensure that the performing agency carried out proper oversight. *Id.* at 43. *See also* GAO, *Federal Bureau of Investigation: Weak Controls over Trilogy Project Led*

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*to Payment of Questionable Contractor Costs and Missing Assets*, GAO-06-306 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2006) (interagency agreement under authority other than the Economy Act).

d. What Work or Services May Be Performed

(1) Details of personnel

A very common type of interagency service is the loan or detail of personnel. A detail is “the temporary assignment of an employee to a different position for a specified period, with the employee returning to regular duties at the end of the detail.” 64 *Comp. Gen.* 370, 376 (1985). Some of the earliest administrative decisions deal with details of personnel.

In 14 *Comp. Dec.* 294 (1907), the Comptroller of the Treasury was asked to advise the Secretary of the Treasury on a proposal to loan an employee to another agency, with the “borrowing agency” to reimburse only the employee’s travel and incidental expenses, but not basic salary. The Comptroller knew what the answer should be: “If these were questions of first impression I would be impelled to answer each of them in the negative, because of that provision of the statute [31 U.S.C. § 1301(a)] which requires all appropriations to be used exclusively for the purposes for which made.” 14 *Comp. Dec.* at 295. However, he continued, “they are not questions of first impression.” *Id.* The practice had developed in the executive branch of loaning employees without reimbursement except for extra expenses incurred on account of the detail. This practice had been around for so long, according to the Comptroller, that it was virtually etched in stone. *Id.* at 295–96. As long as the agency could spare the employee for the requested time, it would be—

“in the interest of good government and economy to so utilize his services. His regular salary would be earned in any event, and in all probability without rendering in his own Department adequate services therefor. Therefore reimbursement has never, to my knowledge, been made on such details for regular salaries. But where additional expenses have accrued because of such detail such expenses have always been reimbursed to the regular appropriation from which originally paid . . . .”

*Id.* at 296. This rationale was quite remarkable. Subsequent comptrollers obviously struggled with the rationale’s weakness and were careful not to expand the rule of the 1907 case. Thus, if the loaning agency had to employ someone else to do the detailed employee’s job while he was gone, the

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salary was reimbursable. 22 Comp. Dec. 145 (1915). A 1916 case, 23 Comp. Dec. 242, soundly attacked the rationale of 14 Comp. Dec. 294, specifically the assumption that the employee “would have remained idle if he had not been loaned,” 23 Comp. Dec. at 245, and came close to throwing it out, but did not. Early GAO decisions failed to seize the opportunity but instead adhered to the “no reimbursement” rule. *E.g.*, 6 Comp. Gen. 217 (1926).<sup>36</sup>

The 1932 enactment of the Economy Act provided the vehicle for change, but it was slow to implement. It was quickly recognized that the Economy Act authorized fully reimbursable details of personnel. 13 Comp. Gen. 234 (1934). However, as with the first round of Economy Act decisions in other contexts, the early decisions held that agencies had a choice. If they chose not to enter into a written Economy Act agreement expressly providing for full reimbursement, they could continue to operate under the old rules. *Id.* at 237. The question of how you could have nonreimbursable details in light of 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a) never went away but, like a stubborn weed in the garden, the “informal accommodation” approach survived (*e.g.*, B-182398, Mar. 29, 1976; B-30084, Nov. 18, 1942), and was reaffirmed as late as 59 Comp. Gen. 366 (1980).

If enactment of the Economy Act was the first shoe dropping, the second shoe did not drop until 64 Comp. Gen. 370 (1985). After reviewing the prior decisions and the legislative history of the Economy Act, the Comptroller General said in 1985 what the Economy Act probably thought it was saying in 1932, and certainly what the Comptroller of the Treasury really wanted to say in 1907:

“Although Federal agencies may be part of a whole system of Government, appropriations to an agency are limited to the purposes for which appropriated, generally to the execution of particular agency functions. Absent statutory authority, those purposes would not include expenditures for programs of another agency. Since the receiving agency is gaining the benefit of work for programs for which funds have been appropriated to it, those appropriations should be used to pay for that work. Thus, a violation of the

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<sup>36</sup> Oddly, the early decisions were not so rigid when it came to intra-agency work. Where an employee did work for different bureaus within the same agency, the agency could prorate the salary among the appropriations involved, or could pay the entire salary from one appropriation and seek reimbursement from the others. 5 Comp. Gen. 1036 (1926).



purpose law does occur when an agency spends money on salaries of employees detailed to another agency for work essentially unrelated to the loaning agency's functions.”

64 Comp. Gen. at 379. Accordingly, absent specific statutory authority to the contrary, details of personnel between agencies or between separately funded components of the same agency may not be done on a nonreimbursable basis, but must be done in accordance with the Economy Act, which requires full reimbursement of actual costs, one of which is the employee's salary. The fact that the loaning agency pays the employee from a revolving fund changes nothing; a nonreimbursable detail still creates an unauthorized augmentation of the receiving agency's appropriation as well as violates the purpose limitations of 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a). B-247348, June 22, 1992.

Apart from details which may be nonreimbursable under some specific statutory authority, the decisions recognize two exceptions. First, nonreimbursable details are permissible “where they involve a matter similar or related to matters ordinarily handled by the loaning agency and will aid the loaning agency in accomplishing a purpose for which its appropriations are provided.” 64 Comp. Gen. at 380. Second, details “for brief periods when . . . the numbers of persons and cost involved are minimal” and “the fiscal impact on the appropriation is negligible” do not require reimbursement. *Id.* at 381. GAO has declined to attempt to specify the limits of the *de minimis* exception but it could not, for example, be stretched to cover a detail of 15–20 people. 65 Comp. Gen. 635 (1986).

The Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel has taken essentially the same position as 64 Comp. Gen. 370. 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 188 (1989) (United States Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia must reimburse Defense Department for year-long detail of 10 lawyers); 12 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 233 (1988) (detail of Internal Revenue Service agents to investigate tax fraud for an Independent Counsel could be nonreimbursable under the commonality of functions exception). While the OLC's approach and analysis are otherwise the same, it has misgivings over the propriety of a *de minimis* exception. 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel at 190.

While the agreement should normally precede the detail, an agreement entered into after the detail has started can include the services already performed. B-75052, May 14, 1948. Reimbursement should include accrued annual and sick leave. 17 Comp. Gen. 571 (1938). It should also include



travel expenses incurred in connection with the detail work. [15 Comp. Gen. 334 \(1935\)](#); [B-141349, Dec. 9, 1959](#). If the detail is to be for a substantial period of time, the loaning agency should change the employee's official duty station to the location of the detail and then restore it when the assignment is done. If applicable to the distances involved, the employee may then become entitled to allowances incident to a permanent change of station, such as shipment of household goods. [24 Comp. Gen. 420 \(1944\)](#). A case where this was done is [B-224055, May 21, 1987](#).

If interagency details are authorized under statutory authority other than the Economy Act, whether or not they are reimbursable will naturally depend on the terms of the statute. A statute which is silent on the issue will generally be construed as not precluding reimbursement unless a contrary intent is manifested. For example, 5 U.S.C. § 3341 authorizes intra-agency details within the executive branch for renewable periods of not more than 120 days. The statute says nothing about reimbursement. GAO regards this as merely providing authority to make the details and not as exhibiting an intent that they be nonreimbursable. [64 Comp. Gen. at 381–82](#). The same applies to 5 U.S.C. § 3344 which authorizes detailing of administrative law judges but is similarly silent on the issue of reimbursement. [65 Comp. Gen. 635 \(1986\)](#). The Justice Department has said the same thing with respect to “temporary reassignments” under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988.<sup>37</sup> [13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 188 \(1989\)](#). An example of a statute which addresses reimbursement is 3 U.S.C. § 112, which authorizes details of executive branch employees to various White House offices and requires reimbursement for details exceeding 180 calendar days in any fiscal year. *See* [64 Comp. Gen. at 380](#); [B-224033-O.M., May 26, 1987](#).

A different type of statute, discussed and applied in [B-247348, June 22, 1992](#), is 44 U.S.C. § 316, which prohibits details of Government Printing Office employees “to duties not pertaining to the work of public printing and binding . . . unless expressly authorized by law.”

Finally, it is not uncommon for agencies to detail employees to congressional committees. Two 1942 decisions, [21 Comp. Gen. 954](#) and [21 Comp. Gen. 1055](#), addressed this situation and held essentially that the details could be nonreimbursable if the committee's work for which the detail was sought could be said to help the agency accomplish some

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<sup>37</sup> Pub. L. No. 100-690, title I, 102 Stat. 4181 (Nov. 18, 1988).

purpose of its own appropriations. These cases were the source of the “commonality of function” exception which [64 Comp. Gen. 370](#) applied across the board. *See* 64 Comp. Gen. at 379. The second 1942 decision emphasized that “mutuality of interest” is not enough:

“[I]t must appear that the work of the committee to which the detail or loan of the employee is made will actually aid the agency in the accomplishment of a purpose for which its appropriation was made such as by obviating the necessity for the performance by such agency of the same or similar work.”

21 Comp. Gen. at 1058. A 1988 decision applied these precedents to conclude that the Treasury Department could detail two employees to the House Committee on Government Operations on a nonreimbursable basis to work with the committee on the oversight and review of the FTS-2000 telecommunications project. [B-230960, Apr. 11, 1988](#).

As to reimbursable details, 2 U.S.C. § 72a(f) provides that “[n]o committee [of the Congress] shall appoint to its staff any experts or other personnel detailed or assigned from any department or agency of the Government, except with the written permission of” specified committees. The Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) regards this as implicit authority for reimbursable details of executive branch personnel to congressional committees, the theory being that a restriction like 2 U.S.C. § 72a(f) would be rather pointless if the authority did not already exist. 12 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 184, 185 (1988). *See also* 1 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 108 (1977). However, OLC cautions that agencies should have due regard for potential ethics and separation-of-powers concerns. 12 Op. Off. Legal Counsel at 186–89. GAO has pointed out that 2 U.S.C. § 72a(f) is a limitation on the authority of congressional committees to appoint staff assigned or detailed to the committee, not a limitation on agencies to assign or detail employees to committees. [B-129874, Jan. 4, 1971](#). Accordingly, the responsibility for compliance with section 72a(f) rests with the committee making the request for personnel rather than with the loaning agency. *Id.*

GAO details its own personnel to congressional committees under various authorities. A provision in GAO’s organic legislation, 31 U.S.C. § 712(5), requires the agency to provide requested help, presumably including loans of personnel, to committees “having jurisdiction over revenue, appropriations, or expenditures.” Details under this provision are not

required to be reimbursed. [B-129874, Jan. 4, 1971](#); [B-130496-O.M., Mar. 13, 1957](#). In addition, GAO has applied the two 1942 decisions, [21 Comp. Gen. 954](#) and [21 Comp. Gen. 1055](#), to itself. [B-41849, May 9, 1944](#); [B-130496-O.M., Mar. 13, 1957](#). Another statute, 31 U.S.C. § 734, provides that the Comptroller General “may assign or detail [GAO employees] to full-time continuous duty with a committee of Congress for not more than one year.” A part of this statute which required reimbursement by the Senate was deleted in the 1985 Legislative Branch Appropriations Act<sup>38</sup> “to put the Senate on the same basis as the House in this regard.” S. Rep. No. 98-515, at 15 (1984).

(2) Loans of personal property

Another area where the Economy Act wrought considerable change was reimbursement for interagency loans of equipment and other personal property. Prior to 1932, there was no authority to charge another government agency for the use of borrowed property. *E.g.*, [9 Comp. Gen. 415 \(1930\)](#). Also, the borrowing agency lacked authority to use its appropriations to repair the borrowed property unless for its own continued use, the theory being that the property belonged to the United States and not to any individual agency. To some extent at least, the Economy Act amounts to “tacit recognition of property ownership rights in the various departments and agencies possessing such property.” [30 Comp. Gen. 295, 296 \(1951\)](#).

Thus, one early case held that the Economy Act provided sufficient authority for the old Civil Aeronautics Board to lease surplus aircraft from another government agency. [24 Comp. Gen. 184 \(1944\)](#). It also authorized the Soil Conservation Service to borrow a shallow draft river boat from the Bureau of Land Management for certain work in Alaska. [30 Comp. Gen. 295 \(1951\)](#). The logic of the 1951 decision is simple. If the Economy Act authorizes the permanent transfer of equipment, and it unquestionably does, then it must also authorize “lesser transactions between departments on a temporary loan basis.” *Id.* at 296. Another boat was involved in [38 Comp. Gen. 558 \(1959\)](#). The Maritime Administration wanted to loan a tug to the Coast Guard and asked if the transaction was within the scope of [24 Comp. Gen. 184](#). Sure it was, GAO replied. There was no “essential difference” between the lease in the 1944 case and the loan in this one

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<sup>38</sup> Pub. L. No. 98-367, § 8(2), 98 Stat. 472, 475 (July 17, 1984).

(38 Comp. Gen. at 559), and therefore no reason not to follow 24 Comp. Gen. 184 and 30 Comp. Gen. 295.

That the Economy Act authorizes interagency loans of personal property has been confirmed in several judicial decisions, a rare example of the Economy Act coming before the courts in any context. The cases arose out of the 1973 occupation of the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, by members of a group called the American Indian Movement. Various law enforcement agencies had been called in, including the United States marshals and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Army provided substantial amounts of equipment, such as sniper rifles, protective vests, and armored personnel carriers. Defendants charged with obstructing law enforcement officers tried to argue that the Army's involvement violated 18 U.S.C. § 1385, the so-called *Posse Comitatus* Act, which prohibits use of the Army or Air Force for law enforcement unless specifically authorized. With one exception, the courts held that the *Posse Comitatus* Act applies to personnel, not to equipment, and in any event providing the equipment was authorized by the Economy Act. *United States v. McArthur*, 419 F. Supp. 186, 194 (D.N.D. 1975), *aff'd*, 541 F.2d 1275 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 970 (1977); *United States v. Red Feather*, 392 F. Supp. 916, 923 (D.S.D. 1975); *United States v. Jaramillo*, 380 F. Supp. 1375, 1379 (D. Neb. 1974), *appeal dismissed*, 510 F.2d 808 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1975). As the *McArthur* court noted, borrowing “highly technical equipment . . . for a specific, limited, temporary purpose is far preferable” to having to maintain the equipment permanently. *McArthur*, 419 F. Supp. at 194. One court disagreed, holding that the Economy Act applies “only to sales, and not to loans.” *United States v. Banks*, 383 F. Supp. 368, 376 (D.S.D. 1974). However, *Banks* goes against the clear weight of authority in this respect.<sup>39</sup>

The reimbursement of actual costs is somewhat different for loans of personal property than for other Economy Act transactions. If an agency loans a piece of equipment to another agency and the borrowing agency returns it in as good condition as when loaned, the loaning agency has not

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<sup>39</sup> Subsequent to the Wounded Knee litigation, Congress enacted 10 U.S.C. § 372, which expressly authorizes the Secretary of Defense to make equipment available to law enforcement organizations. At first, reimbursement was discretionary. See Pub. L. No. 97-86, § 905(a)(1), 95 Stat. 1099, 1116 (Dec. 1, 1981); 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 464 (1982). The reimbursement provision, 10 U.S.C. § 377, was amended in 1988 to require reimbursement, with certain exceptions, “[t]o the extent otherwise required” by the Economy Act or other applicable law. See Pub. L. No. 100-456, div. A, title XI, § 1104(a), 102 Stat. 1918, 2045 (Sept. 29, 1988).

incurred any direct costs. Thus, the decision at [24 Comp. Gen. 184](#) (lease of surplus aircraft) said merely that the borrowing agency should agree “to reimburse the department for the cost, if any, necessarily incurred by it in connection with such transaction,” plus repair costs. *Id.* at 186. Depreciation is an identifiable indirect cost, but recovery of depreciation is normally inappropriate under the standard of [57 Comp. Gen. 674](#) (1978), previously discussed in section B.1.c(2) of this chapter. Reimbursable costs (or costs the borrowing agency should pay directly in the first instance) include such things, to the extent applicable, as transportation, activation, operation, maintenance, and repair. *See, e.g.*, [38 Comp. Gen. 558, 560](#) (1959). Another permissible item of cost is a refundable deposit on containers. [B-125414, Sept. 30, 1955](#). An important expense which the borrowing agency should assume under the agreement is the cost of repairing and/or restoring the property so as to return it to the lending agency in the same condition as when borrowed. *E.g.*, [30 Comp. Gen. 295](#) (1951).

While there is no payment for the bare use of the property, that is, divorced from some cost actually incurred by one of the agencies, the Economy Act should not be used for loans for indefinite periods which amount to permanent transfers in disguise. The reason is that a permanent transfer, while authorized under the Economy Act, requires payment for the property. [59 Comp. Gen. 366, 368](#) (1980); [38 Comp. Gen. 558, 560](#) (1959). In [16 Comp. Gen. 730](#) (1937), for example, an agency had loaned office equipment to another agency. When the borrowing agency’s need for the property continued to the point where the lending agency had to replace it for its own use, the borrowing agency paid for the equipment. Agencies desiring a permanent transfer without reimbursement should seek statutory authority. [38 Comp. Gen.](#) at 560.

A permanent transfer raises the question of how to value the property. The same question arises when property loaned under the Economy Act is totally destroyed. The decision at [16 Comp. Gen. 730](#) does not specify how the amount of the payment was calculated. In a case where property was destroyed, the question was whether value should be set at acquisition value or the value of similar property being disposed of as surplus property. GAO declined to choose, advising that the amount to be billed “is primarily a matter for adjustment and settlement” between the agencies concerned. [B-146588, Aug. 23, 1961](#), at 2. In [25 Comp. Gen. 322](#) (1945), however, a case involving lost property, the answer was zero. The parties could have provided for the situation in an Economy Act agreement, except they did not enter into one. Once the property was lost, “there existed no proper

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subject of a purchase or sale,” and, absent a prior agreement to that effect, the borrowing agency’s appropriations were not available to purchase nonexistent property. *Id.* at 325.

(3) Common services

It often makes sense, economically as well as operationally, to provide certain common services centrally, procurement for example. Centralization often occurs within larger agencies made up of component bureaus or offices funded under separate appropriations. It also occurs across government agencies, with one agency providing a common service to other agencies.

How an agency that is made up of component bureaus or offices provides common services within the agency depends primarily on its appropriations structure. One approach is to appropriate specifically for common services from a single, centralized appropriation. For example, a department might receive an appropriation which is available for certain specified departmentwide services such as personnel, information resources management, and other necessary expenses for management support services. Under this type of structure, questions of reimbursement should not arise. Indeed, requiring reimbursement from the component bureaus when Congress has provided funding in the departmental appropriation would be improper. [B-202979-O.M., Sept. 28, 1981.](#)

A different legislative approach is illustrated by 43 U.S.C. § 1467, which establishes a working capital fund for the Interior Department to be available for specified common services—reproduction (of documents, we think), communication, supply, library, and health—plus “such other similar service functions as the Secretary determines may be performed more advantageously on a reimbursable basis.” The receiving components are required to reimburse the fund “at rates which will return in full all expenses of operation, including reserves for accrued annual leave and depreciation of equipment.” *Id.* Under this structure, services within the scope of the working fund are provided centrally, but each component bureau must budget for its own needs, much as agencies budget for and pay rent to the General Services Administration.

If each bureau receives its own appropriations for support services and there is no further statutory guidance, the agency may centralize the provision of common services on a reimbursable basis under authority of the Economy Act provided the reimbursements correspond to the value



actually received. [B-308762, Sept. 17, 2007](#) (human capital management, budget support, and systems maintenance); [70 Comp. Gen. 592, 595 \(1991\)](#) (executive computer network); [B-77791, July 23, 1948](#) (procurement of office supplies); [B-202979-O.M., Sept. 28, 1981](#) (legal services).

In 1962, the Bureau of the Census sought and received specific authority to charge common services to any available appropriation, provided the benefiting appropriation(s) reimbursed the financing appropriation no later than the end of the fiscal year. Pub. L. No. 87-489, 76 Stat. 104 (June 19, 1962). Other agencies sought similar authority and GAO supported the enactment of governmentwide legislation. See [B-136318, Dec. 20, 1963](#). This authority is now found at 31 U.S.C. § 1534, referred to as the “account adjustment statute,” and is discussed in section B.2 of this chapter.

Agencies are also increasingly using common services provided by another agency. In 2002, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) encouraged centralizing the provision of common goods and services across agencies by introducing 24 initiatives to use technology to eliminate redundant systems and improve the government’s quality of customer service for citizens and business.<sup>40</sup> These initiatives are referred to as Electronic Government or E-Gov initiatives.<sup>41</sup> Congress subsequently enacted the E-Government Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-347, 116 Stat. 2899 (Dec. 17, 2002), which, among other things, required agencies to support the E-Gov initiatives and established the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) role in administering the initiatives.

In order to facilitate centralization, OMB designated a number of agencies as “centers of excellence.”<sup>42</sup> These centers function as governmentwide service providers and make their services available to other agencies on a

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<sup>40</sup> OMB Press Release No. 2002-11, *New E-Government Strategy Is Roadmap to Better Service: 24 New Initiatives to Help Millions Who Access the Government Online* (Feb. 27, 2002), available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/pubpress/2002-11.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/pubpress/2002-11.html) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> These initiatives are available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> OMB also refers to these centers as “Shared Service Centers,” “Shared Service Providers,” and “Cross-Agency Service Providers.” See, e.g., *Report to Congress on the Benefits of the President’s E-Government Initiatives: Fiscal Year 2007* (2007), available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov/e-2-reports.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov/e-2-reports.html) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008); *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2007* (Feb. 6, 2006), at 152–53, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2007](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2007) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

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fee-for-service basis.<sup>43</sup> Whether an agency will use the Economy Act or some other specific statutory authority to enter into an agreement to purchase these common goods and services will depend on the statutory authority of the performing agency.

Agencies also obtain common goods and services through franchise funds and other similar intragovernmental revolving funds that provide services governmentwide on a fee-for-service basis. These types of funds are discussed in section C.3.c of this chapter.

(4) Other examples

As summarized earlier, the subject of an Economy Act transaction must be something the ordering agency is authorized to do and the performing agency is in a position to provide. Also, there must be direct benefit to the paying agency. B-16828, May 21, 1941; B-170587-O.M., Oct. 21, 1970. Apart from these general prescriptions, the Economy Act makes no attempt to define the kinds of work, services, or materials that can be ordered. This is in apparent recognition of the great diversity of tasks and functions one encounters in the federal universe, and the fact that these tasks and functions are subject to change over time. The legislative history gives some illumination:

“For illustration, the Navy maintains a highly specialized and trained inspection service. Why should not this personnel, when available, be used by other departments to inspect materials and supplies ordered to make certain that such materials comply strictly with specifications? Or if a department needs statistical work that can be more expeditiously done by another department it should have the right to call upon the agency especially equipped to perform the work. The Bureau of Standards is a highly specialized agency and its equipment and technical personnel should be made available to other services. Frequently the engineering staff of one department might be utilized by another department to great advantage.

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<sup>43</sup> *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2006* (Feb. 5, 2005), at 174, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2006](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2006) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008). For additional information about the E-Government initiatives and cross-agency service providers, see the *Report to Congress on the Benefits of the President's E-Government Initiatives: Fiscal Year 2007*, *supra* n.42.



“The War and Navy Departments are especially well equipped to furnish materials, work, and services for other departments. . . .

“The Treasury Department, Department of Justice, Interior Department, and Shipping Board have many vessels at sea. The Government navy yards should be available to these whenever repairs or other work can be done by the Navy Department as expeditiously and for less money than the materials and services will cost elsewhere.

“Illustrations might be multiplied but the above are sufficient to give a general idea of what may reasonably be expected under the [bill].”

H.R. Rep. No. 72-1126, at 15–16 (1932).

The examples we offer here are cases in which the cited decision or opinion either directly approved the proposed transaction (which does not necessarily mean that it actually took place), or at least noted it without further question in a context which can fairly be viewed as implicit approval.

One situation we have already noted is the provision of administrative support services. The Economy Act is used to enable the General Services Administration (GSA) to provide certain support services to smaller agencies. *E.g.*, [B-130961, Apr. 21, 1976](#) (Federal Election Commission). In the case of a temporary agency or commission, the agreement may authorize GSA to perform various “posthumous” functions necessary for the liquidation of the agency’s assets and liabilities. *E.g.*, [B-210226, May 28, 1985](#). However, there is no authority for anyone to do anything until the agency actually comes into existence. [B-230727, Aug. 1, 1988](#) (legislative authority would be necessary to enable GSA or Treasury or anyone else to accept or act as custodian of private funds donated for use of commission prior to its statutory effective date).

Another group of cases involves the use of federal facilities (real property) of one type or another. A long line of decisions predating the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, ch. 288, 63 Stat. 377, 380 (June 30, 1949), established the proposition that an agency could, under authority of the Economy Act, make surplus space available to other agencies. For government-owned buildings, the amount charged could

include special services such as utilities and janitor services, but not rent. [26 Comp. Gen. 677 \(1947\)](#); B-70978, Dec. 5, 1947. For leased premises, the charge could include a proportionate share of the rent. [27 Comp. Gen. 317 \(1947\)](#); [24 Comp. Gen. 851 \(1945\)](#); B-74905, May 13, 1948; B-48853, Apr. 21, 1945. It could also include alterations made by the agency holding the lease to adapt the space for use by the new tenant. [B-72269, Jan. 16, 1948](#). Agencies subject to the Federal Property Act now obtain their space requirements through GSA and no longer need to rely on the Economy Act. However, in situations not covered by the Federal Property Act, the old cases continue to apply. *E.g.*, [43 Comp. Gen. 687 \(1964\)](#). That case involved a proposal to make space in leased Postal Service facilities available to the Customs Service for it to perform its mail examining responsibilities. Since the Postal Service has its own space acquisition authorities, and since GSA regarded Customs' space as "special purpose space" and hence beyond GSA's responsibility, the solution was an Economy Act agreement based on the precedent of [24 Comp. Gen. 851](#) and its progeny.

Similarly, when the Coast Guard needed temporary residential facilities at an airport in Alaska pending construction of permanent quarters, it could obtain them from the Federal Aviation Administration under the Economy Act. [B-150530, Jan. 28, 1963](#). *See also* [B-14855, Feb. 8, 1941](#) (agency can store and service another agency's motor vehicles if it can do so at less cost than private sources).

Medical services and facilities are not treated any differently. Thus, the Department of Veterans Affairs can make its hospitals available to nonveteran beneficiaries of other agencies, such as the Public Health Service, on a space-available basis, but cannot "bump" its own veteran beneficiaries in order to put itself in a position to do so. [B-156510, Feb. 23, 1971](#); [B-156510, June 7, 1965](#). *See also* [B-133044-O.M., Aug. 11, 1976](#); [B-183256-O.M., Dec. 22, 1975](#) (Economy Act authorizes VA to provide medical services to persons eligible for medical assistance from the Defense Department). A variation is [B-171924, Apr. 7, 1971](#), holding that an Air Force hospital on Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines could provide services to a child struck by a Coast Guard vehicle, to be reimbursed by the Coast Guard under the Economy Act.<sup>44</sup> Another medical case is [B-62540, Feb. 12, 1947](#), holding that the Economy Act was the appropriate authority

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<sup>44</sup> This is another example where the Economy Act was used as authority even though there was no written agreement "up front."

for using agencies to pay proportionate shares of the operating cost of an emergency room run by the Public Health Service in a federal office building.

Another broad area in which the Economy Act is particularly useful is the occasional need by one agency of something another agency performs or produces on a regular basis. One example noted earlier is [13 Comp. Gen. 138 \(1933\)](#), in which a government corporation authorized to issue securities sought help from what is now the Bureau of the Public Debt. Similarly, when Congress directed the Treasury Department to sell a portion of the nation's gold reserves, Treasury entered into an Economy Act agreement with the General Services Administration to conduct the sale. [B-183192, July 17, 1975](#). Again, when the Defense Department wanted to conduct examinations of credit unions at U.S. military installations overseas, it logically turned to what is now the National Credit Union Administration, which routinely conducts similar examinations of credit unions stateside. [B-158818, May 19, 1966](#). Other examples in this family are [54 Comp. Gen. 624, 630 \(1975\)](#) (Secret Service protection for government officials other than those statutorily entitled to receive it); [B-192875, Jan. 15, 1980](#) (hearing examiners provided to other agencies by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in discrimination complaints); [B-98216, Oct. 2, 1950](#) (purchase by Defense Department of surplus potatoes from Department of Agriculture); [B-95094, June 2, 1950](#) (technical services by National Bureau of Standards for the Bureau of the Mint).

Finally, we note a few miscellaneous cases, primarily to try to give some idea of the variety of transactions that can fit under the Economy Act's umbrella. The Economy Act has been used in, or at least was recognized as available for, the following situations:

- Sale of arms by Defense Department to Central Intelligence Agency for use in covert operations. [B-225832-O.M., Feb. 25, 1987](#).
- Civic/humanitarian assistance activities by the Defense Department overseas. [63 Comp. Gen. 422, 443–46 \(1984\)](#).
- Agreement between Veterans Administration and Navy whereby Navy would execute and superintend a contract for the construction of the Corregidor-Bataan Memorial. [46 Comp. Gen. 73 \(1966\)](#).

- Purchase by Walter Reed Army Medical Center of motion picture supplies and services from Department of Agriculture. [B-140652](#), [Nov. 9, 1959](#).
- Agreement between Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service for “control of predatory animals and rodents” on public domain lands. [A-82570](#), [B-120739](#) [Aug. 21, 1957](#).
- Services of National Park Service in planning and supervising installation of equipment in Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. [B-64762](#), [Mar. 31, 1947](#).

Also, a congressional subcommittee study concluded that agencies could and should share federal laboratories under the Economy Act if no more specific authority was available. Subcommittee on Science, Research, and Development, House Committee on Science and Astronautics, *Utilization of Federal Laboratories*, H.R. Print No. H1203 (1968). *See also* 48 C.F.R. § 35.017(a)(2) (“a Federally Funded Research and Development Center may perform work for other than the sponsoring agency under the Economy Act . . . when the work is otherwise not available from the private sector”).

e. What Work or Services May Not Be Performed

Apart from the restrictions specified in the Economy Act itself, limitations on what can be done under the Economy Act derive largely from common sense and axiomatic requirements of the appropriations process. One rule frequently encountered is that the Economy Act may not be used for services which the performing agency is required by law to provide and for which it receives appropriations. As the Department of Justice has noted, this rule “is required in order to prevent agencies from agreeing to reallocate funds between themselves in circumvention of the appropriations process.” 9 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 81, 83 (1985). *See also* [61 Comp. Gen. 419, 421 \(1982\)](#) (charging the receiving agency “would compromise the basic integrity of the appropriations process” and would amount to a “usurpation of the congressional prerogative”).

For example, if a GAO audit enables an agency to recover overcharges, the amounts recovered may not be paid over to GAO to help defray the cost of conducting the audit. [B-163758-O.M.](#), [Dec. 3, 1973](#). The reason is that conducting audits is GAO’s job and it receives appropriations for that purpose. Similarly, the Social Security Administration is not authorized to

charge the Railroad Retirement Board for information it is required to furnish under 45 U.S.C. § 231f(b)(7). [44 Comp. Gen. 56 \(1964\)](#).<sup>45</sup>

Nor may the Justice Department, which is required by law to conduct the government's litigation and which receives appropriations for its litigation functions, pass the costs on to the "client agency." [16 Comp. Gen. 333 \(1936\)](#). However, while Justice must conduct the litigation, the client agency typically provides a variety of support to the Justice Department, and to that extent Economy Act agreements are possible, even extending to the hiring of additional attorneys, provided that the work for which the client agency is paying is work it is authorized to do itself. 9 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 81 (1985); 2 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 302 (1978). The types and extent of support depend in part on the breadth of the client agency's own statutory authority. 2 Op. Off. Legal Counsel at 305–06.

If a service is required to be provided on a nonreimbursable basis, the inadequacy of the providing agency's appropriations is legally irrelevant and does not permit reimbursement by the receiving agency. [18 Comp. Gen. 389, 391 \(1938\)](#). If the service is authorized but not required, there may be circumstances under which reimbursement is permissible. An internal memorandum, [B-194711-O.M., Jan. 15, 1980](#), discussed one such situation. Each agency is required by 44 U.S.C. § 3102 to have a records management program. In addition, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has oversight and assistance responsibilities, which include conducting surveys and inspections. When NARA is performing its oversight function, or conducts a study on its own initiative, the general rule applies and NARA's appropriations must bear the cost. However, if an agency wants to conduct a study of its own program and asks NARA to do it, and NARA's appropriations are insufficient, nothing precludes a reimbursable arrangement under the Economy Act. Also, as discussed in [B-165117-O.M., Dec. 23, 1975](#), if Congress has provided appropriations for a particular activity for an initial start-up period, and later discontinues funding with the intent that the activity become self-sufficient, reimbursement under the Economy Act is authorized.

An agency providing services over and above what it is required by law to provide may invoke the Economy Act to recover the actual costs of the nonrequired services. For example, 44 U.S.C. § 1701 requires the Government Printing Office to provide addressing, wrapping, and mailing

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<sup>45</sup> Several additional examples are summarized in Chapter 6, section E.4.

services for certain public documents. It cannot charge for these required services. [29 Comp. Gen. 327 \(1950\)](#). However, section 1701 specifically excludes certain documents from its mandate. Since GPO was also in a position to provide those services in an efficient and economical manner with respect to the excluded documents, it could do so on a reimbursable basis under the Economy Act. *Id.* Similarly, the Secret Service is statutorily required to provide protective services to specified officials. Officials other than those specified may obtain the services only by “purchasing” them under the Economy Act. [54 Comp. Gen. 624 \(1975\)](#), *modified on other grounds*, [55 Comp. Gen. 578 \(1975\)](#).

A variation worthy of note occurred in [34 Comp. Gen. 340 \(1955\)](#). A series of decisions in the early 1950s had held that the Patent and Trademark Office could not charge fees to other government agencies for services performed in administering the patent and trademark laws. [33 Comp. Gen. 559 \(1954\)](#), *modified*, [34 Comp. Gen. 340 \(1955\)](#); [33 Comp. Gen. 27 \(1953\)](#); [32 Comp. Gen. 392 \(1953\)](#). In [34 Comp. Gen. 340](#), the Army had entered into an agreement with the United Kingdom for a royalty-free license to an invention, with the Army to bear all costs associated with filing and prosecuting a patent application in the United States. GAO agreed with the Patent Office that the rule need not apply because the services were not really being rendered to another government agency. The fees were essentially part of the consideration for the license. The law was changed in 1965<sup>46</sup> to authorize the Patent Office to charge fees to other government agencies, subject to discretionary waiver in the case of an “occasional or incidental request.” 35 U.S.C. § 41(e). While the payment in [34 Comp. Gen. 340](#) would now be authorized under the statute, the approach of that decision could still be useful in analogous situations.

Closely related in both concept and rationale is the principle that an agency may not transfer administrative functions to another agency under the aegis of the Economy Act. Even under the Economy Act’s 1920 predecessor, the Comptroller of the Treasury had held that “a particular duty placed on one branch of the Government by enactment of Congress or going to the essence of its existence” could not be transferred to another agency without statutory authority. [27 Comp. Dec. 892, 893 \(1921\)](#). *See also* [8 Comp. Gen. 116 \(1928\)](#). The rule continued under the Economy Act, its rationale being stated as follows in [B-45488, Nov. 11, 1944](#), at 3:

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<sup>46</sup> Pub. L. No. 89-83, 79 Stat. 259 (July 24, 1965).

“The theory . . . is that there is inherent in a grant of authority to a department or agency to perform a certain function, and to expend public funds in connection therewith, a responsibility which, having been reposed specifically in such department or agency by the Congress, may not be transferred except by specific action of the Congress. The soundness of this principle is without question . . . .”

The difficulty in applying the rule is that no one has ever attempted to define the admittedly vague term “administrative function” in this particular context, although as the rule has evolved a definition is arguably unnecessary. Certainly it would prohibit transfer of an entire appropriation. Decision of July 7, 1923 (no file designation), 23A MS 101, *quoted in 8 Comp. Gen. 116, 118 (1928)*. That decision stated the following rather fundamental proposition: “The intent of the Congress in requiring estimates and the making of appropriations thereon is the imposition of a duty upon the department to which [the appropriations are] made to act and be responsible for the expenditures made under the appropriations.”

The rule has been held to embrace functions with respect to which an agency has authority to make “final and conclusive” determinations. Thus, the Veterans Administration could not transfer to the Federal Housing Administration management and disposal functions with respect to property acquired incident to its credit programs. [B-156010-O.M., Mar. 16, 1965](#). Equally unauthorized is the transfer of debt collection responsibilities under the Federal Claims Collection Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3701, 3711. While debt collection services can be provided under the Economy Act, they may not include the taking of final compromise or termination action. [B-117604\(7\)-O.M., June 30, 1970](#). Both of these cases involve functions subject to final and conclusive authority. *See also 17 Comp. Gen. 1054 (1938)* holding, in a case predating the Federal Claims Collection Act, that there was no authority for an agency to transfer its debt collection responsibilities. In any event, while final and conclusive authority will most likely bring a function under the rule, it is not an indispensable prerequisite.

Earlier decisions addressing the transfer of administrative functions seemed to emphasize the permanency of the proposed transfer. *E.g.*, [14 Comp. Gen. 455 \(1934\)](#). However, later decisions recognize the crucial factor as who ends up exercising ultimate control. The first case to adopt this approach appears to have been [B-45488, Nov. 11, 1944](#). The Civil



Service Commission proposed, at least for the duration of wartime conditions, to advance to the Army funds from the Civil Service Retirement and Disability Fund. The Army would hold the money in a trust account and treat it as a working fund from which to make refunds of retirement deductions to certain separating civilian employees. All concerned seemed to accept, as a starting premise, that the proposal amounted to performance by the Army of an administrative function of the Civil Service Commission. However, the proposal also contemplated that the Commission would audit all cases of refunds, and this, said the decision, “must be considered as a retention of a certain degree of supervision and control.” *Id.* at 5. Thus, while the Army would be actually making the refunds, “responsibility for the performance of the function generally would remain” in the Commission. *Id.* Therefore, the proposal was authorized under the Economy Act.

In sum, the lesson of B-45488 is that, for purposes of applying the administrative function rule, the allocation of ultimate responsibility is more important than becoming immersed in a semantic morass over what does or does not constitute an administrative function. An agency can acquire services under the Economy Act, but cannot turn over the ultimate responsibility for administering its programs or activities.

f. Contracting Out and “Off-Loading”

As originally enacted, the Economy Act made no provision for the performing agency to contract out all or any part of its performance. Indeed, the law authorized only work or services the performing agency was “in a position” to provide, and GAO construed this as precluding performance by use of contracts with third parties. [20 Comp. Gen. 264 \(1940\)](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 544 \(1939\)](#). Notwithstanding this limitation, it soon became clear that the use of commercial contracts in performing Economy Act orders could in certain circumstances be advantageous.

In 1942, Congress considered legislation which would have amended the Economy Act to authorize all agencies to use private contracts in performing Economy Act orders. GAO found the proposal unobjectionable. *See* [B-18980, Feb. 13, 1942](#). However, the legislation as enacted (Act of July 20, 1942, ch. 507, 56 Stat. 661) authorized contracting out only if the ordering agency was one of five specified agencies—Army, Navy, Treasury, Federal Aviation Administration, and Maritime Administration. The only explanation appearing in any printed legislative history materials was some concern over “trading going on among too many departments.” *See* [52 Comp. Gen. 128, 133 \(1972\)](#), *citing* 88 Cong. Rec. 5622 (1942) (remarks of Mr. May). This remained the law for 40 years.



In a 1972 decision, however, GAO advised the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that the Economy Act did not inhibit the joint funding of contracts to carry out mutually beneficial projects where EPA was statutorily authorized to cooperate with the other participating agencies. The decision further noted that the Economy Act would not preclude EPA from entering into mutually beneficial projects with other agencies, which might in turn use contracts as part of their performance. [52 Comp. Gen. 128, 134](#) (1972).

In 1982, Congress again amended the Economy Act, this time authorizing all agencies to obtain goods and services by contract in fulfilling Economy Act orders. Pub. L. No. 97-332, 96 Stat. 1622 (Oct. 15, 1982). The legislative history described some of the potential advantages:

“Since 1942, when the Economy Act was amended to allow agencies to contract out for goods and services on behalf of only 5 specified agencies, numerous areas of agency expertise have been developed. With the authority extended to allow agencies to contract out on behalf of any other Federal agency, an agency having only an occasional requirement in a specific area could turn to an agency with substantial experience in the area for assistance. This would eliminate the need to duplicate the requisite expertise. For instance, if the [then] Immigration and Naturalization Service has a requirement for night sensors for border protection, that agency could seek assistance from the Department of Defense which presumably has already developed expertise in that area. Or, if the Coast Guard had a requirement for navigational equipment, it could seek assistance from the Department of the Navy to acquire such, rather than duplicate research and development already under way or completed. Various statutes now permit such interagency requisitioning in specific areas; however, removal of the general restriction allows the maximum utilization by the Government of valuable expertise developed over the years in the various Government agencies. In addition, such generally-available authority creates the potential for wider use by the Government of quantity discounts or other benefits which may not have been available in the past. It will also permit an agency to use another agency which has some, though not all, of the capability to do the requisitioned work by

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allowing the requisitioned agency to simply contract out the part of the work that it cannot do.”

H.R. Rep. No 97-456, at 4 (1982).

The 1982 amendment changed the Economy Act in three ways. First, it amended 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a)(3) to generally authorize performing agencies to obtain ordered goods and services by contract, and deleted the limitation to the five named agencies. This eliminated the existing inhibition. Second, it amended 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a)(4)—the “lower cost” determination quoted at the beginning of our coverage—to replace the specific reference to competitive bids with a more general reference to providing the goods or services simply “by contract.” The intent of this change was to permit the performing agency to use whatever methods of procurement are available to it. H.R. Rep. No. 97-456 at 5.

Finally, it added 31 U.S.C. § 1535(c): “A condition or limitation applicable to amounts for procurement of an agency or unit placing an order or making a contract under this section applies to the placing of the order or the making of the contract.” This provision is designed to preclude use of the Economy Act to avoid legal restrictions on the availability of appropriated funds. Originally recommended by GAO,<sup>47</sup> it “prevents the ordering agency from accomplishing under the guise of an Economy Act transaction, objects or purposes outside the scope of its authority.” [B-259499, Aug. 22, 1995](#), at 8.

The Competition in Contracting Act requires that procuring agencies obtain full and open competition “except in the case of procurement procedures otherwise expressly authorized by statute.” 41 U.S.C. § 253(a)(1) (civilian procurements); 10 U.S.C. § 2304(a)(1) (military procurements). For purposes of this provision, the Economy Act is one of the otherwise authorized procedures. *National Gateway Telecommunications, Inc. v. Aldridge*, 701 F. Supp. 1104, 1113 (D.N.J. 1988), *aff’d mem.*, 879 F.2d 858 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1989) (10 U.S.C. § 2304); [70 Comp. Gen. 448, 453–54](#) (1991) (41 U.S.C. § 253). Thus, an agency can obtain its needs under another

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<sup>47</sup> *Reorganization Act of 1981; Amend Economy Act to Provide That All Departments and Agencies Obtain Materials of Services from Other Agencies by Contract; and Amend the Federal Grant and Cooperative Agreement Act: Hearings on H.R. 2528 et al. Before a Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations, 97<sup>th</sup> Cong. 78* (1981) (statement of Milton J. Socolar, Special Assistant to the Comptroller General of the United States).

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agency's requirements contract, as long as the transaction is in compliance with the Economy Act and the action is permissible under the performing agency's contract. *National Gateway*, 701 F. Supp. at 1114; 70 Comp. Gen. at 454; [B-244691.2, Nov. 25, 1992, reconsideration denied, B-244691.3, Jan. 5, 1993](#). Exceeding a maximum quantity specified in the contract, however, would be outside the scope of the contract and would violate CICA's competition requirements. 70 Comp. Gen. at 457.

One of the Economy Act requirements the ordering agency must satisfy is the "lower cost" determination, 31 U.S.C. § 1535(a)(4). For example, in [B-244691.2, Nov. 25, 1992](#), the ordering agency made the determination without testing the open market because the price under the performing agency's requirements contract was lower than the current Federal Supply Schedule price, and agencies are permitted to purchase from a Supply Schedule contract without seeking further competition. This, GAO found, was perfectly reasonable.

As long as the various requirements of the Economy Act are satisfied, the ordering agency may also legitimately take into consideration such factors as administrative convenience or procurement risks, 70 Comp. Gen. at 454 n.5, or the need to obligate funds to avoid future funding cuts, *National Gateway*, 701 F. Supp. at 1111.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, congressional attention to reported abuses under the Economy Act resulted in a detailed report by the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, *Off-Loading: The Abuse of Inter-Agency Contracting to Avoid Competition and Oversight Requirement*, S. Prt. No. 103-61 (1994). The report's title reflects the birth of a new term, off-loading, defined (on page 1 of the Senate report) as "when one agency buys goods or services under a contract entered and administered by another agency." The report found that government agencies "off-load billions of dollars of contracts every year," and that "improper off-loads total at least in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and losses to the taxpayers are at least in the tens of millions of dollars." *Id.* at 5. Among the abuses the report cited were the use of off-loading to avoid competition, to direct contracts to favored contractors, to improperly obligate expiring year-end appropriations, and to make a variety of inappropriate purchases. *Id.* at 6. The report recommended that off-loading be limited and subject to stronger regulatory controls. *Id.* at 44-46.

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Congress responded with two pieces of legislation: for military procurements, section 844 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-160, 107 Stat. 1547, 1720–21 (Nov. 30, 1993), enacted into law as the Senate report was being written; and for civilian procurements, section 1074 of the Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1974, Pub. L. No. 103-355, 108 Stat. 3243, 3271–72 (Oct. 13, 1994). The two provisions are virtually identical and require that the governing procurement regulations be amended to:

- permit off-loading only if the performing agency (a) has an existing contract for the same or similar goods or services, (b) is better qualified to enter into or administer the contract by reason of capabilities or expertise the ordering agency does not have, or (c) is specifically authorized by law to act in that capacity;
- require that off-loads be approved in advance by an authorized official of the ordering agency; and
- prohibit the payment of any fee in excess of the performing agency's actual costs or, if not known, estimated costs.

Implementing regulations are found in the Federal Acquisition Regulation, 48 C.F.R. subpart 17.5.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the law directed the Secretary of Defense and the Administrator for Federal Procurement Policy to develop systems to collect and evaluate data in order to monitor compliance. *See* Pub. L. No. 103-355, § 1074(c); Pub. L. No. 103-160, § 844(c).

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## 2. Account Adjustment Statute

The “account adjustment statute,” 31 U.S.C. § 1534, authorizes an agency to temporarily charge one appropriation for an expenditure benefiting other appropriations within the same agency, as long as (1) amounts are available in the appropriation to be charged and in the benefiting appropriation and (2) the accounts are adjusted to reimburse the appropriation initially charged during or as of the close of the same fiscal

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<sup>48</sup> GAO conducted a study in 1995 that indicated reasonable progress in implementing the controls mandated by the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1994. *See* GAO, *Interagency Contracting: Controls Over Economy Act Orders Being Strengthened*, GAO/NSIAD-96-10 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 1995).

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year.<sup>49</sup> For example, an agency procuring equipment to be used jointly by several of the agency's bureaus or offices that are funded under separate appropriations may initially charge the entire cost of this equipment to a single appropriation and later allocate the cost among the appropriations of the benefiting components. [B-308762, Sept. 17, 2007](#); [70 Comp. Gen. 601 \(1991\)](#); [70 Comp. Gen. 592 \(1991\)](#).

Agencies sought this authority to facilitate the acquisition of common services. The Bureau of the Census received this authority in 1962. Pub. L. No. 87-489, 76 Stat. 104 (June 19, 1962). Other agencies sought similar authority, and GAO supported the enactment of governmentwide legislation. *See* [B-136318, Dec. 20, 1963](#). Governmentwide authority was provided in Public Law 89-473, § 1, 80 Stat. 221, June 29, 1966. The Senate report accompanying the public law explained that the legislation is “primarily a bookkeeping convenience” that will facilitate the accounting and payment of common-service types of activities, and “promote economies by making unnecessary the estimating and precharging of various accounts and appropriations.” S. Rep. No. 89-1284 (1966), at 1–2. In a 1991 decision, GAO found that, because the Army Civilian Appellate Review Agency charged another component's appropriation for the actual costs involved in investigating grievances filed by employees of the benefiting component, the agency did not augment its appropriation. [70 Comp. Gen. 601](#).

[An agency using the authority of 31 U.S.C. § 1534 must be careful to charge the benefiting appropriations an amount that is commensurate with the value each benefiting appropriation receives, or the transaction may result in an augmentation to one or more appropriations.](#)<sup>50</sup> For example, in a 2007 decision, GAO found that the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Preparedness Directorate may have improperly augmented several appropriations when it failed to allocate costs of shared services to all benefiting appropriations. [B-308762, Sept. 17, 2007](#). The Preparedness Directorate, which was dissolved in 2007, developed a complex system in order to provide cross-cutting services to multiple appropriations within the directorate. One appropriation entered into contracts for services that benefited most of the appropriations throughout the directorate. These

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<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of 31 U.S.C. § 1534 in the context of transfers, see Chapter 2, section B.3.a.

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter 6, section E, for a discussion of augmentation of appropriations.

services included human capital management, budget justification preparation, budget execution, program review and analysis, and facilities management. GAO found that the Preparedness Directorate had authority, pursuant either to the Economy Act or to 31 U.S.C. § 1534, to draw on multiple appropriations to fund the shared services. The directorate, however, did not enter into valid written Economy Act agreements and thus could not rely on the Economy Act to justify the shared services transactions. And, while DHS had authority to carry out these transactions pursuant to section 1534, DHS could not provide GAO with documentation showing that the directorate properly recorded allocated charges against each of the benefiting appropriations. The directorate improperly augmented the benefiting appropriations to the extent it did not record an obligation against the appropriations for the estimated value of the services each appropriation received. To the extent DHS did not charge all of the benefiting appropriations, it was required to adjust its expired appropriations so that each benefiting appropriation was charged for the value received. If insufficient unobligated balances remained in any of the appropriations accounts, DHS was required to report a violation of the Antideficiency Act. 31 U.S.C. § 1351.

In a 1991 decision, GAO examined the Department of Labor's (DOL) use of the appropriations of nine agencies within DOL to finance computer equipment for a communications network linking executive staff throughout DOL. [70 Comp. Gen. 592](#). GAO found that DOL could arguably have used either the Economy Act or the account adjustment statute to finance a network benefiting multiple agencies within DOL. GAO also found, however, that DOL's cost allocation methodology exceeded the authority granted by these statutes in that it required several of the appropriations to subsidize costs allocable to other appropriations, resulting in an improper augmentation of the subsidized appropriations. [70 Comp. Gen. at 596](#). As in the decision regarding the Preparedness Directorate's use of shared services, DOL was required to adjust its appropriation accounts, and to the extent it did not have available unobligated balances adequate to make the adjustments, it was required to report an Antideficiency Act violation.

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### 3. Other Authorities

Although the best known interagency authority is the Economy Act, there are many others. One such authority is the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act,<sup>51</sup> which is discussed in various sections in this chapter. Revolving funds, discussed in section C of this chapter, also provide agencies with authority to enter into interagency transactions independent of the Economy Act.

The Economy Act will not apply in the face of a more specific statute. *E.g.*, [44 Comp. Gen. 683 \(1965\)](#); [B-301561, June 14, 2004](#) (nondecision letter); 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 464 (1982); *Integrated Systems Group, Inc. v. GSA*, GSBCA No. 13108-P, 95-1 BCA ¶ 27,484 (1995). Having said this, there are still situations in which it is legitimate to look to the Economy Act for guidance even though, strictly speaking, it does not apply, an example being where the statute prescribes reimbursement only in general terms. *E.g.*, [72 Comp. Gen. 159, 163–64 \(1993\)](#) (term “reimbursable basis” in statute directing agencies to furnish certain services to Nuclear Regulatory Commission can include “added factor” for overhead). Be that as it may, the starting point is that each statute stands on its own with respect to what services can be provided, who the customers may be, and who bears the costs.

It is important to understand what authority an agency is using to enter into its agreements because of the different statutory requirements. For example, for interagency transactions governed by authorities other than the Economy Act the ordering agency is not required to deobligate funds at the end of the fiscal year if the performing agency has not performed or incurred a valid obligation, as is required by the Economy Act. In [B-302760, May 17, 2004](#), the Library of Congress entered into an interagency agreement with the Architect of the Capitol for the redesign and renovation of a loading dock at the Library. The Library entered into the agreement under its transfer authority, 2 U.S.C. § 141(c), which specifically authorizes the Architect and the Library to “enter into agreements with each other to perform work under this section” and to “transfer between themselves appropriations . . . to pay the cost therefor.” Accordingly, this transaction was not governed by the Economy Act. As explained in [B-302760](#), an interagency transaction, like that authorized by section 141(c), is, in some ways, not unlike a contractual transaction. Similar to a contractual transaction for a nonseverable service, at the time the agencies involved in

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<sup>51</sup> Ch. 288, 63 Stat. 377 (June 30, 1949).



the transaction enter into an interagency agreement, the ordering agency incurs an obligation for the costs of the work to be performed. [B-302760, May 17, 2004](#). See also [B-286929, Apr. 25, 2001](#) (interagency obligations pursuant to 40 U.S.C. § 757<sup>52</sup> are treated like other agency obligations rather than like Economy Act obligations, and the existence of a defined requirement at the time the agreement is executed forms the basis for incurring and recording a financial obligation).

An agency that enters into an interagency agreement governed by an authority other than the Economy Act also is not required to prepare a Determination and Finding (D&F) as required by the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) for Economy Act transactions.<sup>53</sup> See 48 C.F.R. subpt. 17.5. In a 2000 decision, a contractor contended that a procurement conducted by the General Services Administration (GSA) on behalf of the Army violated the Economy Act and constituted an “illegal off-load” by the Army because the Army neglected to prepare a D&F. GAO concluded that because GSA had authority to conduct this procurement under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act (currently codified at 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)), the Economy Act was not applicable to this transaction. Accordingly, the Army was not required to prepare a D&F, and the procurement was not an illegal off-load. [B-285451, Oct. 25, 2000](#).

A few other interagency authorities are described below.

*Government Employees Training Act.* Under the Government Employees Training Act, an agency covered by the act (as defined in 5 U.S.C. § 4101) can extend its training to employees of other government agencies. The key provision is 5 U.S.C. § 4104:

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<sup>52</sup> This decision addresses the GSA Information Technology Fund, which in August 2002 was recodified at 40 U.S.C. § 322. In 2006, Congress merged the Information Technology Fund with the GSA General Supply Fund to form the Acquisition Services Fund. Pub. L. No. 109-313, § 3, 120 Stat. 1732, 1735–37 (Oct. 6, 2006), *codified at* 40 U.S.C. § 321.

<sup>53</sup> The FAR requires executive branch agencies to support each Economy Act order with a D&F. Pursuant to 48 C.F.R. § 17.503, a D&F must state that: “(1) Use of an interagency acquisition is in the best interest of the Government; and (2) The supplies or services cannot be obtained as conveniently or economically by contracting directly with a private source.” 48 C.F.R. § 17.503(a). If the servicing agency is going to fill the Economy Act order through a contract, the D&F must also include a specific statement supporting the contract action. 48 C.F.R. § 17.503(b).



“An agency program for the training of employees by, in, and through Government facilities under this chapter shall—

“ . . . (2) provide for the making by the agency, to the extent necessary and appropriate, of agreements with other agencies in any branch of the Government, on a reimbursable basis when requested by the other agencies, for—

“(A) use of Government facilities under the jurisdiction or control of the other agencies in any branch of the Government; and

“(B) extension to employees of the agency of training programs of other agencies.”

The legislative history of this provision, discussed in [B-193293, Nov. 13, 1978](#), makes clear that training can be reimbursable or nonreimbursable, in the discretion of the agency providing it. Thus, the Defense Department may, in its discretion, make its procurement training courses available on a space-available and tuition-free basis to employees of civilian agencies. *Id.* An agency choosing to charge a fee for its training under this provision is equally free to do so, and may credit fees received from other federal agencies to the appropriation which financed the training.<sup>54</sup> [B-271894, July 24, 1997](#); [B-247966, June 16, 1993](#); [B-241269, Feb. 28, 1991](#). An agency may provide training to private sector personnel on a space-available basis, provided that the fees received for the training are deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. [B-271894, July 24, 1997](#).

*Department of Defense.* The Defense Department has the following provision: “If its head approves, a department or organization within the Department of Defense may, upon request, perform work and services for, or furnish supplies to, any other of those departments or organizations, without reimbursement or transfer of funds.” 10 U.S.C. § 2571(b). Authority to furnish the supplies or perform the services already exists under the Economy Act, so this provision adds nothing in that respect. What it does is authorize the military department or organization, at its

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<sup>54</sup> A separate statute, 42 U.S.C. § 4742, provides authority to admit state and local government employees to federal agency training programs and credit fees to the appropriation or fund used for paying the training costs.

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discretion, to provide the supplies or services to another military entity on a nonreimbursable basis, that is, free.

*Tennessee Valley Authority.* The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) is authorized to “provide and operate facilities for the generation of electric energy . . . for the use of the United States or any agency thereof.” 16 U.S.C. § 831h-1. TVA is required to charge rates to produce revenue “sufficient to provide funds for operation, maintenance, and administration of its power system; payments to States and counties in lieu of taxes,” required payments to the United States Treasury, and commitments to bondholders, among other things. *Id.* § 831n-4(f). This is an example of a statute which is sufficiently specific and detailed to wholly displace the Economy Act. [44 Comp. Gen. 683 \(1965\)](#). Since electric power is a utility service, GSA, under 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)(B), can contract with TVA for periods of up to 10 years,<sup>55</sup> and can delegate this authority to other agencies. 40 U.S.C. § 121(d); 48 C.F.R. § 41.103.

*District of Columbia.* Enacted as part of the 1973 District of Columbia home rule legislation, 31 U.S.C. § 1537 authorizes the United States government and the District of Columbia government to provide reimbursable services to each other. Services provided under this authority are to be documented in an agreement negotiated by the respective governments and approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget and the Mayor of the District of Columbia. Section 1537(c) provides that—

“(1) costs incurred by the United States Government may be paid from appropriations available to the District of Columbia government officer or employee to whom the services were provided; and

“(2) costs incurred by the District of Columbia government may be paid from amounts available to the United States Government officer or employee to whom the services were provided.”

Charges are to be “based on the actual cost of providing the services.” *Id.* § 1537(b)(2). Under this authority, for example, the Bureau of Prisons

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<sup>55</sup> GSA has specific authority to contract for public utility services for a period of not more than 10 years. 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)(B).

could provide personnel to the District of Columbia Department of Corrections in the event of a strike by District employees. 4B Op. Off. Legal Counsel 826 (1980). Another example is printing done for the District of Columbia by the Government Printing Office. [60 Comp. Gen. 710 \(1981\)](#). That decision pointed out that, since the District is not a federal agency, the federal agency providing the services can charge interest on overdue accounts, and can collect a debt by administrative offset, but not against amounts withheld from the salaries of federal employees for D.C. income tax.

*National Academy of Sciences.* A statute dating back to the Civil War era (1863, to be precise) provides that—

“[o]n request of the United States Government, [the National Academy of Sciences] shall investigate, examine, experiment, and report upon any subject of science or art. The [National Academy] may not receive compensation for services to the Government, but the actual expense of the investigation, examination, experimentation, and report shall be paid by the Government from an appropriation for that purpose.”

36 U.S.C. § 150303. This statute authorizes the Academy to be reimbursed for its “actual expenses,” but nothing beyond that. A formal contract is not required, although the documentation used should adequately describe the services to be provided and the payment terms. [B-37018, Oct. 14, 1943](#).

An agreement calling for a fixed price which is not confined to reimbursement of actual expenses has been said to violate the statute. [B-4252, June 21, 1939](#). It is probably more accurate to say that it creates no obligation over and above the payment of actual expenses. The other side of the coin is that the Academy has been permitted to recover the excess where its actual expenses exceeded the fixed price. [39 Comp. Gen. 71 \(1959\)](#), as modified by [39 Comp. Gen. 391 \(1959\)](#). GAO’s suggestion is that the agreement should provide for the reimbursement of actual expenses up to a stipulated maximum, and should also provide that no costs be incurred above that amount unless authorized by some form of supplemental agreement. [39 Comp. Gen. at 392](#). A flat surcharge for overhead also violates the statute, but if the interagency work causes the Academy to increase its normal overhead, the amount of the increase (or a reasonable approximation) constitutes part of the actual expenses. [B-19556, Aug. 28, 1941](#). Cases like these do not stand for the proposition that the Academy’s

cost recovery cannot be subjected to contractual limits. Thus, a 1977 decision held the Academy's recovery of Independent Research and Development costs limited by provisions in procurement regulations to which it had agreed to be bound. [B-58911, Aug. 1, 1977](#).

*Inspection of Personal Property.* Section 201(d) of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act, 40 U.S.C. § 504, provides the following, subject to GSA regulations:

“(a) Receiving Assistance.—An executive agency may use the services, work, materials, and equipment of another executive agency, with the consent of the other executive agency, to inspect personal property incident to procuring the property.

(b) Providing Assistance.—Notwithstanding section 1301(a) of title 31 or any other law, an executive agency may provide services, work, materials, and equipment for purposes of this section without reimbursement or transfer of amounts.”

This provision is similar to the Defense Department statute noted above in that the service involved—property inspection in this case—could have been furnished under the Economy Act. Like the Defense Department statute, the significance of 40 U.S.C. § 504 is that it authorizes the providing agency to waive reimbursement.

*National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).* The Archivist of the United States has a range of duties and responsibilities with respect to the custody and preservation of government records. The Archivist is authorized by 44 U.S.C. § 2116(c) to charge a user fee for making or authenticating copies or reproductions of materials in his custody, calculated to recover costs including increments for the estimated cost of equipment replacement. The statute further provides: “The Archivist may not charge for making or authenticating copies or reproductions of materials for official use by the United States Government unless appropriations available to the Archivist for this purpose are insufficient to cover the cost of performing the work.” *Id.*

The problem with this is that NARA receives a lump-sum operating appropriation and has the normal range of discretion in using it. Therefore, unless the Office of Management and Budget were to apportion a specific amount for reproducing documents for other agencies, when could it fairly

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be said that appropriations were insufficient? To avoid this problem, NARA simply stopped requesting appropriations for that specific purpose and funded the entire program on a reimbursable basis, an approach GAO approved in [64 Comp. Gen. 724 \(1985\)](#). This, observed GAO, was “the most equitable way of allocating cost in performing this activity,” since any other approach would inevitably favor early (in the fiscal year) users over later ones. *Id.* at 726.

*Consumer Product Safety Commission.* Section 27(g) of the Consumer Product Safety Act, 15 U.S.C. § 2076(g), provides that: “The Commission is authorized to enter into contracts with governmental entities, private organizations, or individuals for the conduct of activities authorized by this chapter.” GAO concluded that based on the plain meaning of the language in section 27(g), as confirmed by the legislative history of the Consumer Product Safety Act, the Commission had authority pursuant to section 27(g) to enter into agreements with other federal agencies for any purpose authorized by the Consumer Product Safety Act. [B-289380, July 31, 2002](#). Consequently, the agreements were not subject to the Economy Act. *Id.*

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## C. Revolving Funds

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### 1. Introduction

#### a. Concept and Definition

A recurrent theme throughout much of this publication is the attempt to balance the legitimate need for executive flexibility with the constitutional role of the legislature as controller of the purse. While this theme underlies much of federal fiscal law, it is perhaps nowhere as clear as in the area of revolving funds. A revolving fund authorizes an agency to retain receipts and deposit them into the fund to finance the fund’s operations. The concept of a revolving fund is to permit the financing of some entity or activity on what is regarded as a more “business-like” basis. Laws that establish revolving funds may authorize agencies to perform reimbursable work for either the public or other federal agencies, or both.

Most Treasury accounts are either receipt accounts or expenditure accounts. Under the typical or “traditional” funding arrangement, any money an agency receives from any source outside of its congressional appropriations must, unless Congress has provided otherwise, be

deposited in the Treasury to the credit of the appropriate general fund receipt account. 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). Absent an appropriation, an agency may not withdraw money from a general fund receipt account. Congress provides the agency's operating funds by making direct appropriations from the general fund of the Treasury. These are carried on Treasury's books in the form of general fund expenditure accounts. It is possible to credit money to an appropriation (expenditure) account—if specifically authorized by statute or if the money qualifies as a “repayment,” such as the recovery of an erroneous payment, but the money is subject to the same limitations as the appropriation to which credited. 65 Comp. Gen. 600, 602 (1986), citing Treasury Department-GAO Joint Regulation No. 1, reprinted in GAO, *Policy and Procedures Manual for Guidance of Federal Agencies*, title 7, app. II.<sup>56</sup> Most importantly, its obligational availability expires along with the rest of the appropriation, and if the appropriation has already expired for obligational purposes at the time of the deposit, the funds deposited have only the limited availability of expired balances.<sup>57</sup> It should be apparent that a key element of congressional control is the ability to control the disposition and use of receipts. For a further description of accounts relating to the government's financial operations, see the *Treasury Financial Manual*, 1 TFM 2-1500, and GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 2–5 (*Budget Glossary*).

A revolving fund, while classified as an expenditure account, combines elements of both receipt and expenditure accounts. The term “revolving fund” may be defined as “a fund established by Congress to finance a cycle of businesslike operations through amounts received by the fund.” *Budget Glossary*, at 88. See I TFM 2-1520.45 (also defining revolving funds); OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20.3 (July 2, 2007). See also 38 Comp. Gen. 185, 186 (1958). A 1977 GAO report explained that:

“In concept, expenditures from the revolving fund generate receipts which, in turn, are earmarked for new expenditures, thereby making the Government activity a

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<sup>56</sup> Available at [www.gao.gov/special.pubs/ppm.html](http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/ppm.html) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

<sup>57</sup> Congress, of course, can authorize reimbursements to be made to appropriations “currently available” or “then current and chargeable.” See B-75345, May 20, 1948. While this affects the agency's ability to reuse the money, the reimbursement still cannot remain available beyond the appropriation to which credited.

self-sustaining enterprise. The concept is aimed at selected Government programs in which a buyer/seller relationship exists to foster an awareness of receipts versus outlays through business-like programming, planning, and budgeting. Such a market atmosphere is intended to create incentives for customers and managers of revolving funds to protect their self-interest through cost control and economic restraint, similar to those that exist in the private business sector.”

GAO, *Revolving Funds: Full Disclosure Needed for Better Congressional Control*, GAO/PAD-77-25 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 30, 1977), at 2. Because a revolving fund authorizes the agency to retain receipts and deposit them into the fund, the miscellaneous receipts requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b) does not apply. The legislation authorizing a revolving fund is a permanent, indefinite appropriation.

Revolving funds in the federal government appear to have developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although we have not been able to identify the first revolving fund, the Navy is said to have had one as far back as 1878. GAO/PAD-77-25 at 11. Some years later, as part of the Navy’s 1894 appropriation act, Congress created a permanent naval supply fund for the purchase of “ordinary commercial supplies . . . , to be reimbursed from the proper naval appropriations whenever the supplies purchased under said fund are issued for use.” Act of March 3, 1893, 27 Stat. 715, 723–24. The term “revolving fund” does not appear in the early statutes, but seems to have come into use in the early 1900s. Thus, the Comptroller of the Treasury was able to observe in a 1919 decision:

“The Congress has at times barred the application of [31 U.S.C. § 3302(b)] by authorizing expenditures under appropriations to be reimbursed such appropriations, and in recent years has used the term revolving fund for such purpose and the further purpose generally of permitting the use of the moneys without the fiscal year limitations which usually attend appropriations.”

26 Comp. Dec. 295 (1919). Within just a few more years, the term could be said to have an established meaning as a fund which functioned as both a receipt account and an expenditure account, and which authorized receipts the fund earned through its operations to remain available without fiscal

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year limitation. [1 Comp. Gen. 704 \(1922\)](#). These, then, are the two key features of a revolving fund:

- A revolving fund is a single combined account to which receipts are credited and from which expenditures are made. Treasury does not assign separate “receipt” and “appropriation” accounts.
- The generated or collected receipts are available for expenditure for the authorized purposes of the fund without the need for further congressional action and without fiscal year limitation.

Thus, a revolving fund amounts to “a permanent authorization for a program to be financed, in whole or in part, through the use of its collections to carry out future operations.” [GAO/PAD-77-25](#) at 47. Therefore, as explained below, a revolving fund is a permanent appropriation. The fund’s continuing availability is what distinguishes a revolving fund from a reimbursable appropriation. In the case of a reimbursable appropriation, the reimbursements are available only during the same period that the appropriation itself is available, whereas in a revolving fund, “monies are paid in and out over and over again for the same purpose.” [B-75345, May 20, 1948](#), at 2. It is important to note, however, that only the receipts or collections that the fund has earned through its operations are available without fiscal year limitation. For example, advances made by a customer agency to a revolving fund to cover the costs of the order have not been earned by the fund and retain the fiscal year limitations of the customer agency. *See, e.g.,* [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#) (customer agency funds advanced to the Library of Congress Federal Library and Information Network revolving fund are not available without fiscal year limitation; amounts transferred do not take on the character of the revolving fund). The time availability of funds an agency transfers to a revolving funds is discussed in more detail in section C.4.c of this chapter.

Proponents of revolving funds cite several advantages.<sup>58</sup> Since it involves only one “pocket,” a revolving fund provides a simpler funding structure. A revolving fund presents a clearer picture of an activity’s profit or loss. Also, reflecting expenditures in budget totals on a net basis, as is done with revolving funds, helps reduce budget distortion. Revolving funds also provide increased flexibility since the agency does not have to ask

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<sup>58</sup> *See* Senate Committee on Government Operations, *Financial Management in the Federal Government*, S. Doc. No. 87-11, at 267–68 (1961).



Congress for the money. In addition, as discussed above, revolving funds provide agencies with authority to enter into interagency agreements independent of the Economy Act, and thus the customer agency is not subject to the deobligation requirements of 31 U.S.C. § 1535(d). *See* [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#); [B-286929, Apr. 25, 2001](#); [B-301561, June 14, 2004](#) (nondecision letter). For these reasons, most executive agencies, naturally and understandably, will take all the revolving funds they can get.

b. Creation/Establishment

Perhaps the most fundamental rule relating to revolving funds is that a federal agency may not establish a revolving fund unless it has specific statutory authority to do so. [44 Comp. Gen. 87, 88 \(1964\)](#); [A-68410, Jan. 20, 1936](#); [A-65286, Oct. 1, 1935](#). The reason is that 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), the so-called “miscellaneous receipts statute,” requires that any money a federal agency receives from any source outside of its congressional appropriations be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury unless otherwise provided. Since this requirement is statutory, exceptions must be statutory. Thus, agencies have no authority to administratively establish revolving funds.

The legislative authority creating a revolving fund must be explicit. Authority to reimburse an appropriation does not authorize the creation of a revolving fund. *See* [38 Comp. Gen. 185 \(1958\)](#); [B-75345, May 20, 1948](#). The authority to establish a revolving fund, of course, may be contained in an appropriation act.<sup>59</sup> The National Technical Information Service revolving fund, for example, was created in the 1993 appropriation act for the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State. *See* Pub. L. No. 102-395, title II, 106 Stat. 1828, 1853 (Oct. 6, 1992), 15 U.S.C. § 3704b note. *See also* [B-127121, Apr. 3, 1956](#) (appropriation act riders used over long period of time to modify restrictive provision in the Alaska Railroad’s revolving fund).

While the authority must be explicit, there is no prescribed formula. Certainly the words “revolving fund” will do the job. As noted earlier, there is a long-established congressional pattern of using the term “revolving fund” to mean the authority to retain specified receipts and to use them for authorized purposes without further congressional action and without fiscal year limitation. [1 Comp. Gen. 704 \(1922\)](#); [26 Comp. Dec. 295 \(1919\)](#);

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<sup>59</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, section B.4, a provision contained in an annual appropriations act may not be construed as permanent legislation unless the language or nature of the provision makes it clear that Congress intended it to be permanent.

[B-209680, Feb. 24, 1983](#). However, as long as the statute contains the required elements, use of the words revolving fund is not necessary and failure to use them is not controlling. [B-135037-O.M., June 19, 1958](#).

In order to create a revolving fund, a statute, at a minimum, must do the following:

- It must specify the receipts or collections which the agency is authorized to credit to the fund (user charges, for example).
- It must define the fund's authorized uses, that is, the purpose or purposes for which the funds may be expended.
- It must authorize the agency to use receipts for those purposes without fiscal year limitation. However, as explained above, only receipts and collections that the fund has earned through its operations are available without fiscal year limitation.

A statute illustrating several of these points is 15 U.S.C. § 1527a, the Commerce Department's Economics and Statistics Administration Revolving Fund:

“There is hereby established the Economics and Statistics Administration Revolving Fund which shall be available without fiscal year limitation. For initial capitalization, there is appropriated \$1,677,000 to the Fund: *Provided*, That the Secretary of Commerce is authorized to disseminate economic and statistical data products as authorized by [15 U.S.C. §§ 1525–1527] and charge fees necessary to recover the full costs incurred in their production. Notwithstanding [31 U.S.C. § 3302], receipts received from these data dissemination activities shall be credited to this account as offsetting collections, to be available for carrying out these purposes without further appropriation.”

First, it specifies the receipts for credit to the fund—the fees charged to recover the costs in production of the data products to be disseminated. Second, it defines the authorized uses of the fund—to carry out the purposes of 15 U.S.C. §§ 1525–1527. Third, the statute uses the term “revolving fund” and states the fund “shall be available without fiscal year limitation.” Statutes creating revolving funds often specify additional

features. For example, such statutes may fix the amount of the fund's capital; authorize the fund to be maintained at the desired level by periodic appropriations as needed; direct that the fund be self-sustaining, or substantially so; require the return of excess amounts to the Treasury or, alternatively, authorize investment of these funds; or impose reporting requirements or other congressional control devices.

A statute which does not use the words "revolving fund" is 12 U.S.C. § 1755, the National Credit Union Administration's operating fund. However, it contains the attributes of a revolving fund. For example, it specifies that the National Credit Union Administration is authorized to collect annual operating fees. It defines the purpose for which these collections may be used. Also, the Administration is implicitly authorized to use the collections without fiscal year limitation. It says that the National Credit Union Administration Board may invest "such portions of the annual operating fees . . . as the Board determines are not need for current operations." If the collections were not available without fiscal year limitation, any unused collections would have to be deposited in miscellaneous receipts at the end of the fiscal year. The Treasury Department's *Federal Account Symbols and Titles* in fact classifies this fund as a public enterprise revolving fund.<sup>60</sup> See I TFM, FAST, at A-95.

Examples of statutes requiring the return of excess amounts to the Treasury are cited later in section C.5 of this chapter. Examples of the alternative approach—authorizing investment of funds not needed for current operations—are 12 U.S.C. § 1755(e), the revolving fund of the National Credit Union Administration, and 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-4(k)(3), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Education, Technical Assistance, and Training Revolving Fund. Typically, as in these two instances, the statute authorizes investment only in obligations of, or whose principal is guaranteed by, the United States, and authorizes income from the investment to be retained by the fund.

The requirement for specific statutory authority applies to federal agencies. It does not apply to the use of revolving funds by grantees and contractors unless prohibited by the relevant grant agreement or contract. The question in [44 Comp. Gen. 87 \(1964\)](#) was whether an educational institution funded by a State Department grant could use a revolving fund to finance the printing and sale of publications. The answer was yes, because nothing

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<sup>60</sup> See section C.3.a of this chapter for a discussion of public enterprise revolving funds.

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in the grant documents prohibited it and the miscellaneous receipts statute does not apply to funds in the hands of a grantee. A 1974 case, [B-164031\(1\)-O.M., Oct. 3, 1974](#), applied the same result to the publishing activities of a contractor. A requirement in the contract that unexpended funds be returned to the government upon completion did not stand in the way; the contractor's accountability upon completion of the contract did not alter its discretionary authority during the course of performance.

If it takes a statute to create a revolving fund, it logically follows that it also takes a statute to terminate one, unless the law establishing the fund includes some sort of built-in termination mechanism. Legislation terminating a revolving fund should address the payment of existing debts if any remain, and the disposition of the fund's balance and future receipts.<sup>61</sup> As discussed in section C.4.c of this chapter, GAO, in the past, has also regarded the account closing statute as applicable to revolving funds. Section 1555 of title 31, United States Code, provides that a no-year account shall be closed if the agency head determines that the purposes of the appropriation have been carried out and no disbursement has been made against the appropriation for two consecutive fiscal years.

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## 2. Receipts and Reimbursements

Since a revolving fund is a creature of statute, the statute which established the fund (or subsequent amendments or appropriation acts) will determine what may go into the fund. Receipts may be lumped generally into two categories, initial and ongoing or operational.

The typical revolving fund may receive an initial infusion of working capital (called the fund's "*corpus*") to enable it to finance operations until the "operational receipts" start coming in. This initial capitalization, which the fund may be required to repay, is normally furnished as part of the legislation establishing the fund. It may be in the form of an initial lump-sum appropriation, a transfer of balances from some existing appropriation or fund, a transfer of property and/or equipment, borrowing authority, or some combination of these.

An example of a fund capitalized by a direct appropriation is the Economics and Statistics Administration Revolving Fund, 15 U.S.C. § 1527a ("For initial capitalization, there is appropriated \$1,677,000 to the Fund").

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<sup>61</sup> See GAO, *Revolving Funds: Office of the Attending Physician Revolving Fund Can Be Terminated*, GAO/AFMD-89-29 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 1988), at 2–3.

Capitalization by transfer is illustrated by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Education, Technical Assistance, and Training Revolving Fund, which received its initial working capital by a transfer of \$1,000,000 from the Commission's Salaries and Expenses appropriation. 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-4(k)(4). The Corps of Engineers Civil Revolving Fund authorized the Secretary of the Army "to provide capital for the fund by capitalizing the present inventories, plant and equipment of the civil works functions of the Corps of Engineers." 33 U.S.C. § 576. An example of one form of borrowing authority to capitalize a fund is 31 U.S.C. § 5136, the United States Mint Public Enterprise Fund, which authorized the Secretary of the Treasury, subject to reimbursement within 1 year, to "borrow such funds from the General Fund as may be necessary to meet existing liabilities and obligations incurred prior to the receipt of revenues into the Fund."

After the initial capitalization, the defining feature of a revolving fund is, as we have seen, its ability to retain and use receipts. Normally, the receipts will be those generated by the fund's operations as this is the very concept of a revolving fund. *See, e.g.,* B-124995, Sept. 27, 1955; B-112395, Oct. 20, 1952; B-105693, Oct. 22, 1951.<sup>62</sup> This is not a firm legal requirement, however, and a revolving fund can mean "a fund which when reduced is replenished by new funds from specific sources," whether or not generated by the fund's operations. 23 Comp. Gen. 986, 988 (1944). However the fund is capitalized, the authority to retain receipts is an exception to 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). *E.g.,* 20 Comp. Gen. 280 (1940); 19 Comp. Gen. 791 (1940). When describing 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), we usually say that it requires that all receipts be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts absent statutory authority for some other disposition. However, the portion of the statute requiring that all receipts be deposited in the Treasury promptly and without deduction also applies to receipts credited to an appropriation pursuant to a specific statutory authority. Accordingly, the requirement that all receipts be deposited in the Treasury promptly and without deduction applies fully to revolving funds deposits. B-305402, Jan. 3, 2006; B-72105, Nov. 7, 1963.

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<sup>62</sup> These three cases involved the Vessels Operations Revolving Fund, 46 U.S.C. App. § 1241a. While the fund was terminated by Pub. L. No. 109-304, § 19, 120 Stat. 1485, 1710-18 (Oct. 6, 2006), the cases are interesting illustrations of the relationship of receipts to fund operations.

The statute will prescribe the types of receipts which may be credited to the fund and, where contextually appropriate, the method of payment. The prescription of sources is found in varying degrees of specificity, depending on the purpose of the fund. A fund intended to finance an entity rather than a particular activity tends to have broader language, an example being the Bonneville Power Administration's provision, 16 U.S.C. § 838i(a) ("all receipts, collections, and recoveries . . . from all sources"). Some funds expressly authorize the crediting of receipts from the sale or exchange of, and payments for loss or damage to, fund property. *E.g.*, 5 U.S.C. § 1304(e)(3) (Office of Personnel Management investigation/training fund); 44 U.S.C. § 309(b)(2) (Government Printing Office revolving fund). Unlike an activity funded by direct appropriations, a revolving fund would, even without this explicit authority, be able to retain payments for loss or damage to fund property. [B-302962, June 10, 2005](#); [50 Comp. Gen. 545 \(1971\)](#).

The specification of authorized receipts operates, as one might expect, as a limitation as well as an authorization, although this principle should not be applied to the exclusion of common sense. Thus, a provision of the Agricultural Marketing Act providing that payments of principal or interest on loans be deposited in a revolving fund (12 U.S.C. § 1141f(b)) includes sale proceeds obtained in a foreclosure proceeding as well as voluntary payments. [12 Comp. Gen. 553 \(1933\)](#).

Revolving fund legislation may or may not authorize advance payments. If the statute specifies reimbursement and is silent as to advances, advances are not authorized. [32 Comp. Gen. 99 \(1952\)](#). But see [32 Comp. Gen. 45 \(1952\)](#), in which legislative history was used to conclude that while the statute did not specifically authorize advance payments, it did not preclude payment in advance. While the approach in [32 Comp. Gen. 45](#) appears questionable as a general proposition, the apparent congressional intent in that case was buttressed by a separate provision in the same appropriation act which made the appropriations of the client agencies available "for advances or reimbursements" to the fund.<sup>63</sup> An interesting linguistic variation found in several of the working capital fund statutes is "reimbursed in advance." *E.g.*, 20 U.S.C. § 3483(b) (Department of Education); 42 U.S.C. § 3513 (Health and Human Services); 49 U.S.C.

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<sup>63</sup> The statute in that case, the Office of Personnel Management revolving fund, was subsequently amended to specifically include advances. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 1304(e)(3)(A).

§ 327(d) (Transportation). *Cf.* B-286929, Apr. 25, 2001 (Economy Act authorizes transactions on a “reimbursable advance payment basis”).

Customer agencies receiving goods or services from the Government Printing Office’s revolving fund are required to pay promptly upon the Public Printer’s written request, “either in advance or upon completion of the work, all or part of the estimated or actual cost, as the case may be, and bills rendered by the Public Printer are not subject to audit or certification in advance of payment.” 44 U.S.C. § 310. Under this provision, regardless of the status of the work, “[p]ayment of an acceptable invoice may not be delayed in order to complete a prepayment audit.” 56 *Comp. Gen.* 980, 981 (1977).

Where receipts are based on the cost of work or services, such as the typical working capital fund, the statute will generally require the recovery of indirect costs (overhead) as well as direct costs. For example, the Corps of Engineers Civil Revolving Fund, 33 U.S.C. § 576, requires payment “at rates which shall include charges for overhead and related expenses, depreciation of plant and equipment, and accrued leave.” In B-167790, Dec. 23, 1977, an agency whose regulations precluded reimbursement of administrative overhead nevertheless entered into an agreement with the Corps for revolving fund work. Since the requirement to charge for overhead was statutory, it had to prevail over the contrary provision in the customer agency’s regulations. The burden properly fell upon the agency even if it did not fully understand that the Corps would be using its revolving fund. A 1995 decision involving the same revolving fund advised that the fund could recover its costs for “idle time” where fund property was forced to remain idle as the result of a congressional enactment, even though the effect may be that the reimbursing appropriations are paying for periods of nonuse. B-257064, Apr. 3, 1995. Precisely how to account for these costs (allotments, rate adjustments, *etc.*) is within the Corps’ discretion.

The statutory language may be less explicit, providing merely for recovery on an actual cost basis, an example being the Office of Personnel Management revolving fund, 5 U.S.C. § 1304(e)(1). GAO has construed this language to include indirect costs, consistent with similar language in the Economy Act. B-206231-O.M., Sept. 12, 1986. *See also* 72 *Comp. Gen.* 159 (1993) (similar interpretation of term “reimbursable basis”). In a more recent decision, GAO found an administrative fee that a Library of Congress revolving fund charged to each customer agency was consistent with GAO’s long held view that, pursuant to the Economy Act, it is



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appropriate for agencies to assess administrative fees to other agencies in the course of providing goods and services, in order to recover overhead and other indirect costs. B-301714, Jan. 30, 2004.

As discussed above, it is not uncommon for revolving funds to enter into contracts with private parties as part of their performance. If a customer agency cancels an order and the revolving fund is forced to terminate the commercial contract for the convenience of the government and bear the resultant termination costs, the revolving fund may recover these costs from the customer agency. 60 Comp. Gen. 520 (1981). However, the fund itself should bear the loss if it terminates a contract it entered into merely to build up its inventory in anticipation of customer orders. *Id.* at 523. In accord is 69 Comp. Gen. 112 (1989), holding that the General Services Administration (GSA) could assess termination charges, payable to its then Information Technology revolving fund, against an agency which had withdrawn from GSA's telecommunications system. The alternative in both cases would have been to pass those costs on to other customers.

A more recent GAO decision involved a somewhat different situation in which the revolving fund was required to bear the loss. In B-301714, Jan. 30, 2004, the Library of Congress incurred losses as a result of advance payments that the Federal Library and Information Network (FEDLINK) revolving fund made for the acquisition of subscriptions to a contractor who subsequently defaulted and declared bankruptcy. The FEDLINK fund has two components: (1) advance payments made by agencies to cover their orders for goods and services, and (2) administrative fees to reimburse the Library for its administrative costs, both direct and indirect, of operating the program. The Library also uses the administrative fees to build a reserve in the revolving fund to finance future improvements and to replace outdated equipment. In an earlier FEDLINK decision, GAO agreed that it was prudent for the Library to reserve some of the administrative fees, not spending all of them in the same fiscal year in which they were collected, so that they might be used for "legitimate business costs" which arise in subsequent years. B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001. GAO considered the losses associated with the bankruptcy to be "legitimate business costs" of the FEDLINK fund. Accordingly, GAO concluded that the Library should use the administrative fees that it collects from all FEDLINK customers to cover this loss, rather than assign the loss to the specific agencies whose orders were placed with the contractor. B-301714, Jan. 30, 2004.

We should note one final potential source of capital for a revolving fund—the United States Treasury. If a fund is falling behind its goal of self-



sufficiency, or if there has been a significant impairment of capital, or if Congress wishes to increase the fund's capital, Congress can enact additional appropriations. Some revolving fund statutes expressly recognize this possibility (for example, 31 U.S.C. § 5142, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing Fund), although, subject to a possible point of order, absence of the language can not stop Congress from making the appropriation. Also, some revolving funds have borrowing authority, one example being the Rural Electrification and Telephone Revolving Fund, 7 U.S.C. § 931.<sup>64</sup>

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### 3. Types

There are three broad categories of revolving funds—public enterprise, trust, and intragovernmental.<sup>65</sup> Since they are all revolving funds, they share the common elements of revolving funds discussed below: they are created by act of Congress, they operate as combined receipt and expenditure accounts, and they authorize use of the receipts without further congressional action.

#### a. Public Enterprise Revolving Fund

A public enterprise revolving fund is a revolving fund which derives most of its receipts from sources outside of the federal government. It usually involves a business-type operation, which generates receipts, that are in turn used to finance a continuing cycle of operations. Although not a legal requirement, like a self-sustaining business operation the fund should be self-sustaining or nearly so. [B-302962, June 10, 2005](#); [65 Comp. Gen. 910 \(1986\)](#); GAO, *Revolving Funds: Full Disclosure Needed for Better Congressional Control*, GAO/PAD-77-25 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 30, 1977), at 7, 51.

Many wholly owned government corporations are financed, at least in part, by public enterprise revolving funds. They are also commonly used for credit programs (direct loan, loan guarantee) of agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Small Business Administration. Although not necessary, the governing legislation

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<sup>64</sup> For a detailed analysis of revolving fund use of borrowing authority, see GAO, *Spending Authority Recordings in Certain Revolving Funds Impair Congressional Budget Control*, PAD-80-29 (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 1980).

<sup>65</sup> Our definitions are culled from several sources: GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 3–5; I TFM § 2-1520; OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20 (July 2, 2007).

sometimes explicitly designates the fund as a “public enterprise” fund. An example is 31 U.S.C. § 5136, the United States Mint Public Enterprise Fund. Either way, if it meets the criteria, Treasury will assign it an account symbol from the 4000–4499 group reserved for public enterprise revolving funds.<sup>66</sup> An example is the Senate Restaurant Revolving Fund, which is Account 4022. *See* GAO, *Financial Audit: Senate Restaurants Revolving Fund for Fiscal Years 2006 and 2005*, GAO-07-462 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 13, 2007).

b. Trust Revolving Fund

A trust revolving fund account (Treasury accounts 8400–8499) is similar to other types of revolving funds—a fund permanently established to finance a continuing cycle of business-type operations—except that it is used for specific purposes or programs in accordance with a statute that designates the fund as a trust fund.<sup>67</sup> Examples of trust revolving funds include the Employees’ Life Insurance Fund, 5 U.S.C. § 8714, and the Veterans Special Life Insurance Fund, 38 U.S.C. § 1923. Chapter 15, section D, provides an in-depth discussion of federal trust funds.

c. Intragovernmental Revolving Fund

An intragovernmental revolving fund (Treasury accounts 4500–4999) is, as the name implies, a revolving fund whose receipts come primarily from other government agencies, programs, or activities. It is designed to carry out a cycle of business-type operations with other federal agencies or separately funded components of the same agency. Some intragovernmental revolving funds perform the services or provide the requested goods primarily themselves, such as the Transportation Systems Center working capital fund (49 U.S.C. § 328). Others enter into contracts with private vendors to provide the customer agency with the agreed upon goods or services. Examples of such intragovernmental revolving funds include the Federal Library and Information Network (FEDLINK) revolving fund (2 U.S.C. § 182c), which the Library of Congress uses to provide other federal agencies online access to databases, periodical subscriptions, and other related reimbursable services, and the Acquisition Services Fund

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<sup>66</sup> In most cases, the type of fund should be apparent from the statutory language and context. If not, the account symbol will at least tell you how Treasury regards it. See 1 TFM 2-1530.10 for a list of fund types and their associated Treasury account symbols. *See also* OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20.12 (July 2, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> For an overview of federal trust funds, see GAO, *Federal Trust and Other Earmarked Funds: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, GAO-01-199SP (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2001).

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(40 U.S.C. § 321),<sup>68</sup> which provides federal agencies with supplies, services, personal property management, and telecommunications services and support. See General Services Administration Modernization Act, Pub. L. No. 109-313, § 3, 120 Stat. 1734, 1735–37 (Oct. 6, 2006). For additional examples of intragovernmental revolving funds, see GAO, *Budget Issues: Franchise Fund Pilot Review*, GAO-03-1069 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 22, 2003), at 50–51.

Intragovernmental revolving funds have common elements:

- As with all revolving funds, receipts that the fund has earned through its operations are available without fiscal year limitation. [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#); [1 Comp. Gen. 704 \(1922\)](#); 26 Comp. Dec. 295 (1919); [B-209680, Feb. 24, 1983](#).
- The authorizing statute will address the services to be covered in one of three ways: it may list the services (*e.g.*, 42 U.S.C. § 3513), leave it to the agency’s discretion (*e.g.*, 42 U.S.C. § 3535(f)), or provide some combination. Discretion is not unbridled, but must remain within the scope of the fund statute. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 384, 386 n. 8 (1982).
- The authorizing statute will require payment for goods or services the fund provides. Some authorize advance payments, while others do not. An advance payment provision may limit the advance’s period of availability to that of the paying appropriation. *E.g.*, 7 U.S.C. § 2235.
- The authorizing statute may require some form of budgetary disclosure. Authorizing statutes usually include some direction on determining the amount of reimbursement, the inclusion of depreciation being the most common.
- The authorizing statutes may also have a provision limiting the amount the fund may retain and requiring return of amounts exceeding the limitation to the general fund of the Treasury. *E.g.*, 15 U.S.C. § 278b(f).

Intragovernmental revolving funds include stock funds, industrial funds, supply funds, working capital funds, and franchise funds. We will discuss the latter two in more detail below. Stock funds finance inventories of

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<sup>68</sup> The Acquisition Services Fund replaced the General Services Administration’s General Supply Fund and Information Technology Fund.

consumable items and industrial funds generally finance industrial- and commercial-type activities. See Senate Committee on Government Operations, *Financial Management in the Federal Government*, S. Doc. No. 87-11, at 171 (1961). Both are found primarily within the Defense establishment. See section C.7 of this chapter for more information on stock and industrial funds. A supply fund is largely self-explanatory and is used to finance the operation and maintenance of an agency's supply system, plus whatever else the governing legislation may specify. Examples include a revolving supply fund within the Department of Veterans Affairs (38 U.S.C. § 8121) and the Coast Guard Supply Fund (14 U.S.C. § 650).

(1) Working capital funds

A working capital fund is a form of intragovernmental revolving fund that generally finances the centralized provision of common services within an agency. A typical example<sup>69</sup> of a working capital fund that is used to finance the centralized provision of common services within an agency is the Commerce Department's working capital fund, 15 U.S.C. § 1521:

“There is established a working capital fund of \$100,000, without fiscal year limitation, for the payment of salaries and other expenses necessary to the maintenance and operation of (1) central duplicating, photographic, drafting, and photostating services and (2) such other services as the Secretary, with the approval of the Director of the [Office of Management and Budget], determines may be performed more advantageously as central services; said fund to be reimbursed from applicable funds of bureaus, offices, and agencies for which services are performed on the basis of rates which shall include estimated or actual charges for personal services, materials, equipment (including maintenance, repairs, and depreciation) and other expenses: Provided, That such central services shall, to the

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<sup>69</sup> Other working capital funds include 7 U.S.C. § 2235 (Agriculture); 15 U.S.C. § 278b (National Institute of Standards and Technology); 20 U.S.C. § 3483 (Education); 22 U.S.C. § 2684 (State); 28 U.S.C. § 527 (Justice); 29 U.S.C. §§ 563, 563a (Labor); 31 U.S.C. § 322 (Treasury); 40 U.S.C. § 293 (General Services Administration); 42 U.S.C. § 3513 (Health and Human Services); 42 U.S.C. § 3535(f) (Housing and Urban Development); 43 U.S.C. § 1467 (Interior); 43 U.S.C. § 1472 (Bureau of Reclamation); and 49 U.S.C. § 327 (Transportation). The Defense Department legislation (10 U.S.C. § 2208) is covered separately.

fullest extent practicable, be used to make unnecessary the maintenance of separate like services in the bureaus, offices, and agencies of the Department . . .”

As the Justice Department has pointed out, a working capital fund statute like 15 U.S.C. § 1521 provides the necessary authority to tap the appropriations of the component bureaus to pay for the services, regardless of whether they were previously funded on a centralized or decentralized basis. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 384 (1982).

A working capital fund may also provide goods or services to other agencies on a reimbursable basis. *See, e.g.*, 43 U.S.C. § 50a, the United States Geological Survey Working Capital Fund (“the fund shall be credited with appropriations and other funds of the Survey, and other agencies of the Department of the Interior, other Federal agencies, and other sources, for providing materials, supplies, equipment, work and services”). These working capital funds may operate similarly to the franchise and other entrepreneurial revolving funds described below.

In recent years, federal agencies have turned increasingly to contracting services provided through fee-for-service intragovernmental revolving funds, and to contracts one agency makes available governmentwide, such as Governmentwide Acquisition Contracts (GWACs), and Multiple Award Schedule (MAS) Contracts. Under GWACs and MAS contracts, the purchasing agency incurs an obligation directly against the contract; accordingly, interagency agreements are not required when placing orders against these contracts. Section A of this chapter discusses MAS contracts and GWACs.

(2) Franchise and other revolving funds

In the 1990s, in an attempt to foster competition among agencies in the area of providing common services in order to increase efficiency at reduced cost, Congress introduced the concept of the “franchise fund” as a pilot. Government Management Reform Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-356, § 403, 108 Stat. 3410, 3413 (Oct. 13, 1994), *codified at* 31 U.S.C. § 501 note. Section 403(a) authorized the establishment of franchise fund pilots in six executive agencies to be selected by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in consultation with specified congressional committees. Section 403(b) provides:

“Each such fund may provide, consistent with guidelines established by the Director [of OMB], such common administrative support services to the agency and to other agencies as the head of such agency, with the concurrence of the Director, determines can be provided more efficiently through such a fund than by other means. To provide such services, each such fund is authorized to acquire the capital equipment, automated data processing systems, and financial management and management information systems needed. Services shall be provided by such funds on a competitive basis.”

Section 403(c) addresses funding by providing those elements commonly found in revolving fund legislation. It authorizes the necessary start-up appropriations and the transfer of certain unexpended balances and inventories. It also addresses the charging and disposition of fees as follows:

“Fees for services shall be established by the head of the agency at a level to cover the total estimated costs of providing such services. Such fees shall be deposited in the agency’s fund to remain available until expended, and may be used to carry out the purposes of the fund.”

Pub. L. No. 103-356, § 403(c)(2). Thus, a franchise fund is a type of intragovernmental revolving fund designed to compete with similar funds of other agencies to provide common administrative services. Examples of such services include accounting, financial management, information resources management, personnel, contracting, payroll, security, and training.

The six executive agencies selected by OMB in consultation with specified congressional committees were the Department of Commerce, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of the Interior, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Department of the Treasury. See OMB and Chief Financial Officers Council, *2000 Federal Financial Management Report* (Nov. 20, 2000), at 23, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/financial/2000\\_ffm.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/financial/2000_ffm.pdf) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008); *Report to Congress: The Franchise Fund Program, An Interim Progress Report* (Apr. 1998). The specific statutory authority for each fund is as follows:

- Department of Commerce: Pub. L. No. 105-277, div. A, title II, § 209, 112 Stat. 2681, 2681-87 (Oct. 21, 1998), 31 U.S.C. § 501 note.
- Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): This franchise fund operates under the authority of the HHS Service and Supply Fund. 42 U.S.C. § 231.
- Department of the Interior: Pub. L. No. 104-208, div. A, title I, § 113, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-200–201 (Sept. 30, 1996), 31 U.S.C. § 501 note (Acquisition Services Directorate, formerly GovWorks).
- Department of Veterans Affairs (VA): Pub. L. No. 104-204, title I, 110 Stat. 2874, 2880 (Sept. 26, 1996), 31 U.S.C. § 501 note.
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Pub. L. No. 104-204, 110 Stat. at 2912–13. EPA's franchise fund was subsequently reclassified as a working capital fund and not a franchise fund pilot. *See* Pub. L. No. 105-65, title III, 111 Stat. 1344, 1374 (Oct. 27, 1997), *codified at* 42 U.S.C. § 4370e.
- Department of the Treasury: Pub. L. No. 104-208, 110 Stat. at 3009-316–317.

The provisions for Commerce, Interior, VA, and Treasury are similar and track the enabling legislation. The Interior and Commerce statutes mandate payment in advance (as did the EPA statute). The HHS, Treasury, and VA statutes permit advance payment but do not require it.

As explained in section C.6 of this chapter, a common feature of most revolving funds is that they are intended to operate on a break-even basis or reasonably close to it, over the long term. Most of the franchise fund pilots authorize the funds to charge a fee at rates which will return in full all expenses of operation, including an amount necessary to maintain a reasonable operating reserve, as well as to retain up to 4 percent of total annual income as a reserve for acquisition of capital equipment and enhancement of support systems, with any excess to be transferred to the Treasury. *See, e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 104-208, § 113. Revolving fund statutes may also limit the amount the revolving fund may retain and require periodic payments of surplus amounts to the general fund of the Treasury.

The Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Act established a new franchise fund at the Federal Aviation

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Administration. *See* Pub. L. No. 104-205, 110 Stat. 2951, 2957 (Sept. 30, 1996). It has authorities similar to those of the Commerce, Interior, Treasury, and VA franchise funds. *Id.*

Other agencies also have revolving funds that operate on a fee-for-service basis, but these funds generally do not have the authority to retain up to 4 percent of total annual income as a reserve for capital equipment. *See, e.g.,* Federal Library and Information Network's (FEDLINK) revolving fund (2 U.S.C. § 182c); General Services Administration's Acquisition Services Fund (40 U.S.C. § 321); Department of Interior's Working Capital Fund (43 U.S.C. § 1467).

(3) Contracting services and revolving funds

GAO and inspectors general of several agencies have identified numerous issues in contracting services provided by revolving funds, including possible Antideficiency Act violations. GAO added management of interagency contracting to the High Risk List in 2005. GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-05-207 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2005). The report discussed both interagency agreements through which one agency uses the contracting services of another agency, and contracts that one agency makes available to other agencies governmentwide. *See also* GAO, *Interagency Contracting: Improved Guidance, Planning, and Oversight Would Enable the Department of Homeland Security to Address Risks*, GAO-06-996 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2006).

Inspectors General of DOD, GSA, and Interior have been critical of their agencies with respect to obtaining or providing goods and services through interagency agreements with revolving funds. For example, the DOD Inspector General reported that guidance on the use of GSA's then Information Technology Fund was widely misunderstood and that DOD may have violated the Antideficiency Act. *See* DOD Office of Inspector General, *Acquisition: DOD Purchases Made Through the General Services Administration*, Report No. D-2005-096 (July 29, 2005), *available at* [www.dodig.mil/audit/reports/05report.htm](http://www.dodig.mil/audit/reports/05report.htm) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

A General Services Administration Inspector General report identified instances of inappropriate contracting practices, including misuse by GSA of contract vehicles, inadequate competition, nonexistent or ineffective contract administration, misleading descriptions of work, and awarding contracts outside of the scope of the then Information Technology Fund. *See* GSA, Office of the Inspector General, *Compendium of Audits of*



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*Federal Technology Service Client Support Centers* (Dec. 14, 2004), at 5, available at [www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov), under About GSA, OIG Reports, Special Reports (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

A subsequent report by the DOD Inspector General in 2006 found that although GSA and DOD contracting and management officials improved the interagency acquisition process, they continued to purchase goods and services without fully complying with appropriations law and federal regulations. DOD Office of Inspector General, *Acquisition: FY 2005 DoD Purchases Made Through the General Services Administration*, Report No. D-2007-007 (Oct. 30, 2006), at i, available at [www.dodig.mil/audit/reports/07report.htm](http://www.dodig.mil/audit/reports/07report.htm) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

The Department of Defense Inspector General also reported numerous appropriations and procurement issues regarding the goods and services the Department of Interior revolving funds provided to DOD. Department of Interior Office of Inspector General, *Audit of FY2005 Department of the Interior Purchases Made on Behalf of the Department of Defense*, Report No. X-IN-MOA-0018-2005 (Jan. 9, 2007), available at [www.doioig.gov/upload/2007-G-0002.txt](http://www.doioig.gov/upload/2007-G-0002.txt) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

DOD, in an effort to improve its compliance with appropriations and procurement laws, entered into agreements with both GSA and Interior outlining more than 20 areas in which GSA and Interior agreed to work with DOD to achieve “acquisition excellence,” and to ensure the acquisition practices comply with all statutory, regulatory, and policy requirements.<sup>70</sup> One area was severable services and compliance with 41 U.S.C. § 253l and 10 U.S.C. § 2410a.<sup>71</sup> In particular, GSA and Interior agreed that if DOD has transferred fiscal year appropriations to them, they will return those appropriations to DOD when they expire unless the agency has obligated

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<sup>70</sup> *Memorandum of Agreement Between the Department of Defense and the General Services Administration*, Dec. 2006, available at [www.gsa.gov/graphics/fas/DOD\\_GSA\\_MOA.doc](http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/fas/DOD_GSA_MOA.doc) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008); *Memorandum of Agreement Between the Department of Defense and the Department of Interior, March 6, 2007*, available at [www.govworks.gov/home/MOA\\_032007.asp](http://www.govworks.gov/home/MOA_032007.asp) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

<sup>71</sup> Most federal agencies have authority to enter into a 1-year severable services contract at any time during the fiscal year extending into the next fiscal year, and to obligate the total amount of the contract to the appropriation current at the time the agency entered into the contract. *See, e.g.*, 41 U.S.C. § 253l and 10 U.S.C. § 2410a. Chapter 5, section B.9.a, provides additional information about this authority.

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those appropriations for a severable services contract for DOD during the appropriation's period of availability and the contract's performance period does not exceed 1 year. In establishing this practice, DOD, GSA, and Interior will prevent use of an expired appropriation to fund a new contract.<sup>72</sup>

Recent GAO decisions have examined interagency agreements and revolving funds and found that customer and performing agencies are violating the *bona fide* needs statute and trying to “park” or “bank” expiring appropriations. B-308944, July 17, 2007, and discussion in section C.4.c.2 of this chapter. For a discussion of “parking,” see Chapter 5, section B.1.c. We also found that agencies cannot use a revolving fund to acquire office space when neither the customer nor performing agency has authority to enter into leases. B-309181, Aug. 17, 2007, and the discussion in section C.4.b of this chapter. The next section examines interagency agreements in the context of purpose, time, and amount.

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#### 4. Expenditures/Availability

##### a. Status as Appropriation

There are perhaps two “fundamental rules” pertaining to revolving funds from which all else flows. One, discussed earlier, is that specific statutory authority is necessary to create a revolving fund. The second is that a revolving fund is an appropriation. Hence, funds in a revolving fund are appropriated funds. The significance of this second rule is twofold. First, except as may be otherwise specified by statute, a revolving fund is available for expenditure without further appropriation action by Congress. It “is in no way dependent on the existence of [a separate] appropriation for the same purpose.” B-209680, Feb. 24, 1983, at 4. Second, unless specifically exempted, funds in a revolving fund are subject to the various purpose, time, and amount limitations and restrictions applicable to appropriated funds.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the reason for the rule that revolving funds are appropriated funds follows from the Miscellaneous Receipts Act, 31 U.S.C.

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<sup>72</sup> See Memorandum from the Under Secretary of Defense to Secretaries of the Military Departments, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Under Secretaries of Defense, and other DOD officials, *Subject: Non-Economy Act Orders*, Oct. 16, 2006, available at [www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/specificpolicy/Non-EconomyActPolicy20061018.pdf](http://www.acq.osd.mil/dpap/specificpolicy/Non-EconomyActPolicy20061018.pdf) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

§ 3302(b), and the Appropriations Clause, U.S. Const., art. I, § 9, cl. 7. Under 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b) all moneys received for the use of the United States must be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury absent statutory authority for some other disposition. [B-271894, July 24, 1997](#). Pursuant to the Appropriations Clause, once the money is in the Treasury, it can be withdrawn only if Congress appropriates it.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the authority for an agency to obligate or expend collections without further congressional action amounts to a continuing appropriation or permanent appropriation of the collections.<sup>74</sup> *E.g.*, *United Biscuit Co. v. Wirtz*, 359 F.2d 206, 212 (D.C. Cir. 1965), *cert. denied*, 384 U.S. 971 (1966); [73 Comp. Gen. 321 \(1994\)](#); [69 Comp. Gen. 260, 262 \(1990\)](#).

In addition, 31 U.S.C. §§ 701(2)(C) and 1101(2)(C) define “appropriation” as including “other authority making amounts available for obligation or expenditure.” A revolving fund certainly fits this definition. Discussing a now-obsolete fund called the “Farm Labor Supply Revolving Fund,” the Comptroller General set forth the principle in these terms:

“The payments received from the growers who make use of the workers represent moneys collected for the use of the United States and in the absence of specific statutory authority would be required to be deposited into the general fund of the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts under [31 U.S.C. § 3302(b)]. In this case, the specific statutory authority to use the moneys is supplied by the referred-to legislation establishing the Fund. The result of such legislation is to continuously appropriate such collections for the authorized expenditures for which the Fund is available . . . . Thus, we conclude that the ‘Farm Labor Supply Revolving Fund’ does represent an ‘appropriation’ . . . .”

[35 Comp. Gen. 436, 438 \(1956\)](#).

GAO has expressed this principle on numerous occasions. *E.g.*, [B-289219, Oct. 29, 2002](#) (revolving funds of the Pension Benefit Guarantee

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<sup>73</sup> U.S. Const. art. I, § 9, cl. 7 (discussed in Chapter 1, section B).

<sup>74</sup> Some have argued that a law making moneys available from some source other than the general fund of the Treasury is not an appropriation. *See* Chapter 2, section B.1.

Corporation, a wholly owned government corporation, are appropriated funds and are subject to statutory restrictions governing appropriated monies); [63 Comp. Gen. 31 \(1983\)](#), *aff'd on reconsideration*, [B-210657, May 25, 1984](#) (operating fund of National Credit Union Administration is an appropriation and thus subject to certain employee compensation provisions in title 5 of the United States Code; the 1984 decision includes the more detailed discussion of the appropriation issue); [60 Comp. Gen. 323 \(1981\)](#) (Federal Prison Industries revolving fund is an appropriated fund for purposes of surplus personal property provisions of Federal Property and Administrative Services Act); [35 Comp. Gen. 615 \(1956\)](#) (statutory restriction on use of appropriated funds applies to operating fund of National Credit Union Administration's predecessor); [B-204078.2, May 6, 1988](#) (Panama Canal Revolving Fund); [B-217281-O.M., Mar. 27, 1985](#) (revolving funds of Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation subject to federal procurement laws and regulations); [B-148229-O.M., May 15, 1962](#) (General Services Administration's General Supply Fund is an appropriated fund for purposes of administrative payment under Federal Tort Claims Act). The decisions have consistently rejected the suggestion that revolving funds should be regarded as nonappropriated funds. *E.g.*, [60 Comp. Gen. at 327](#); [B-210657, May 25, 1984](#).

The fact that the initial capitalization has been paid back to the general fund of the Treasury and the revolving fund has thereafter become fully self-sustaining through collections from private parties does not change the fund's character as an appropriation. [60 Comp. Gen. at 326](#); [35 Comp. Gen. at 438](#).

Most of the cases involve public enterprise revolving funds because it is there that the miscellaneous receipts statute comes into play. It is much harder to try to suggest that an intragovernmental revolving fund is not an appropriated fund, in effect, that moving money from one government pocket to another changes its status. *E.g.*, [31 Comp. Gen. 7 \(1951\)](#) (Navy Management Fund is an appropriation).<sup>75</sup> *See also Pulsar Data Systems, Inc. v. GSA*, GSBCA No. 13223, 96-2 B.C.A. ¶ 28, 407 (1996) (involving a lease funded under GSA's working capital fund in which there is not the slightest suggestion that the monies are anything but appropriated funds).

The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit is in agreement. Holding a military stock fund subject to certain procurement laws, the

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<sup>75</sup> A management fund may or may not be a revolving fund. *See, e.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 2209.

court stated that the revolving fund legislation “eliminated the need for a new appropriation each fiscal year by creating what was, in effect, an on-going appropriation.” *United Biscuit Co. v. Wirtz*, 359 F.2d 206, 212 (D.C. Cir. 1965), *cert. denied*, 384 U.S. 971 (1966). Indeed, the court went on to note, in view of the Appropriations Clause of the Constitution, if a revolving fund is not an appropriation, its constitutionality is cast into doubt. *Id.* at 213 n.14. *See also* [B-67175, July 16, 1947](#).

b. Purpose

Since funds in a revolving fund are appropriated funds, they are fully subject to 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a) which restricts the use of appropriated funds to their intended purpose(s). [63 Comp. Gen. 110, 112 \(1983\)](#); [37 Comp. Gen. 564 \(1958\)](#); [B-203087, July 7, 1981](#). The purpose requirement, as discussed in detail in Chapter 4, applies to revolving funds in exactly the same manner that it applies to direct appropriations.

You look first and foremost to the statute creating the fund, that is, the appropriation, to identify the fund’s authorized purposes. Since revolving funds are by definition creatures of statute, this step is of paramount importance. The governing legislation may be somewhat general, or it may be painstakingly specific. Either way, the rule is the same: the terms of the statute, in conjunction with other applicable statutory provisions, define the fund’s availability. Thus, for example, revolving funds for the Senate Recording and Photographic Studios, without further statutory authority, may not be invested in short-term certificates of deposit since this is not a specified purpose under the enabling legislation (2 U.S.C. §§ 123b(g) and (h)). [B-203087, July 7, 1981](#). Similarly, the General Services Administration’s Working Capital Fund, which is available for the expenses of operating “a central blueprinting, photostating, and duplicating service” (40 U.S.C. § 3173), may not be used to finance the agency’s central library or travel office. [B-208697, Sept. 28, 1983](#). While reimbursing the Working Capital Fund from the appropriations which should have been charged in the first instance will avoid an Antideficiency Act violation, use of the Fund for unauthorized items was nevertheless improper. *Id.*

While the statute is the first and most important source for determining purpose availability, it cannot be expected to spell out every detail. If the statute does not directly address the item in question one way or the other, the next step is to apply the “necessary expense” rule the same as with any other appropriation. *E.g.*, [63 Comp. Gen. 110, 112 \(1983\)](#); [B-230304, Mar. 18, 1988](#); [B-216943, Mar. 21, 1985](#). This means that a revolving fund is available for expenditures which are directly related to, and which

materially contribute to accomplishing an authorized purpose of, the fund and which are not otherwise specifically provided for or prohibited.

One revolving fund whose purpose statement is quite general is 31 U.S.C. § 5142, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing Fund. The Fund is available “to operate the Bureau of Engraving and Printing” (*id.* § 5142(a)(1)) or, in the original language, “for financing all costs and expenses of operating and maintaining the Bureau” (Act of August 4, 1950, ch. 558, § 2, 64 Stat. 409). Under this language, the Fund has been held available for various alterations and improvements to the Bureau’s real property (replacements and additions of elevators, air conditioning, electrical, plumbing and heating equipment, partitions, flooring, *etc.*), as these are clearly necessary costs of operating and maintaining the Bureau. [B-104492, Oct. 4, 1951](#). It may be used to send representatives to meetings of societies of coin collectors as this is sufficiently related to the Bureau’s activities for purposes of 5 U.S.C. § 4110. [B-152624, Feb. 18, 1965](#). And, in view of legislative history strongly indicating an intent that the language be broadly construed, it satisfies the requirement of 5 U.S.C. § 3109(b) that the procurement of experts and consultants be “authorized by an appropriation or other statute.” [B-122562, May 26, 1955](#).

Another illustration is the Rural Housing Insurance Fund, which, under 42 U.S.C. § 1487(j)(3), is available, for “servicing of loans, and other related program services and expenses.” One “related expense” chargeable to the fund is the purchase of surety bonds needed to obtain the release of deeds of trust for borrowers where the Farmers Home Administration could not find, and therefore could not deliver, the original canceled promissory note. [B-114860, Dec. 19, 1979](#). GAO also regards the fund as available to pay the *pro rata* share of developing and installing a new computerized program accounting system, intended in part to permit prompter and more accurate loan servicing. [B-226249-O.M., Mar. 2, 1988](#).

A somewhat more specific purpose statement was contained in the now-defunct Farm Labor Supply Revolving Fund. The Agricultural Act of 1949, as amended by Pub. L. No. 82-78, 65 Stat. 119 (July 12, 1951), authorized the Department of Labor to incur, on a reimbursable basis, certain expenses incident to the transportation and subsistence of farm workers. Under the legislation establishing the revolving fund, the fund was available “for payment of transportation, subsistence, and all other expenses” which were reimbursable under the Agricultural Act. *See* Supplemental Appropriation Act, 1952, 65 Stat. 741 (Nov. 1, 1951). One decision concluded that the fund was available for the cost of physical examinations

because they could be regarded as directly connected with the transportation of the workers into the country. Of course this also meant that the costs were reimbursable and would ultimately be borne by the employers of the imported workers and not the taxpayers. [33 Comp. Gen. 425 \(1954\)](#). GAO determined, however, that the necessary expense rationale could not be stretched far enough to justify charging the revolving fund for the cost of a management survey of the program. [B-119354, Mar. 30, 1959](#). It is not clear whether GAO would reach this same conclusion today.

An example of an expenditure which is otherwise provided for is [B-230304, Mar. 18, 1988](#), concluding that the Federal Prison Industries' revolving fund was not available to construct a prison camp because Congress had provided statutory procedures and specific appropriations for prison construction. An expenditure which is otherwise prohibited is illustrated in [B-67175, July 16, 1947](#), finding a revolving fund unavailable for the purchase of motor vehicles without the specific authority required by 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). By way of contrast, in [B-122562, May 26, 1955](#), one of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing cases noted above, explicit legislative history combined with sufficiently broad statutory language was found to supply the necessary authority.

In analyzing the purpose availability of a revolving fund, as with any other appropriation, the agency has reasonable discretion in selecting means of implementation, as long as its exercise is consistent with the statutory objectives. Since the 1970s, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) had a revolving fund to finance something called the New Community Development Program. The fund was available for specified forms of credit and other financial assistance, and for “any other program expenditures.” When the program failed and the incipient new communities raced toward insolvency, HUD was faced with a variety of options. In one decision, GAO advised that, under the statute, HUD could acquire the property by foreclosing on its security and undertake a variety of expenditures incident to engaging a new builder. Actions specifically authorized by the statute had to be regarded as “program expenditures,” and nothing in the law required HUD to choose the option which would minimize the government's loss. [B-170971, July 9, 1976](#). The discretion was not open-ended, however. Another decision, cautioning that “program expenditures” means “expenses of the program established by other sections” of the statute, found no basis for using the revolving fund to, in effect, step into the developer's shoes and maintain and operate a



development, except pursuant to a *bona fide* determination to acquire a given security. [B-170971, Jan. 22, 1976](#).

The desirability of a proposed expenditure is not enough to supply legal authority which is otherwise lacking. In [40 Comp. Gen. 356 \(1960\)](#), for example, the Veterans Administration (VA) proposed using its revolving supply fund to finance a program to recover silver from x-ray developing solutions. There was no question that the proposal was a good idea. The problem was that recovering silver was more of an industrial-type operation than the furnishing of supplies and the reclaimed silver was apparently of no benefit to any of the appropriations which supported the supply fund. Therefore, GAO was forced to conclude that the proposal was not an authorized revolving fund activity, but urged the VA to seek an amendment to its statute. This was done, and the statute now specifically includes the “reclamation of used, spent, or excess personal property.” 38 U.S.C. § 8121(a).

Chapter 4 uses over a dozen broad subject areas to illustrate different aspects of purpose availability. The same authorities and limitations apply to revolving funds. For example:

- Statutes dealing with the use of appropriated funds to pay the expenses of attendance at meetings apply to revolving funds. [34 Comp. Gen. 573 \(1955\)](#) (37 U.S.C. § 412 (Department of Defense)); [B-152624, Feb. 18, 1965](#) (5 U.S.C. § 4110).
- Employees paid from revolving funds are subject to the statutory restriction on payment of compensation to noncitizens. [50 Comp. Gen. 323 \(1970\)](#);<sup>76</sup> [B-161976, Aug. 10, 1967](#).
- Like other appropriations, revolving funds are not available for entertainment without statutory authority. [B-170938, Oct. 30, 1972](#).
- Revolving fund may be used to subsidize employee cafeteria if properly justified under the necessary expense rule. [B-216943, Mar. 21, 1985](#).

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<sup>76</sup> Technically, [50 Comp. Gen. 323](#) involved a “special deposit account,” but the decision points out that it was similar to a revolving fund in that it authorized the crediting of receipts and their use for specified purposes.



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- Revolving funds are subject to the prohibition in 31 U.S.C. § 1348(a)(1) on providing telephone service to private residences. [35 Comp. Gen. 615 \(1956\)](#), *aff'd on reconsideration*, [B-126760, Aug. 21, 1972](#).

A revolving fund cannot be used to permit the customer agency to evade restrictions on its funds or to accomplish some purpose it is not authorized to do directly. *E.g.*, [30 Comp. Gen. 453 \(1951\)](#) (working capital fund not available for construction where customer agency lacks the authority required by 41 U.S.C. § 12). *See also* [34 Comp. Gen. 573 \(1955\)](#); [B-161976, Aug. 10, 1967](#).

A similar situation was presented in a transaction involving the DOD's Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA) and GovWorks<sup>77</sup> for acquisition of space to consolidate CIFA's activities. [B-309181, Aug. 17, 2007](#). GovWorks is a revolving fund. CIFA entered into an interagency agreement with GovWorks for GovWorks to consolidate CIFA programs and provide space for multiple activities. CIFA directed GovWorks to enter into a contract with a vendor for services, including supplying office space and facilities management services. The vendor then signed a lease with a property owner for office space for use by CIFA. GAO concluded that without a delegation from GSA or independent statutory authority to enter into a lease, neither GovWorks nor CIFA had authority to obtain office space through a third-party lease. Unless ratified by an appropriate government official, the agreement for office space was unenforceable against the government. The decision stressed that GovWorks and CIFA could not circumvent federal statutory and regulatory requirements on leasing by bundling the lease agreement in a contract for services, and that without ratification, all payments under this third-party lease were improper payments.

The purpose for which a revolving fund may be used, of course, is governed by the statute which created the fund. *See*, for example, [40 Comp. Gen. 356 \(1960\)](#), holding that a revolving supply fund is available to finance a supply operation and not an industrial-type program. In addition, it is necessary to consider the purpose availability of the supporting appropriations, that is, the appropriations from which the revolving fund is advanced or reimbursed. A decision addressing the Navy Industrial Fund stated the rule that the Fund is "available only for the purposes permissible under [the]

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<sup>77</sup> GovWorks is now the Acquisition Services Directorate. *See* [www.govworks.gov](http://www.govworks.gov) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

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source appropriation, and subject to the source restrictions.” 63 Comp. Gen. 145, 150 (1984). See also, e.g., 18 Comp. Gen. 489, 490–91 (1938); B-106101, Nov. 15, 1951. For related material, see section B.1.c(4) of this chapter.

c. Time

(1) Earned receipts and collection

As pointed out earlier in this discussion, one of the key features of a revolving fund is that receipts and collections earned through the fund’s operations and credited to the fund are available without further congressional action and without fiscal year limitation.<sup>78</sup> This continuing availability of receipts and collections that a revolving fund has earned through its operations has long been recognized as an inherent characteristic of a revolving fund, at least as that term is used in statutes enacted by Congress. While the more modern statutes tend to include explicit language such as “without fiscal year limitation” without more, the term “revolving fund” alone would be construed to mean the same thing. 1 Comp. Gen. 704 (1922); 26 Comp. Dec. 296 (1919).

Thus, the various rules discussed in Chapter 5 governing the obligation and expenditure of fixed-year appropriations with respect to time generally do not apply to receipts and collections that a revolving fund has earned through its operations. For purposes of comparison, the time availability of receipts and collections that a revolving fund earns through its operations, unless otherwise restricted by statute, is similar to that of a no-year appropriation—the money is “available until expended.” This being the case, the rules for no-year appropriations provide a useful analogy. Under a no-year appropriation—and therefore a revolving fund as well—“all statutory time limits as to when the funds may be obligated and expended are removed.” 40 Comp. Gen. 694, 696 (1961). Amounts earned and credited to the fund are treated as unobligated balances and are available for obligation the same as any other unobligated money in the fund. *Id.* at 697. Deobligated funds are treated the same way. B-200519, Nov. 28, 1980.

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<sup>78</sup> The key here is “earned.” Earned receipts and collections are the component of the fee that reimburses the revolving fund for the cost of its operations. Advances a customer agency makes to a revolving fund have not yet been earned and retain their fiscal year character.

A question that appears to have drawn little attention is whether 31 U.S.C. § 1555 applies to revolving funds. That statute permits an agency to close a no-year account if the agency head determines that the purposes of the appropriation have been carried out and if there have been no disbursements from the account for two consecutive fiscal years. In [72 Comp. Gen. 295 \(1993\)](#), the Treasury Department had invoked 31 U.S.C. § 1555 to terminate the Check Forgery Insurance Fund, a revolving fund. GAO found closure improper because the reasons the fund had been created continued to exist. While the issue was not directly raised in the decision, apparently both Treasury and GAO regarded 31 U.S.C. § 1555 as applicable to the revolving fund without question.

(2) Appropriations of revolving funds' customer agencies

When entering into a transaction with a revolving fund, the customer agency still must satisfy the various time rules to its own appropriation. Specifically, the customer agency must obligate its appropriation for a *bona fide* need within the specified period of availability.

In order for the customer agency to incur an obligation when it enters into an interagency agreement with the revolving fund, the customer agency must have documentary evidence of a binding agreement between the two agencies for specific goods or services. 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a). In addition, an appropriation is available for obligation only to fulfill a *bona fide* need of the period of availability for which it was made. 31 U.S.C. § 1502(a). In [B-308944, July 17, 2007](#), GAO found that a Department of Interior revolving fund accepted Military Interdepartmental Purchase Requests (MIPRS), which DOD used to document interagency agreements with Interior, that did not identify the specific items or services that DOD wanted the revolving fund to acquire on its behalf. Lacking the necessary specificity as to the items or services ordered, these MIPRS did not obligate DOD's funds. DOD sent more specific information to the revolving fund at a later date, which served to perfect the orders and obligate DOD's appropriations; however, at this point, DOD's appropriations had expired, and they were not available for obligation in the fiscal year when the orders were perfected and the funds were used. Accordingly, when the revolving fund later used these funds for three contracts, the revolving fund improperly used prior year funds.

Funds transferred to a revolving fund through an interagency agreement must comply with the *bona fide* needs rule. So when DOD ordered laser printers (a readily available commercial item) from a revolving fund at the

Department of Interior, and the revolving fund did not execute a contract on DOD's behalf until 17 months later and 11 months after funds transferred expired, GAO found that the contract did not fulfill a *bona fide* need arising during the funds' period of availability. [B-308944, July 17, 2007](#).

When an agency withdraws funds from its appropriation and makes them available for credit to another appropriation, like a revolving fund, the withdrawn amounts retain their time character and do not assume the time character of the appropriation to which they are credited until they are earned. *See* [B-306975, Feb. 27, 2006](#); [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#); [31 Comp. Gen. 109, 114–15 \(1951\)](#). Consequently, unless otherwise specifically provided by law, unexpended expired balances must be returned to the customer agency.

GAO addressed the time availability of funds a customer agency transfers to a revolving fund in a 2001 decision which involved the Library of Congress Federal Library and Information Network (FEDLINK) revolving fund. [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#). Section 103(e) of the Library of Congress Fiscal Operations Improvement Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-481, 114 Stat. 2187, 2189–90 (Nov. 9, 2000), specifies that amounts in the FEDLINK revolving fund are available to the Librarian “without fiscal year limitation” to carry out the FEDLINK program. GAO explained that this language did not permit the Library to retain unexpended fiscal year appropriations advanced by a customer agency that were not needed for costs the Library had incurred in filling the order. [B-288142](#). The Library could not reserve the unexpended amounts to cover future year orders placed by the customer agency but was required to return excess funds to the customer agency. *Id.* If the period of availability of the customer's appropriation has not expired, the customer agency may deobligate the returned funds and use them to place a new order. However, remaining balances are not available to enter into a new obligation once the period of availability of the customer agency's appropriation has expired. *Id.*; [51 Comp. Gen. 766 \(1972\)](#). *See also* [B-306975, Feb. 27, 2006](#) (if a customer agency advances fiscal year funds to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Revolving Fund for September's estimated costs, NARA may not credit excess amount in adjusting October's bill).

GAO addressed a *bona fide* need issue in a decision involving GSA's Federal Systems Integration and Management Center (FEDSIM), which

was financed through GSA's Information Technology Fund.<sup>79</sup> [B-286929, Apr. 25, 2001](#). The U.S. Total Army Personnel Command (PERSCOM) entered into an interagency agreement with the revolving fund using fiscal year 2007 funds and transferred funds to the revolving fund. While the agencies envisioned a three-phase project, PERSCOM actually entered into an agreement for only the first phase of the project. Because PERSCOM entered into an agreement for only the first phase of the project and incurred an obligation during the period of availability of the appropriation only for the first phase, PERSCOM could not apply the expired balance of the amount originally transferred to the revolving fund to complete the remaining project phases. Even if PERSCOM could have established phases II and III as a *bona fide* need of fiscal year 2007, PERSCOM did not take appropriate action to satisfy that need during the fiscal year by contracting for additional phases during the period of availability of the appropriation.

It is also improper for a customer agency using a fiscal-year appropriation to place an order with an industrial fund at the end of the fiscal year without a legitimate need, thereby using the revolving fund to extend the life of the appropriation. GAO, *Improper Use of Industrial Funds by Defense Extended the Life of Appropriations Which Otherwise Would Have Expired*, GAO/AFMD-84-34 (Washington, D.C.: June 5, 1984). Similarly, a customer agency, using fiscal year appropriations, may not amend a properly placed order in a subsequent fiscal year to widen the scope of work and charge the increased costs to expired funds of the prior year. *Id.* app. I at 9.

While the funds a customer agency advances to a revolving fund to cover its order for goods or services are not available without fiscal year limitation, the “earned fee,” that is, the component of the fee that reimburses the revolving fund for the cost of its operations is available until expended. In the FEDLINK example discussed above, fees for service under the FEDLINK revolving fund had two components: (1) advances the customer agency provides the Library of Congress to cover the customer’s order for goods and services, and (2) reimbursements to the Library for the accounting services and its other administrative costs, both direct and indirect, of operating the program. Because the Library intended for these

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<sup>79</sup> The Information Technology Fund has since been merged with the GSA General Supply Fund to become the Acquisition Services Fund. Pub. L. No. 109-313, § 3, 120 Stat. 1734, 1735–37 (Oct. 6, 2006), *codified at* 40 U.S.C. § 321.

amounts to reimburse the Library for administrative costs of running the program rather than as an advance to cover the customer's order for goods and services, GAO agreed with the Library's conclusion that it could retain these amounts without fiscal year limitation. [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#).

Revolving funds must also abide by time restrictions when entering into an indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity contract (IDIQ)<sup>80</sup> on behalf of a customer agency. In [B-308969, May 31, 2007](#), the Department of Interior's (DOI) National Business Center Acquisition Services Division, Southwest Branch (SWB), awarded a 1-year indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity contract on behalf of DOD, having a period of performance from July 1, 2003, to June 30, 2004. This transaction was funded through DOI's working capital fund. The contract required the government to purchase a minimum of \$1 million in services from the contractor. SWB, however, obligated only \$45,000 of \$1 million from DOD's fiscal year 2003 appropriation and incorrectly obligated the balance from DOD's fiscal year 2004 appropriation, using fiscal year 2004 funds to satisfy an obligation established in fiscal year 2003.

d. Amount

As with other appropriations, authorities and limitations relating to the amount that can be obligated or expended apply to revolving funds unless specifically exempted. Limitations fall into three categories. First are governmentwide limitations. An example is [35 Comp. Gen. 436 \(1956\)](#), finding a revolving fund bound by a governmentwide statute, since repealed, limiting obligations or expenditures for improvements to real property to 25 percent of the first year's rent. Because the Farm Labor supply revolving fund constituted an appropriation, the statute applied.

Next are limitations or restrictions specific to the particular fund. An unusual situation occurred in [46 Comp. Gen. 198 \(1966\)](#). Hurricane Betsy caused considerable damage in several southern states in 1965. Part of the congressional response was a law authorizing the Small Business Administration (SBA) to cancel portions of outstanding indebtedness. The indebtedness to be forgiven stemmed from loans financed by a revolving fund. The law authorized the appropriation of \$70 million. Congress subsequently appropriated half that amount, \$35 million. The SBA asked if

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<sup>80</sup> An indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity (IDIQ) contract is a form of indefinite-quantity contract, which provides for an indefinite quantity of supplies or services, within stated limits, during a fixed period. For a detailed discussion of IDIQ contracts, see Chapter 5, section B.8.

it could grant relief in excess of \$35 million, noting quite logically that forgiving an obligation does not require an appropriation. The decision concluded that SBA may not have needed an appropriation, but since it received one, it could not ignore it. The authorization and appropriation reflected the congressional determination to maintain the revolving fund for future program use. (The alternative would have been to let the fund dwindle and pump more money into it later.) Congress chose to enact the limitation, and the agency could not disregard it.

The final category, applicable in the case of intragovernmental revolving funds, consists of limitations on the appropriation from which the fund will be reimbursed. For example, Defense Department industrial funds can finance authorized military construction, reimbursable from Operation and Maintenance appropriations. “Minor military construction” projects may be charged to O&M appropriations up to a monetary ceiling set by 10 U.S.C. § 2805. It is improper to use the industrial fund for a construction project whose cost has been split to evade the ceiling. [B-234326.15, Dec. 24, 1991](#). Similarly improper is the use of revolving fund financing to exceed a ceiling on travel expenses applicable to the reimbursing appropriation. [B-120480, Sept. 6, 1967](#).

Of course, the most important law relating to amount is the Antideficiency Act, which by its terms applies to an “appropriation or fund.” 31 U.S.C. § 1341(a)(1)(A). It is clear that the statutory prohibition against overobligating applies to revolving funds. *E.g.*, [72 Comp. Gen. 59 \(1992\)](#). It also applies to annual obligation limitations on revolving funds. [B-248967.2, Apr. 21, 1993, at 3](#) (Antideficiency Act applies “to any fund administered by a federal employee”). *See also* OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 145.4 (July 2, 2007).

The law is violated by creating an obligation in excess of available budgetary resources. [60 Comp. Gen. 520, 522 \(1981\)](#). Depending on whether the revolving fund is an intragovernmental revolving fund or a public enterprise revolving fund, available budgetary resources may include (a) amounts received from other government accounts that represent valid obligations of the ordering account,<sup>81</sup> and (b) amounts

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<sup>81</sup> *E.g.*, [B-308944, July 17, 2007](#) (Department of Interior revolving fund); [B-288142, Sept. 6, 2001](#) (FEDLINK revolving fund).



received from the public.<sup>82</sup> However, the concept does not include inventory. 72 Comp. Gen. at 61; 60 Comp. Gen. 520. Nor does it include anticipated receipts from transactions that have not yet occurred. GAO, *The Air Force Has Incurred Numerous Overobligations in Its Industrial Fund*, AFMD-81-53 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 14, 1981); B-195316-O.M., Jan. 30, 1980; OMB Cir. No. A-11, § 20.13. A statutory exception is 10 U.S.C. § 2210(b), which authorizes Defense Department stock funds (but not industrial funds) to obligate against anticipated reimbursements if necessary to maintain stock levels planned for the next fiscal year. The Coast Guard Supply Fund has similar authority. 14 U.S.C. § 650(b). The rules relating to indemnification discussed in detail in Chapter 6 apply fully to revolving funds. 63 Comp. Gen. 145 (1984).

A revolving fund can also violate the Antideficiency Act by overspending a specific monetary limitation. B-120480, Sept. 6, 1967. However, if the overobligation or overexpenditure is authorized under some other appropriation or fund available at the time of the overobligation or overexpenditure, the revolving fund can make an accounting adjustment and charge the proper source—assuming it is still available. This would not constitute an Antideficiency Act violation. B-208697, Sept. 28, 1983.

As discussed in Chapter 6, a violation may also occur when an agency charges an obligation or expenditure to an appropriation that is not legally available for that item, regardless of how much money is in the account. The same is true if the proper funding source does not contain adequate budgetary resources to cover the obligation or expenditure when the accounts are adjusted. A problem of this sort arose when the Defense Supply Agency charged the Defense Stock Fund with a renewal option on a multiyear fuel storage service contract. The contractor argued that exercise of the option violated the Antideficiency Act because a Defense Department Directive required that supply administration contracts be charged to Operation and Maintenance appropriations and not to stock funds. There was no question that charging the stock fund was unauthorized. The Armed Services Board of Contract Appeals, however, found that the Defense Directive was merely an “in-house accounting [measure] not relevant to determining the availability of appropriated funds.” Therefore, and since there was no statutory limitation on using stock funds for otherwise authorized fuel storage contracts, there was no Antideficiency Act violation. The Board further noted that, even if the

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<sup>82</sup> *E.g.*, B-286661, Jan. 19, 2001 (United States Enrichment Corporation Fund).



stock fund was considered to be legally unavailable, there would be no violation as long as a funding adjustment could be made. *New England Tank Industries of New Hampshire, Inc.*, ASBCA No. 26474, 88-1 BCA ¶ 20,395, at 103,169 and n.23 (1987). While vacating and remanding the Board's decision on other grounds, the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit expressly agreed that using the stock fund, although unauthorized, did not violate the Antideficiency Act. *New England Tank Industries of New Hampshire, Inc. v. United States*, 861 F.2d 685, 692 n.15 (Fed. Cir. 1988).

Another part of the Antideficiency Act requires the apportionment of "appropriations and funds" by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). 31 U.S.C. §§ 1511(a), 1512, 1513. While fixed-year appropriations are generally apportioned by time, appropriations for an indefinite period are apportioned "to achieve the most effective and economical use." *Id.* § 1512(a). Overobligating or overspending an apportionment is just as illegal as overobligating or overspending the appropriation itself. *Id.* § 1517(a). That the apportionment statutes apply to revolving funds is reinforced by 31 U.S.C. § 1516(2), which authorizes OMB to exempt from apportionment "a working capital fund or a revolving fund established for intragovernmental operations."

The applicability of the apportionment laws to revolving funds is reflected in OMB Circular No. A-11. OMB's illustration of the Standard Form 132 Apportionment and Reapportionment Schedule (Exhibit 121G) includes both public enterprise and intragovernmental revolving funds, while section 120.7 restates OMB's authority to exempt particular intragovernmental funds. For purposes of assessing violations, the fact that the fund includes unapportioned budgetary resources greater than the amount of the deficiency is irrelevant. OMB Cir. No. A-11, § 145.4. The authority of 10 U.S.C. § 2210(b), mentioned above, can be exercised only "with the approval of the President." This means OMB apportionment. B-179708-O.M., July 10, 1975.

An important concept covered in Chapter 4 is the agency's spending discretion under a lump-sum appropriation, illustrated in decisions such as [B-279338, Jan. 4, 1999](#); [55 Comp. Gen. 307 \(1975\)](#); and [55 Comp. Gen. 812 \(1976\)](#). The same discretion applies under a revolving fund. In one year, for example, committee reports expressed the view that the Economic Development Administration not make any direct loans in the upcoming fiscal year. Since this desire did not find its way into any statutory language, the agency's revolving fund was legally available to make the

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loans. Of course, the agency was also within its discretion to comply with the committee preference and not make any direct loans. [B-209680, Feb. 24, 1983](#).

e. **Obligation Requirement**

Nothing exempts revolving funds from the obligation recording provisions of 31 U.S.C. § 1501. When a revolving fund does something that meets one of the statutory recording criteria, it must, just like other appropriations, record an obligation. [72 Comp. Gen. 59 \(1992\)](#) (entering into contract to procure equipment). *See also* [60 Comp. Gen. 700, 703 \(1981\)](#); [51 Comp. Gen. 631 \(1972\)](#).<sup>83</sup>

Under a multiyear or base-year-plus-options contract, the amount to be recorded as an obligation depends on the nature and extent of the government's commitment. For example, if a multiyear contract does not restrict the government's obligation to less than the full contract amount, then the full contract amount is the amount of the obligation. [B-104492-O.M., Apr. 23, 1976](#). If the contract consists of a base period plus renewal options, the obligation is the cost of the base period plus any amounts payable for failure to exercise the options (termination costs), this being the least amount of the government's potential liability.<sup>84</sup> [62 Comp. Gen. 143 \(1983\)](#); [48 Comp. Gen. 497, 502 \(1969\)](#).

Congress, of course, can vary the above treatment by statute. Statutory exceptions have tended to involve multiyear contracts under the rather large Defense Department revolving funds where the chances of premature termination are, from practical and political perspectives, remote. Under a Navy ship-leasing program financed by the Navy industrial fund, for example, Congress enacted a provision authorizing the Navy to obligate only 10 percent of the outstanding gross termination liability. *See* [B-174839, Mar. 20, 1984](#). A case several years earlier considered a recurring Defense appropriation act provision which authorized Defense working capital funds to maintain cash balances only to the extent necessary to cover cash disbursements at any time, and further authorized transfers between such

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<sup>83</sup> Both cases discuss the recording of obligations under credit programs financed by revolving funds. While some of the specifics have been superseded by the Federal Credit Reform Act of 1990, 2 U.S.C. §§ 661–661f, in neither case was the applicability of the recording statute called into question.

<sup>84</sup> See Chapter 5, section B.8, for a detailed discussion of multiyear contracts.

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funds when and if necessary.<sup>85</sup> This provision amounted to an exception to the requirement to obligate for termination liability. [51 Comp. Gen. 598 \(1972\)](#).

With an intragovernmental revolving fund, it is also necessary to consider the obligational treatment of the supporting appropriations. Section 1501(a)(1) of the recording statute (31 U.S.C. § 1501) applies to contracts “between an agency and another person (including other agencies)” and thus applies to interagency agreements with revolving funds. At the time the agencies involved in the transaction enter into a written, binding agreement, the customer agency incurs an obligation for the costs of the work to be performed. *See, e.g.,* [B-308944, July 17, 2007](#); [B-302760, May 17, 2004](#). In [B-308944, July 17, 2007](#), GAO found that Military Interdepartmental Purchase Requests (MIPRs) used to document interagency agreements between DOD and a revolving fund in the Department of Interior (GovWorks, now called the Acquisition Services Directorate) lacked the specificity necessary to comply with the recording statute. Consequently, the DOD funds expired before being properly obligated.

For some types of transactions, however, orders are required by law to be placed with another agency. With these types of transactions, section 1501(a)(3) applies, and the obligation occurs when the order is placed.<sup>86</sup> The same holds true for interagency transactions with a revolving fund. For example, when an agency places an order with the General Services Administration (GSA) for work to be financed from one of GSA’s revolving funds, placing the order obligates the customer agency’s appropriations if the order is one which is required by law—including GSA’s statutory regulations—to be placed with GSA. If the order is not required by law to be placed with GSA, the job order itself does not obligate the customer’s funds. [34 Comp. Gen. 705 \(1955\)](#).

Obligating for purchases from stock or supply funds (Defense Department stock funds or GSA’s General Supply Fund, for example) has its own set of conventions. For common-use stock items which are on hand or on order and expected to be delivered promptly, placing the order obligates the

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<sup>85</sup> The fiscal year 2008 version of this provision is section 8008 of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-116, 121 Stat. 1295, 1314–15 (Nov. 13, 2007).

<sup>86</sup> See Chapter 7, section B.3, for a more detailed discussion of orders required by law.

customer agency's appropriation. 73 Comp. Gen. 259 (1994); 34 Comp. Gen. at 707; 34 Comp. Gen. 418, 422 (1955); 32 Comp. Gen. 436 (1953). For other orders of items which are part of the stock fund system, there is a measure of discretion. The fund can develop a system—for example, a list of items which constitutes an offer to sell at the published prices—under which placing the order “accepts” the offer and creates the recordable obligation. See B-208863-O.M., Apr. 11, 1983; GAO, *Criteria for Recording Obligations for Defense Stock Fund Purchases Should Be Changed*, GAO/AFMD-83-54 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 19, 1983). Otherwise, if the customer's order is the offer, a recordable obligation requires acceptance by the revolving fund unless the order is required by law to be placed with the fund. 34 Comp. Gen. at 707–08; 34 Comp. Gen. at 422; 32 Comp. Gen. 436. For items which are not part of the stock fund system, the order must be accepted before an obligation can be recorded. GAO/AFMD-83-54, app. I at 5.

If a revolving fund finds that it has undercharged the supporting (customer) appropriations, and those appropriations have expired for obligational purposes, the customer agency should use its expired appropriation to reimburse the revolving fund. See 31 U.S.C. § 1553(a). The customer agency incurred an obligation for the order at the time it entered into the interagency agreement with the revolving fund. The undercharge relates back in time to when the customer agency and the revolving fund entered into the interagency agreement. Under 31 U.S.C. § 1553(a), the customer agency's expired appropriation would remain available to make adjustments to obligations that were properly incurred during the period of availability of the appropriation. GAO has taken the position that any such restoration should be supported by adequate documentation of the underlying obligations. Use of statistical methods is not sufficient where the agency cannot identify the underlying transactions. B-236940, Oct. 17, 1989; GAO, *Financial Management: Defense Accounting Adjustments for Stock Fund Obligations Are Illegal*, GAO/AFMD-87-1 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 11, 1987).<sup>87</sup> Presumably, although we have found no published decision, if the customer account has been closed pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 1552(a), a validly supported reimbursement could be charged to current appropriations in accordance with, and subject to the limitations of, 31 U.S.C. § 1553(b).

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<sup>87</sup> The report and legal opinion cited in the text both predated the current statutory account closing structure, but the principle should remain valid.

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Any statement of obligations an agency furnishes either to the Office of Management and Budget in connection with an appropriation request, or to the Congress or a congressional committee, is required to be consistent with the obligational criteria of 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a). *Id.* §§ 1108(c), 1501(b).

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## 5. Augmentation and Impairment

One of the cornerstones of congressional control of the purse is the rule, covered extensively in Chapter 6, that an agency may not augment its appropriations without authority of law, or, in other words, may not retain for credit to its own appropriations anything Congress has not expressly authorized. The primary statutory manifestation of this rule is the miscellaneous receipts requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). We have previously noted that a revolving fund is an exception to the miscellaneous receipts requirement. While this is certainly true, it is not a blanket exemption but goes only so far as the governing legislation specifies. The improper augmentation of a revolving fund can occur in either of two ways: (1) putting something in the fund which Congress has not authorized to be put there, or (2) leaving something in the fund, regardless of the propriety of the original deposit, beyond the point Congress has said to take it out. The presence or absence of a fixed dollar ceiling on the fund's capital is irrelevant.

GAO has frequently used the following formulation of the anti-augmentation rule: “[W]hen Congress specifies the source of money and property that go to make up the permanent working capital of revolving funds there may not be added additional sources which serve to increase the working capital in the absence of specific statutory authority therefor.” [B-149858-O.M., Aug. 15, 1968](#), at 5. The legislation establishing a revolving fund will prescribe what may go into the fund. Depositing anything not expressly authorized by the statute is an improper augmentation. *E.g.*, [23 Comp. Gen. 986 \(1944\)](#); [20 Comp. Gen. 280 \(1940\)](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 791 \(1940\)](#). In these cases, all related and dealing with the same fund, a statute authorized an agency to use, as a revolving fund, income derived from operations of a particularly special fund. It did not authorize the agency to retain and reuse income from any other source, including operations of the revolving fund itself (as opposed to the special fund from whose income the revolving fund was derived), and this income therefore had to be treated as miscellaneous receipts. The situation was admittedly unusual in that the typical revolving fund does depend on self-generated receipts, but in this case Congress had chosen a different approach. “The statute thus having expressly specified the sources of the money that comprise the

revolving fund, other sources may not be added by construction.”  
23 Comp. Gen. at 988.

The lesson of the preceding paragraph is simple: the precise terms of the statute control. Another illustration, closely related to the cases cited above, is the treatment of interest income. Interest income earned on revolving fund operations can be added to the fund if and only if the statute says so. An example is the revolving fund created by the Agricultural Marketing Act, 12 U.S.C. § 1141d. Payments of “principal or interest” on authorized loans “shall be covered into the revolving fund.” *Id.* § 1141f(b). Another example is interest on rural electrification loans. 7 U.S.C. § 931(3). Of course, general language which is sufficiently inclusive will also do the job, for example, the Bonneville Power Administration’s authority in 16 U.S.C. § 838i(a) to retain “all receipts, collections, and recoveries . . . from all sources.” Alternatively, Congress may authorize interest to be deposited to a revolving fund and later paid over to the general fund in whole or under some statutory formula. *See, e.g.*, 15 U.S.C. § 633(c) (Small Business Administration Business Loan and Investment Fund). If the statute does not include authority of the types noted, interest income must be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. 26 Comp. Dec. 295 (1919); [A-96531, Oct. 24, 1940](#). *See also* [1 Comp. Gen. 656 \(1922\)](#) (same principle applies to reimbursable appropriation as opposed to revolving fund). Contrary to the impression a superficial look might give, this is not an example of logic *versus* the law. It is a matter of the choices Congress has made as to the scope and purposes of the revolving fund.

Some further examples of unauthorized augmentations are:

- Increasing a revolving fund’s working capital by transferring funds to it from other revolving funds (or nonrevolving appropriation accounts, for that matter) either without statutory authority or in excess of applicable statutory authority. *See* GAO, *Operations of General Services Administration’s General Supply Fund*, GAO/LCD-76-421 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 19, 1976).
- Retention of funded reserve for accrued annual leave after the employees have transferred to another agency. [B-149858-O.M., Aug. 15, 1968](#).
- Retention of jury service fees remitted by an employee paid from a revolving fund. [B-113214-O.M., Jan. 16, 1953](#).

Our discussion thus far has emphasized the need to follow the precise statutory language. In addition, there are, as discussed in Chapter 6, section E.2, certain nonstatutory exceptions to the miscellaneous receipts requirement, and these apply to revolving funds just as to other appropriations. For example, receipts which qualify as “refunds,” such as the recovery of overpayments or erroneous payments, may be credited to a revolving fund even though not specified in the governing legislation. [69 Comp. Gen. 260 \(1990\)](#). That decision held that the Federal Emergency Management Agency could deposit in its revolving fund recoveries under the False Claims Act sufficient to reimburse the fund for losses suffered as a result of the false claim, including administrative expenses incurred in investigating and prosecuting the case, but must deposit any recoveries in excess of those amounts (treble damages, for example) in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. *See also* [B-281064, Feb. 14, 2000](#) (Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) may credit the TVA Fund (a public enterprise revolving fund) with that portion of a False Claims Act award or settlement that represents a refund of moneys erroneously disbursed from the fund).

Similarly, although we do not have a case precisely on point, a revolving fund may retain excess procurement costs recovered from a defaulting contractor, at least to the extent necessary to fund the procurement or corrective work, regardless of whether the recovery occurs before or after the fund has incurred the additional costs. As discussed in Chapter 6, this is the case where the procurement is funded under a no-year appropriation. If it is true for a no-year appropriation, it is true for a revolving fund.<sup>88</sup>

A variation on this principle is illustrated in two cases involving the Corps of Engineers Civil Revolving Fund, 33 U.S.C. § 576. When supervising military construction under 10 U.S.C. § 2851, the Corps charges its “customer” a flat percentage (5.5 percent in the cases discussed here) of the contract price for “supervision and administration” (S&A). The charge is designed to enable the revolving fund to break even over the long term. In one case, faulty design caused the Air Force to incur additional construction costs, which in turn increased the Corps’ S&A charge. GAO advised the Air Force that it could retain the money recovered from the architect to cover its increased construction costs and the S&A fees actually paid to the revolving fund. However, the portion of the recovery

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<sup>88</sup> One older case seemingly to the contrary, [14 Comp. Gen. 106 \(1934\)](#), must be regarded as overruled by [62 Comp. Gen. 678 \(1983\)](#). *See* [65 Comp. Gen. 838, 841 \(1986\)](#), and the detailed coverage in Chapter 6, section E.2.b(1).



representing S&A expenses over and above the 5.5 percent, which the revolving fund had absorbed, had to go to the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. Had the fund been charging its customers on an actual cost basis, it could have been reimbursed the entire amount of S&A expenses actually incurred. However, since the percentage fee was designed to recover actual costs over time, and the Corps had already received this from the Air Force, any additional reimbursement would amount to an unauthorized augmentation of the fund. *65 Comp. Gen. 838 (1986)*. On the other hand, the fund can be reimbursed for expenses actually incurred which are not covered by the flat rate. *B-237421, Sept. 11, 1991* (additional S&A costs resulting from contractor delay can be reimbursed from recovery of liquidated damages since delay costs are not factored into uniform rate).

The cases cited in the preceding paragraph point to a common feature of most revolving funds—they are intended to operate on a break-even basis or reasonably close to it, over the long term. One thing this means is that the fund should not augment its working capital by retaining funds in excess of what it needs to cover its costs. To nudge this process along, revolving fund statutes frequently include the requirement for the periodic payment of surplus amounts to the general fund of the Treasury. We quote three variations:

- General Services Administration’s (GSA) Acquisition Services Fund, 40 U.S.C. § 321(f):<sup>89</sup>

“Transfer of Uncommitted Balances.—Following the close of each fiscal year, after making provision for a sufficient level of inventory of personal property to meet the needs of Federal agencies, the replacement cost of motor vehicles, and other anticipated operating needs reflected in the cost and capital plan . . . , the uncommitted balance of any funds remaining in the Fund shall be transferred to the general fund of the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts.”

- Bureau of Engraving and Printing Fund, 31 U.S.C. § 5142(d):

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<sup>89</sup> The Acquisition Services Fund replaced the GSA General Supply Fund and the GSA Information Technology Fund. Pub. L. No. 109-313, § 3, 120 Stat. 1734, 1735–37 (Oct. 6, 2006).



“The Secretary shall deposit each fiscal year, in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts, amounts accruing to the Fund in the prior fiscal year that the Secretary decides are in excess of the needs of the Fund. However, the Secretary may use the excess amounts to restore capital of the Fund reduced by the difference between the charges for services of the Bureau and the cost of providing those services.”

- Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Revolving Fund, 5 U.S.C. § 1304(e)(4):

“Any unobligated and unexpended balances in the fund which the Office determines to be in excess of amounts needed for activities financed by the fund shall be deposited in the Treasury . . . as miscellaneous receipts.”

The Acquisition Services Fund provision is the most restrictive, at least on its face. The other two examples confer more discretion. The OPM provision is the most discretionary and permits OPM to reduce retained earnings by freezing or reducing fees, purchasing equipment, or using the money essentially for any authorized purpose, or depositing surplus as miscellaneous receipts. [B-206231-O.M., Sept. 12, 1986](#). While this provision clearly does not require the OPM fund to operate on a break-even basis each year, GAO has voiced the opinion that operating with deficits or surpluses for periods of several years is not consistent with the statutory objective. GAO, *OPM's Revolving Fund Policy Should Be Clarified and Management Controls Strengthened*, GAO/GGD-84-23 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 13, 1983), at 9.

The absence of a provision requiring periodic payments of surplus to the Treasury does not eliminate augmentation as a concern. For example, the Defense Department working capital fund authority, 10 U.S.C. § 2208, contains no such provision. It nevertheless remains the case that the fund should try to minimize annual gains or losses. Absence of statutory limitation merely means that the fund has more discretion in adjusting its charges periodically to recover losses or offset profits of prior periods. [B-181714-O.M., Jan. 3, 1975](#).

The provision quoted above for the Bureau of Engraving and Printing Fund expressly authorizes reductions from surplus for certain capital restoration, with the net amount then to be paid over to the Treasury. This introduces a concept which does not exist in the case of other

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appropriations—the concept of capital impairment. If the objective is to maintain a revolving fund at a certain level, then impairment—diminution of fund capital—is as important to guard against as augmentation.

This concern manifests itself in the statutes in various ways. The revolving fund of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, for example, directs that earned net income be paid over to the general fund of the Treasury at the close of each fiscal year, but may first be applied “to restore any prior impairment of the fund.” 15 U.S.C. § 278b(f). GAO considered the meaning of this provision in [58 Comp. Gen. 9 \(1978\)](#). The decision first noted that “impairment” is not a term of art with an established meaning in the accounting world. *Id.* at 10. Then, after reviewing legislative history and similar provisions in other laws, GAO concluded that impairment in the context of a revolving fund statute means operating losses, specifically, losses sustained by providing services at prices which do not recover costs. *Id.* at 12. The term does not include losses caused by inflation. Under the language of the statute as it then existed, the fund could not retain profits to offset increased equipment replacement costs. (The statute was subsequently amended to permit this.) One of the statutes GAO reviewed in the course of reaching its conclusion was the Bureau of Engraving and Printing provision, a linguistic variation of the anti-impairment concept. *Id.* at 12–13.

The original version of the OPM statute included anti-impairment language similar to 15 U.S.C. § 278b, but it was deleted in the 1969 amendment<sup>90</sup> which recast the provision in the form quoted above. In view of the discretionary language used, the amendment in no way diminished OPM’s ability to restore capital impairment. Rather, it expanded OPM’s authority to use surplus—from the limited purpose of the restoration of impairment, to any authorized fund purpose. *See* [B-110497, May 10, 1968](#) (GAO’s comments on the proposed amendment); [B-206231-O.M., Sept. 12, 1986](#).

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## 6. Property Management and Utilization

Items of property and equipment that revolving funds use in their operations are typically treated as assets of the fund itself. This in turn raises issues which implicate augmentation and impairment concerns.

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<sup>90</sup> Pub. L. No. 91-189, § 1, 83 Stat. 851 (Dec. 30, 1969).

One type of cost the fund will necessarily incur is the cost of equipment replacement. The fund anticipates this by including depreciation in its charges and fees, and establishing a reserve for this purpose. *E.g.*, [B-75212, June 16, 1955](#). The problem is that inflationary pressures drive prices up over time, and a piece of replacement equipment will almost certainly cost more than the original equipment did, sometimes a lot more. Simple enough, you say, just raise prices. The obstacle here is that statutory authority is needed in order to avoid an augmentation. The agency had no such authority in [58 Comp. Gen. 9 \(1978\)](#), discussed in section C.5 above. The decision explained:

“We believe that the term ‘cost,’ absent something in the law or its legislative history indicating otherwise, means historical cost, and not replacement cost. Thus, when capitalizing fixed assets in the fund, the value of the asset is determined by historical cost (*e.g.*, acquisition cost) and it is this value that depreciation allocates over the useful life of the asset.”

*Id.* at 14. *See also* [B-151204-O.M., Dec. 9, 1971](#). Since the agency could not base depreciation on replacement cost, its next thought was to treat the difference between the depreciation reserve and replacement cost as an impairment of capital and to take the difference from surplus before turning it over to the Treasury. As explained above, GAO concluded that impairment did not include losses caused by inflation and that the fund could not retain profits to offset increased equipment replacement costs. [58 Comp. Gen. 9](#).

In some cases, the rule that depreciation refers to historical cost and not replacement cost is expressed in the statute. For example, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing is directed to provide for equipment replacement “by maintaining adequate depreciation reserves based on original cost or appraised values.” 31 U.S.C. § 5141(b)(1)(C). In view of this language, and the rule that would have been applied even without it, the Bureau had no authority to augment its depreciation reserve through a surcharge. [B-104492-O.M., Apr. 23, 1976](#).

One solution is to amend the statute. The statute in [58 Comp. Gen. 9](#), 15 U.S.C. § 278b(f), was later amended to authorize the application of net income “to ensure the availability of working capital necessary to replace equipment and inventories.” The Bureau of Engraving and Printing statute also received a legislative solution with the 1977 enactment of 31 U.S.C.

§ 5142(c)(3), which permits it to adjust its prices “to permit buying capital equipment and to provide future working capital.” Pursuant to this authority, the Bureau can levy a surcharge, or it can simply raise its prices. [B-114801-O.M., Nov. 19, 1979](#). Similarly, at one time, the General Services Administration (GSA) could not charge using agencies the replacement cost of motor pool vehicles as it would have amounted to an unauthorized augmentation of the former General Supply Fund. [B-158712-O.M., Oct. 4, 1976](#). Legislation was enacted in 1978, 40 U.S.C. § 605(b)(2) (formerly cited as 40 U.S.C. § 491(d)(2)) to authorize GSA to charge for estimated replacement costs and to retain those increments in the fund, but only for replacement purposes. Still another statutory approach is to require payment to the Treasury at the end of a fiscal year of any balance “in excess of the estimated requirements for the ensuing fiscal year.” *See* [B-100831-O.M., Mar. 1, 1951](#). Or, a statute may specify the actual amount an agency may retain. For example, many of the franchise fund pilot programs have authority to retain up to 4 percent of total annual income as a reserve for acquisition of capital equipment and enhancement of support systems, with any excess to be transferred to the Treasury. *See, e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 104-208, div. A, title I, § 113, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-200-01 (Sept. 30, 1996), 31 U.S.C. § 501 note (Department of Interior franchise fund). In addition, the exchange/sale authority of 40 U.S.C. § 503 (formerly cited as 40 U.S.C. § 481(c)) is available to a revolving fund. *See* [B-149858-O.M., Feb. 25, 1963](#). If none of these approaches affords a solution, the fund has little choice but to seek additional appropriations from Congress. 58 Comp. Gen. at 14.

It has also been stated as a general proposition that “the *corpus* of [a] revolving fund should not be impaired by the transfer of assets.” [B-121695, Feb. 3, 1955](#), at 2. Of course, transfers authorized by law to be made without reimbursement are an exception. *Id.*; [B-149858-O.M., Feb. 25, 1963](#). Property can become excess to a revolving fund just as it can to any other entity. Unless the fund’s own legislation provides specific authority, the disposal of excess property should be handled under authority of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act and GSA’s implementing regulations. 56 Comp. Gen. 754 (1977); [B-121695, Feb. 3, 1955](#).

One section of the Federal Property Act, 40 U.S.C. § 574(a) (formerly cited as 40 U.S.C. § 485(c)), provides that transfers shall be reimbursable when the property transferred or disposed of was acquired by the use of funds either “not appropriated from the general fund of the Treasury” or appropriated therefrom “but by law reimbursable from assessment, tax, or other revenue or receipts.” This language includes revolving funds. 56 Comp. Gen. at 757; [B-116731, Nov. 4, 1953](#). Another section of the

Federal Property Act, 40 U.S.C. § 522(b) (formerly cited as 40 U.S.C. § 483(a)(1)), states that reimbursement of the fair value of transferred excess property is required if “net proceeds are requested under section 574(a).” In view of these provisions, unless the revolving fund legislation itself requires reimbursement, the rule is that the transfer of excess property from a revolving fund is reimbursable if and when requested by the transferring agency. The agency has discretion in the matter. [35 Comp. Gen. 207 \(1955\)](#); [B-233847, Apr. 14, 1989](#). The same rationale authorizes a military department to credit to its industrial fund the proceeds from the sale of scrap and salvage generated by fund operations, regardless of the potentially large amounts of money involved. [B-162337-O.M., Oct. 2, 1967](#).

Some revolving fund statutes require reimbursement. An example is the Veterans Affairs Supply Fund, which provides that the fund shall be “credited with . . . all other receipts resulting from the operation of the funds, including . . . the proceeds of disposal of scraps, excess or surplus personal property of the fund.” 38 U.S.C. § 8121(a)(3). Under this type of legislation, the disposal would still be done under the authority and procedures of the Federal Property Act and GSA regulations, except that the agency no longer has the discretion to decline reimbursement. The mandatory language of the statute overcomes the discretionary language of 40 U.S.C. § 522(b) and the statement in 41 C.F.R. § 102-36.285(a)(3) that “[i]t is the current executive branch policy that working capital fund property shall be transferred without reimbursement.”

If the authorized transfer of excess property from a revolving fund without reimbursement is not an impairment of the fund, it is equally true that the transfer of excess property to a revolving fund without reimbursement, when authorized by law, is not an improper augmentation. [B-110497, Aug. 28, 1952](#).

Thus far, we have been talking about fund property as opposed to property purchased by the fund on behalf of a customer. Property in the latter category no longer needed by the customer agency, apart from transactions which may be authorized under the Federal Property Act, does not revert to the revolving fund simply because it was initially purchased by the fund; converting the property to cash and then retaining and using those proceeds improperly augments the revolving fund because it would credit the revolving fund with amounts supplied by the customer. [40 Comp. Gen. 356 \(1960\)](#). Somewhat similarly, if an agency using fund property has paid the full cost of the item and then no longer needs it, nothing prevents

the fund from making the property available to a second user at rates based on fair market value. The income should not be used to augment the fund's capital, however, but should, to the extent it exceeds costs, be treated as net income subject to a "transfer to Treasury" provision if there is one. [B-151204-O.M., Dec. 9, 1971.](#)

An unusual provision of law is found in 22 U.S.C. § 2358(a), which authorizes the Agency for International Development (AID) to receive excess property from other agencies for foreign assistance purposes, and to stockpile that property "in advance of known requirements therefor," up to a specified monetary ceiling. In determining compliance with the ceiling, AID may properly deduct the amount of unfilled orders received from overseas missions since the receipt of an order represents a known requirement. [B-160485-O.M., Jan. 17, 1967.](#)

The Federal Property and Administrative Services Act does not apply to the Senate or House of Representatives. However, they may purchase services under the act from GSA if they choose. 40 U.S.C. § 113(d). Therefore, when a revolving fund of the Senate or House of Representatives has excess property, it may either request GSA's assistance or dispose of the property through the official or body with operational control of the particular fund. [B-205013, Jan. 27, 1982 \(Senate\); B-114842, Oct. 17, 1979 \(House\).](#)

Under the "interdepartmental waiver doctrine," the general rule is that if one agency damages the personal property of another agency, funds available to the agency causing the damage may not be used to pay claims for damages by the agency whose property suffered the damage.<sup>91</sup> The general rule, however, does not apply to revolving fund activities. A 1986 decision, [65 Comp. Gen. 910](#), held that a revolving fund which had loaned vehicles to another agency for use on a project unrelated to the fund's purpose should be reimbursed for damage which occurred while the vehicles were in the borrower's custody.<sup>92</sup> Acknowledging the general prohibition on interagency damage liability, the decision states: "It is our opinion, however, that even in the absence of an Economy Act or similar agreement, the prohibition should not apply where the fund that would be

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<sup>91</sup> For further discussion of the interdepartmental waiver doctrine, see Chapter 6, section E.2.c.

<sup>92</sup> Although the decision specifically notes that the vehicles were not being used for fund work at the time of the damage, this factor does not appear necessary to the decision.

charged with the cost of repair if reimbursement were not permitted is a reimbursable or revolving fund.” *Id.* at 911. The decision further pointed out that the fund in that case, the Air Force Industrial Fund, treated repair costs as an indirect cost factored into its charges, but it is assumed that this referred to damage which occurred while the property was being used by the Air Force on fund work, not damage caused by another agency. *Id.*

The view that a revolving fund should be reimbursed for damage to fund property caused by another agency is supported by the approach taken in [59 Comp. Gen. 515 \(1980\)](#). GSA regulations provide that GSA will charge the using agency for damage to motor pool vehicles which occurs while the vehicle is assigned or issued to that agency, unless the damage can be attributed to the fault of an identifiable party other than the using agency or its employee. 41 C.F.R. § 101-39.406(a). Motor pool vehicles are financed under GSA’s Acquisition Services Fund (formerly its General Supply Fund). Reviewing an earlier (but not substantially different in principle) version of the regulations, GAO agreed that GSA was well within its discretion because repair cost is certainly a cost of maintaining the service. The decision further noted: “In addition, since the GSA revolving fund is intended to be operated on a businesslike basis, it is inequitable to impose upon the revolving fund a loss for which the managing agency is in no way responsible.” *59 Comp. Gen.* at 518.

A 2005 GAO decision held that a federal agency should collect for damages to property financed by a revolving fund either from the customer agency, the customer agency’s contractor, or the revolving fund agency’s own contractor, as the case may be. [B-302962, June 10, 2005](#). The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) asked GAO whether it could collect and retain in its Records Center revolving fund payments for damages to a Records Center storage facility caused by a customer agency or the agency’s contractor. GAO concluded that NARA should collect amounts sufficient to repair damages to the facilities, whether the damage was caused by NARA’s customer, the customer’s contractor, or NARA’s own contractor, depending on which entity was responsible for the damages, and deposit these amounts into the Records Center revolving fund. *Id.*

Similarly, in [50 Comp. Gen. 545 \(1971\)](#), GAO advised the National Credit Union Administration that it could credit to its revolving fund recoveries for property lost or damaged in transit. The fund consists of fees paid by member credit unions, and the decision emphasized legislative history expressing the intent that “the Administration will not cost the taxpayers a single penny.” *Id.* at 546. Several revolving fund statutes—mostly



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intragovernmental funds where the “not cost the taxpayers a penny” rationale has no meaning—expressly authorize the retention of payments for loss or damage to fund property. *E.g.*, 5 U.S.C. § 1304(e)(3)(B) (Office of Personnel Management revolving fund); 38 U.S.C. § 8121(a)(3) (Veterans Affairs Supply Fund); 40 U.S.C. § 321(b)(2) (Acquisition Services Fund); 44 U.S.C. § 309(b)(2) (Government Printing Office revolving fund).

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## 7. Revolving Funds in the Department of Defense

At the outset of our discussion, we noted that revolving funds in the federal government appear to have originated within the defense establishment. Their use in that establishment has grown over the course of the past century so that they now play a highly significant role in financing defense operations. For example, the Defense-wide Working Capital Fund is estimated to have financed about \$49 billion in defense operations in fiscal year 2008. *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2009 Appendix* (Feb. 4, 2008), at 317, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2009/appendix.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2009/appendix.html) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

The most important piece of legislation was section 405 of the National Security Act Amendments of 1949, which enacted what is now 10 U.S.C. § 2208. Pleased with the success of the Navy’s working capital funds through two World Wars, Congress decided to expand the concept and extend it to all of the military departments. The objectives Congress sought to achieve were “most effectively to control and account for the cost of the programs and work performed, to provide adequate, accurate, and current cost data which can be used as a measure of efficiency, and to facilitate the most economical administration and operation of the military departments.” S. Rep. No. 81-366, at 17 (1949).

Section 2208(a) of title 10, United States Code authorizes the Secretary of Defense to create working capital funds to: “(1) finance inventories of such supplies as he may designate; and (2) provide working capital for such industrial-type activities, and such commercial-type activities that provide common services within or among departments and agencies of the Department of Defense, as he may designate.” These are known as, respectively, stock funds and industrial funds. The stock fund concept was intended to standardize procurement, storage, and issue policies and thereby encourage interservice utilization; reduce over-all inventory requirements; facilitate procurement of seasonal items at times when the market is most favorable; facilitate cost control; and permit standard



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pricing. S. Rep. No. 81-366, at 19. The Senate report described the intended operation of industrial funds as follows:

“All costs of the operation of [the] industrial-type or commercial-type activity would be paid from the working capital fund, utilizing standard, accepted, and approved commercial practices for the distribution of direct and indirect costs to jobs in process. . . . The activity which places a work order with the industrial-type or commercial-type activity would establish proper commitments and obligations against moneys appropriated to it—generally in the same manner as would be followed if the order were placed for the work to be done by a private concern. The industrial plant would enter the order and distribute the work in the plant by its own job orders—a fundamentally sound procedure. When the work is completed and the cost of the job ascertained, the plant will invoice or bill the cost to the ordering military agency and its proper appropriation and budget program. . . . The invoice charges would include items of cost for labor, material, and current operating expense.”

*Id.* at 20–21.

Section 2208(b) of title 10 directs the Secretary of the Treasury to establish the appropriate accounts on Treasury’s books upon request of the Secretary of Defense. Section 2208(c) authorizes the revolving funds to be charged with the cost of supplies and services, including administrative expenses, and to be reimbursed from available appropriations. Section 2208(d) authorizes the capitalization of existing inventories and the appropriation of necessary amounts. Section 2208(e) authorizes internal reorganization of military departments in order to take maximum advantage of the revolving funds. Section 2208(f) prohibits a requisitioning agency from incurring costs for supplies or services from any of the revolving funds in excess of “the amount of appropriations or other funds available for those purposes.” The Senate Committee described this subsection as the means by which Congress controls the amount of money that may be spent by the department and agencies for supplies or services. S. Rep. No. 81-366, at 18.

Under section 2208(g), supplies returned to inventory are charged to the applicable revolving fund and the proceeds credited to “current applicable

appropriations” of the customer agency. Where the return takes place in a subsequent fiscal year, this amounts to an augmentation of the current appropriation (B-132900-O.M., Feb. 1, 1974), but it is expressly authorized. This procedure is intended to encourage the return of materials found not to be immediately needed and to “reduce the temptation to overbuy.” S. Rep. No. 81-366, at 18. Section 2208(h) authorizes implementing regulations. The remaining portions of the statute were added in later amendments.

According to one commentator, performance of the military revolving funds “is not well documented.” Although there is “some evidence” that they are achieving the desired benefits, the evidence is “mixed.” Patricia E. Byrnes, *Defense Business Operating [sic] Fund: Description and Implementation Issues*, 13 Public Budgeting and Finance 29, 32 (No. 4, 1993). According to Byrnes:

“Revolving funds are intended to provide at least three important benefits. First, in contrast to the services budgeted and financed through the appropriations process, the contractual relationship between the fund activity (supplier) and the customer improves supplier incentives for efficient, demand-driven production. Second, because revolving funds are intended to operate across organization boundaries, economies of scale can be achieved in procurement and use of facilities. Finally, in addition to reduced rates from more efficient provision of services, the customers should also realize advantages of stabilized rates typical of contractual arrangements.”

*Id.* at 31–32.

While, as Byrnes points out, the measure of success of an activity intended to be businesslike is how closely it resembles a commercial activity, the goal of a government revolving fund, in sharp contrast with a private business’s goal of profit maximization, is “a zero fund balance.” *Id.* at 32.

In any event, after operating under the structure established by the 1949 legislation for over four decades, the next major development took place in late 1991 with the introduction of the Defense Business Operations Fund (DBOF). The Defense Department had proposed the DBOF as a consolidation of the various stock and industrial funds already in existence, together with other activities, such as the Defense Commissary

Agency and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service, which would be converted to revolving fund status. Considering the proposal as part of Defense's 1992 appropriations package, the congressional reception was cautious. The Senate Appropriations Committee reported:

“The DBOF proposal has been met with both antipathy and confusion. The antipathy arises, for the most part, from the perception of Congress losing influence on and oversight of programs to be subsumed in the fund. The confusion arises from several factors; probably the most important of these was the Department having not clearly defined the advantages of establishing DBOF when the proposal was first made to Congress.”

S. Rep. No. 102-154, at 354 (1991). The conference committee shared the concern over the potential loss of oversight. H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 102-328, at 176 (1991). These concerns notwithstanding, Congress gave the DBOF its initial statutory basis in section 8121 of the 1992 Department of Defense Appropriations Act, Pub. L. No. 102-172, title VIII, § 8121, 105 Stat. 1150, 1204–05 (Nov. 26, 1991), as “a working capital fund under the provisions of” 10 U.S.C. § 2208.

To call the DBOF “big” would be somewhat of an understatement. Testifying before a congressional subcommittee only 6 months after the DBOF was established GAO noted that for fiscal year 1993, when compared with the “Fortune 500,” the DBOF’s sales “would make the Fund equivalent to the fifth largest corporation in the world.”<sup>93</sup> The Fund experienced a number of management problems, and GAO issued a steady stream of reports over the next few years.<sup>94</sup>

In 1996, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1996 (Pub. L. No. 104-106, § 371, 110 Stat. 186, 277–80 (Feb. 10, 1996)), Congress repealed the 1991 provision and codified the DBOF in more

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<sup>93</sup> GAO, *Financial Management: Defense Business Operations Fund Implementation Status*, GAO/T-AFMD-92-8 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 30, 1992), at 2.

<sup>94</sup> E.g., GAO, *Defense Business Operations Fund: DOD Is Experiencing Difficulty in Managing the Fund's Cash*, GAO/AIMD-96-54 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 10, 1996); *Defense Business Operations Fund: Management Issues Challenge Fund Implementation*, GAO/AIMD-95-79 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 1, 1995); *Financial Management: Status of the Defense Business Operations Fund*, GAO/AIMD-94-80 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 9, 1994).

detailed legislation, 10 U.S.C. § 2216a, which restricted the DBOF to a list of specified funds and activities. Later that year Congress directed the Secretary of Defense to prepare and submit a comprehensive plan to improve the management and performance of the DBOF. Pub. L. No. 104-201, § 363, 110 Stat. 2422, 2493–94 (Sept. 23, 1996). In December 1996, the Defense Department initiated a reorganization, and in effect a “de-consolidation,” of the DBOF and created four new working capital funds—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Defense-wide.<sup>95</sup> The authority to manage working capital funds and certain activities through the DBOF was terminated when section 2216a was repealed in 1998. Pub. L. No. 105-261, div. A, title X, § 1008, 112 Stat. 1920, 2115–17 (Oct. 17, 1998).<sup>96</sup> The military working capital funds, however, continued to face management problems following the de-consolidation of DBOF, and GAO continued to issue reports examining the funds.<sup>97</sup>

The funds’ various permutations notwithstanding, the legal issues they raise and the analytical approach used in resolving them are not fundamentally different from other revolving funds, and cases and reports dealing with the military funds have been included in the various topics throughout our discussion. While the funds are certainly here to stay in one form or another, their precise scope and direction will almost certainly continue to evolve.

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## D. User Charges

This section, like our earlier coverage of the Economy Act in section B.1 of this chapter, deals with the authority of federal agencies to charge for goods and services they provide—to other federal entities in the case of the

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<sup>95</sup> Memorandum from the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *Subject: Working Capital Funds for Defense Support Organizations*, Dec. 11, 1996. The reorganization is noted in GAO, *Navy Ordnance: Analysis of Business Area Price Increases and Financial Losses*, GAO/AIMD/NSIAD-97-74 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 14, 1997).

<sup>96</sup> The authority for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Defense-wide working capital funds continues to be 10 U.S.C. § 2208.

<sup>97</sup> See, e.g., GAO, *Navy Working Capital Fund: Management Action Needed to Improve Reliability of the Naval Air Warfare Center’s Reported Carryover Amounts*, GAO-07-643 (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2007); *Army Depot Maintenance: Ineffective Oversight of Depot Maintenance Operations and System Implementation Efforts*, GAO-05-441 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2005); *Air Force Depot Maintenance: Improved Pricing and Cost Reduction Practices Needed*, GAO-04-498 (Washington, D.C.: June 17, 2004); *Defense Logistics: Better Fuel Pricing Practices Will Improve Budget Accuracy*, GAO-02-582 (Washington, D.C.: June 21, 2002).

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Economy Act; to mostly private parties under the authorities discussed in this section.

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## 1. Providing Goods or Services to Private Parties

We start with a principle regarded as so elementary that references to it invariably include the word “fundamental,” as in the following statement from [28 Comp. Gen. 38, 40 \(1948\)](#): “It is fundamental that Federal agencies cannot make use of appropriated funds to manufacture products or materials for, or otherwise supply services to, private parties, in the absence of specific authority therefor.” Not surprisingly, GAO has reiterated this principle in many subsequent decisions. *See, e.g.,* [B-300218, Mar. 17, 2003](#); [62 Comp. Gen. 323, 335 \(1983\)](#); [31 Comp. Gen. 624, 626 \(1952\)](#).

This simple-sounding principle goes to the essence of the relationship between the federal government and the taxpayers. When Congress creates and funds a department or agency, it does so to serve one or more public purposes. If accomplishing these public purposes produces incidental benefit to some private interest, no harm is done. If the roles become reversed, however, and the public purpose becomes incidental to the private benefit, or the private benefit exists independent of any public purpose, closer scrutiny is warranted. The theory, abetted by the statutory bar on using appropriated funds for unauthorized purposes (31 U.S.C. § 1301(a)), is that the activity should be undertaken only if it has been explicitly authorized by the elected representatives of the taxpayers. The miscellaneous receipts statute, 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), discourages violations by prohibiting agencies from keeping any proceeds they may receive from the private parties.

The earliest administrative decisions dealt with the sale of commodities. In [15 Comp. Dec. 178 \(1908\)](#), the Army, which manufactured hydrogen for use in aviation balloons, asked if it could sell hydrogen to private individuals for the inflation of private balloons. The agency cannot sell it to private parties “at any price or for any purpose,” the Comptroller of the Treasury responded. Since the miscellaneous receipts act would require the proceeds to go into the general fund of the Treasury, the practical effect would be to deplete the Army’s appropriation for the manufacture of hydrogen on purposes not contemplated by Congress. *Id.* at 179. However, the manufacturing process produced oxygen as a by-product, for which the Army had no use. This could be sold to the private sector, the Comptroller continued, but the proceeds would have to be deposited as miscellaneous receipts. *Id.* at 181.

Restated, 15 Comp. Dec. 178 said two things. First, a government agency has no authority, on its own initiative, to produce something in order to sell it to a private interest. Second, an agency, which in the ordinary course of its operations, necessarily produces a surplus of any commodity may sell that surplus, but must account for the proceeds as miscellaneous receipts unless it has statutory authority for some other disposition. The portion of the rule dealing with the sale of surplus commodities has been applied to surplus electric power produced by government-owned generating plants (28 Comp. Gen. 38 (1948); 5 Comp. Gen. 389 (1925)); excess water produced by a then Veterans Administration hospital water filtration plant (55 Comp. Gen. 688 (1976)); and surplus steam from a government power plant (A-34549, Dec. 19, 1930). As several of these cases point out (e.g., 5 Comp. Gen. at 391), the alternative would be to let the surplus commodity go to waste.

Turning from goods to services, the concept of “surplus” of course has no relevance (notwithstanding the reference to “surplus services” in 55 Comp. Gen. at 690), and we are left with the prohibitory rule as quoted above and as applied in the first portion of 15 Comp. Dec. 178. It makes no difference that the recipient is willing to reimburse the government. B-69238, July 13, 1948.<sup>98</sup> Nor does it matter that the proposed reimbursement is in the form of credits rather than cash. 28 Comp. Gen. 38, 41 (1948) (pointing out that even where the service or sale is authorized, the agency would have to transfer the value of the credit from its appropriations to miscellaneous receipts). The rule is not limited to private interests but applies as well to governmental units. 31 Comp. Gen. 624 (1952). Applications of the rule include B-300218, Mar. 17, 2003 (provision of technical assistance services to a foreign government outside the scope of an agency’s statutory grant-making authority); 34 Comp. Gen. 599 (1955) (construction of a sewerage system in excess of the government’s needs so that it may be shared with a local government); and 62 Comp. Gen. 323, 334–35 (1983) (use of military personnel as chauffeurs and personal escorts at presidential inaugural and pre-inaugural activities).

A judicial application of the rule may be found in the case of *National Forest Preservation Group v. Volpe*, 352 F. Supp. 123 (D. Mont. 1972), *reconsideration denied*, 359 F. Supp. 136 (D. Mont. 1973), in which the

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<sup>98</sup> The result in B-69238 was modified by B-69238, Sept. 23, 1948, upon a showing that the services in question were in fact authorized, although GAO continued to emphasize that receipts had to go to the Treasury’s general fund.

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court, holding that the designation of an access road as a “federal-aid primary highway” exceeded the Department of Transportation’s statutory authority, enjoined federal funding of the construction. The road would primarily have served the interests of private corporations who wanted to develop recreational property. The court stated:

“There is no rationale for the expenditure of federal funds which serve to benefit directly this type of private business venture without explicit congressional authorization. To allow the primary highway designation to stand would have the effect of holding that the [Federal Highway Administration] may become a partner in private enterprise without explicit statutory authority.”

*Volpe*, 352 F. Supp. at 130.

To sum up, regardless of who pays or what happens to the money, a government agency needs statutory authority in order to provide goods or services to nongovernment parties. Fiscal issues come into play only after this authority has been established.

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## 2. The Concept of User Charges

When Congress authorizes a program or activity that will benefit private interests, it must also decide how to finance that program or activity. Basically, the choices are subsidization, user financing, or some combination of the two. Subsidization means funding the activity from appropriated funds, thus spreading the cost among all taxpayers. The user financing option involves some form of user charge or fee, under which part or all of the cost is borne by the recipients of the benefit. A user fee may be defined as “a price charged by a governmental agency for a service or product whose distribution it controls,”<sup>99</sup> or “any charge collected from recipients of Government goods, services, or other benefits not shared by the public.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Clayton P. Gillette and Thomas D. Hopkins, *Federal User Fees: A Legal and Economic Analysis*, 67 B.U. L. Rev. 795, 800 (1987).

<sup>100</sup> GAO, *The Congress Should Consider Exploring Opportunities to Expand and Improve the Application of User Charges by Federal Agencies*, PAD-80-25 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 28, 1980), at 1. See also GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 100.

We all pay a variety of user fees. When you buy postage stamps at your local post office, buy a fishing license, or pay highway tolls, you are paying a user fee. These common examples show some of the different types of user fees. You pay the toll only when you use the highway; if you never use the highway, you never need to pay the toll. Similarly, if you have no intention of going fishing, you do not need to buy a fishing license. Once you buy the license, however, whether you ever use it or not is irrelevant to the issuing authority. You can use it as often as you like during the fishing season, but it becomes worthless once the season or specified time period is over, and even if you have never used it you cannot get your money back. You can use the postage stamp for its intended purpose, or you can save it. Although you cannot sell it back to the post office, it never loses its face value as long as it remains unused.<sup>101</sup>

The advantages and disadvantages of user financing are much discussed and debated in the public financing literature. Supporters of user fees regard them as equitable because they place the economic burden on those receiving the benefit. They are also politically and “budgetarily” attractive as an alternative to general tax increases. This was especially true during the budgetary shortfalls of the 1980s and early 1990s. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has noted that “[m]ost of the new and increased [user fee] charges of the 1980s followed the passage of the Balanced Budget Act of 1985. As the search for new sources of funds intensified, changes in law and budget processes helped assure the enactment of new user charges.” CBO, *The Growth of Federal User Charges* xi (Aug. 1993). Moreover, the legal basis for setting user charges expanded from reimbursing an agency’s costs of providing services, to financing all or specified portions of the agency’s budget. *Id.*

While user fees at the federal level are not new,<sup>102</sup> they received relatively little attention prior to the final third of the twentieth century. In March 1980, GAO issued its report *The Congress Should Consider Exploring Opportunities to Expand and Improve the Application of User Charges*

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<sup>101</sup> The further categorization of user fees is beyond our scope. Approaches may be found in studies by the Congressional Budget Office—*Charging for Federal Services*, 10 (Dec. 1983), *The Growth of Federal User Charges*, 3–7 (Aug. 1993), and *The Growth of Federal User Charges: An Update*, 1–11 (Oct. 1995).

<sup>102</sup> See, e.g., *United States v. Grimaud*, 220 U.S. 506, 521–22 (1911), to the effect that a statute addressing the use or disposition of fees implicitly authorizes imposition of the fees.



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by *Federal Agencies*, PAD-80-25, the thrust of which is evident from its title. Page 1 of that report stated:

“Both individuals and businesses are concerned with tax burdens. Businesses are also concerned with the fact that compliance with Federal regulations is often expensive. Both concerns can be addressed by the Government’s promotion of economy and efficiency through actively employing user charges. [Footnote omitted.]

“User charges can reduce Federal taxes, as well as the costs of certain types of regulation. They are a source of revenue that can partially replace general taxation of individuals and businesses. They also reduce the amount of taxes needed to finance the production of goods and the delivery of services to the extent that charging higher prices reduces recipient demand.”

In addition, GAO has issued a minor deluge of reports analyzing, and encouraging optimum use of, user fees in specific contexts.<sup>103</sup> The fever spread to Congress generally as well as the Office of Management and Budget and the rest of the executive branch, with the result that the growth of user fees mushroomed. Between 1980 and 1991, CBO found, user charges increased by 54 percent in constant dollars, and financed much larger shares of many agencies’ budgets. CBO, *The Growth of Federal User Charges*. A later GAO report supports the notion that this trend continued during the 1990s, as many agencies became increasingly more reliant upon user fees, over general tax revenues, to fund their programs and

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<sup>103</sup> Examples are GAO, *National Park Service: Major Operations Funding Trends and How Selected Park Units Responded to Those Trends for Fiscal Years 2001 through 2005*, GAO-06-431 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2006); *Recreation Fees: Comments on the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, H.R. 3283*, GAO-04-745T (Washington, D.C.: May 6, 2004) (a version of this legislation was enacted and is now codified at 16 U.S.C. §§ 6801–6814); *Federal Energy Regulatory Commission: Charges for Hydropower Projects’ Use of Federal Lands Need to be Reassessed*, GAO-03-383 (Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2003); *User Fees: DOD Fees for Providing Information Not Current and Consistent*, GAO-02-34 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 12, 2001); *Federal Lands: Fees for Communications Sites Are Below Fair Market Value*, GAO/RCED-94-248 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 1994); *INS User Fees: INS Working to Improve Management of User Fee Accounts*, GAO/GGD-94-101 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 12, 1994); and *USDA Revenues: A Descriptive Compendium*, GAO/RCED-93-19FS (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 27, 1992). In addition, PAD-80-25 includes a 4-page appendix listing reports issued in the 1969–1978 period.

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operations. GAO, *Federal User Fees: Budgetary Treatment, Status, and Emerging Management Issues*, GAO/AIMD-98-11 (Dec. 19, 1997). While user fees have not expanded as dramatically in more recent years, they are generally still on the increase. GAO's 1997 report indicated that user fees produced \$196.4 billion in fiscal year 1996 revenues. *Id.* at 1. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) estimates user fee receipts will increase to \$243.2 billion for fiscal year 2007. *See Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2007* (Feb. 6, 2006), at 272, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2007](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2007) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008). OMB projects that such fees will grow to over \$258 billion in 2011. *Id.* However, the latter figure assumes implementation of OMB's proposals for new user fees and for extension of expiring fees.

Political attractions aside, levying user fees is not simply a question of raising revenue, but can implicate a variety of other economic and public policy issues as well. For example, increasing a user fee can result in capital losses in the form of decreased asset values. This in turn raises questions as to the desirability of some form of compensation for these losses. A GAO analysis of these issues can be found in *Congressional Attention Is Warranted When User Charges or Other Policy Changes Cause Capital Losses*, GAO/PAD-83-10 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 13, 1982). The case study presented in that report is the use of water in the Columbia Basin Project in the Pacific Northwest. The study showed that, if the price charged for water provided to farmers for irrigation purposes were raised to market levels, water would be diverted from farming to the production of electricity, and the value of farmland would drop significantly.

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### 3. The Independent Offices Appropriation Act

#### a. Origin and Overview

In 1950, the Senate Committee on Expenditures in the Executive Departments (a forerunner of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs) conducted a study of user fees in the federal government, and issued a report entitled *Fees for Special Services*, S. Rep. No. 81-2120 (1950). The committee's governing philosophy was that "those who receive the benefit of services rendered by the Government especially for them should pay the costs thereof." S. Rep. No. 81-2120, at 3. The report concluded: "On the basis of the limited study reported upon herein, the committee has established conclusively that opportunity exists for the

equitable transfer of many financial burdens from the shoulders of the taxpaying general public to the direct and special beneficiaries.” *Id.* at 15. The report did not recommend any particular legislation, but left it to the jurisdictional committees to consider and develop legislative proposals within their respective areas of responsibility.

Several committees then began their own studies. The following year, while many of these studies were in process, Congress enacted general user fee authority to fill in the gaps. Its intent, the House Appropriations Committee reported, was to—

“provide authority for Government agencies to make charges for . . . services in cases where no charge is made at present, and to revise charges where present charges are too low, except in cases where the charge is specifically fixed by law or the law specifically provides that no charge shall be made.”

H.R. Rep. No. 82-384, at 3 (1951). The new legislation was title V of the Independent Offices Appropriation Act, 1952, Pub. L. No. 82-137, 65 Stat. 268, 290 (Aug. 31, 1951), known as the “IOAA” or the “User Charge Statute.”<sup>104</sup> Codified at 31 U.S.C. § 9701, the law provides in part as follows:

“(a) It is the sense of Congress that each service or thing of value provided by an agency (except a mixed-ownership Government corporation) to a person (except a person on official business of the United States Government) is to be self-sustaining to the extent possible.

“(b) The head of each agency (except a mixed-ownership Government corporation) may prescribe regulations establishing the charge for a service or thing of value provided by the agency. Regulations prescribed by the heads of executive agencies are subject to policies prescribed by the President and shall be as uniform as practicable. Each charge shall be—

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<sup>104</sup> For a judicial summary of the history outlined in the text, see *Beaver, Bountiful, Enterprise v. Andrus*, 637 F.2d 749, 754–55 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1980).

“(1) fair; and

“(2) based on—

“(A) the costs to the Government;

“(B) the value of the service or thing to the recipient;

“(C) public policy or interest served; and

“(D) other relevant facts.”

Although enacted as an appropriation act rider, the IOAA is permanent legislation and applies to all agencies, not just those funded by the act in which it originally appeared. [B-178865, Apr. 19, 1974](#). The statute is permissive rather than mandatory. It authorizes fees; it does not require them. *Aeronautical Radio, Inc. v. United States*, 335 F.2d 304, 307 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1964), *cert. denied*, 379 U.S. 966 (1965); [42 Comp. Gen. 663, 665–66 \(1963\)](#); [B-128056, July 8, 1966](#). Thus, while the law encourages uniformity, an agency’s authority to charge a fee under the IOAA is not diminished by the fact that other agencies may choose not to charge for similar services. *Ayuda, Inc. v. Attorney General*, 661 F. Supp. 33, 36 (D.D.C. 1987), *aff’d*, 848 F.2d 1297 (D.C. Cir. 1988); [B-167087, July 25, 1969](#). Nor is failing to charge a fee where one could have been charged a violation of law. [B-130961-O.M., Sept. 10, 1976](#); [B-114829-O.M., June 11, 1975](#).<sup>105</sup> Guidance for the executive branch is found in Office of Management and Budget Circular No. A-25, *User Charges* (July 8, 1993).

It is also important to note that the IOAA merely provides authority to charge fees, not authority to provide the underlying services. The legal basis for the services—which, as noted at the outset of this section, must exist before you ever get to the question of fees—must be found elsewhere. [62 Comp. Gen. 262, 263 \(1983\)](#).

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<sup>105</sup> One occasionally encounters a description in mandatory terms. *E.g., Bunge Corp. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 511, 515 (1984), *aff’d*, 765 F.2d 162 (Fed. Cir. 1985) (“The IOAA directs all federal agencies to charge fees . . .”). However, no one has ever actually applied it that way.

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The IOAA is not free from difficulty or controversy. Gillette and Hopkins offer the following rather harsh assessment:

“[T]he IOAA does not constitute a model of clarity and precision. To the contrary, the statute uses vague terms and invokes ephemeral principles that demand substantial interpretation. The statute provides little guidance concerning the constituents of a ‘service or thing of value’ and leaves fairly open the appropriate mechanisms for computing a proper charge. Instead, the statute recites considerations that are, at best, inconclusive, and, at worst, inherently conflicting.”

Clayton P. Gillette and Thomas D. Hopkins, *Federal User Fees: A Legal and Economic Analysis*, 67 B.U. L. Rev. 795, 826–27 (1987) (footnote omitted).

b. Fees *versus* Taxes

The government has many ways to get money from your pocket. In *National Cable Television Ass’n v. United States*, 415 U.S. 336 (1974), the Supreme Court distinguished two of them, fees and taxes. A fee is something you pay incident to a voluntary act on your part, for some benefit the government has bestowed or will bestow on you which is not shared by other members of society, examples being “a request that a public agency permit an applicant to practice law or medicine or construct a house or run a broadcast station.” *National Cable Television*, 415 U.S. at 340. Taxes, on the other hand, need not be related to any specific benefits: “Taxation is a legislative function, and Congress . . . may act arbitrarily and disregard benefits bestowed by the Government on a taxpayer and go solely on ability to pay, based on property or income.” *Id.* (footnote omitted). The distinction had lurked in the bushes since shortly after the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) was enacted. In [B-108429, Mar. 24, 1952](#), for example, GAO advised a Member of Congress that “in the absence of clear and convincing evidence to the contrary,” GAO would be unwilling “to assume that [any government agency] would attempt to levy a tax . . . under the guise of a fee” as authorized by the IOAA.

The issue remained largely dormant until the *National Cable Television* decision, in which the Supreme Court held that the IOAA authorizes fees but not taxes. In that case, the cable TV industry challenged fees assessed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which had been under pressure from both Congress and the Office of Management and Budget to recoup its full costs from the industry it regulated “to fully support all its

activities so the taxpayer will not be required to bear any part of the load in view of the profits regulated.” *National Cable Television*, 415 U.S. at 339 (citations omitted). After drawing the distinction noted above, the Court added that the primary measure of a fee under the IOAA is the “value of the service or thing to the recipient” standard of 31 U.S.C. § 9701(b)(2)(B). An attempt to recoup total cost would go beyond this by charging recipients for the public as well as private benefits of the FCC’s regulatory activities,<sup>106</sup> which would at least arguably amount to levying a tax. Holding that the FCC could not do so, the Court said: “It would be such a sharp break with our traditions to conclude that Congress had bestowed on a federal agency the taxing power that we read [the IOAA] narrowly as authorizing not a ‘tax’ but a ‘fee.’” *National Cable Television*, 415 U.S. at 341. By adopting this interpretation, the Court was able to avoid having to directly confront the constitutional issue of the extent to which Congress could delegate its power to tax.

In determining the proper scope of the IOAA’s fee-setting authority, the Court suggested extreme caution in applying the criteria of 31 U.S.C. §§ 9701(b)(2)(C) and (D)—“public policy or interest served” and “other relevant facts”—which “if read literally, carr[y] an agency far from its customary orbit and pu[t] it in search of revenue” and thereby tend to indicate assessments more in the nature of taxes. *National Cable Television*, 415 U.S. at 341. Indeed, the Court concluded: “The phrase ‘value to the recipient’ is, we believe, the measure of the authorized fee.” *Id.* at 342–43. Thus, some lower courts have stated that *National Cable Television* “effectively read[s] out of the statute” the “public policy and interest served” and “other relevant facts” criteria. *Bunge Corp. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 511, 515 (1984), *aff’d*, 765 F.2d 162 (Fed. Cir. 1985). *See also Seafarers International Union v. United States Coast Guard*, 81 F.3d 179, 183 (D.C. Cir. 1996).

On the same day it decided *National Cable Television*, the Court also decided the companion case of *Federal Power Commission v. New England Power Co.*, 415 U.S. 345 (1974), applying *National Cable Television* to invalidate annual assessments levied on pipeline companies by the then Federal Power Commission. The Court agreed with the lower court that the IOAA does not authorize assessments on whole industries, but applies only with respect to “specific charges for specific services to

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<sup>106</sup> “Certainly some of the costs inured to the benefit of the public, unless the entire regulatory scheme is a failure, which we refuse to assume.” *National Cable Television*, 415 U.S. at 343.

specific individuals or companies.” *New England Power*, 415 U.S. at 349. The Court noted with approval portions of OMB Circular A-25, *User Charges*, now found at sections 6 (agencies should assess user charges to “each identifiable recipient” of a special benefit),<sup>107</sup> and 6a(4) (agencies should not assess fees “when the identification of the specific beneficiary is obscure”). This, said the Court, “is the proper construction of the [IOAA]” and helps to restrain it from crossing the line into the realm of taxes. *New England Power*, 415 U.S. at 351.

Thereafter, the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit issued a series of decisions elaborating on the standards laid down in *National Cable Television* and *New England Power*. See, e.g., *National Association of Broadcasters v. Federal Communications Commission*, 554 F.2d 1118 (D.C. Cir. 1976); *Electronic Industries Ass’n v. Federal Communications Commission*, 554 F.2d 1109 (D.C. Cir. 1976). The court particularly focused on the importance of cost in the analysis:

“When the cost of the benefit conferred is exceeded by any material amount, one immediately gets into the taxing area and the result is revenue and not a fee . . . We do not mean to circumscribe the ingenuity of the agencies in dealing with this problem. But there still remains the overall requirement that the process be fairly related to costs and that a proper nexus exist between the service, the cost of the service and the fee charged for the service. The fee must bear some reasonable relation to the cost or it ceases to be a fee and [*National Cable Television*] does indicate that it cannot go beyond being a ‘fee.’ ”

*National Ass’n of Broadcasters*, 554 F.2d at 1130 n. 28.

Notwithstanding overbroad language occasionally encountered in some lower court decisions,<sup>108</sup> *National Cable Television* and *New England Power* do not stand for the proposition that Congress may not delegate the authority to assess charges which are more appropriately categorized as

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<sup>107</sup> The July 8, 1993, revision of OMB Circular No. A-25 changed “should” to “will” in the introductory sentence of section 6 stating its general policy. The 1993 revision is the current version of this circular.

<sup>108</sup> See Clayton P. Gillette and Thomas D. Hopkins, *Federal User Fees: A Legal and Economic Analysis*, 67 B.U. L. Rev. 795, 823 (1987).

taxes. Indeed, as we will see later in section D.4 of this chapter, it is now settled that Congress can do so as long as the statutory delegation is sufficiently explicit and provides intelligible guidelines. Rather, these cases hold merely that Congress did not do so in the IOAA.

c. Establishing the Fee

(1) Need for regulations

Some courts have held that in order to assess fees under the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA), an agency must first issue regulations. *See, e.g., Sohio Transportation Co. v. United States*, 766 F.2d 499, 502 (Fed. Cir. 1985); *Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. v. United States*, 624 F.2d 1005, 1009 (Ct. Cl. 1980); *Alaskan Arctic Gas Pipeline Co. v. United States*, 9 Cl. Ct. 723, 732–33 (1986), *aff'd*, 831 F.2d 1043 (Fed. Cir. 1987) (issuance of regulations a “condition precedent”). A simple policy statement to the effect that fees will be charged for special services has been held too vague to support fee assessment. *Diapulse Corp. of America v. FDA*, 500 F.2d 75, 79 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1974). Rather, since rulemaking under the Administrative Procedure Act generally must provide the opportunity for public comment, 5 U.S.C. § 553, the agency’s notice must include, or make available on request, a reasonable explanation of the basis for the proposed fee. This, one court has held, must be one that “the concerned public could understand.” *Engine Manufacturers Association v. EPA*, 20 F.3d 1177, 1181 (D.C. Cir. 1994). In that case, the court rejected as inadequate an agency cost analysis which, according to the court, “contains page after page of impressive looking but utterly useless tables” and some “complete gibberish.” *Id.* It is probably impossible to predict what would be acceptable to any given court at any given time, but cases like this demonstrate the need for the agency to observe at least some minimal level of clarity and provide its explanation “in intelligible if not plain English.” *Id.* at 1183. The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has also stressed the need for the agency to make a clear public statement of the basis for its fees so that a reviewing court can measure the agency’s action against the Supreme Court’s standards. *National Cable Television Association v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1094, 1100, 1104–05 (D.C. Cir. 1976).

(2) Benefit under the Independent Offices Appropriation Act

The first step in establishing a fee or fee schedule under the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) is to “identify the activity which justifies each particular fee” the agency wishes to assess. *National Cable Television Association v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1094, 1100 (D.C. Cir. 1976). Thus, the threshold question is what kinds of government services or activities



are regarded as conferring special benefits for purposes of the IOAA?<sup>109</sup> The statute itself refers merely to “each service or thing of value provided by the agency.” 31 U.S.C. § 9701(a). That this phrase should be construed broadly<sup>110</sup> is made clear by the source language, 65 Stat. 290, which authorized fees for “any work, service, publication, report, document, benefit, privilege, authority, use, franchise, license, permit, certificate, registration, or similar thing of value or utility performed, furnished, provided, granted, prepared, or issued by any Federal agency . . . to or for any person (including groups, associations, organizations, partnerships corporations or businesses).” OMB Circular No. A-25, *User Charges*, § 6a (July 8, 1993), provides further guidance, stating that, for example—

“a special benefit will be considered to accrue and a user charge will be imposed when a Government service:

“(a) enables the beneficiary to obtain more immediate or substantial gains or values . . . than those that accrue to the general public . . . ; or

“(b) provides business stability or contributes to public confidence in the business activity of the beneficiary . . . ; or

“(c) is performed at the request of or for the convenience of the recipient, and is beyond the services regularly received by other members of the same industry or group or by the general public . . . .”

One area in which the issue has arisen with some frequency is the government’s regulatory activities. On the one hand, the mere fact of regulation is not enough to justify a fee. *Engine Manufacturers Ass’n v. EPA*, 20 F.3d 1177, 1180 (D.C. Cir. 1994); *Central & Southern Motor Freight Tariff Ass’n v. United States*, 777 F.2d 722, 729 (D.C. Cir. 1985). On the other hand, however, the granting of a license or similar operating authority

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<sup>109</sup> Some of the examples in the text are now covered by specific statutory authority and thus reliance on the IOAA may no longer be necessary. Our examples are intended merely to illustrate the types of services or activities which have been regarded as within the IOAA’s scope.

<sup>110</sup> *Ayuda, Inc. v. Attorney General*, 848 F.2d 1297, 1300 (D.C. Cir. 1988).

clearly is enough. *Seafarers International Union v. United States Coast Guard*, 81 F.3d 179 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (merchant marine licensing by Coast Guard); *Engine Manufacturers Ass’n*, 20 F.3d at 1180 (EPA certificate of approval for motor vehicles); *Mississippi Power & Light Co. v. United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission*, 601 F.2d 223, 229 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979), *cert. denied*, 444 U.S. 1102 (1980) (license from the Commission to operate nuclear facility); *National Cable Television*, 554 F.2d at 1103 (grant of operating authority by the Federal Communication Commission); [B-217931-O.M., Apr. 2, 1985](#) (drug and antibiotic review and approval by the Food and Drug Administration).

Where an application is voluntarily withdrawn before final agency action, the First Circuit has held that the agency can charge a fee for work done prior to withdrawal. *New England Power Co. v. United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission*, 683 F.2d 12 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1982). The agency’s intent to do so must be specified in its regulations. *Id.* If failure to process is attributable to the government, for example, a change in program requirements, no fee should be charged and any amounts collected should be refunded to the applicants. [53 Comp. Gen. 580 \(1974\)](#).

An agency may also charge a fee under the IOAA for services which assist regulated entities in complying with statutory duties. *Electronic Industries Ass’n v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1109, 1115 (D.C. Cir. 1976) (tariff filings, equipment testing and approval); *Raton Gas Transmission Co. v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 852 F.2d 612, 617 (D.C. Cir. 1988) (rate reduction application); *Phillips Petroleum Co. v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 786 F.2d 370, 376 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986), *cert. denied*, 479 U.S. 823 (1986) (tariff filings, certifications, charges for transportation of natural gas); *Mississippi Power & Light*, 601 F.2d at 231 (routine safety inspections of nuclear facilities); [B-216876-O.M., Jan. 30, 1985](#) (pipeline safety inspection). This is particularly true where the statute was enacted “in large measure for the benefit of the individuals, firms, or industry upon which the agency seeks to impose a fee.” *Central & Southern Tariff Ass’n*, 777 F.2d at 734 (tariff filing requirement of Interstate Commerce Act and Motor Carrier Act).

Use of government property is another activity for which fees may be charged under the IOAA. A common example is the granting of a right-of-way over public lands. [B-307319, Aug. 23, 2007](#); [B-118678, May 11, 1976](#). Rights-of-way are sought for such things as the construction of power transmission facilities and energy pipelines. *E.g., Nevada Power Co. v. Watt*, 711 F.2d 913 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983) (electricity transmission lines); *Alaskan*

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*Arctic Gas Pipeline Co. v. United States*, 9 Cl. Ct. 723 (1986), *aff'd*, 831 F.2d 1043 (Fed. Cir. 1987) (gas pipeline); *Sohio Transportation Co. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 620 (1984); *aff'd*, 766 F.2d 499 (Fed. Cir. 1985) (oil pipeline). Other examples are nonfederal use under a revocable license (B-180221, Aug. 20, 1976 (nondecision letter)), and commercial leasing by the Alaska Railroad (B-124195-O.M., Apr. 12, 1977). This category also illustrates the point that those liable for fees under the IOAA can, in appropriate circumstances, include government employees. *E.g.*, B-148736, Apr. 6, 1976 (use of facilities at certain national parks as “guest houses” for federal officials); B-212397-O.M., July 13, 1984 (locker room facilities in government building).

Information is certainly a “thing of value.” Accordingly, the dissemination or distribution of information is another area subject to the IOAA to the extent not governed by some other statute such as the Freedom of Information Act. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 552. IOAA user fees have been held appropriate for such things as copying and delivery of materials requested in discovery by parties to an agency enforcement action (B-302825, Dec. 22, 2004), subscriptions to government publications (B-110418, July 8, 1952), subscription to a Department of Agriculture market news wire service (B-128056, July 8, 1966), and international flight documentation provided to aviation interests by the National Weather Service (B-133202-O.M., Sept. 17, 1976). Examples from the procurement arena are B-236822, Sept. 8, 1989 (fee for copies of specifications and drawings); B-209933, June 6, 1983 (fee for solicitation documents); and B-184007, Sept. 24, 1975 (fee for copy of bid abstract).<sup>111</sup> The statute applies even to requests for information directly about the requester. *Reinoehl v. Hershey*, 426 F.2d 815 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1970) (pre-indictment request for documents from Selective Service file).

Starting in the 1980s, emphasis began to shift to electronic dissemination. A 1986 congressional study found the IOAA not particularly suited to information services but still better than nothing, and told agencies to do

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<sup>111</sup> Generally, solicitation documents, including specifications, technical data, and other pertinent information determined necessary by the contracting officer, are publicly available at [www.fedbizopps.gov](http://www.fedbizopps.gov) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008). In certain circumstances, however, when solicitation documents are not otherwise publicly available, the contracting officer will provide these documents and may require payment of a fee, not exceeding the actual cost of duplication of these documents. *See* 48 C.F.R. § 5.102.

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the best they could under it until something better comes along.<sup>112</sup> Some of the complexities are illustrated in [B-219338, June 2, 1987](#), discussing a Department of Agriculture system established under a statute (7 U.S.C. § 2242a) which mandates consistency with the IOAA.

An agency may permit a contractor to provide information to the public, with the contractor assessing and retaining the fees, but the fees may not exceed what the agency could have charged had it provided the information directly. [61 Comp. Gen. 285 \(1982\)](#); [B-166506, Oct. 20, 1975](#). See also chapter 3 of GAO's report *ADP Acquisition: SEC Needs to Resolve Key Issues Before Proceeding With Its EDGAR System*, GAO/IMTEC-87-2 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 9, 1986).

Another activity susceptible to IOAA fees is adjudicatory services by an administrative agency. The services may or may not be incident to a regulatory program. An example of the former is Federal Energy Regulatory Commission review of administrative appeals of remedial orders. [B-224596, Aug. 21, 1987](#). An example of the latter is the range of adjudicatory services rendered to aliens by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Department of Homeland Security (previously provided by the then Immigration and Naturalization Service in the Department of Justice). *Ayuda, Inc. v. Attorney General*, 661 F. Supp. 33 (D.D.C. 1987), *aff'd*, 848 F.2d 1297 (D.C. Cir. 1988); [B-125031-O.M., July 23, 1974](#). As the *Ayuda* appellate court stressed, the procedures "are triggered only at the instance of the individual who seeks, obviously, to benefit from them." *Ayuda*, 848 F.2d at 1301. Another example is [B-167062, June 13, 1969](#) (IOAA reimbursement to former Civil Service Commission for advisory opinions rendered at request of foreign military representatives in United States).

Fees incident to litigation in the courts are also commonplace, but they implicate certain constitutional considerations and are prescribed under statutes other than the IOAA. See 28 U.S.C. §§ 1911 (Supreme Court), 1913 (courts of appeals), 1914 (district courts), 1926 (Court of Federal Claims), 1930 (bankruptcy fees). The rule is that, with the exception of certain indigent situations, reasonable fees may be charged to those seeking access to the courts. *E.g., Lumbert v. Illinois Department of Corrections*,

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<sup>112</sup> House Committee on Government Operations, *Electronic Collection and Dissemination of Information by Federal Agencies: A Policy Overview*, H.R. Rep. No. 99-560, at 37-38 (1986).

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827 F.2d 257 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987).<sup>113</sup> Fees may be charged even to involuntary litigants provided they do not unduly burden access to the judicial process, determined by balancing the litigant's interest against the government's interest in assessing the fee. *In re South*, 689 F.2d 162 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982), *cert. denied*, 460 U.S. 1069 (1983); *In re Red Barn, Inc.*, 23 B.R. 593 (Bankr. D. Me. 1982).

Still another example is transportation services. Thus, if local services are not available, the National Park Service may provide transportation to injured or ill visitors in national parks, but should attempt to recover its costs under the IOAA. [B-198032, June 3, 1981](#). A case analogous to the “information contractor” cases noted above is [46 Comp. Gen. 616 \(1967\)](#). Public transportation to a then Veterans Administration hospital in an isolated area had been discontinued due to a low level of usage. Aware that visits by family members often have significant therapeutic value to patients, GAO agreed that the VA could use its appropriated funds to remedy the situation. One approach would have been for the VA to furnish transportation directly, presumably charging the riders under authority of the IOAA. However, the VA found it would be substantially less expensive to enter into a “subsidy contract” with a private carrier under which the carrier would be paid a guaranteed annual amount less fares collected, the fares to be comparable to commercial common carrier fares. GAO concurred, advising that payment should be on a net balance basis and that the contract should include adequate controls to insure proper accounting of the fares collected.

While it is possible to categorize a great many of the user fee situations as we have tried to do here—regulatory activities, use of government property, dissemination of information, adjudicatory services, transportation services—there are also many situations which defy further generalization, the test being simply whether an activity fits the terms of the statute as the courts have construed it. Thus, GAO has regarded the IOAA's authority as extending to the following:

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<sup>113</sup> Even indigents are sometimes liable for fees. In 1996, Congress amended 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b) to make prisoners financially responsible for eventually paying the full filing fees in civil actions and appeals that they bring *in forma pauperis*. Pub. L. No. 104-134, title I [title VIII, § 804(a)], 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-73-74 (Apr. 26, 1996). The statute generally requires that such prisoners pay the fees in installments, to the extent they have resources in their prison accounts. Prisoners are not entitled to a refund or to relief of their indebtedness with respect to the fees if they withdraw their appeals. *Goins v. DeCaro*, 241 F.3d 260 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 2001).

- Fees charged to nonfederal participants in government-sponsored conference. [B-190244, Nov. 28, 1977](#).
- Surcharge for expedited processing of passport applications. [B-118682, June 22, 1970](#).<sup>114</sup> (The basic fee is authorized by 22 U.S.C. § 214.)
- Fees for certain allotments from the pay of civilian employees under 5 U.S.C. § 5525. [42 Comp. Gen. 663 \(1963\)](#) (state income tax where withholding is not required); [B-152032, Aug. 1, 1963](#) (private disability income insurance).<sup>115</sup> The Office of Personnel Management’s regulations implementing 5 U.S.C. § 5525 are found at 5 C.F.R. part 550, subpart C.

(3) Public versus private benefit

The Supreme Court, in *National Cable Television Ass’n v. United States*, 415 U.S. 336 (1974), cautioned that an attempt by a regulatory agency to recover its full operating costs would amount to charging the regulated entities for those portions of the program that benefit the public as a whole. This would go beyond the concept of a “fee,” which is all the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) authorizes. Implicit in this is the recognition that a government activity which benefits a private party also to greater or lesser extent includes an element of public benefit, and it may not always be possible to draw a clear line of demarcation.

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<sup>114</sup> The State Department’s 1995 appropriation act provided permanent authority to credit these charges to the Administration of Foreign Affairs account as an offsetting collection. Pub. L. No. 103-317, 108 Stat. 1724, 1760 (Aug. 26, 1994).

<sup>115</sup> GAO had also held that a reasonable fee could be charged to unions for the payroll deduction of union dues ([42 Comp. Gen. 342 \(1963\)](#)), but legislation now prohibits charging either the union or the employee. 5 U.S.C. § 7115(a).

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Although the Supreme Court has not revisited the IOAA since 1974, two important principles have emerged from the body of lower court jurisprudence:<sup>116</sup>

- When establishing a fee for a specific benefit conferred on an identifiable beneficiary in a regulatory context, the agency must exclude expenses incurred in serving some *independent* public interest.
- Once it is established that a given activity confers a specific benefit on an identifiable beneficiary, the agency may charge its full costs of providing the service, regardless of the fact that the service may *incidentally* benefit the general public as well.

The D.C. Circuit has offered the following test: “If the asserted public benefits are the necessary consequence of the agency’s provision of the relevant private benefits, then the public benefits are not independent, and the agency would therefore not need to allocate any costs to the public.” *Central & Southern Motor Freight Tariff Ass’n v. United States*, 777 F.2d 722, 732 (D.C. Cir. 1985).

More recently, the D.C. Circuit has come to view the term “private benefit” with disfavor because it can mislead parties into attempting to weigh the “public” *versus* “private” benefits of a given government activity. The correct principle, said the court, is simply that the IOAA authorizes an agency to charge the full cost of a service which confers a specific benefit on an identifiable beneficiary, notwithstanding any incidental benefit to the general public. There is no need to weigh the relative public and private interests. *Seafarers International Union v. United States Coast Guard*, 81 F.3d 179, 183–85 (D.C. Cir. 1996). The *Seafarers* decision also contains an illustration of an “independent” public benefit although the court uses a slightly different characterization. If, as part of the process of issuing merchant marine licenses to qualified individuals, the Coast Guard chooses

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<sup>116</sup> *Engine Manufacturers Ass’n v. EPA*, 20 F.3d 1177, 1180 (D.C. Cir. 1994); *Phillips Petroleum Co. v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 786 F.2d 370 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 479 U.S. 823 (1986); *Mississippi Power & Light Co. v. United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission*, 601 F.2d 223, 229–30 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979), *cert. denied*, 444 U.S. 1102 (1980); *National Cable Television Ass’n v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1094, 1104 (D.C. Cir. 1976); *Electronic Industries Ass’n v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1109, 1114–15 (D.C. Cir. 1976). The guidance in OMB Circular No. A-25, *User Charges*, § 6a(3) (July 8, 1993), also embodies these principles. See also [B-307319](#), Aug. 23, 2007.



to conduct boat inspections, it cannot include the cost of the boat inspections in the fee charged to the applicants because those costs are not “materially related” to the statutory license requirements. *Id.* at 186.

One issue which has provided a battleground for these concepts is whether a fee authorized by the IOAA can include the cost of preparing an environmental impact statement (EIS) required by the National Environmental Policy Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C). In a 1976 opinion to a Member of Congress, GAO expressed what would later become the established rule: “[W]here an impact statement is required to be prepared in connection with the processing of a right-of-way, we believe that the agency may include its cost as a direct cost attributable to the special benefit represented by the right-of-way which is chargeable to the applicant under 31 U.S.C. § [9701].” [B-118678, May 11, 1976](#), at 2.

In view of the substantial sums involved, however, it was inevitable that the issue would find its way to the courts—again and again. The first published court decision to consider the question was *Public Service Co. v. Andrus*, 433 F. Supp. 144 (D. Colo. 1977), in which the plaintiffs had sought rights-of-way over federal lands for electric power transmission lines. The plaintiffs argued—as they would in every case—that the National Environmental Policy Act was enacted for the primary benefit of the general public, not them. The court agreed, holding that EIS costs “are not of primary benefit to the right of way applicant, and thus cannot properly be charged as fees” under the IOAA. *Public Service*, 433 F. Supp. at 153.

While *Public Service* has never been directly overruled,<sup>117</sup> this portion of it has been effectively repudiated. The Fifth Circuit considered the issue in connection with Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) licensing fees, holding that the NRC could include the EIS costs notwithstanding the “obvious public benefit” because they are a mandatory prerequisite to the issuance of a license and hence properly chargeable as part of the full cost of conferring the benefit. *Mississippi Power & Light Co.*, 601 F.2d at 231. A few years later, the Tenth Circuit, the governing circuit of the Colorado

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<sup>117</sup> An article written by an Interior Department attorney explains that *Public Service* was not appealed because the Bureau of Land Management thought that the newly enacted Federal Land Policy and Management Act provided the necessary authority. Kristina Clark, *Public Lands Rights-of-Way: Who Pays for the Environmental Studies?*, 2 *Natural Resources & Environment* 3, 4 (1986).



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court which decided the *Public Service* case, said the same thing. *Nevada Power Co. v. Watt*, 711 F.2d 913, 933 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983).<sup>118</sup> Other cases reaching the same result are *Alaskan Arctic Gas Pipeline Co. v. United States*, 9 Cl. Ct. 723 (1986), *aff'd*, 831 F.2d 1043 (Fed. Cir. 1987), and *Sohio Transportation Co. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 620 (1984), *aff'd*, 766 F.2d 499 (Fed. Cir. 1985).

#### (4) Calculation

Up to this point, we have established that the agency must identify its activities which provide specific services within the scope of the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) and must be able to identify specific beneficiaries; having done this, it may charge those beneficiaries the full cost of providing the services, any incidental benefits to the general public notwithstanding, but excluding the cost of independent public benefits. OMB Circular No. A-25 sets out two methodologies for setting fees:

- fees based on an agency's costs, such that the agency gets a "full cost" recovery, which should be used when the government is acting in its capacity as sovereign; and
- fees based on market price" (*i.e.*, the market value of the goods or services provided), which should be used under business-type conditions, such as when leasing or selling goods or resources.

OMB Cir. No. A-25, *User Charges*, § 6.a (July 8, 1993). It remains to translate this into dollars and cents.

#### Fees based on costs in regulatory context

Courts have had many occasions to review fees of regulatory agencies. The agency must first separate its beneficiaries into "recipient classes" (applicants, grantees, carriers, *etc.*), among which costs will be allocated. Each recipient class should be "the smallest unit that is practical." *Electronic Industries Ass'n v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1109, 1116 (D.C. Cir. 1976).

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<sup>118</sup> *Nevada Power* also held that EIS costs can be assessed under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, but only to the extent warranted by a consideration of the reasonableness factors listed in 43 U.S.C. § 1734(b). *Nevada Power*, 711 F.2d at 933. See also *Alumet v. Andrus*, 607 F.2d 911 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979).

The agency then proceeds to calculate the cost basis for each fee assessed against each recipient class.

Full cost for purposes of the IOAA includes both direct and indirect costs. *Engine Manufacturers Ass’n v. EPA*, 20 F.3d 1177, 1181 (D.C. Cir. 1994); *Electronic Industries Ass’n*, 554 F.2d at 1117; *Public Service Co. v. Andrus*, 433 F. Supp. 144, 155 (D. Colo. 1977); [B-237546, Jan. 12, 1990](#); OMB Cir. No. A-25, *User Charges*, § 6d (July 8, 1993). As GAO pointed out, the original version of the IOAA specified that the fee take into consideration “direct and indirect” cost to the government (65 Stat. 290), but the 1982 recodification in 31 U.S.C. § 9701 dropped these words as unnecessary. [B-237546, Jan. 12, 1990](#). Indirect costs include administrative overhead. [55 Comp. Gen. 456 \(1975\)](#). They also include depreciation of plant and equipment. [38 Comp. Gen. 734 \(1959\)](#), *aff’d*, [56 Comp. Gen. 275, 277 \(1977\)](#). The Fifth Circuit has offered the following explanation:

“The cost of performing a service, such as granting a license to construct a nuclear reactor, involves a greater cost to the agency than merely the salary of the professional employee who reviews the application. The individual must be supplied working space, heating, lighting, telephone service and secretarial support. Arrangements must be made so that he is hired, paid on a regular basis and provided specialized training courses. These and other costs such as depreciation and interest on plant and capital equipment are all necessarily incurred in the process of reviewing an application. Without these supporting services, professional employees could not perform the services requested by applicants.

“Such costs may be assessed against an applicant as part of the total cost of processing and approving a license; we emphasize again that the Commission may recover the *full cost* of providing a service to a beneficiary.”

*Mississippi Power & Light Co. v. United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission*, 601 F.2d 223, 232 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979), *cert denied*, 444 U.S. 1102 (1980) (emphasis in original).

The agency is not required to calculate its costs with “scientific precision.” *Central & Southern Motor Freight Tariff Ass’n v. United States*, 777 F.2d 722, 736 (D.C. Cir. 1985). Reasonable approximations will suffice. *Id.*;

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*Mississippi Power & Light*, 601 F.2d at 232; *National Cable Television Ass'n v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1094, 1105 (D.C. Cir. 1976); 36 *Comp. Gen.* 75 (1956). Thus, it was “entirely sensible and reasonable” for an agency to use the governmental fringe benefit cost percentage from an existing Office of Management and Budget source rather than conduct its own probably duplicative study. *Central & Southern Tariff Ass'n*, 777 F.2d at 736.

The final step is for the agency to “divide that cost among the members of the recipient class . . . in such a way as to assess each a fee which is roughly proportional to the ‘value’ which that member has thereby received.” *National Cable Television Ass'n*, 554 F.2d at 1105–06.

In the regulatory context, the fee cannot exceed the agency’s cost of rendering the service. *Central & Southern Motor Freight Tariff Ass'n*, 777 F.2d at 729; *Mississippi Power & Light*, 601 F.2d at 230; *Electronic Industries Ass'n*, 554 F.2d at 1114. The fee must also be reasonably related to the value of the service to the recipient, and may not unreasonably exceed that value. *Central & Southern Motor Freight Tariff Ass'n*, 777 F.2d at 729; *National Cable Television Ass'n*, 554 F.2d at 1106. This is because the IOAA requires that the fee be based on both factors and that it be “fair.” 31 U.S.C. §§ 9701(b)(1), (b)(2)(A) and (B). While the courts have not suggested that the agency must engage in a separate calculation of “value to the recipient” in order to compare it to the government’s costs, neither have they furnished instruction on how to measure that value. The D.C. Circuit, in a 1996 case, tried to simplify matters by stating that “the measure of fees is the cost to the government of providing the service, not the intrinsic value of the service to the recipient,” but acknowledged that this would still be subject to the statutory fairness prescription. *Seafarers International Union v. United States Coast Guard*, 81 F.3d 179, 185 and n.4 (D.C. Cir. 1996). Thus, the agency must calculate its fee on the basis of its actual or estimated costs.

When an agency applies these principles, the agency might well not be able to recover its full costs in the case of a high-cost but low-value service.<sup>119</sup> Conversely, in a situation where the value to the recipient may substantially exceed the cost to the government, the agency will be able to recover its

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<sup>119</sup> Gillette and Hopkins conclude that “[i]n effect courts limit fees to either cost to the government or value to the beneficiary, whichever is lower.” Clayton P. Gillette and Thomas D. Hopkins, *Federal User Fees: A Legal and Economic Analysis*, 67 B.U. L. Rev. 795, 839 (1987).

full costs but no more. It is improper, for example, to look to the value the recipient may derive from the service, such as anticipated profits. *National Cable Television Ass'n*, 554 F.2d at 1107. In the cited case, the fee charged to cable operators was based on the number of subscribers. The court recognized the possibility that increased numbers of subscribers could produce increases in agency regulatory costs, but required evidence of that linkage to avoid concluding that the fee was based on revenues, which the IOAA does not authorize. *Id.* at 1108. Similarly, the IOAA does not authorize an agency to levy a surcharge over and above its costs, or to vary its fees among beneficiaries. *Capital Cities Communications, Inc. v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1135, 1138 (D.C. Cir. 1976); [B-237546, Jan. 12, 1990](#). Of course there is no objection to use of a sliding scale if the graduated fees in fact reflect graduated costs. *Electronic Industries Ass'n*, 554 F.2d at 1116; [B-237546, Jan. 12, 1990](#).

Depending on the circumstances, a fee system which permits deviation from established schedules may be acceptable. The case of *Phillips Petroleum Co. v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 786 F.2d 370 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 479 U.S. 823 (1986), provides an illustration. The agency had a fee schedule for regulatory filings, but occasionally received filings which were much more extensive than average. Factoring the extraordinary cases into the regular schedule would have meant that the average filings would be subsidizing the extensive ones. To avoid this, the agency developed a system, published in its orders, whereby an extraordinary filing would be billed not under the schedules but on the basis of the direct and indirect costs associated with that specific filing. The court found this system in accord with the IOAA and a reasonable exercise of the agency's discretion, not just a pretext to avoid work. *Phillips Petroleum*, 786 F.2d at 378–79.

If any of this sounds easy, it is not. The D.C. Circuit conceded the “extreme difficulty” of the task, which it said, “resembles unscrambling eggs.” *Electronic Industries Ass'n*, 554 F.2d at 1117. GAO in its many reports on the IOAA also acknowledges the difficulty of the task but regards the obstacles as not insurmountable. [B-201667-O.M., May 5, 1981](#). A more detailed discussion may be found in GAO, *Establishing a Proper Fee Schedule Under the Independent Offices Appropriation Act, 1952*, CED-77-70 (Washington, D.C.: May 6, 1977).

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Fees based on market value

The foregoing discussion has all been in the regulatory context with the government acting in its capacity as sovereign. The same rules do not necessarily apply when the government is selling goods, property, or services.

In 1982, the then Court of Claims examined a contract dispute between the National Park Service (NPS) and a concessioner in Yosemite National Park, the Yosemite Park and Curry Company. *Yosemite Park & Curry Co. v. United States*, 686 F.2d 925, 929 (Ct. Cl. 1982). As part of the concession, the concessioner purchased electricity from NPS. NPS is authorized by 16 U.S.C. § 1b(4) to provide electricity to concessioners on a reimbursable basis. The concessioner asserted that NPS was overcharging for the electricity it supplied because NPS charged rates based on local utility rates, which could exceed NPS costs. The Court of Claims referred to a variety of authorities, including the then Bureau of the Budget Circular A-25 and IOAA, in concluding that the NPS rate-setting methodology was “reasonable” within the meaning of the contract, although it, in fact, might result in NPS charging a rate in excess of cost. *Id.* at 930. Circular A-25 at the time provided that “[w]here federally owned resources or property are leased or sold, a fair market value should be obtained,” as determined by the application of “sound business management principles and comparable commercial practices.”<sup>120</sup>

In referring to IOAA, the Court of Claims acknowledged the line of federal cases interpreting IOAA to “mandate a cost based fee schedule” and establish that “cost must be the ultimate basis of fees,” but found that those cases were “not apposite” to NPS’s authority under 16 U.S.C. § 1b(4). *Id.* at 930–32. Instead, the court relied on the fact that the government was not acting, in that instance, as a sovereign: “In the present case . . . the Government has not created the need for electricity, nor is the service provided a regulatory one.” *Id.* at 932. In selling electricity to the concessioner, the government was entering into a voluntary contract for the sale of electricity to a willing partner. *Id.* at 934. This is fundamentally different from the circumstances in *National Cable Television Ass’n v. United States*, 415 U.S. 766 (1974), for instance, where “the Government’s power to allocate the airwaves and to issue licenses came not from its ownership of the airwaves but from its sovereign power to regulate certain

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<sup>120</sup> Bureau of the Budget, Circular No. A-25, ¶¶ 3(b), 4(e) (Sept. 23, 1959).

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activities . . .” *Id.* Thus, the Court of Claims found the comparative-rate system methodology used by NPS to set rates for electricity acceptable, despite the fact that those rates could exceed NPS costs. *See also* [B-307319, Aug. 23, 2007](#).

Subsequently, the Office of Management and Budget adopted the court’s distinction between the government acting as a sovereign and the government acting commercially in setting user fees for goods and services in the 1993 revision to its Circular No. A-25 (which is the current version) as follows:

“[U]ser charges will be based on market prices (as defined in Section 6d) when the Government, not acting in its capacity as sovereign, is leasing or selling goods or resources, or is providing a service (*e.g.*, leasing space in federally owned buildings). Under these business-type conditions, user charges need not be limited to the recovery of full cost and may yield net revenues.”

OMB Circular No. A-25, *User Charges*, § 6a(2)(b) (July 8, 1993).

d. Refunds

It would seem an elementary proposition that money collected in excess of what is due should be refunded, and there is no reason this should not apply to fees under the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA). After the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *National Cable Television Ass’n v. United States*, 415 U.S. 336 (1974), holding that the IOAA authorized only fees, not taxes, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) refunded the cable television fees it had collected under the schedule the Court struck down.<sup>121</sup> Shortly thereafter, other regulated entities which had paid fees under the same schedule sued the FCC to have their fees refunded. In *National Association of Broadcasters v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1118 (D.C. Cir. 1976), the court held that the FCC’s broadcast system fees were vulnerable under the Supreme Court’s interpretation the same as its cable television fees. It did not follow, however, that the entire fee was invalid. Noting what it called the “mandate” of the IOAA that government services to identifiable beneficiaries should be self-sustaining to the extent possible (31 U.S.C. § 9701(a)), the court said: “It is our interpretation of this mandate that the

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<sup>121</sup> *See National Cable Television Ass’n v. FCC*, 554 F.2d 1094, 1098 n.9 (D.C. Cir. 1976).

Commission should retain the maximum portion of the fees collected that would be permissible under the principles announced in [cited Supreme Court decisions] and the statute.” *National Association of Broadcasters*, 554 F.2d at 1133. Accordingly, the court remanded the case to the FCC to calculate a proper fee under the court’s guidelines and to then “refund that portion of the money which was collected in excess thereof.” *Id.*

The court was careful to point out that it was not asking the agency to engage in “retroactive rulemaking.” *Id.* at 1133 n.42. The D.C. Circuit revisited this concept several years later in *Air Transport Ass’n of America v. Civil Aeronautics Board*, 732 F.2d 219 (D.C. Cir. 1984). The defendant agency had revised its fee schedules following the fee/tax refund litigation of the mid-1970s and announced a refund policy under which it would offset the total amount of fees a claimant had paid during a calendar year against the total amount of recalculated fees the agency could have charged, and actually pay a refund only if and to the extent the former exceeded the latter. Finding that this offset policy amounted to unlawful retroactive rulemaking, the court emphasized that the principle of *National Association of Broadcasters* must be applied on an individual fee basis. *Air Transport*, 732 F.2d at 226–28. The court also flatly rejected a claim for the refund of the full amount of the fees as “irreconcilable” with *National Association of Broadcasters*. *Id.* at 228 n.17.

If the principle of *National Association of Broadcasters*—that the agency may retain what it could have charged under a properly established fee and must refund only the excess—is circumscribed by considerations of retroactive rulemaking, one situation in which refund of the entire fee may appear appropriate is where the agency did not have regulations to begin with. The Court of Claims reached this result in *Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. v. United States*, 624 F.2d 1005 (Ct. Cl. 1980). See also [B-145252-O.M., Nov. 12, 1976](#).

If an agency is refunding fees which were improperly assessed under IOAA guidelines, and if those fees were deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts as the IOAA requires, then the refund is chargeable to the permanent, indefinite appropriation entitled “Refund of Moneys Erroneously Received and Covered,” established by 31 U.S.C. § 1322(b)(2).

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[55 Comp. Gen. 243 \(1975\)](#);<sup>122</sup> [B-181025, July 11, 1974](#). If the agency has been authorized to credit the fee to some other appropriation or fund, the refund is chargeable to the appropriation or fund to which the fee was credited. *See, e.g.,* [55 Comp. Gen. 625 \(1976\)](#).

Absent statutory direction to the contrary, the rules of the preceding paragraph apply equally to refunds of fees collected under statutes other than the IOAA. For example, fees under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act are deposited in a “special account” from which they are authorized to be appropriated. 43 U.S.C. § 1734(b). Erroneous or excessive fees may be refunded “from applicable funds.” *Id.* § 1734(c). Where an appropriation from the special account has actually been made, that appropriation is the “applicable fund.” [61 Comp. Gen. 224 \(1982\)](#). If the statute is silent as to disposition, the fees are properly treated as miscellaneous receipts, in which event refunds of erroneous or excessive fees are chargeable to the “Erroneously Received and Covered” account. *Id.*

OMB Circular No. A-25, *User Charges*, § 6a(2)(c) (July 8, 1993), tells agencies to collect user fees “in advance of, or simultaneously with, the rendering of services unless appropriations and authority are provided in advance to allow reimbursable services.” An agency collecting a fee in advance should use common sense to avoid depositing the money in the general fund prematurely. In [53 Comp. Gen. 580 \(1974\)](#), for example, fees for certain permits had been deposited as miscellaneous receipts when a change in the law authorized transfer of permit issuance to the states but made no provision for transfer of funds. When the state also charged a fee, applicants naturally sought refund of the fees they had already paid to the federal government and for which they had received nothing. Although not discussed in the decision, the “Erroneously Received and Covered” appropriation was not available because the receipt of the fees had been entirely proper. The solution was a two-step procedure—make an adjustment from the receipt account to the agency’s suspense account to correct the erroneous deposit, then make the refund from the suspense account. The proper accounting treatment should have been to retain the fees in the suspense account or a trust account until they were “earned” by

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<sup>122</sup> The question of the amount to be refunded was not raised in the GAO decision. In any event, to the extent [55 Comp. Gen. 243](#) implies that the entire fee should be refunded, it is of course to that extent superseded by the subsequent D.C. Circuit precedent in *National Association of Broadcasters*.



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performance, then transferred to the appropriate general fund receipt account. *See, e.g.*, A-44005, Apr. 24, 1935.

For refund purposes, whether or not the fees were paid under protest is immaterial. *Alyeska Pipeline Service Co.*, 624 F.2d at 1018; 55 Comp. Gen. at 244. However, waiting too long to assert a claim could be fatal under the doctrine of laches if, for example, through no fault on the part of the agency, records are no longer available from which the fees could be recalculated. *Air Transport*, 732 F.2d at 225–26. Laches will not help an agency which fails to retain adequate records if it is on notice of a challenge to its fee schedule. *Id.* at 226 n.14. Whether a simple payment under protest will serve this purpose is not clear.

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#### 4. Other Authorities

##### a. Subsection (c) of the Independent Offices Appropriation Act

For approximately 35 years, although there were other fee statutes on the books, the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) was the predominant federal user fee statute; it remains the only governmentwide authority. In the mid-1980s, however, as the need to attack the growing budget deficit took center stage, and general tax increases were not forthcoming, congressional attention turned increasingly to user fees as a revenue source. Starting in 1986, Congress enacted dozens of fee provisions directed at particular agencies or activities.<sup>123</sup>

The relationship between the IOAA and these other statutes is addressed in the IOAA itself, specifically 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c):

“(c) This section does not affect a law of the United States—

“(1) prohibiting the determination and collection of charges [or directing] the disposition of those charges; and

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<sup>123</sup> Several important provisions appeared in the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (Pub. L. No. 99-272, 100 Stat. 82 (Apr. 7, 1986)), the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1986 (Pub. L. No. 99-509, 100 Stat. 1874 (Oct. 21, 1986)), and the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 (Pub. L. No. 101-508, 104 Stat. 1388 (Nov. 5, 1990)). For more detail, see Congressional Budget Office, *The Growth of Federal User Charges* (Aug. 1993), at 19–22, and *The Growth of Federal User Charges: An Update* (Oct. 1995).

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“(2) prescribing bases for determining charges, but a charge may be redetermined under this section consistent with the prescribed bases.”<sup>124</sup>

This is largely a codification of the canon of construction that a general statute must yield to the terms of a specific statute addressing the same subject matter.

Perhaps the simplest application of section 9701(c) is the prohibitory statute, in which case the IOAA is knocked out of the picture. An example is 21 U.S.C. § 695 which provides that, except for certain overtime services, the “cost of inspection . . . under the requirements of laws relating to Federal inspection of meat and meat food products shall be borne by the United States.” Enacted in 1948, this statute replaced an unsuccessful 1-year experiment in financing federal meat inspections through user fees. *See* S. Rep. No. 81-2120, at 5 (1950); *Combs v. United States*, 98 F. Supp. 749 (D. Vt. 1951). Unlike the broad proscription of the meat inspection statute, a prohibitory statute may simply have the effect of barring reliance on the IOAA, effectively requiring more explicit authority. The Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) appropriation, for example, regularly carries a proviso that prohibits use of the FDA’s Salaries and Expenses money “to develop, establish, or operate any program of user fees authorized by 31 U.S.C. § 9701.” For the fiscal year 2006 version, see Pub. L. No. 109-97, title VI, 119 Stat. 2120, 2148 (Nov. 10, 2005). The origin of this proviso is discussed in [B-217931, July 31, 1985](#). The FDA does have a user fee system, but it is authorized under the FDA’s own detailed and specific legislation (21 U.S.C. § 379h), not the IOAA.

The Small Business Administration (SBA) is another agency with a specific, and exclusive, statutory user fee system. Section 634(b)(12) of title 15, United States Code, provides that SBA may “impose, retain, and use only those fees which are specifically authorized by law or which are in effect on September 30, 1994.” It goes on to authorize certain specific fees to be imposed and used subject to approval in appropriation acts. Relying on

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<sup>124</sup> In the recodified version carried in the United States Code, the word “and” appears in place of the words bracketed in the text, which is clearly erroneous. The meaning is clarified by resort to the source provision: the IOAA shall not “modify existing statutes prohibiting the collection, fixing the amount, or directing the disposition of any fee, charge, or price” (65 Stat. 290). The conjunctive “and” is meaningless because a statute which prohibits charging a fee would have no occasion to then address, much less prohibit, disposition.

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section 634(b)(12), GAO held in B-300248, Jan. 15, 2004, that SBA could not impose certain fees on lenders in its Preferred Lender Program since such fees were not specifically authorized under SBA's statutes and the IOAA was not available to SBA as an independent source of authority.<sup>125</sup>

GAO stated its approach to 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c) *vis-à-vis* other fee statutes in [55 Comp. Gen. 456, 461 \(1975\)](#): “[I]t has consistently been our view that . . . 31 U.S.C. § [9701(c)] preclude[s] the imposition of additional user charges under that section only to the extent that another statute expressly or by clear design constitutes the only source of assessments for a service.” *See also* [B-307319, Aug. 23, 2007](#).

b. Independent Offices  
Appropriation Act  
Incorporated by Reference

One form of user fee statute is based directly on the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) and makes explicit reference to it. An example is 14 U.S.C. § 664(a): “A fee or charge for a service or thing of value provided by the Coast Guard shall be prescribed as provided in section 9701 of title 31.” Another very similar Coast Guard statute is 46 U.S.C. § 2110(a)(1).

The main thrust of statutes like these is to remove the discretionary aspect of the IOAA and to make the authority mandatory. *See Boat Owners Ass’n of the United States v. United States*, 834 F. Supp. 7, 12 (D.D.C. 1993). A statute of this type may include its own limitations on use of the authority. For example, the Coast Guard legislation prohibits charging a fee for any search or rescue service. 46 U.S.C. § 2110(a)(5).

Another example is 42 U.S.C. § 2214(b), applicable to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, enacted as part of the 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act: “Pursuant to section 9701 of Title 31, any person who receives a service or thing of value from the Commission shall pay fees to cover the Commission’s costs in providing any such service or thing of value.” Like the Coast Guard statutes, use of the word “shall” makes mandatory what would otherwise be discretionary under the IOAA.

One step removed from these is a statute which authorizes or directs the charging of fees, with the link to the IOAA appearing in legislative history rather than the statute itself. An example is the original version of the

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<sup>125</sup> SBA argued in B-300248 that the agency itself was not imposing a user fee because the fee was actually assessed and collected by an SBA contractor. However, GAO viewed this argument as elevating form over substance .

Freedom of Information Act which specified merely “fees to the extent authorized by statute.” Committee reports made it clear that the IOAA was the statute Congress had in mind. See *Diapulse Corp. v. Food and Drug Administration*, 500 F.2d 75, 78 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1974); [B-161499-O.M., Aug. 13, 1971](#). The Freedom of Information Act now includes its own detailed fee provision in 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4).

A variation is 7 U.S.C. § 2242a. Section 2242a(a) authorizes the Department of Agriculture to charge reasonable user fees for departmental publications or software. Section 2242a(b) then goes on to state that “[t]he imposition of such charges shall be consistent with section 9701 of title 31.” GAO analyzed Agriculture’s authority under this provision in [B-219338, June 2, 1987](#). Finding no legislative history to explain what Congress intended by the “consistent with” terminology, GAO concluded that the agency was not required to adopt every wrinkle of judicial interpretation under the IOAA. GAO advised:

“At a minimum . . . we take it to mean that the charges may be cost-related under any of the various formulations sanctioned by the decisions of the courts, or, in the absence of a cost based fee schedule, reasonable. Also, the requirement that fees be ‘consistent’ with section 9701 fees clearly does not mean that they must be identical to those that would be imposed under section 9701 or that they must have been promulgated in accordance with all the procedural requirements [of the IOAA].”

[B-219338, June 2, 1987](#), enclosure at 16–17.

c. Statutes *In Pari Materia*

Another type of user fee statute one encounters is a statute which authorizes or directs an agency to charge a fee or to recover costs in general terms, without making specific reference to the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA). The statute may apply to a specific type of activity or to a broader range. Unless there is something in the statute or its legislative history to compel a different result, the approach is to regard it as being *in pari materia* with the IOAA—that is, statutes dealing with the same subject matter or having a common purpose (*Black’s Law Dictionary* 807 (8<sup>th</sup> ed. 2004))—and to construe them together as part of an overall statutory scheme. Where this principle applies, it is legitimate to look to the body of law developed under the IOAA for guidance in construing the other statute.

For example, the National Park Service is authorized to furnish utility services to concessioners “on a reimbursement of appropriation basis.” 16 U.S.C. § 1b(4). In *Yosemite Park & Curry Co. v. United States*, 686 F.2d 925 (Ct. Cl. 1982), a concessioner at Yosemite National Park who had been purchasing electricity from the Park Service challenged the Park Service’s rate structure, which was based on the average of rates charged by other area utilities rather than cost reimbursement. Viewing 16 U.S.C. § 1b(4) and the IOAA as being *in pari materia*, the court analogized to the fee structure under the IOAA, as implemented by the then Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-25 (Sept. 23, 1959)), and found it reasonable under both statutes. *Yosemite*, 686 F.2d at 928.

Another illustration is 30 U.S.C. § 185(l), part of the Mineral Leasing Act:

“The applicant for a right-of-way or permit shall reimburse the United States for administrative and other costs incurred in processing the application, and the holder of the right-of-way or permit shall reimburse the United States for the costs incurred in monitoring the construction, operation, maintenance, and termination of any pipeline and related facilities on such right-of-way or permit area . . . .”

The then Court of Claims held that this provision did not supersede or override the requirement of the IOAA that fees be assessed only pursuant to regulations. *Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. v. United States*, 624 F.2d 1005 (Ct. Cl. 1980). See also *Sohio Transportation Co. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 620 (1984), *aff’d*, 766 F.2d 499 (Fed. Cir. 1985). The lower court in the *Sohio* litigation also looked to precedent under the IOAA to determine that the Bureau of Land Management’s pipeline right-of-way fees were not taxes. 5 Cl. Ct. at 628.

Another illustration is the legislation governing the Comptroller of the Currency’s assessments against national banks. At one time, the law directed the Comptroller to recover the expense of required examinations by assessments on the national banks in proportion to their assets or resources. 12 U.S.C. § 482 (1988). Applying the *pari materia* concept in effect if not in terms, one court sustained the Comptroller’s assessment regulations, concluding that “the Comptroller is directed, to the fullest possible extent, to assess fees reflective of the actual cost of examination while adhering to the statutory guideline of asset and resource size.” *First National Bank of Milaca v. Smith*, 445 F. Supp. 1117, 1123 (D. Minn. 1977). See also *First National Bank of Milaca v. Smith*, 572 F.2d 1244 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir.

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1978). The district court rejected the bank's argument that 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c) rendered the IOAA inapplicable (see section D.4.a of this chapter); 12 U.S.C. § 482 did not fix the amount of the fee but merely provided a basis for calculation, in which event section 9701(c) encourages fee recalculation to more fully achieve, or at least approach, self-sufficiency. *First National*, 445 F. Supp. at 1123. A 1991 amendment<sup>126</sup> to 12 U.S.C. § 482 deleted the asset/resource size requirement and the statute now merely provides a general assessment requirement with respect to fees. The amendment does not appear to affect the relationship of section 482 to the IOAA.

d. Statutes Entirely  
Independent of the  
Independent Offices  
Appropriation Act

Once you eliminate those user fee statutes that are tied in to the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) either expressly or by a *pari materia* rationale, those that are left have little in common other than their independence of the IOAA by virtue of 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c) (see section D.4.a of this chapter). The only safe generalization is that each statute stands alone and its own terms determine its coverage and limitations. Many of the laws stem from the post-1985 period and there is little interpretive case law. Accordingly, our objective here is essentially to present a typology to illustrate the different kinds of user fee laws and the different things Congress has tried to do with them.

Perhaps the simplest type is a provision that directly fixes the amount of the fee. An example is 8 U.S.C. § 1356(d):

“In addition to any other fee authorized by law, the Attorney General shall charge and collect \$7 per individual for the immigration inspection of each passenger arriving at a port of entry in the United States, or for the preinspection of a passenger in a place outside of the United States prior to such arrival, aboard a commercial aircraft or commercial vessel.”

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<sup>126</sup> Pub. L. No. 102-242, § 114(a)(1), 105 Stat. 2236, 2248 (Dec. 19, 1991).

Section 1356(e) sets forth limitations. While this type of statute may generate other questions of interpretation,<sup>127</sup> it eliminates the calculation nightmare. Of course, a fixed-fee approach is not always viable. Conceptually similar is a statute which fixes the amount of the fee and provides a mechanism for periodic adjustment by the administering agency. An example is 47 U.S.C. § 158 (Federal Communications Commission application fees).

Another simple type, at least simple to administer, is a fee set as a percentage of some reference amount. Congress enacted legislation in 1985 directing the Federal Reserve Bank of New York to deduct 1-1/2 percent of the first \$5 million and 1 percent of any amount over \$5 million from every award by the Iran-United States Claims Tribunal in favor of a United States claimant. The deduction was intended to reimburse the government for expenses of its participation in the claims program. Pub. L. No. 99-93, § 502, 99 Stat. 405, 438 (Aug. 16, 1985), 50 U.S.C. § 1701 note. In *United States v. Sperry Corp.*, 493 U.S. 52 (1989), the Supreme Court upheld the deduction against a variety of challenges, one of which was that the government had failed to demonstrate the relationship of the amount of the deduction to the costs presumably being reimbursed. The Court responded:

“This Court has never held that the amount of a user fee must be precisely calibrated to the use that a party makes of Government services. Nor does the Government need to record invoices and billable hours to justify the cost of its services. All that we have required is that the user fee be a ‘fair approximation of the cost of benefits supplied.’”

*Sperry*, 493 U.S. at 60, citing *Massachusetts v. United States*, 435 U.S. 444, 463, n.19 (1978). The statute declared the deduction to be a user fee, and it is the claimant’s burden to demonstrate otherwise. *Sperry*, 493 U.S. at 60. Of course there are limits to this rationale. The Court continued:

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<sup>127</sup> One issue was whether the statute, which requires ticket-issuers and airlines to collect the fee on behalf of the government, provides a basis for holding them financially liable for fees they fail to collect. In *American Airlines, Inc. v. United States*, 68 Fed. Cl. 723 (2005), the court said no. See also *Continental Airlines, Inc. v. United States*, 77 Fed. Cl. 482 (2007).

“The deductions authorized by § 502 are not so clearly excessive as to belie their purported character as user fees. This is not a situation where the Government has appropriated all, or most, of the award to itself and labeled the booty as a user fee. . . . We need not state what percentage of the award would be too great a take to qualify as a user fee, for we are convinced that on the facts of this case, 1-1/2% does not qualify as a ‘taking’ by any standard of excessiveness.”

*Id.* at 62 (citations and footnotes omitted). There is no apparent reason why the Court’s approach in *Sperry* would not apply equally to a fee in the form of a fixed dollar amount. Also, as the statute in *Sperry* illustrates, a fixed-amount fee or a fixed-percentage fee can be in the form of a sliding scale. Indeed, a number of lower courts have applied, or suggested in *dicta* that they would apply, the *Sperry* approach to both fixed and variable fees. *See, e.g., Slade v. Hampton Roads Regional Jail*, 407 F.3d 243 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005) (\$1 per day charge to pretrial detainee to partially defray the costs of incarceration); *Vance v. Barrett*, 345 F.3d 1083 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003) (charges to cover administrative costs of prisoner personal property and savings accounts); *Owens v. Sebelius*, 357 F. Supp. 2d 1281 (D. Kan. 2005) (\$25 monthly supervision fee for parolees); *Dudley v. United States*, 61 Fed. Cl. 685 (2004) (filing fees pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b), for civil actions and appeals brought by prisoners).<sup>128</sup>

Most user fee statutes are not this simple. Rather than fixing the amount of the fee, they tend to prescribe the basis for determining the fee and vary greatly in their level of detail. At one end of the spectrum are laws that prescribe a cost basis and include some additional detail. Section 304(a) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, for example, 43 U.S.C. § 1734(a), authorizes fees “with respect to applications and other documents relating to the public lands” and lists several factors to be considered in determining reasonableness. *See Nevada Power Co. v. Watt*, 711 F.2d 913 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983). Additional examples are the fee provisions of the Grain Standards Act, 7 U.S.C. §§ 79(j) (inspection) and 79a(1) (weighing). In holding the IOAA inapplicable to these statutes, the Claims Court noted that “accepted principles of statutory construction require that a specific legislative enactment be given effect to the exclusion of a more

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<sup>128</sup> It seems from these cases that prisoners are particularly resistant to paying fees and likely to challenge them.



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general one.” *Bunge Corp. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 511, 516 (1984), *aff’d mem.*, 765 F.2d 162 (Fed. Cir. 1985).

At the other end of the spectrum are statutes containing a complex fee-setting mechanism set forth in considerable detail, often including waiver authority. One example is 7 U.S.C. § 136a-1(i), prescribing fees for pesticide registration under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. The law combines fixed fees for certain pesticides, fees set administratively within limits for other pesticides, and formula fees for reregistration. The law also includes annual ceilings per registrant and an aggregate target revenue amount.

Another example is 21 U.S.C. § 379h, fees for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The law authorizes three fees—human drug application and supplement fees, prescription drug establishment fees, and prescription drug product fees. 21 U.S.C. § 379h(a). The fees are fixed dollar amounts subject to an adjustment mechanism. The law also specifies aggregate fee revenue amounts which the fees are to generate. *Id.* § 379h(b). Section 379h(f)(1) requires FDA to refund fees unless its Salaries and Expenses appropriations meet or exceed certain levels for a given fiscal year. Section 379h(g) provides that the fees shall be collected and available only to the extent provided in advance in appropriation acts.<sup>129</sup>

A well-known user fee system is the one prescribed in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4), which illustrates still a different fee-setting approach. FOIA’s fee provisions are quite complex. Fees are set at three levels varying with the purpose and identity of the requester. At the highest level are fees charged to commercial-use requesters, who pay for search, duplication, and review. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(I). The lowest level fees are charged to educational or noncommercial scientific institutions and the news media, who pay only for duplication provided that they are not seeking information for commercial purposes. *Id.* § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(II). All others are charged for search and duplication. *Id.* § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(III). Each agency is to issue its own fee regulations, but in the interest of uniformity they must conform to Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines. *Id.*

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<sup>129</sup> For additional background on the FDA’s user fee system, see James L. Zelenay, Jr., *The Prescription Drug User Fee Act: Is a Faster Food and Drug Administration Always a Better Food and Drug Administration?*, 60 Food & Drug L. J. 261, 275–323 (2005).

§ 552(a)(4)(A)(i). OMB’s guidelines are found in 52 Fed. Reg. 10012 (Mar. 27, 1987). An agency’s own regulations may simply adopt the OMB guidelines. *Media Access Project v. FCC*, 883 F.2d 1063 (D.C. Cir. 1989). FOIA explicitly limits fees for all categories of requesters to “reasonable standard charges”; restricts fees to the direct costs of search, duplication, and review; and specifies what may be included in review costs. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iv). No fee may be charged any requester if the fee is likely to be less than the cost of collecting and processing it, and all noncommercial requesters are entitled to two free hours of search time and 100 pages of free duplication. *Id.*

Section 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) of FOIA entitles educational, noncommercial scientific, and media requesters to a fee waiver or reduction “if disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” This provision has generated extensive litigation. The following cases illustrate the standards that courts have applied in adjudicating waiver requests: *Environmental Protection Information Center v. Forest Service*, 432 F.3d 945 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005); *Forest Guardians v. Department of the Interior*, 416 F.3d 1173 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005); *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Department of Justice*, 365 F.3d 1108 (D.C. Cir. 2004); *Community Legal Services, Inc. v. Department of Housing and Urban Development*, 405 F. Supp. 2d 553 (E.D. Pa. 2005); *Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance v. Bureau of Land Management*, 402 F. Supp. 2d 82 (D.D.C. 2005); *Electronic Privacy Information Center v. Department of Defense*, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5 (D.D.C. 2003). A number of these cases emphasize the admonition in the legislative history of FOIA that the act “is to be liberally construed in favor of waivers for noncommercial requesters.” 132 Cong. Rec. 514,298 (Sept. 30, 1986) (statement of Senator Leahy). *See, e.g., Environmental Protection Information Center*, 432 F.3d at 947; *Forest Guardians*, 416 F.3d at 1178.

Finally, section 552(a)(4)(A)(vi) of FOIA provides: “Nothing in this subparagraph [covering all of the provisions described above] shall supersede fees chargeable under a statute specifically providing for setting the level of fees for particular types of records.” This provision has been raised in some of the waiver litigation, including two decisions that represent a possible split in the circuits concerning its scope. In *Environmental Protection Information Center*, 432 F.3d at 947–49, the Ninth Circuit held that the exception under section 552(a)(4)(A)(vi) extended only to another statute that *mandated* the imposition of fees.

Thus, an otherwise qualified requester was entitled to a fee-waiver under FOIA even if the information requested was covered by another statute that permitted but did not require the charging of fees. *Environmental Protection Information Center*, 432 F.3d at 947–49. In reaching this conclusion, the court quoted from and relied on the OMB guidelines, which clearly state that the FOIA fee provisions are superseded only by another statute that specifically requires an agency to set fees. The court acknowledged that its “result may be at odds with” *Oglesby v. Department of the Army*, 79 F.3d 1172 (D.C. Cir. 1996), which held that a discretionary fee-setting statute came within the section 552(a)(4)(A)(vi) exception. However, the court noted that the *Oglesby* decision did not consider the OMB guidelines. *Environmental Protection Information Center*, 432 F.3d at 949.

In *Oglesby*, a FOIA requester sought records from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), among other sources. NARA denied the requester a FOIA fee waiver on the basis that its statute, which permits but does not require charges, constituted an exception to FOIA.<sup>130</sup> The D.C. Circuit agreed with NARA. The court concluded that under the plain meaning of both statutes, the NARA provision “fits comfortably within the exception carved out in FOIA” section 552(a)(4)(A)(vi). *Oglesby*, 79 F.3d at 1177. However, the *Oglesby* opinion went on to limit its holding:

“We wish . . . to make it clear that we are in no way ruling on a separate argument which *Oglesby* failed to raise in a timely fashion. In a motion filed after oral argument, *Oglesby* pressed the claim that the FOIA subsection (vi) exception excuses a qualified agency only from FOIA’s fee-setting requirements, and not from the fee-waiver provision.”

*Oglesby*, 79 F.3d at 1178. The Ninth Circuit court took a more definitive approach, specifically giving deference to the OMB guidelines and concluding that only statutes setting mandatory fees, rather than statutes setting discretionary ones, could satisfy the exception in 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(vi). *Environmental Protection Information Center v. Forest Service*, 432 F.3d 945, 948–49 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005).

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<sup>130</sup> The NARA statute at 44 U.S.C. § 2116(c) provides in part: “The Archivist may charge a fee set to recover the costs for making or authenticating copies or reproductions of materials transferred to his custody.”

Several user fee provisions were included in the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (COBRA), Pub. L. No. 99-272, 100 Stat. 82 (Apr. 7, 1986). The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) has observed that if the IOAA was the first turning point in user fee legislation in the post-World War II era, COBRA was the second. CBO, *The Growth of Federal User Charges* 19 (1993). This is because several of the COBRA provisions departed from the traditional approach of basing fees on the cost of specific benefits, and instead linked fees to recovering part or all of an agency's operating budget.

One provision of COBRA, the amended version of which is found at 42 U.S.C. § 2213, directed the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to assess annual charges on its licensees so that the annual charges, when added to the fees the NRC was already assessing under the IOAA, would approximate 33 percent of the NRC's operating budget. The annual charges "shall be reasonably related to the regulatory service provided by the Commission and shall fairly reflect the cost to the Commission of providing such service." 42 U.S.C. § 2213(1)(B). A group of licensees sued, arguing that the COBRA provision must be read as incorporating the limitations of the IOAA, otherwise it would amount to an unconstitutional delegation by Congress of its power to tax. The challenge was rejected in *Florida Power & Light Co. v. United States*, 846 F.2d 765 (D.C. Cir. 1988), *cert. denied*, 490 U.S. 1045 (1989). The court first held that COBRA was intended to go beyond the IOAA by authorizing the NRC to recover "generic costs, that is, costs which do not have a specific, identifiable beneficiary." *Florida Power & Light Co.*, 846 F.2d at 769. The court then went on to hold that, even if you wanted to call the annual charges a "tax," the COBRA provision satisfied the Supreme Court's test for a permissible delegation because it provided adequate standards for the implementing agency to apply. *Id.* at 772-76.

The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 added a provision, codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 2214, directing the NRC to collect additional fees and charges. Originally, the collections were to approximate 100 percent of NRC's budget authority. Section 2214 now provides a sliding scale that reduces the collections to 90 percent of the agency's budget. The Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel has determined that this fee extends to and is payable by other federal agencies which hold NRC licenses. 15 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 91 (1991).

Another COBRA provision, now codified at 49 U.S.C. § 60301, directs the Secretary of Transportation to collect annual fees from operators of

various pipeline facilities. The fees are to be calculated to cover the costs of activities under the Natural Gas Pipeline Safety Act of 1968 and the Hazardous Liquid Pipeline Safety Act of 1979, not to exceed 105 percent of the total appropriations made for those activities in a given year. As with the NRC provision noted above, there was no way this provision could pass muster under the rigid interpretations of the IOAA, and, again as with the NRC provision, the operators were in court before the ink on the statute was dry. This time, the litigation produced a Supreme Court decision which once and for all laid to rest the “taxing issue” (bad pun) which had hovered over all user fee statutes since the 1974 IOAA decisions. The case is *Skinner v. Mid-America Pipeline Co.*, 490 U.S. 212 (1989). This time, the plaintiffs conceded that the statute satisfied the requirements of the nondelegation doctrine, but argued that the standards should be tighter when Congress is delegating authority under its taxing power. Not so, held the Court: “Even if the user fees are a form of taxation, we hold that the delegation of discretionary authority under Congress’ taxing power is subject to no constitutional scrutiny greater than that we have applied to other nondelegation challenges.” *Skinner*, 490 U.S. at 223. As to the 1974 IOAA cases:

“*National Cable Television* [415 U.S. 336] and *New England Power* [415 U.S. 345] stand only for the proposition that Congress must indicate clearly its intention to delegate to the Executive the discretionary authority to recover administrative costs not inuring directly to the benefit of regulated parties by imposing additional financial burdens, whether characterized as ‘fees’ or ‘taxes,’ on those parties. . . . Of course, any such delegation must also meet the normal requirements of the nondelegation doctrine.”

*Id.* at 224. Thus, what is important is not whether you call something a fee or a tax, but whether Congress has legislated its intention with sufficient clarity.

Another COBRA provision in this family is 42 U.S.C. § 7178, which directs the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to “assess and collect fees and annual charges in any fiscal year in amounts equal to all of the costs incurred by the Commission in that fiscal year.” *Id.* § 7178(a)(1). Like the NRC statute noted above, this provision does not replace fees charged under other laws but prescribes charges which, when added to those other fees, will reach the desired budgetary goal. In this case, the fees expressly preserved are those authorized under the Federal Power Act. *Id.*

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§ 7178(a)(2). A case interpreting the Power Act fee provision is *City of Vanceburg v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 571 F.2d 630 (D.C. Cir. 1977), *cert. denied*, 439 U.S. 818 (1978). Cases interpreting the COBRA provision, 42 U.S.C. § 7178, include *Michigan Public Power Agency v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 405 F.3d 8 (D.C. Cir. 2005); *Midwest Independent Transmission System Operator, Inc. v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 388 F.3d 903 (D.C. Cir. 2004); and *City of Tacoma v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 331 F.3d 106 (D.C. Cir. 2003).

A final example is 21 U.S.C. § 886a, enacted as part of the Justice Department’s 1993 appropriation act.<sup>131</sup> It directs the Drug Enforcement Administration to set fees under its diversion control program “at a level that ensures the recovery of the full costs of operating the various aspects of that program.” 21 U.S.C. § 886a(1)(C). In *American Medical Ass’n v. Reno*, 857 F. Supp. 80 (D.D.C. 1994), the court held the IOAA inapplicable, rejecting what has become almost a ritualistic challenge that the restrictive IOAA standards should continue to govern. The *Reno* decision was remanded on appeal. *American Medical Ass’n v. Reno*, 57 F.3d 1129 (D.C. Cir. 1995). The court of appeals did not challenge the underlying legality of the fee nor did it address the IOAA issue. Rather, it held only that the rulemaking on which the fees were based violated the Administrative Procedure Act, 5 U.S.C §§ 553(b)–(c), by providing inadequate information as to how the components of the fee were determined. Indeed, the appeals court declined to vacate the rule at the time of remand in view of the likelihood that the fees were not “grossly out of line” and that the agency could come up with the necessary explanation to justify them. *Reno*, 57 F.3d at 135. Presumably, the agency did so since there is no reported subsequent history for this case.

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## 5. Disposition of Fees

The rule governing the accounting and disposition of user fees is the same rule that governs the accounting and disposition of receipts in general—they must, as required by 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts unless the agency has statutory authority to do something else.

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<sup>131</sup> Pub. L. No. 102-395, § 111(b), 106 Stat. 1828, 1843 (Oct. 6, 1992).

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- a. Fees under the Independent Offices Appropriation Act
- Normally, fees collected under the authority of the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) must be deposited as miscellaneous receipts. *E.g.*, [B-302825, Dec. 22, 2004](#); [49 Comp. Gen. 17 \(1969\)](#). The original version of the IOAA specifically included the miscellaneous receipts requirement (65 Stat. 290). When the IOAA became 31 U.S.C. § 9701 in 1982, the recodifiers dropped the miscellaneous receipts language because there was no need for the IOAA to repeat what was already clearly the case by virtue of the general requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). See the Revision Note following 31 U.S.C. § 9701. As the Claims Court has pointed out, there is no other significance to the deletion. *Bunge Corp. v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 511, 516 n.2 (1984), *aff'd*, 765 F.2d 162 (Fed. Cir. 1985).

Of course, Congress is always free to legislate exceptions. Thus, it is possible to have a fee authorized and governed by the IOAA but with specific authority for a different disposition in whole or in part. See [B-307319, Aug. 23, 2007](#); [B-215127, Oct. 30, 1984](#). Several of the decisions cited in section D.6 of this chapter, in our case study of U.S. Customs and Border Protection fees, provide specific examples.

- b. Fees under Other Authorities

Again, the rule is the same—the fees are deposited as miscellaneous receipts unless Congress has provided otherwise. As noted earlier, the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) itself reinforces this result by expressly preserving, in 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c)(1), any other statute which addresses the disposition of fees. This provision looks both forward and backward. For later enacted statutes, the result would at least arguably be the same under the specific *versus* general canon. For statutes predating the IOAA, section 9701(c)(1) eliminates any possibility of an implied repeal or “later enactment of Congress” argument. See, *e.g.*, [36 Comp. Gen. 75 \(1956\)](#). Thus, there is no need to determine when a given fee statute was enacted. If it is silent as to disposition, the miscellaneous receipts statute governs. If it specifically addresses disposition, its own terms control.

It is not at all uncommon for fee statutes to address disposition. The precise approach varies depending on what Congress is trying to accomplish, or perhaps what the agency is able to persuade its oversight committees to permit, but it is nevertheless possible to identify broad categories.

(1) Miscellaneous receipts

Although silence would produce the same result, a number of statutes expressly require that the fees be deposited as miscellaneous receipts. One

example is the statute requiring a percentage deduction from awards of the Iran-United States Claims Tribunal. The statute specifies that amounts deducted “shall be deposited into the Treasury of the United States to the credit of miscellaneous receipts.” Pub. L. No. 99-93, § 502(b), 99 Stat. 405, 438 (Aug. 16, 1985), 50 U.S.C. § 1701 note. Another example is 44 U.S.C. § 1307(b) (fees received by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration from sale and/or licensing of nautical or aeronautical products).

Congress sometimes uses the term “general fund” which, for deposit purposes, is synonymous with “miscellaneous receipts.” See Chapter 6, section E.2. Thus, application fees paid to the Federal Communications Commission are to be “deposited in the general fund of the Treasury.” 47 U.S.C. § 158(e). The same language is used for permit fees paid to the Secretary of Commerce by owners or operators of foreign fishing vessels. 16 U.S.C. § 1824(b)(10)(B).

Miscellaneous receipts is a particularly appropriate disposition when the fees are intended to recoup the operating budget of some agency or activity rather than augment the agency’s operating funds. For example, we noted earlier 42 U.S.C. § 7178, which directs the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to assess fees to recover all of its costs. The statute goes on to provide that “[a]ll moneys received under this section shall be credited to the general fund of the Treasury.” 42 U.S.C. § 7178(f).

(2) Credit to agency’s appropriation

Another group of fee statutes authorizes the agency to retain the fees for credit to its own operating appropriations. This approach is used when Congress wants to let an agency augment its appropriation and finance a greater program level than would be possible under the amount Congress is willing to appropriate directly. Perhaps the clearest form of augmentation approach is the fee statute for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 21 U.S.C. § 379h. Section 379h(g)(1) provides in part: “Fees . . . shall be collected and made available for obligation only to the extent and in the amount provided in advance in appropriations Acts. Such fees are authorized to remain available until expended.”

The augmentation feature is highlighted by 21 U.S.C. § 379h(f)(1), under which fees in any fiscal year must be triggered by a Salaries and Expenses appropriation at least equal to a specified base year. Lest anyone think these user fees are pocket change, the FDA’s 2006 appropriation act



appropriated over \$305 million in fees under section 379h to the FDA's Salaries and Expenses account. Pub. L. No. 109-97, title VI, 119 Stat. 2120, 2147 (Nov. 10, 2005).

Another situation in which Congress may authorize crediting to an appropriation account is where the fee amounts primarily to reimbursement of expenses borne by the receiving appropriation. Some examples are:

- The Department of Agriculture may sell various products and services of the National Agricultural Library, at prices set to at least recoup costs. Sale proceeds “shall be deposited in the Treasury of the United States to the credit of the applicable appropriation and shall remain available until expended.” 7 U.S.C. § 3125a(f).
- Another Agriculture Department statute authorizes the furnishing of departmental paper or electronic publications at “reasonable” fees. 7 U.S.C. § 2242a(a)(2). The fees may be used to pay related costs and “may be credited to appropriations or funds that incur such costs.” 7 U.S.C. § 2242a(c)(2).
- The State Department is authorized to incur certain expenses incident to procuring information for private parties on a reimbursable basis. Reimbursements are to be “credited to the appropriation under which the expenditure was charged.” 22 U.S.C. § 2661.
- Military departments may furnish stevedoring and terminal services and facilities to certain vessels at “fair and reasonable rates.” 10 U.S.C. § 2633(b). Proceeds “shall be paid to the credit of the appropriation or fund out of which the services or facilities were supplied.” 10 U.S.C. § 2633(c).

To determine the availability of amounts collected, each statute must be examined in two important respects. First, statutes which authorize crediting of fees to operating appropriations may require further congressional action to make the fees available for obligation, like 21 U.S.C. § 379h, or may, like 7 U.S.C. § 3125a, in effect permanently appropriate the receipts similar to a revolving fund.

Second, the statute may direct which fiscal year receives the credit. For example, reimbursements to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for detention, transportation, hospitalization, and other expenses of

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detained aliens “shall be credited to the appropriation for the enforcement of this chapter for the fiscal year in which the expenses were incurred.” 8 U.S.C. § 1356(a). Although not a user fee statute, the very next subsection illustrates the contrasting approach. Moneys spent by ICE to purchase evidence and subsequently recovered are “reimbursed to the current appropriation” of ICE. *Id.* § 1356(b). More directly on point is 10 U.S.C. § 2686(b), under which proceeds from the sale of certain utilities and related services by military departments “shall be credited to the appropriation currently available for the supply of that utility or service.”

Collections credited to appropriation accounts are a form of offsetting collection (GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 29), and some statutes use this terminology. Federal Communications Commission regulatory fees “shall be deposited as an offsetting collection in, and credited to, the account providing appropriations to carry out the functions of the Commission.” 47 U.S.C. § 159(e). Similarly, the Science, State, Justice, Commerce, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, contains several provisions authorizing agencies to retain certain fee proceeds as “offsetting collections” to help fund the activities that generate the fees. *See, e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 109-108, 119 Stat. 2290, 2292 (Antitrust Division, Department of Justice), 2330 (Federal Trade Commission), 2331–32 (Securities and Exchange Commission) (Nov. 22, 2005). Use of the offsetting collection language is of significance primarily for budgetary purposes and by itself has no impact on the availability of the money to the agency.

### (3) Special account or fund

In addition to crediting fees to an agency appropriation, Congress can “dedicate” the fees to a particular purpose by authorizing deposit to a revolving fund, a trust account, or a “special account,” which simply means a receipt account earmarked by statute for a particular purpose.<sup>132</sup> The special account may be permanently appropriated, or it may require further congressional action to make the funds available for obligation. An example of the former is the treatment of Department of Agriculture grain inspection fees under 7 U.S.C. § 79. Section 79(j) provides:

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<sup>132</sup> *See* GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 4.

“Such fees, and the proceeds from the sale of samples obtained for purposes of official inspection which become the property of the United States, shall be deposited into a fund which shall be available without fiscal year limitation for the expenses of the Secretary incident to providing services under this chapter.”

The statute may direct deposit into an already existing fund. The Agriculture Department also charges fees for grain weighing services; they are “deposited into the fund created in section 79(j) of this title.” 7 U.S.C. § 79a(l)(1). Another example is 13 U.S.C. § 8(d) which governs the disposition of fees for certain documents and services furnished by the Census Bureau:

“All moneys received in payment for work or services enumerated under this section shall be deposited in a separate account which may be used to pay directly the costs of such work or services, to repay appropriations which initially bore all or part of such costs, or to refund excess sums when necessary.”

An example requiring further congressional action is section 304(b) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, 43 U.S.C. § 1734(b), which provides in part: “The moneys received for reasonable costs under this subsection shall be deposited with the Treasury in a special account and are hereby authorized to be appropriated and made available until expended.”

Similar to many of the statutes authorizing credit to appropriations, statutes establishing special accounts may prescribe that the deposits be treated as offsetting receipts.<sup>133</sup> An example is 21 U.S.C. § 886a, which establishes “in the general fund of the Treasury a separate account which shall be known as the Diversion Control Fee Account.” Certain fees charged by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) are deposited in the account “as offsetting receipts,” and are periodically refunded by Treasury to the DEA to reimburse expenses incurred in the DEA’s diversion control program, the target being the recovery of the program’s full

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<sup>133</sup> An offsetting *receipt* is a form of offsetting collection which is credited to a receipt account rather than an appropriation account. *Glossary*, at 30–31. Again, the terminology is significant primarily for budgetary purposes.

operating costs. The Department of Homeland Security has several similar accounts, including 8 U.S.C. §§ 1356(h) (Immigration User Fee Account), 1356(m) (Immigration Examinations Fee Account), and 1356(q) (Land Border Inspection Fee Account), all of which specify treatment of deposits as offsetting receipts.

Finally, there are instances where offsetting receipts terminology is used solely for accounting purposes and not tied in to any form of dedicated or earmarked account. An example is the following Coast Guard statute, 14 U.S.C. § 664(b): “Amounts collected by the Secretary for a service or thing of value provided by the Coast Guard shall be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury as proprietary receipts of the department in which the Coast Guard is operating and ascribed to Coast Guard activities.”<sup>134</sup>

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6. U.S. Customs and  
Border Protection: A  
Case Study

Because of the nature of its mission, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) of the Department of Homeland Security, formerly the Customs Service,<sup>135</sup> has considerable exposure to the private sector in its day-to-day operations. This exposure in turn enhances the agency’s potential for various forms of user financing. A survey of cases and statutes dealing with user financing in CBP is instructive because it illustrates in practice virtually every concept and principle we have covered thus far in our discussion.

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<sup>134</sup> A “proprietary receipt” is simply a type of offsetting receipt representing collections from outside the government. *Glossary*, at 31.

<sup>135</sup> The Homeland Security Act, Pub. L. No. 107-296, 116 Stat. 2135 (Nov. 25, 2002), established the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and provided for the transfer of the U.S. Customs Service from the Department of the Treasury to DHS, with DHS generally to assume responsibility for administering the customs laws of the United States. *See* 6 U.S.C. §§ 202(6), 203(1), 211. In accordance with section 1502 of the Act, the President provided a DHS reorganization plan modification renaming the Customs Service as U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and making it responsible for the resources and missions relating to borders and ports of entry of the Customs Service and the former Immigration and Naturalization Service of the Justice Department. *See Reorganization Plan Modification for the Department of Homeland Security*, H.R. Doc. No. 108-32, at 4 (2003), available at [www.gpoaccess.gov/serialset/cdocuments/108cat1.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/serialset/cdocuments/108cat1.html) (last visited Mar. 20, 2008). The older cases discussed and cited in this section refer to the former Customs Service and we have left those references for illustrative purposes. Otherwise, we refer to CBP. The two terms should be considered interchangeable for purposes of this discussion.

In the decades before the Independent Offices Appropriation Act (IOAA) was enacted, the Customs Service was in the same boat as most other agencies, and various proposals for user financing had to be rejected. *E.g.*, [11 Comp. Gen. 153 \(1931\)](#); [10 Comp. Gen. 209 \(1930\)](#); [3 Comp. Gen. 128 \(1923\)](#); [2 Comp. Gen. 775 \(1923\)](#). It made no difference that the private parties were perfectly willing to pay, and in many cases had in fact initiated the offer, in order to get services over and above what Customs was able or willing to provide. In addition, the proposals often involved paying the salaries of customs officials which, without congressional authorization, would have amounted to an improper augmentation of the agency's appropriations. [2 Comp. Gen. at 776](#). To make matters worse, a provision of the criminal code (now found at 18 U.S.C. § 209) makes it illegal for anyone to supplement or contribute to the salary of a government employee and for the employee to accept it.

Once the IOAA was enacted, Customs began to explore its new options. A series of decisions approved proposals to assess user fees for a variety of services, including the following:

- Preclearance of air passengers at major airports in Canada over and above what the operation would cost if performed entirely in the United States. [48 Comp. Gen. 24 \(1968\)](#). Preclearance, it could be demonstrated, conferred a financial benefit on the airlines and, some felt, attracted passengers. *Id.* at 25.
- Additional costs of extended hours at certain highway crossing points along the Canadian and Mexican borders. [48 Comp. Gen. 262 \(1968\)](#). This case, as did [48 Comp. Gen. 24](#), pointed out that the charges could include employee compensation. In effect, the authority of the IOAA removed both the augmentation concern and the potential bar of 18 U.S.C. § 209.
- Reimbursement for the services of a customs officer upon the temporary designation of a community airport as an international airport. [B-171027, Dec. 7, 1970](#).
- Reimbursement (which could include free or reduced-rate transportation or accommodations) of the costs of providing employees to train private travel agents in Custom's regulations and procedures. [62 Comp. Gen. 262 \(1983\)](#).

In addition, each of these decisions noted that Customs could, as specifically authorized by 19 U.S.C. § 1524, credit the fees to the appropriations from which the costs in question had been paid. That statute had been on the books long before the IOAA, and, as we have seen, 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c) expressly defers to any specific disposition authority. A similar provision is 19 U.S.C. § 1755(b), reflected in CBP's regulations at 19 C.F.R. § 147.33, which requires that fair operators reimburse the United States government for "actual and necessary" expenses of services provided in connection with trade fairs, the reimbursement to be credited to the appropriation from which the expenses were paid.

In a 1980 decision, GAO was called upon to review its 1968 preclearance decision, 48 Comp. Gen. 24, in light of the intervening judicial decisions which had restrictively interpreted the IOAA. Some airlines had argued that preclearance was really for the benefit of the general public. However, Customs pointed out that preclearance was provided only when an airline specifically requested it. Accordingly, based on the body of jurisprudence from the Supreme Court and the courts of appeals, GAO agreed with Customs that the fees were within the scope of the IOAA. 59 Comp. Gen. 389 (1980). Among the costs Customs could recover were those specified in its regulations (19 C.F.R. § 24.18), including housing allowances, post of duty allowances, certain transportation costs, and equipment, supplies, and administrative costs. In addition, the agency could include that portion of the costs of its computerized data processing system attributable to the preclearance sites. 59 Comp. Gen. at 395.

Of course, there are limits on how far you can take the IOAA; another 1980 decision, 59 Comp. Gen. 294, illustrates one of them. The Miami International Airport is a busy place, and long delays incident to customs clearance were producing a lot of complaints. Local business and community leaders suggested that the airport or airlines might reimburse Customs to permit it to hire additional staff to expedite clearance during normal business hours. Congress had authorized Customs to charge for certain overtime services and for certain "special services" performed during normal duty hours. The Miami proposal involved neither situation, however. Accordingly, the decision concluded:

"Since the Congress has appropriated monies to provide for the salary of Customs inspectors to perform clearance functions during regular business hours and has authorized the collection of fees only for certain special services, . . . the collection of funds for clearance services performed

during regular business hours on behalf of the general public would constitute an augmentation of the appropriations made by the Congress for performing such services.”

59 Comp. Gen. at 296.

While all of this IOAA activity was going on, Customs had several other statutes which authorized it to do certain specific things on a reimbursable basis. Examples are 19 U.S.C. §§ 1447 (supervise the unloading of cargo from vessels at locations other than ports of entry); 1456 (compensation of customs officer stationed on a vessel or vehicle proceeding from one port of entry to another); 1457 (customs officer directed to remain on vessel or vehicle to protect revenue); 1458 (supervise unloading of bulk cargo under extension of time limit); and 1555(a) (supervise receipt and delivery of merchandise to and from bonded warehouses). These statutes direct that the compensation of the customs officers performing the services “shall be reimbursed” by the appropriate owner, proprietor, or “party in interest.”<sup>136</sup> These and other situations are set forth in CBP’s regulations, 19 C.F.R. § 24.17. At one time, the reimbursement obligation was held to include statutorily retroactive salary increases. [31 Comp. Gen. 417 \(1952\)](#). However, that is no longer the case. [55 Comp. Gen. 226 \(1975\)](#).

The relationship of these specific statutes to the IOAA was the subject of [55 Comp. Gen. 456 \(1975\)](#). Under 31 U.S.C. § 9701(c), the IOAA yields to other statutes which prohibit the collection of a fee, or either fix the amount of a fee or prescribe the basis for determining it. The statutes in question do none of these things, nor was there any indication that any of them were intended to be exclusive. Accordingly, Customs could recover the kinds of costs authorized under the IOAA—specifically, administrative overhead—in addition to the reimbursements required by the other statutes. CBP regulations (19 C.F.R. § 24.21) now include administrative overhead.

A highly unusual approach is found in 19 U.S.C. § 58a. In addition to the statutes noted above, Customs had several other user fee statutes, some of which were old and prescribed fees which had long ago become

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<sup>136</sup> “Party in interest” for purposes of 19 U.S.C. § 1447 can include another federal agency. See [48 Comp. Gen. 622 \(1969\)](#) (services performed on air force base billed to Department of the Air Force).

economically obsolete (for example, 20 cents for various documents). Legislation enacted in 1978<sup>137</sup> repealed several of these old laws and replaced them with 19 U.S.C. § 58a, a simple authorization for the Secretary of the Treasury to charge fees to recover the costs of services “similar to or the same as services furnished by customs officers under the sections repealed by subsection (a).” Problem is, “subsection (a)” refers to the 1978 legislation and is nothing more than the repealer provision. Therefore, in order to determine what services are covered by section 58a, it is necessary to consult the 1976 edition of the United States Code. See, for example, 19 U.S.C. § 58 (1976) for the 20-cent items noted above.

During the mid-1980s, Customs, like other parts of the federal government, received additional user fee authority. The process started innocuously enough with a provision of the Trade and Tariff Act of 1984,<sup>138</sup> now codified at 19 U.S.C. § 58b, which authorized user fees to cover the cost of providing customs service at a number of small airports, defined as those whose volume or value of business is not sufficient to otherwise justify the availability of customs services. Fees were to be deposited in a special account dedicated to the particular airport which earned them, but required further appropriation action to make them available for obligation. Two years later, the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (COBRA) amended the funding provision to permanently appropriate the fees, but retained the dedication aspect and emphasized that the fees could not be used for any other purpose.<sup>139</sup> The law was expanded in 1989 to include seaports and other facilities.<sup>140</sup>

Then came 19 U.S.C. § 58c. Although its origin in COBRA 1985 was humble enough, it has evolved into a statute of nearly indescribable complexity.<sup>141</sup> Given its level of detail, it clearly displaces the IOAA to the extent of its coverage. The law prescribes a schedule of fees, a mixture of fixed fees

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<sup>137</sup> Pub. L. No. 95-410, § 214, 92 Stat. 888, 904 (Oct. 3, 1978).

<sup>138</sup> Pub. L. No. 98-573, § 236, 98 Stat. 2948, 2992–93 (Oct. 30, 1984).

<sup>139</sup> Pub. L. No. 99-272, § 13032, 100 Stat. 82, 310–11 (Apr. 7, 1986).

<sup>140</sup> Pub. L. No. 101-207, § 3(f), 103 Stat. 1833, 1835 (Dec. 7, 1989).

<sup>141</sup> A good piece, although ending in 1988 because it was written in 1988, is Frederick M. Kaiser, *U.S. Customs Service User Fees: A Variety of Charges and Counter Charges*, 8 Public Budgeting & Finance 78 (1988). More recent information may be found in GAO, *Customs Service: Information on User Fees*, GAO/GGD-94-165FS (Washington, D.C.: June 17, 1994).



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and *ad valorem* levies, applicable to a variety of passenger and merchandise processing services. It also includes a variety of qualifications and limitations.<sup>142</sup>

Disposition of the fees, which could be the subject of a board game, is addressed in 19 U.S.C. § 58c(f). Merchandise processing fees—those prescribed by sections 58c(a)(9) and (a)(10)—are deposited in the Customs User Fee Account, a separate account in the Treasury, where they are available, to the extent provided in appropriation acts, to pay the costs of CBP’s commercial operations. The rest of the fees—those prescribed by 19 U.S.C. § 58c(a) except for subsections (9) and (10)—are permanently appropriated to be used for a number of purposes that the statute spells out in great detail, including reimbursement for costs of premium pay and overtime compensation, agency retirement and disability contributions, and deficit reduction transfer to the Treasury.

The advent of statutes like 19 U.S.C. § 58c has an obvious impact on the kind of analysis needed to resolve problems. Questions of agency discretion under broad statutory language are necessarily replaced by an almost algebraic application of excruciatingly detailed provisions. An example is [71 Comp. Gen. 444 \(1992\)](#), in which GAO concluded that Customs was not authorized to charge express air freight carriers for clearance services at centralized hub facilities during normal duty hours. Another decision advised that user fees reimbursed to appropriations under 19 U.S.C. § 58c(f) could be used to defray inspectional overtime costs in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico but not the U.S. Virgin Islands. [B-253292, Dec. 30, 1994](#).

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## 7. User Fee as Grant Condition

In Chapter 10 on grants, we present the established proposition that Congress may, within constitutional bounds, attach conditions to the receipt of federal money. Congress is not required to establish grant programs, and if it chooses to do so, may use the “carrot and stick” approach to foster some policy objective. An example is section 204(b) of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, also known as the Clean Water Act, 33 U.S.C. § 1284(b).

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<sup>142</sup> For a case interpreting 19 U.S.C. § 58c and rejecting a challenge to one of the fees imposed under it, see *Princess Cruises, Inc. v. United States*, 201 F.3d 1352, 1360–62 (Fed. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 530 U.S. 1274 (2000).

As amended in 1972, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act authorizes the Environmental Protection Agency to make grants for the construction of publicly owned waste treatment facilities up to a specified percentage of construction costs. 33 U.S.C. §§ 1281(g), 1282. The law includes the following condition:

“[T]he Administrator shall not approve any grant for any treatment works under [33 U.S.C. § 1281(g)(1)] . . . unless he shall first have determined that the applicant has adopted or will adopt a system of charges to assure that each recipient of waste treatment services within the applicant’s jurisdiction . . . will pay its proportionate share . . . of the costs of operation and maintenance (including replacement) of any waste treatment services provided by the applicant[.]”

33 U.S.C. § 1284(b)(1). The requirement that grant applicants adopt user charge systems has two purposes: first, to assure adequate funding once the plant is constructed, and second, to encourage water conservation. *City of New Brunswick v. Borough of Milltown*, 519 F. Supp. 878, 883 (D.N.J. 1981), *aff’d*, 686 F.2d 120 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1982), *cert. denied*, 459 U.S. 1201 (1983).

A number of localities which employed *ad valorem* tax systems complained and argued that an *ad valorem* tax should be acceptable. An *ad valorem* tax is one which is based on the value of the property being taxed. The question reached the Comptroller General who concluded in [54 Comp. Gen. 1 \(1974\)](#) that an *ad valorem* tax could not be used to satisfy the user charge requirement of 33 U.S.C. § 1284(b)(1). The decision quoted extensively from legislative history. As explained in several subsequent letters (*e.g.*, [B-183788, Feb. 25, 1976](#), and [B-166506, Oct. 31, 1974](#)), the decision rested on several grounds:

- The statute, supported by more legislative history than one normally finds, clearly contemplated a user charge system, not a tax system.
- An *ad valorem* tax would violate the statutory requirement that each recipient pay its proportionate share because (a) tax-exempt users would not contribute, and (b) certain taxable nonusers—industrial facilities with their own waste treatment systems and residences with their own septic systems—would pay more than their proportionate share.

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- An *ad valorem* tax system would not further the goal of promoting water conservation.

GAO emphasized that it was not going to get into the business of evaluating one user charge system against another, but noted that a system which included a minimum usage charge did not appear legally objectionable. [B-183788, Feb. 25, 1976](#); [B-183788, Jan. 14, 1976](#). The important thing is that whatever system is adopted must “achieve a greater degree of proportionality among users than is obtainable through an *ad valorem* tax system.” [B-183788, June 13, 1975](#), at 2.

The controversy continued and, as documented in [B-166506, Aug. 26, 1974](#), at least one major city turned down a grant rather than change its system. The concluding sentence of [54 Comp. Gen. 1](#) had advised EPA to seek a legislative solution if it felt *ad valorem* taxes would be appropriate in some circumstances. *Id.* at 5. This was done, and 33 U.S.C. § 1284(b)(1) was amended in 1977<sup>143</sup> to make an *ad valorem* tax acceptable if (1) it is a dedicated tax; (2) it was in use as of December 27, 1977, the date of the amendment; and (3) it “results in the distribution of operation and maintenance costs for treatment works within the applicant’s jurisdiction, to each user class, in proportion to the contribution to the total cost of operation and maintenance of such works by each user class.” Thus, the amended version of the law would continue to use the federal financial “carrot” to influence the choice in all future cases, but would not force an applicant who already had a qualifying *ad valorem* system in place to change. EPA’s regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 35.929-1(b), set forth the requirements for a “dedicated” tax.

GAO’s 1974 decision recognized the difficulty of achieving true proportionality short of using meters, “which no one contends are required.” [54 Comp. Gen.](#) at 5. Some localities did go to a metering system, and this too produced its complaints. *See, e.g.*, [B-183788, June 13, 1975](#). The 1977 amendment to 33 U.S.C. § 1284 added subsection (b)(4), which specifies that a system of charges “may be based on something other than metering,” as long as the applicant has a system to assure that the necessary funds for operation and maintenance will be available, and residential users are notified as to what portion of their total payment is allocated to waste treatment services. Pub. L. No. 95-217, § 22.

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<sup>143</sup> Pub. L. No. 95-217, § 22, 91 Stat. 1566, 1572–73 (Dec. 25, 1977).

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The user charge condition has been upheld as a legitimate exercise of the congressional power to fix the terms on which it disburses federal money. *Middlesex County Utilities Authority v. Borough of Sayreville*, 690 F.2d 358 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1982), *cert. denied*, 460 U.S. 1023 (1983); *City of New Brunswick v. Borough of Milltown*, 686 F.2d 120 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1982), *cert. denied*, 459 U.S. 1201 (1983). In addition, both cases upheld EPA's right to withhold or suspend grant payments for noncompliance. *See also Metropolitan Saint Louis Sewer District v. Ruckelshaus*, 590 F. Supp. 385, 388 (E.D. Mo. 1984) (EPA's right to withhold funds conceded). EPA's remedies are spelled out in its regulations. *See* 40 C.F.R. §§ 35.929, 35.965.

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## E. Motor Vehicles

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### 1. Acquisition

#### a. Need for Statutory Authority

Statutory controls over the acquisition and use of motor vehicles date back to 1914 with the enactment of what is now 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). The 1914 law required specific authority to use appropriated funds “for the purchase of any motor-propelled or horse-drawn passenger-carrying vehicle for the service of any of the executive departments or other Government establishments, or any branch of the Government service.”<sup>144</sup> The law was restated and amended as part of the Administrative Expenses Act of 1946<sup>145</sup> to delete the quadruped reference and to exempt vehicles for the use of the President, “secretaries to the President,” or the heads of the departments listed in 5 U.S.C. § 101 (the cabinet departments). Other exemptions are listed in 31 U.S.C. § 1343(e). The statute also requires specific authority to use appropriations, other than those of the armed forces, to buy, maintain, or operate aircraft. 31 U.S.C. § 1343(d).

In what may be record time, the first decision under the original law, 21 Comp. Dec. 14 (1914), was issued just seven days after enactment. In it, the Comptroller of the Treasury confirmed that the statute applies to the entire federal government regardless of geographical location, and to all appropriations, no-year as well as annual. It does not, however, apply to

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<sup>144</sup> Pub. L. No. 63-127, § 5, 38 Stat. 454, 508 (July 16, 1914).

<sup>145</sup> Pub. L. No. 79-600, § 16(a), 60 Stat. 806, 810 (Aug. 2, 1946).

mixed-ownership government corporations. [B-94685-O.M., May 8, 1950](#) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation).

The major issue of the early decades of the statute’s life was the definition of “passenger vehicle,” attributable in part perhaps to the fact that the “motor car” was still somewhat of a novelty. Short of Rosebud, virtually every contrivance in or on which a human could ride was the subject of a decision. Of course, this was more than academic. If a given vehicle did qualify as a passenger vehicle, it was—and is—subject to the statutory requirement for specific authority. If it did not so qualify, then unless there was some other applicable restriction, its acquisition was simply a matter of applying the “necessary expense” doctrine. *E.g.*, [18 Comp. Gen. 226 \(1938\)](#).

As one might expect, the key distinction was between a passenger vehicle and a truck. The statute “has no effect whatever” on the purchase of trucks. [21 Comp. Dec. 38 \(1914\)](#). It does not apply to a pickup truck ([16 Comp. Gen. 320 \(1936\)](#)) or a panel truck ([29 Comp. Gen. 213 \(1949\)](#)). An agency’s appropriations are available to buy a truck without regard to 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b) if, as noted above, the expenditure is “reasonably necessary to carry out the object for which the appropriation is made.” [18 Comp. Gen. at 227](#). The fact that the truck may be used to transport personnel is not controlling. [2 Comp. Gen. 573 \(1923\)](#); [B-150028-O.M., Nov. 16, 1962](#). *See also* [3 Comp. Gen. 900 \(1924\)](#).

From these and similar decisions, the following test developed:

“[T]he question whether a vehicle is ‘passenger-carrying’ must be determined from the character of the vehicle as shown by its construction and design, and not from its intended use, and where it appears that the automobile is in fact a passenger-carrying vehicle, the prohibition of [31 U.S.C. § 1343(b)] applies irrespective of the purpose of the Government department or agency involved to convert it to other usages. . . . That is to say, the provisions of the act may not be evaded upon the plea that a passenger-carrying automobile, once acquired, will be used otherwise than for the transportation of passengers.”

[16 Comp. Gen. 260, 261 \(1936\)](#). Similar statements appear in numerous decisions, for example, [8 Comp. Gen. 636, 637 \(1929\)](#) and [23 Comp. Dec. 19, 20 \(1916\)](#).

Thus, a station wagon clearly is a passenger vehicle. [26 Comp. Gen. 542 \(1947\)](#); [15 Comp. Gen. 451 \(1935\)](#); [14 Comp. Gen. 367 \(1934\)](#). So is an ordinary motorcycle. [22 Comp. Dec. 324 \(1916\)](#). And a prison van. [26 Comp. Dec. 879 \(1920\)](#). However, “jeeps” have been held not to be passenger vehicles for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). [23 Comp. Gen. 955 \(1944\)](#).<sup>146</sup> Nor are motor boats or aircraft, “vehicle” being defined in terms of land transportation. [24 Comp. Gen. 184 \(1944\)](#); [26 Comp. Dec. 904 \(1920\)](#); [22 Comp. Dec. 262 \(1915\)](#). Initially, the Comptroller of the Treasury held the statute inapplicable to ambulances. [21 Comp. Dec. 830 \(1915\)](#). However, the specific exemption for ambulances from the later-enacted price limitation provision of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(c), discussed further below, showed that Congress “has classified ambulances as passenger vehicles and thus subject to the prohibition against purchase without specific authorization.” [33 Comp. Gen. 539, 540 \(1954\)](#). *See also* [41 Comp. Gen. 227, 229 \(1961\)](#).

Stating the test in terms of construction and design rather than intended use inevitably led to a number of cases dealing with a variety of structural and other alterations. In the most simple situation, painting “truck” on the door of a limousine does not make it a truck. *See* [23 Comp. Dec. 19, 20 \(1916\)](#). Slight changes, such as adding a tool box or similar attachment to a passenger vehicle, do not change the vehicle’s character. [21 Comp. Dec. 116 \(1914\)](#); [B-117843-O.M., Jan. 27, 1954](#). However, structural alterations which are of sufficient magnitude to preclude use of a vehicle for carrying passengers will remove it from the statute’s coverage. [24 Comp. Gen. 123 \(1944\)](#); [B-115608, June 16, 1953](#); [B-62865, Jan. 30, 1947](#). The converse is equally true. [33 Comp. Gen. 539 \(1954\)](#) (panel truck converted to ambulance use thereby became a passenger vehicle). Similarly, although an ordinary motorcycle is regarded as a passenger vehicle, a motorcycle constructed and equipped for freight-carrying purposes loses its character as a passenger vehicle. [4 Comp. Gen. 141 \(1924\)](#); [27 Comp. Dec. 1016 \(1921\)](#).

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<sup>146</sup> The courts have held that a jeep is a passenger vehicle for transportation rate classification purposes. *E.g.*, *Union Pacific Railroad Co. v. United States*, 91 F. Supp. 762 (Ct. Cl. 1950) (the leading case on the point); *United States v. Louisville & Nashville Railroad*, 217 F.2d 307 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1954). Although GAO followed these cases in its former transportation rate decisions (*e.g.*, [B-145028, Aug. 8, 1961](#)), the transportation rate cases have never been held to affect [23 Comp. Gen. 955](#).

While the statement of the test in many of the decisions suggests that the intended use of the vehicle is irrelevant, this is not entirely accurate. In one very early case, for example, GAO advised something called the Federal Board for Vocational Education that it could, without specific authority, purchase unserviceable vehicles to be used for instructional purposes in shops and classrooms. [1 Comp. Gen. 58 \(1921\)](#). Similarly, passenger automobiles to be used for research or testing purposes and not as a means of transportation have been viewed as exempt from 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). [49 Comp. Gen. 202 \(1969\)](#) (air pollution control testing); [1 Comp. Gen. 360 \(1922\)](#) (fuel consumption testing). *See also* [4 Comp. Gen. 270 \(1924\)](#) (automobile chassis as part of defense mobile searchlight unit). In such cases, an appropriate certification should appear on or accompany the voucher. [49 Comp. Gen. at 204](#); [1 Comp. Gen. at 361](#).

The original 1914 version of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b) used only the word “purchase.” However, it was soon held that purchase included “hire,” at least hire by the month or year, and certainly an indefinite hire; otherwise, the prohibition would be a sham. [4 Comp. Gen. 836 \(1925\)](#); [21 Comp. Dec. 462 \(1915\)](#). The statutory language was expanded to “purchase or hire” in the 1946 amendment, and hire became “lease” in the 1982 codification of title 31 of the United States Code. This does not apply to the rental of taxicabs or other vehicles on a “per trip” basis incident to the normal performance of day-to-day business. [33 Comp. Gen. 563 \(1954\)](#); [2 Comp. Gen. 693 \(1923\)](#); [21 Comp. Dec. at 463](#). Nor does it apply to the rental of vehicles by employees on official travel. [24 Comp. Dec. 189 \(1917\)](#). If purchase included hire under the early decisions for purposes of the prohibition, the authority to purchase logically should include the authority to hire. [4 Comp. Gen. 453 \(1924\)](#); [22 Comp. Dec. 187 \(1915\)](#). The issue has not been revisited since hire was specifically added to the statute, but there appears to be no compelling reason for a different result.

The statute specifies that the concept of purchase includes a transfer between agencies. 31 U.S.C. § 1343(a). Thus, the transfer of a vehicle declared excess under 40 U.S.C. §§ 521–522, with or without reimbursement, is a purchase requiring specific authority under 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). [44 Comp. Gen. 117 \(1964\)](#). However, this is true only where the transfer has the effect of augmenting the number of vehicles the receiving agency is authorized to have. The statute does not apply to transfers without reimbursement for replacement or upgrading purposes where the receiving agency reports an equal number of vehicles as excess. [45 Comp. Gen. 184 \(1965\)](#).



If the transfer of an excess vehicle to another agency is a purchase for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b), so is a transfer to another agency's grantee. [55 Comp. Gen. 348 \(1975\)](#). Custody and accountability for the transferred vehicle would pass to the grantor agency even though the grantee would have actual use during the life of the grant. Also, upon completion of the grant, the vehicle could well revert to the grantor. *Id.* at 351. This is distinguishable from a situation, such as that encountered in [43 Comp. Gen. 697 \(1964\)](#), in which a grantee, incident to its performance and where not otherwise restricted, purchases a vehicle with grant funds. In a case where the government was authorized to purchase vehicles for use by a contractor, GAO cautioned that, upon completion of the contract, the agency could not retain the vehicles to augment its fleet in disregard of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). [B-146876-O.M., June 8, 1965](#).

An acquisition not subject to the statute is illustrated in [B-122552, Feb. 7, 1957](#). The government seized an automobile which had been purchased with the proceeds of a forged check. The Secret Service found that it would be cheaper to retain the car (which the government was authorized to do under a settlement agreement) and use it than to convert it to cash. GAO found that the government had acquired the car “not by purchase, but by operation of law as a partial recovery of the sum it lost through the forgery.” Under the circumstances, 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b) did not apply to the acquisition or to the transfer of the car’s reasonable value from Secret Service appropriations to the account which had suffered the loss.

The authority required by 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b) must be specific. It cannot be implied from broad grants of discretionary authority. [13 Comp. Gen. 226 \(1934\)](#). The authority to purchase necessary supplies and equipment is not enough. [26 Comp. Dec. 904, 905 \(1920\)](#). The phrase “means of transportation” has also been found insufficient. [21 Comp. Dec. 671 \(1915\)](#). The authority may be conferred in an appropriation act or elsewhere, and appears in a variety of forms. Appropriation language authorizing the purchase and/or hire of passenger motor vehicles is quite common. For instance, the Science, State, Justice, Commerce, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-108, 119 Stat. 2290 (Nov. 22, 2005), contains over 20 such provisions. The Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, the District of Columbia, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-115, 119 Stat. 2396 (Nov. 30, 2005), has almost 30. An agency may be authorized to use its operating appropriations for the purchase and/or hire of motor vehicles; a specific amount may be earmarked for this purpose from a lump-sum appropriation; the legislation may specify the number of vehicles



authorized to be acquired. Following are a few random examples from these and other fiscal year 2006 appropriations acts to illustrate the variety:

- The United States Marshals Service appropriation for Fees and Expenses of Witnesses provided that “not to exceed \$1,000,000 may be made available for the purchase and maintenance of armored vehicles for transportation of protected witnesses.” Pub. L. No. 109-108, 119 Stat. at 2293.
- The Federal Bureau of Investigations Salaries and Expense appropriation was available for “purchase for police-type use of not to exceed 3,868 passenger motor vehicles, of which 3,039 will be for replacement only.” *Id.*, 119 Stat. at 2294. Similar provisions applied to the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. *Id.*, 119 Stat. at 2295.
- A general provision in the Commerce Department’s appropriation act provided that, “[d]uring the current fiscal year, appropriations made available to the Department of Commerce by this Act for salaries and expenses shall be available for the hire of passenger motor vehicles as authorized by 31 U.S.C. [ §§ ] 1343 and 1344.” Pub. L. No. 109-108, § 202.
- The Department of Transportation’s “applicable appropriations” were available for “hire of passenger motor vehicles and aircraft.” Pub. L. No. 109-115, § 160.
- The Defense Department’s Procurement, Defense-Wide appropriation was available for “the purchase of passenger motor vehicles for replacement only, and the purchase of 5 vehicles required for physical security of personnel, notwithstanding prior limitations applicable to passenger vehicles but not to exceed \$255,000 per vehicle.” Department of Defense, Emergency Supplemental Appropriations to Address Hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, and Pandemic Influenza Act, Pub. L. No. 109-148, 119 Stat. 2680, 2692–93 (Dec. 30, 2005).
- Funding for the Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health, was “available for the purchase of not to exceed 29 passenger motor vehicles for replacement only.” Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-149, 119 Stat. 2833, 2849 (Dec. 30, 2005).

For some agencies, authority exists in permanent legislation. An example is 50 U.S.C. § 403j(a)(1), under which appropriations made available to the Central Intelligence Agency may be used for “purchase, maintenance, operation, repair, and hire of passenger motor vehicles, and aircraft, and vessels of all kinds.” An agency with no authority to purchase or hire motor vehicles can still obtain them from the General Services Administration’s motor pool described separately below.

b. Price Limitations

Statutory price limitations on the purchase of passenger motor vehicles first appeared in the 1934 Treasury and Post Office Departments Appropriations Act, Pub. L. No. 72-428, § 3, 47 Stat. 1489, 1513 (Mar. 3, 1933). Out of apparent concern that the ceiling could be evaded by offering essentially a frame at a basic price with such frills as wheels and an engine priced separately as extras, section 3(a) prohibited the purchase of “any motor-propelled passenger-carrying vehicle (exclusive of busses [sic], ambulances, and station wagons), at a cost, completely equipped for operation, and including the value of any vehicle exchanged, in excess of \$750, unless otherwise specifically provided for in the appropriation.”

This price limitation gave rise to another lengthy series of decisions holding that such things as heaters ([28 Comp. Gen. 720 \(1949\)](#)) and air conditioners ([40 Comp. Gen. 205 \(1960\)](#)) had to be charged against the ceiling. The phrase “completely equipped for operation” came to include all equipment or accessories permanently attached to the vehicle which contributed to “the comfort and convenience of the passengers and the efficient operation of the vehicle.” [36 Comp. Gen. 725, 726 \(1957\)](#). While the decisions doubtlessly reflected the intent of the legislation, they reached a level of detail such as whether a replacement gas cap and an extra length of heater hose were chargeable against the ceiling. *See* [B-140843-O.M., Oct. 19, 1959](#) (they were).

In 1970, Congress amended the law (Pub. L. No. 91-423, 84 Stat. 879 (Sept. 26, 1970)), and it is now found at 31 U.S.C. § 1343(c) as follows:

“(1) Except as specifically provided by law, an agency may use an appropriation to buy a passenger motor vehicle (except a bus or ambulance) only at a total cost (except costs required only for transportation) that—

“(A) includes the price of systems and equipment the Administrator of General Services decides is

incorporated customarily in standard passenger motor vehicles completely equipped for ordinary operation;

“(B) includes the value of a vehicle used in exchange;

“(C) is not more than the maximum price established by the agency having authority under law to establish a maximum price; and

“(D) is not more than the amount specified in a law.

“(2) Additional systems and equipment may be bought for a passenger motor vehicle if the Administrator decides the purchase is appropriate. The price of additional systems or equipment is not included in deciding whether the cost of the vehicle is within the maximum price specified in a law.”

The monetary ceiling is adjusted annually and set forth as a governmentwide general appropriation act provision. For fiscal year 2006, the provision states:

“Unless otherwise specifically provided, the maximum amount allowable during the current fiscal year in accordance with [31 U.S.C. § 1343(c)], for the purchase of any passenger motor vehicle (exclusive of buses, ambulances, law enforcement, and undercover surveillance vehicles), is hereby fixed at \$8,100 except station wagons for which the maximum shall be \$9,100: *Provided*, That these limits may be exceeded by not to exceed \$3,700 for police-type vehicles, and by not to exceed \$4,000 for special heavy-duty vehicles . . . .”<sup>147</sup>

The first feature to note about 31 U.S.C. § 1343 is that the exemptions for section 1343(b) differ from those for section 1343(c). Section 1343(b) precludes the use of appropriated funds to acquire vehicles for the use of anyone other than certain specified officials. Section 1343(c), however, sets price ceilings on all vehicle purchases. Thus, the acquisition of a vehicle for the use of a cabinet secretary does not require specific

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<sup>147</sup> Pub. L. No. 109-115, § 803, 119 Stat. 2396, 2495–96 (Nov. 30, 2005).

authority, but it is subject to the price limitation. [32 Comp. Gen. 345 \(1953\)](#). Conversely, buses and ambulances are exempt from the price limitation but require specific authority. [33 Comp. Gen. 539 \(1954\)](#). Apart from the exemptions specified in the statute, a passenger vehicle for one subsection is a passenger vehicle for the other. If, for example, a vehicle to be used solely for research or testing purposes is not considered a passenger vehicle for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b), it is not subject to the price limitation of section 1343(c). [B-81562, Dec. 1, 1948](#). The price limitation has been held inapplicable to purchases from a trust fund made up of testamentary gifts. [B-78578, Aug. 4, 1948](#).

Under 31 U.S.C. § 1343(c)(1)(A), GSA decides what is or is not included in a vehicle “completely equipped for ordinary operation,” and the price ceiling applies to this package. Additional equipment, again within GSA’s discretion, is not charged against the ceiling. GSA’s regulations provide that standard passenger vehicles as defined in *Federal Standard No. 122*<sup>148</sup> will be regarded as “completely equipped for ordinary operation,” with items other than those listed as standard to be considered additional equipment for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1343(c). 41 C.F.R. § 101-26.501(b)(1). GSA has taken the position, and GAO agrees, that dealers should not be permitted to circumvent the statutory limitation “by transferring part of the basic vehicle cost to . . . the portion of the bid price allocated to additional systems and equipment,” and that contracting officers should examine bid prices to guard against this. [B-182754, Feb. 18, 1975](#), at 3. Similarly, GAO sustained GSA’s rejection of a bid which attempted to include required options not specified in the solicitation. [B-188439, June 30, 1977](#).

Section 1343(c)(1)(B) specifies that any trade-in value is part of the total cost chargeable against the ceiling. This means that the trade-in value is part of the price and, when added to the balance paid in cash, may not exceed the limit. [17 Comp. Gen. 215 \(1937\)](#). Determining trade-in value is not an exact science. The so-called “blue book” published by the National Automobile Dealers Association is a guide but is not conclusive and any reasonable method of valuation is acceptable. [28 Comp. Gen. 495, 497 \(1949\)](#); [B-74529, Oct. 20, 1948](#). However, the valuation must not be a sham to avoid the statutory limitation. [17 Comp. Gen. 911, 913 \(1938\)](#)

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<sup>148</sup> GSA issues *Federal Vehicle Standards* for passenger motor vehicles and various classes of trucks, updated for each new model year. *Federal Standard No. 122* is the standard for passenger vehicles. The standards can be found at <http://apps.fss.gsa.gov/vehiclestandards> (last visited Mar. 20, 2008).

(“ridiculously low” trade-in allowance an obvious circumvention); 28 Comp. Gen. at 497 (allowance approximating scrap value questionable where vehicle had not been wrecked and was not unserviceable). In legitimate circumstances, there is no legal objection to trading in more than one used vehicle toward the purchase of a new one. 28 Comp. Gen. 495; 17 Comp. Gen. at 582. However, if one of the old vehicles is excess, it should be disposed of in accordance with the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act. *See* 27 Comp. Gen. 30 (1947).

While trade-in value of an old vehicle actually traded in must be factored in, it is improper to consider the future trade-in value of the vehicle being purchased. This is because anticipated or prospective depreciation is regarded as too uncertain to be used as a bid evaluation factor. 33 Comp. Gen. 108 (1953).

Section 1343(c)(1) further provides that transportation costs are to be excluded for purposes of determining compliance with the price ceiling. Decisions applying this principle in a variety of factual contexts and contract terms include 21 Comp. Gen. 474 (1941); 20 Comp. Gen. 677 (1941); 14 Comp. Gen. 82 (1934); and B-127291, Mar. 22, 1956.

Under a rental agreement whereby title to the vehicle passes to the government when total rental payments reach a stated value, or sooner if, upon termination, the government pays the difference between total payments and the stated value, the total amount paid, rental payments included, may not exceed the price ceiling. 29 Comp. Gen. 21 (1949). The decision distinguished 21 Comp. Gen. 548 (1941), in which, for purposes of exercising a recapture provision in a cost reimbursement contract, the rentals paid by the contractor prior to recapture were not required to count against the ceiling.

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## 2. Use

### a. The “Official Purpose” Limitation

Vehicles purchased or rented by the United States government are supposed to be used for government business; anything else is illegal. The first sentence of 31 U.S.C. § 1344(a)(1) makes the point: “Funds available to a Federal agency, by appropriation or otherwise, may be expended by the Federal agency for the maintenance, operation, or repair of any passenger carrier only to the extent that such carrier is used to provide transportation for official purposes.” The “official purpose” limitation

appears to have originated as a governmentwide general provision in appropriation acts in the 1930s and early 1940s. 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 329, 330 (1979). See [A-19101, July 25, 1942](#), for an example. It became permanent as part of section 16 of the Administrative Expenses Act of 1946, Pub. L. No. 79-600, § 16(a), 60 Stat. 806, 810 (Aug. 2, 1946), and was reenacted in 1986 as part of the general revision of 31 U.S.C. § 1344. See Pub. L. No. 99-550, §1(a), 100 Stat. 3067 (Oct. 27, 1986).

The coverage of the statute is quite broad. The phrase “appropriation or otherwise” covers all types of funding. Section 1344(h)(1) defines “passenger carrier” as any “passenger motor vehicle, aircraft, boat, ship, or other similar means of transportation that is owned or leased by the United States Government.” Section 1344(h)(2) defines “federal agency” to include, in addition to the “regular” departments and agencies, government corporations, mixed-ownership government corporations, the Executive Office of the President, independent regulatory agencies, the Smithsonian Institution, and nonappropriated fund instrumentalities. Section 1344(i) adds in the Postal Service. The definition does not apply to the legislative and judicial branches and it excludes the District of Columbia government. However, the official purposes principle embodied in section 1344 extends to any entity using appropriated funds by virtue of the fundamental rule of 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a)(1) that appropriations may be applied only to the objects for which they were made except as otherwise provided by law. Thus, the legislative history of section 1344 and the case law under it are relevant to the practices of entities not directly covered by that section. [B-305864, Jan. 5, 2006](#).

With one significant exception, one thing the law does not do is define official purposes. In fact, perhaps wisely, apart from the conventional wisdom that contrasts “official” with “personal,” no one has attempted to do so. Lacking a definition, one is left with whatever one can glean from the cases.

The overwhelming majority of cases under 31 U.S.C. § 1344 have involved home-to-work transportation, what one senator once called “the ultimate status symbol for a Federal bureaucrat.”<sup>149</sup> Power to Lenin may have come from the barrel of a gun, but to many in Washington it comes from being picked up at your front door in a chauffeured limousine, courtesy of the taxpayers. It is settled beyond any debate that ordinary home-to-work

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<sup>149</sup> 132 Cong. Rec. 30249 (1986) (Sen. Proxmire).

commuting is the personal responsibility—and personal expense—of the individual. *E.g.*, B-305864, Jan. 5, 2006; 27 Comp. Gen. 1 (1947); 19 Comp. Gen. 836 (1940); B-233591, Sept. 21, 1989. This principle applies to overtime work. Thus, there is no authority for the government to provide or pay for home-to-work transportation in connection with the performance of overtime. 16 Comp. Gen. 64 (1936); B-190071, May 1, 1978. It makes no difference that the additional work is performed on nonregular work days (B-171969.42, Jan. 9, 1976), or is “call-back” overtime. B-307918, Dec. 20, 2006; 36 Comp. Gen. 171 (1956); B-189061, Mar. 15, 1978.

From the above general principle it is but a small and logical step to conclude that using a government vehicle for home-to-work transportation is not an official purpose, unless of course Congress has authorized it. The motor vehicle provision as amended by the Administrative Expenses Act of 1946 included a home-to-work prohibition with a few exceptions.<sup>150</sup> While the very existence of the statute perhaps deterred abuse, some argued that home-to-work transportation could be provided on the basis of little more than an “interest of the government” determination. The argument derived support, according to its proponents, from language in GAO decisions such as 25 Comp. Gen. 844, 847 (1946), in which GAO observed that the “primary purpose” of the prohibition against home-to-work transportation was to prevent the use of government-owned vehicles for “personal convenience” and, therefore, it should not be interpreted as precluding such transportation when determined as a matter of administrative discretion to be “in the interest of the government.”

Over time, GAO came to view the law’s intent as unclear and advocated legislative clarification. *E.g.*, B-178342, July 16, 1973; B-178342, May 8, 1973. However, uncertainty over the extent to which home-to-work transportation could be authorized continued into the early 1980s as its widespread use persisted. As GAO observed in 62 Comp. Gen. 438, 440 (1983):

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<sup>150</sup> The 1946 version retained the limit on use of passenger motor vehicles to official purposes and provided that such purposes did not include home-to-work transportation “except in cases of medical officers on out-patient medical service and . . . officers and employees engaged in field work the character of whose duties makes such transportation necessary and then only . . . when . . . approved by the head of the department concerned.” Willful violations were subject to suspension or removal. The statute also exempted from its limitations the President, heads of cabinet departments, and principal diplomatic and consular officials. Pub. L. No. 79-600, § 16.

“[T]he use of Government-owned or leased automobiles by high ranking officials for travel between home and work has been a common practice for many years in a large number of agencies. . . . The justification advanced for this practice is the apparent acquiescence by the Congress which regularly appropriates funds for limousines and other passenger automobiles knowing, in many instances, the uses to which they will be put but not imposing limits on the discretion of the agencies in determining what uses constitute ‘official business.’”

The 1983 decision sought to lay the confusion to rest. In essence, 62 Comp. Gen. 438 held that, apart from those exceptions sanctioned in the statute plus a couple of fairly narrow nonstatutory exceptions, the use of government vehicles for home-to-work transportation was statutorily prohibited, period. Thus, agencies have no discretion to exercise in the matter. The decision (62 Comp. Gen. at 446) quoted a Justice Department opinion, 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 329 (1979), which a few years earlier had given very similar advice. If anything, Justice was even more direct. To those who argued that chauffeured limousine service enabled them to extend their work day by working while being transported, the answer was simple: come in earlier, stay later, or live closer to the office. 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel at 332. While the decision in 62 Comp. Gen. 438 lowered the boom on discretionary use of government vehicles for home-to-work transportation, it also recognized that GAO, itself, had contributed to the confusion on this issue. Thus, GAO both applied its decision prospectively, and suspended its application entirely until the end of the then-present Congress in order to allow Congress a chance to legislatively resolve the matter. 62 Comp. Gen. at 440. Meanwhile, GAO reports continued to document existing practice.<sup>151</sup>

In 1986, Congress enacted Pub. L. No. 99-550, 100 Stat. 3067 (Oct. 27, 1986), which completely overhauled 31 U.S.C. § 1344. The objective was clear: “Whatever the cause for the continued violation of 31 USC 1344, it is obvious that legislation is needed to end the confusion, by providing clear

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<sup>151</sup> *E.g.*, GAO, *Use of Government Motor Vehicles for the Transportation of Government Officials and the Relatives of Government Officials*, GAO/GGD-85-76 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 16, 1985); *Use of Government Vehicles for Home-to-Work Transportation*, GAO/NSIAD-83-3 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 1983).



congressional guidance which will prevent future waste of government funds.” H.R. Rep. No. 99-451, at 5 (1985).

The revised 31 U.S.C. § 1344(a)(1) starts with the general official purposes requirement quoted above. It then adds: “Notwithstanding any other provision of law, transporting any individual other than the individuals listed in subsections (b) and (c) of this section between such individual’s residence and such individual’s place of employment is not transportation for an official purpose.” The “notwithstanding any other provision of law” language was intended to mean that 31 U.S.C. § 1344 prevails over any other inconsistent prior or subsequent legislation:

“Any legislation authorizing home-to-work transportation for officers or employees of the Executive Branch enacted prior to the enactment of this measure is no longer valid unless specifically recognized by this section. Further, any legislation enacted after this measure authorizing such transportation . . . must specifically indicate that it is being enacted as an amendment or exception to this law.”

H.R. Rep. No. 99-451 at 7. The legislative history makes clear that residence means “the primary place where an individual resides while commuting to a place of employment,” and is not to be confused with the concept of legal domicile where the two differ. *Id.* It also makes clear that the prohibition does not affect temporary duty situations. *Id.* Travel between a temporary duty site and a temporary residence such as a motel is not regarded as home-to-work transportation for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1344. 41 C.F.R. § 102-5.20(a). This has always been the case. *See, e.g., B-159210-O.M., Jan. 4, 1967.*

The statute also specifies the permissible exemptions. They fall into two categories—position and situation. Section 1344(b) lists the position exceptions. The list starts, of course, with the President and Vice-President. The President then is given 16 discretionary designations, 6 in the Executive Office of the President and 10 in other federal agencies. The remainder of the list includes: Justices of the Supreme Court; cabinet heads and a “single principal deputy” for each; the Ambassador to the United Nations and principal diplomatic and consular officials abroad; several high-level military officials; the heads of the Central Intelligence Agency and several law enforcement agencies; the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration; the Chairman of the Board

of Governors of the Federal Reserve; the Comptroller General; and the Postmaster General.

What we call the situational exceptions are found in sections 1344(a)(2)(A), (a)(2)(B), (b)(9), and (g). Section 1344(a)(2)(A) preserves an exception from the 1946 law and provides that home-to-work transportation “required for the performance of field work,” in accordance with regulations prescribed by the General Services Administration (GSA), is permissible when approved in writing by the agency head. The GSA regulations define “field work” as follows:

“Field work means official work requiring the employee’s presence at various locations other than his/her regular place of work. (Multiple stops (itinerant-type travel) within the accepted local commuting area, limited use beyond the local commuting area, or transportation to remote locations that are only accessible by Government-provided transportation are examples of field work.)”

41 C.F.R. § 102-5.30. Section 1344(a)(2)(B) authorizes home-to-work transportation which is “essential for the safe and efficient performance of intelligence, counterintelligence, protective services, or criminal law enforcement duties,” again when approved in writing by the agency head. *See, e.g., B-195073, Nov. 21, 1979* (certain Federal Bureau of Investigation agents authorized to take government vehicles home in order to maintain emergency response capability).<sup>152</sup> The protective services part of this exemption is reinforced by section 1344(c), which authorizes home-to-work transportation for anyone entitled to Secret Service protection under 18 U.S.C. § 3056(a) or those entitled to protection under several other listed authorities.

Section 1344(b)(9) gives a statutory basis to some nonstatutory exemptions recognized in the prior decisions. GAO had expressed the view that the law should allow an exception for emergencies. *E.g., B-181212, Aug. 15, 1974*. Of course, this presumes a real emergency. *B-152006-O.M., July 26, 1965, quoting B-152006-O.M., Oct. 22, 1963* (“[I]t is difficult to believe that

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<sup>152</sup> Since section 1344(a)(2)(B) did not exist in 1979, the decision had to strain somewhat to try to apply the field work exception, which did exist. All pre-1986 decisions should be reexamined in light of the 1986 law and General Services Administration regulations. Those we cite here illustrate points which appear unaffected by the subsequent changes.

emergencies arise at the Savannah River plant with such frequency as to warrant an average of 442 trips per month in connection with overtime work.”).

A “clear and present danger” of terrorist activities in foreign countries became another nonstatutory exception. [54 Comp. Gen. 855 \(1975\)](#). Now, under 31 U.S.C. § 1344(b)(9), the head of any federal agency can provide home-to-work transportation to any officer or employee by making a written determination, in accordance with General Services Administration (GSA) regulations, “that highly unusual circumstances present a clear and present danger, that an emergency exists, or that other compelling operational considerations make such transportation essential to the conduct of official business.” Transportation under this subsection is for a maximum of 15 calendar days, but may be extended for additional 90-day periods. 31 U.S.C. § 1344(d)(2). While there is obviously some discretion under these standards, the statute makes clear that “comfort and convenience” is not sufficient justification. *Id.* § 1344(e)(1).

The GSA regulations provide in general that emergency circumstances “exist whenever there is an immediate, unforeseeable, temporary need to provide home-to-work transportation for those employees necessary to the uninterrupted performance of the agency’s mission.” 41 C.F.R. § 102-5.30. The same regulation uses a public transportation strike as an example of a circumstance that may trigger the emergency exception: “An emergency may occur where there is a major disruption of available means of transportation to or from a work site, an essential Government service must be provided, and there is no other way to transport those employees.” *Id.*

Prior GAO decisions, which may be helpful in applying this regulation, had emphasized that the unavailability of public transportation alone does not shift to the government the employee’s responsibility to get to work. In other words, a transit strike is not automatically an emergency justifying home-to-work transportation. [60 Comp. Gen. 420 \(1981\)](#); [B-200022, Aug. 3, 1981](#). In two other cases, however, the circumstances were found to justify exceptions. In a 1975 case, the local Social Security Administration hired buses to transport employees to work from predetermined pick-up points during a San Francisco transit strike. Absent this or similar action, the processing of claims and payments at one of the nation’s major Social Security centers would have come to an abrupt halt. GAO agreed that the action was within the agency’s discretion as a “temporary emergency measure.” [54 Comp. Gen. 1066 \(1975\)](#). Some years earlier, during a New

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York City subway strike, an Internal Revenue Service supervisor “directed” one of his employees to use his own car to take five other employees to and from home during the strike. GAO agreed that the driver’s increased commuting costs could be paid. A key factor here was that the then Civil Service Commission had authorized employees to stay home without a charge to leave. Thus, the supervisor’s action enabled the work of the office to continue at minimum expense, as opposed to having to pay the employees anyway for doing no work. [B-158931, May 26, 1966.](#)

The most recent situational exception is in 31 U.S.C. § 1344(g), added by Pub. L. No. 109-59, § 3049(b), 119 Stat. 1144, 1712 (Aug. 10, 2005). Section 1344(g) authorizes agency heads, in their sole discretion and subject to certain conditions, to provide employees shuttle service between their places of employment and mass transit facilities. The same section of the 2005 law enacted statutory authority for the provision of subsidies to federal employees in the National Capital Region who commute by mass transit. The conference report on the 2005 legislation noted that “[b]y improving access to commuting alternatives, Federal agencies will be able to provide a benefit to their employees that will also help to reduce congestion and improve air quality across the nation.” H.R. Rep. No. 109-203, at 975 (2005).

There is no authority to provide home-to-work transportation for handicapped employees. [B-198323-O.M., Mar. 24, 1981.](#) However, the situation in [B-216602, Jan. 4, 1985,](#) could possibly be considered under the “compelling operational considerations” exception. The Solicitor of Labor had received a serious injury and during his recovery period was forbidden to drive an automobile or ride public transportation. Government transportation was the only way he could get to work, and the Secretary said his availability was “essential.” GAO agreed that he could receive transportation “during the period in which he is medically incapable of otherwise commuting to and from his office,” but that he should reimburse the government to the extent of his normal commuting costs. [B-216602, at 3.](#) Alternatively, if GSA were to conclude that a situation like this is not covered by any of the statutory exceptions, it might be possible to take advantage of one of the President’s discretionary designations under 31 U.S.C. § 1344(b)(1)(C) if any were available at the time.

The prohibition on home-to-work transportation applies to any portion of transportation between home and work. Thus, unless one of the exceptions can be invoked, there is no authority for an agency to provide shuttle service for its employees to and from various intermediate areas.

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[B-162326, Sept. 14, 1967](#); [B-183617-O.M., Aug. 2, 1976](#). One illustration of this point is [B-261729, Apr. 1, 1996](#). An agency which had relocated one of its offices was concerned that many of its employees were not overly excited over commuting the extra distance. It proposed to equip a bus with phones and computers, call it a “mobile work site,” and use it to transport employees from the old location to the new one. Noble motive, the decision concluded, but it’s still commuting and would require statutory authority.<sup>153</sup>

Another illustration involves the United States Capitol Police (USCP). [B-305864, Jan. 5, 2006](#). The USCP provided parking for employees adjacent to its headquarters building on the Senate side of the Capitol grounds. Commuting employees would simply park their cars and walk into the headquarters building to report for work. However, the USCP needed to move some of its offices to the House of Representatives side where employee parking was not yet available. The USCP asked GAO whether it could provide a shuttle to transport employees from the Senate parking lot to their new work locations on the House side until regular parking was arranged there. The USPS reasoned that since appropriated funds are available to provide employee parking, they likewise should be available to transport employees from government-provided parking to their actual work locations. GAO disagreed. First, the fact that USCP provided employee parking was irrelevant to the issue, GAO said. Instead, the issue was governed by the longstanding rule regarding the nature of commuting costs. Citing [B-261729, Apr. 1, 1996](#), GAO concluded:

“In our view, an employee’s arrival at a parking lot cannot be considered the end of the commute. Rather, a parking lot is simply an intermediate stop—like a subway or bus stop—within the totality of the commute from home to office. For purposes of section 1344(a)(1), legislative history suggests that the end of the commute, or ‘place of employment,’ is the ‘primary place where an officer or employee performs his or her business.’ . . .”

[B-305864](#), at 3. Thus, providing a shuttle to enable employees to complete their commutes to their offices on the House side was not permissible. On the other hand, GAO observed, if the USCP maintained a shuttle between

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<sup>153</sup> As noted above, the recently enacted section 1344(g) does provide specific statutory authority for one form of intermediate shuttle service.

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its Senate and House offices for operational purposes, there would be no objection to commuting employees using it on a space-available basis and at no additional cost to the government. *Id.* at 3–4.

The law does not prohibit use of government transportation from an employee’s home to an airport incident to official travel, subject to whatever guidance the Federal Travel Regulations include. 70 Comp. Gen. 196 (1991).

Agencies are required to “maintain logs or other records necessary to establish the official purpose” of home-to-work transportation they provide. 31 U.S.C. § 1344(f). The information to be recorded is specified in 41 C.F.R. § 102-5.120. Public access to these records would be governed by the disclosure requirements and exemptions of the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552. B-233995, Feb. 10, 1989 (nondecision letter). Of course the records must be made available for legitimate audit purposes. A 1991 GAO study found that the revised 31 U.S.C. § 1344 seemed to be working and that agencies were generally complying with it. GAO, *Government Vehicles: Officials Now Rarely Receive Unauthorized Home-to-Work Transportation*, GAO/GGD-91-27 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 1991).

Although the home-to-work prohibition captures the lion’s share of attention under 31 U.S.C. § 1344, it is only one form of unauthorized use. Personal use of a government vehicle on weekends and holidays is another. *E.g.*, B-216016, Mar. 23, 1987. Still another controversial area is the use of government vehicles to transport family members. It does not violate the law for an agency to permit a family member to accompany an employee while the vehicle is being used for official business. 68 Comp. Gen. 186 (1989); 57 Comp. Gen. 226 (1978). The same principle applies to government aircraft. B-192053-O.M., Aug. 3, 1978. *See also* B-155950, July 10, 1975. It is illegal, however, to use a government vehicle to shuttle about family members on personal errands. B-211586-O.M., July 8, 1983. It is equally unauthorized to permit a family member to use the vehicle for personal business. *E.g.*, *Clark v. United States*, 162 Ct. Cl. 477, 483–84 (1963).

In B-275365, Dec. 17, 1996, an official used a government car to drive himself and several other employees to the funeral of another employee’s child because “he wanted to send a message that he cared for his people.” GAO was unwilling to say that there are no circumstances in which this sort of thing might qualify as an official purpose, but in this particular case

use of the car violated the statute because, if for no other reason, the official made the decision himself and did not seek agency approval.

Use of a government vehicle not so much for personal convenience as for the convenience of an agency was the subject of [63 Comp. Gen. 257 \(1984\)](#). In that decision, the then Veterans Administration (VA) had acquired a passenger bus to use in transporting students from a medical college to a VA hospital as part of a statutory training program. GAO agreed that the driver could keep the bus at home. The alternative would have been for the driver to make two round trips—one to pick up the bus and another to transport the students. Under the circumstances, any personal benefit to the driver was purely incidental to carrying out the program. The GSA regulations at 41 C.F.R. § 102-5.90 provide somewhat of a variant on this theme: “situations may arise where, for cost or other reasons, it is in the Government’s interest to base a Government passenger carrier at a Government facility located near the employee’s home or work rather than authorize the employee home-to-work transportation.”

Providing transportation to individuals may constitute an official purpose in some circumstances. For example, GAO observed in [B-216670, Dec. 13, 1984](#):

“[T]he transportation of representatives of foreign nations is a common practice in the day-to-day conduct of American foreign relations. The provision of such transportation has evidently been a long-standing practice of the Defense and State Departments. . . . Accordingly, in our view, it would be inappropriate for this office to challenge this long-standing practice.”

In [71 Comp. Gen. 469 \(1992\)](#), GAO held that use of a government vehicle to transport students incident to the agency’s participation in a “partnership in education” program did not violate the statute. GAO, however, discouraged the practice because of the increased potential for government liability in the event of an accident. [71 Comp. Gen. at 472](#). This is also the case where an employee is transporting a family member ([68 Comp. Gen. 186 \(1989\)](#)), or for that matter in any case of expanded use ([B-254296, Nov. 23, 1993](#)). Agencies should take precautions to limit potential tort liability in these situations. A device that has been used on occasion in the case of space-available transportation in government aircraft is the waiver of liability. Such waivers are generally valid although there is some state-to-state variation. *See* [B-231930-O.M., Nov. 23, 1988](#). In any event, there is



no authority to use appropriated funds to purchase, or to reimburse an employee-driver for, liability insurance. [45 Comp. Gen. 542 \(1966\)](#).

Another provision of law, 31 U.S.C. § 1349(b), gives 31 U.S.C. § 1344 some teeth. It provides:

“An officer or employee who willfully uses or authorizes the use of a passenger motor vehicle or aircraft owned or leased by the United States Government (except for an official purpose authorized by section 1344 of this title) or otherwise violates section 1344 shall be suspended without pay by the head of the agency. The officer or employee shall be suspended for at least one month, and when circumstances warrant, for a longer period or summarily removed from office.”

The penalty applies only to “willful” violations. For a violation found to be willful, the minimum penalty of a month’s suspension without pay is mandatory. *E.g.*, *Clark v. United States*, 162 Ct. Cl. 477, 486–87 (1963). As such, it cannot be reduced by an arbitrator. *Devine v. Nutt*, 718 F.2d 1048, 1055 (Fed. Cir. 1983), *rev’d on other grounds*, 472 U.S. 648 (1985).

GAO will not decide whether a violation is willful. [B-275365, Dec. 17, 1996](#). The Merit Systems Protection Board, which sees many of these cases in its review of adverse actions, has developed a test. The Board will consider a violation as willful if the employee “had actual knowledge that the use of the vehicle would be characterized as nonofficial or that he acted in reckless disregard as to whether the use was for nonofficial purposes.” *Fischer v. Department of the Treasury*, 69 M.S.P.R. 614, 617 (1996). The Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit endorses this approach. *Kimm v. Department of the Treasury*, 61 F.3d 888 (Fed. Cir. 1995); *Felton v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, 820 F.2d 391 (Fed. Cir. 1987). In addition, the Board will not regard a violation as willful if it involves “minor personal use” while the vehicle is being used primarily on official business. *Fischer*, 69 M.S.P.R. at 617; *Madrid v. Department of the Interior*, 37 M.S.P.R. 418, 423(1988). Acting with advice of counsel, however misguided or flat wrong that advice may be, would most likely preclude a finding that a violation was willful. [64 Comp. Gen. 782, 786 \(1985\)](#).

Examples of situations in which the Board has sustained imposition of a penalty include the following:



- Using a government vehicle to commute from duty station to law school classes. *Aiu v. Department of Justice*, 70 M.S.P.R. 509, *aff'd*, 98 F.3d 1359 (Fed. Cir. 1996).
- Driving a government vehicle to lunch. *Cantu v. Department of the Treasury*, 88 M.S.P.R. 253 (2001). (To make matters worse, the employee left about 250 pounds of cocaine—in his possession for official purposes—unguarded in the government vehicle while he was at lunch.) Similarly, in *Utnage v. Department of the Army*, 119 Fed. Appx. 269 (2004), the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit affirmed a Board decision upholding the suspension of an employee for driving a government vehicle home for meal breaks. The employee said he knew he was not supposed to drive the government car home for lunch. His defense was that he parked the car one block away from his residence and walked the final block home, so he had not actually driven to his home. Unfortunately for the employee, but hardly surprising, neither the Board nor the court bought this defense. *Utnage*, 119 Fed. Appx. at 271–72.
- Driving loan officer to lawyer’s residence to sign papers on a personal loan. *Madrid*, 37 M.S.P.R. 418–23.
- Transporting agency employees and equipment to supervisor’s residence to help build a fish pond. *Barrett v. Department of the Interior*, 65 M.S.P.R. 186 (1994).
- Transporting employee’s son on personal business. *Campbell v. Department of Health and Human Services*, 40 M.S.P.R. 525 (1989). See also *Davis v. Department of the Army*, 56 M.S.P.R. 583 (1993). Under the particular circumstances involved in *Kimm v. Department of the Treasury*, 61 F.3d 888, however, driving a child to day care was found not to constitute a willful violation.
- Being arrested drunk and asleep while parked on the side of the road with the motor running. *Tenorio v. Department of Health and Human Services*, 30 M.S.P.R. 136 (1986). This one got the employee fired.

A car rented by an employee while on official travel is not “owned or leased by the United States Government” for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1349. *Chufu v. Department of the Interior*, 45 F.3d 419 (Fed. Cir. 1995). When an employee is renting a car while on travel or temporary duty, there is nothing wrong with using the car for personal business. The impropriety

enters the picture when the employee tries to charge the government for the personal portion of the use. In contrast, a government-furnished vehicle may be used only for official purposes. Federal Travel Regulations, 41 C.F.R. § 301-10.201. The concept of official purpose is somewhat broader in the travel/temporary duty context than at the regular duty station. [B-254296, Nov. 23, 1993](#) (limited recreational use permissible at remote location where no other transportation available).

One final statute that requires mention is section 503 of the Ethics Reform Act of 1989, Pub. L. No. 101-194, 103 Stat. 1716, 1755 (Nov. 30, 1989), as amended by Pub. L. No. 101-280, § 6(b), 104 Stat. 149, 160 (May 4, 1990), 31 U.S.C. § 1344 note, which provides: “Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the head of each department, agency, or other entity of each branch of the Government may prescribe by rule appropriate conditions for the incidental use, for other than official business, of vehicles owned or leased by the Government.” The scope and intended effect of this provision are unclear. A GAO report issued not too long after the enactment of section 503 noted that the legislative history was silent as to its intent. GAO, *Government Vehicles: Officials Now Rarely Receive Unauthorized Home-to-Work Transportation*, GAO/GGD-91-27 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 15, 1991), at 7. The report also observed that some agency officials thought that section 503 “opens a hole in the home-to-work law, . . . rolls back the restrictions on home-to-work transportation, and . . . seems to contradict the home-to-work transportation law.” *Id.* at 8. However, GAO expressed a “much more restrictive” interpretation:

“Section 503, as we view it, is designed simply to provide reasonable agency latitude under prescribed rules for minor nonofficial vehicle use incidental to otherwise authorized official use. Section 503 does not provide the authority for any agency to ignore the provisions of the home-to-work transportation law, a specific statutory scheme designed to be comprehensive in terms of specifying the situations under which certain officials and employees may be provided home-to-work transportation in a government vehicle.”

*Id.* As the 1991 GAO report anticipated, section 503 appears to have had little impact. We have found no judicial or administrative decision addressing section 503 and only one published substantive agency regulation explicitly issued pursuant to it. That regulation, adopted by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 14 C.F.R. § 1204.1600,

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permits employees to drive a government vehicle home at the close of the day preceding or concluding a temporary duty assignment if the authorizing official determines that this will result in significant time savings.

b. General Services  
Administration Motor Pools

Under sections 601–611 of title 40, United States Code, the General Services Administration (GSA) has broad authority to establish, operate, and discontinue interagency vehicle motor pools.<sup>154</sup> Subject to regulations issued by the President under 40 U.S.C. § 603(b) and if determined advantageous in terms of economy, efficiency, or service, section 602(a)(1) of title 40 provides that GSA shall—

“(1) take over from executive agencies and consolidate, or otherwise acquire, motor vehicles and related equipment and supplies;

“(2) provide for the establishment, maintenance, and operation (including servicing and storage) of motor vehicle pools or systems; and

“(3) furnish motor vehicles and related services to executive agencies for the transportation of property and passengers.”

The President’s regulations, mandated by 40 U.S.C. § 603(b), are contained in Executive Order No. 10579, Nov. 30, 1954, 40 U.S.C. § 601 note, section 11 of which authorizes GSA to issue supplementary regulations. GSA’s regulations are found at 41 C.F.R. part 101-39. “Executive agency” as used in 40 U.S.C. § 602(a)(1), includes the judicial branch. [B-158712, Mar. 7, 1977](#). Also, nothing in the statute or executive order prohibits GSA from permitting the use of motor pool vehicles by cost-reimbursement contractors. [B-157729, Feb. 10, 1966](#).

The statute quoted above allows GSA, when forming a motor pool, to “take over” vehicles purchased by another agency with its own appropriations. *See also* 41 C.F.R. § 101-39.001. GSA must reimburse the fair market value only if the vehicle was originally acquired from a government corporation or through a revolving fund or trust fund and not previously reimbursed.

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<sup>154</sup> GSA now calls them “interagency fleet management systems.” *See generally* 41 C.F.R. pt. 101-39.

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40 U.S.C. § 604(a); *see also* 41 C.F.R. § 101-39.104-2. This does not include a reimbursable but nonrevolving appropriation. [38 Comp. Gen. 185 \(1958\)](#).

GSA's activities under 40 U.S.C. §§ 601–611 are financed through GSA's revolving Acquisition Services Fund (40 U.S.C. § 321—formerly known as the General Supply Fund) and must be reimbursed by the customer agencies. Under 40 U.S.C. § 605(a), the Acquisition Services Fund is available to pay the costs of motor pools and related services under section 602, including the purchase and rental of motor vehicles and related equipment and supplies. Section 605(b) provides that GSA should fix reimbursements so as to recover, as far as practicable, all section 602 costs, including increments to cover estimated replacement costs. The law further provides that the purchase price of vehicles and equipment, plus the replacement increments, cannot be charged all at once but must be recovered through amortization. 40 U.S.C. § 605(c). It also directs GSA to use accrual accounting. *Id.*; [B-139506, Oct. 1, 1959](#).

The Acquisition Services Fund is available for improvements to government-owned property incident to the establishment and operation of motor pools. This includes such things as fences, gasoline pumps and storage tanks, parking facilities, service stations, and storage facilities. [B-134511, Mar. 10, 1958](#). It is also available for the initial financing, subject to reimbursement as with other costs, of temporary service facilities and equipment on leased property. [43 Comp. Gen. 738 \(1964\)](#).

Questions have arisen concerning GSA's authority to charge the using agency for damage to the vehicle. For many years, GSA's regulations provided that GSA would charge the using agency for damage caused by negligence or misuse attributable to the using agency, and GAO consistently upheld GSA's authority to include such a provision. The first decision considering a challenge to the regulation was [37 Comp. Gen. 306 \(1957\)](#), in which the Comptroller General stated: "There can be no question but that the costs of making repairs to vehicles damaged while being operated in a motor vehicle pool (or the amount of the loss where the vehicle is incapable of being repaired) are elements of cost incident to the operation of such motor vehicle pool." [37 Comp. Gen. at 307](#). The provision of the statute requiring amortization of the purchase price has no effect on GSA's ability to charge for damage. *Id.* at 307–08.

The very next decision, [37 Comp. Gen. 308 \(1957\)](#), reached the same conclusion where the damage was caused by an employee of the using agency other than the vehicle operator, and pointed out that 40 U.S.C.

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§ 602 and the implementing regulations override the nonstatutory rule<sup>155</sup> under which an agency is normally not liable for damage to the property of another agency. The validity of GSA's regulation was upheld again in [41 Comp. Gen. 199 \(1961\)](#), and still again in [59 Comp. Gen. 515 \(1980\)](#).

The regulations have changed since those decisions and now provide that GSA will charge the using agency for all damage to the vehicle unless caused by mechanical failure, normal wear and tear, or the negligence or willful act of an identifiable party other than an employee of the using agency. 41 C.F.R. § 101-39.406. There is no apparent reason why the principle of the earlier decisions should not apply equally to this version of the regulation. The using agency is responsible for investigating accidents and filing the required accident and investigation reports with GSA. *See id.* §§ 101-39.401, 101-39.403. GSA makes the initial determination based on this material. The using agency can dispute GSA's finding but GSA has the final word. *Id.* § 101-39.406(d).

GSA provides a range of services from short-term use to shuttle and driver services to indefinite assignment. *Id.* § 101-39.201. An agency which lacks the specific authority to purchase or hire passenger motor vehicles as required by 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b) can nevertheless use its appropriations to reimburse GSA for motor vehicle services provided under 40 U.S.C. § 602. [B-158712, Mar. 7, 1977](#). In other words, lack of authority to acquire the vehicles directly is not an impediment to obtaining them through the GSA interagency fleet system. Similarly, if GSA delegates leasing authority to a requesting agency because GSA cannot satisfy the agency's requirements, the agency can use its appropriations to lease vehicles pursuant to the delegation notwithstanding any lack of specific authority otherwise required by 31 U.S.C. § 1343(b). [B-210657-O.M., July 15, 1983](#). A delegation from GSA can also be used to augment an agency's specific statutory authorization. [B-158712-O.M., Jan. 11, 1977](#).

c. Expenditure Control  
Requirements

In fiscal year 1985, the 20 federal agencies with the largest motor vehicle fleets controlled a total of more than 340,000 vehicles and spent \$915 million on their acquisition, operation, and disposal.<sup>156</sup> Concerned

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<sup>155</sup> See [B-302962, June 10, 2005](#), and cases cited for more on this general rule, known as the "interdepartmental waiver doctrine."

<sup>156</sup> GAO, *Federal Motor Vehicles: Agencies' Progress in Meeting Expenditure Control Requirements*, GAO/GGD-88-40 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 1988), at 8.

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with these numbers, Congress, as part of the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985,<sup>157</sup> enacted the provisions found at 40 U.S.C. §§ 17501–17510. The legislation applies to executive agencies (excluding the Tennessee Valley Authority) which operate at least 300 motor vehicles. Twenty agencies then met this qualification. They are identified in GAO/GGD-88-40, at 9 n.1. The legislation contained short-term cost-reduction goals (which GAO found in GAO/GGD-88-40 were generally met) and permanent requirements.

Each covered agency is to designate an office or officer to establish a central monitoring system and to provide oversight of the agency’s motor vehicle operations. 40 U.S.C. § 17502. The agency is also directed to develop a system to “identify, collect, and analyze” cost data with respect to its motor vehicle operations. *Id.* § 17503(a).

The agency must include with each appropriation request a statement specifying total motor vehicle costs (acquisition, maintenance, leasing, operation, and disposal) for three fiscal years, and justifying why its requirements cannot be met more cheaply by some other means, such as increased use of GSA’s motor pool system. *Id.* § 17504(a). The President’s budget submission is to include a summary and analysis of these statements. *Id.* § 17505(a).

GSA has several duties under this legislation. It is to develop requirements, in cooperation with GAO and the Office of Management and Budget, for agency data collection systems. *Id.* § 17503(b). It is also to reduce vehicle storage and disposal costs, and develop a program of vehicle reconditioning designed to improve the rate of return on vehicle sales. *Id.* § 17506.

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### 3. Chauffeurs

Very little has been written about the use of appropriated funds for what may be the most sacred perk of all, chauffeurs. There is no governmentwide statute or statutory regulation purporting to authorize, prohibit, or restrict the use of chauffeurs. Accordingly, most of the GAO reports which broach the subject—and they are few to begin with—are merely exercises in fact-finding. *E.g.*, GAO, *Use of Government Vehicles*

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<sup>157</sup> Pub. L. No. 99-272, title XV, subtitle C, §§ 15301–15313, 100 Stat. 82, 335–38 (Apr. 7, 1986).

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*for Home-to-Work Transportation*, GAO/NSIAD-84-27 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 1983) (presenting overtime data in tabular form).

While there are no governmentwide provisions, there is the occasional restriction that appears in an appropriation act. For example, section 412 of the 1997 Departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act includes the following general provision: “Except as otherwise provided in section 406, none of the funds provided in this Act to any department or agency shall be obligated or expended to provide a personal cook, chauffeur, or other personal servants to any officer or employee of such department or agency.” Pub. L. No. 104-204, § 412, 110 Stat. 2874, 2922 (Sept. 26, 1996). Section 406 is another general provision that reiterates the home-to-work prohibition and exemptions of 31 U.S.C. § 1344. Section 412 would not prohibit chauffeured home-to-work transportation for the Secretaries of HUD and VA, but the then Veterans Administration was not covered before it became a cabinet department and a former Administrator reimbursed the government for the costs of what was then improper. *See* GAO, *Office Refurbishing, Use of a Government Vehicle and Driver, and Out-of-Town Travel by the Former Administrator of Veterans Affairs*, GAO/HRD-83-10 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 18, 1983). GAO suggested in that report that a definition of “chauffeur” for purposes of section 412 would be helpful. *Id.* at 20. Is it, for example, intended to cover someone designated to drive for several officials or who has nondriving duties as well?

The most controversial use of chauffeurs tends to be in the context of home-to-work transportation. GAO has summarized its position as follows:

“While the law does not specifically include the employment of chauffeurs as part of the prohibition in [31 U.S.C. § 1344(a)], GAO has interpreted this section, in conjunction with other provisions of law, as authorizing such employment only when the officials being driven are exempted by [31 U.S.C. § 1344(b)]. . . from the prohibition.”

[62 Comp. Gen. 438, 441 \(1983\)](#). As support for this passage, the 1983 decision cited [B-150989, Apr. 17, 1963](#), which contains the following statement:

“Chauffeurs for Cabinet officers are not expressly provided for by law; however, it is implicit in [31 U.S.C. §§ 1343 and 1344] that the use of automobiles, by Cabinet officers,

purchased or leased with appropriated funds is to be considered as a use for official purposes. Consequently, the general employment authority conferred upon heads of Departments by [5 U.S.C. § 3101] constitutes authority to employ chauffeurs when an appropriation is available for the payment of their compensation.”

B-150989, at 1. These decisions would seem to support the proposition that an official who is authorized to use a government vehicle for home-to-work transportation may also use a chauffeur unless restricted by some agency-specific legislation.

In a 1975 decision, [B-162111, Dec. 17, 1975](#), an official of the Selective Service System, without seeking agency approval, used an employee to chauffeur him to and from work in his (the official's) own car. The agency head, upon learning of the arrangement, disapproved, and the official resigned. As to what further action should be taken, GAO first noted that the home-to-work statutes were inapplicable because the official had used his own car. There might well have been a violation of 5 U.S.C. § 3103 which provides that an individual may be employed “only for services actually rendered in connection with and for the purposes of the appropriation from which he is paid,” but the penalty for violating 5 U.S.C. § 3103 is removal and the violator was already gone. Accordingly, and since congressional intent in the area was “quite uncertain,” GAO's advice was to consider the case closed. [B-162111, at 2](#).

A final decision involves a situation other than home-to-work transportation. The question was whether the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission could use appropriated funds to hire a chauffeured limousine to transport a witness (who happened to be a senator) from the airport to a hearing site and back to the airport. Since the home-to-work statutes were not involved, and since the Commission had authority to hire passenger vehicles (assuming it was needed for this type of hire), the question boiled down to one of purpose availability. The Commission had statutory authority to reimburse the expenses of a witness, and could have done so even without the specific authority. The agency chose to provide transportation rather than reimburse expenses, and while GAO chided that it would have been cheaper to call a taxi, the choice could not be called illegal. [B-194881, Dec. 27, 1979](#).



# Real Property

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**Chapter 13**  
**Real Property**

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# Real Property

## A. Introduction and Terminology

*Question:* Who is the Nation's biggest landowner?

*Answer:* Uncle Sam.

The federal government owns about one-fourth of all the land in the United States. The pattern of ownership is geographically imbalanced, with the United States owning large portions of land in several western states and very small amounts in many eastern states. It averages out, however, to roughly 25 percent.<sup>1</sup>

At one time or another, the federal government owned most of the land, apart from the original 13 colonies, that is now the United States. It acquired this land by purchase (the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, for example) and by conquest (the Native Americans). The legal basis of the federal government's title to its original lands (the theories of title by discovery and title by conquest) was explored in depth, and settled, by Chief Justice John Marshall in an early decision of the Supreme Court, *Johnson and Graham's Lessee v. McIntosh*, 21 U.S. (8 Wheat.) 543 (1823).

The history of America in the nineteenth century is largely the story of the acquisition and disposal by the United States of the "public domain." The land policy of the United States during the nineteenth century was, in a

<sup>1</sup> The federal government owns approximately 636 million acres nationwide. This includes 3.5 percent of all land in the northeastern and north central United States, 5.1 percent in the south Atlantic and south central regions, and 56.6 percent of the western United States. GAO, *High-Risk Series: Federal Real Property*, GAO-03-122 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2003), at 5–6. The proportion of federal land ownership is actually decreasing. A 1996 report put the figure at about 650 million acres or about 30 percent, down from slightly over 700 million acres in 1964. GAO, *Land Ownership: Information on the Acreage, Management, and Use of Federal and Other Lands*, GAO/RCED-96-40 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 13, 1996), at 2–4. One major caveat with respect to these figures is that Uncle Sam does not really know how much property he owns since available data are unreliable. See generally GAO, *Federal Real Property: Better Governmentwide Data Needed for Strategic Decisionmaking*, GAO-02-342 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2002). GAO recently reported that the federal government has made progress in revamping its governmentwide real property inventory since GAO's 2003 high-risk designation in GAO-03-122, but data reliability is still a problem at the agency level. GAO, *Federal Real Property: An Update on High-Risk Issues*, GAO-07-895T (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2007), at 14. See also GAO, *Federal Real Property: Progress Made Toward Addressing Problems, but Underlying Obstacles Continue to Hamper Reform*, GAO-07-349 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 13, 2007). The material that follows in this Introduction has been distilled from many sources. They include: Marla E. Mansfield, *A Primer of Public Land Law*, 68 Wash. L. Rev. 801, 802 n.1 (1993); George C. Coggins and Charles F. Wilkinson, *Federal Public Land and Resources Law* (1981); and Paul W. Gates, Public Land Law Review Commission, *History of Public Land Law Development* (1968).

word, disposal. Land was granted to individuals for homesteads and farming, to states for various purposes, to railroads, *etc.* It is largely in this way that the Nation was built.

Federal “management” over the public domain during this period was virtually nonexistent. As the public domain diminished, America began to develop a heightened awareness that its resources were not unlimited. Gradually toward the close of the nineteenth century, and more rapidly in the twentieth, federal policy shifted from disposal to retention.<sup>2</sup> Along with retention came the need for management and conservation.

The first stage of this new policy was “withdrawal.” When land is “withdrawn” from the public domain, it is removed from the operation of some or all of the disposal laws. All federal land has now been withdrawn from the homestead laws. The concept of withdrawal is still used, but it now has a somewhat more limited meaning. When public land is withdrawn today, it usually means withdrawal from sale or some form(s) of resource exploitation. Section 103(j) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), 43 U.S.C. § 1702(j), provides a statutory definition:

“The term ‘withdrawal’ means withholding an area of Federal land from settlement, sale, location, or entry, under some or all of the general land laws, for the purpose of limiting activities under those laws in order to maintain other public values in the area or reserving the area for a particular public purpose or program . . . .”

Once public land has been withdrawn, the next step is “reservation.” The reservation of withdrawn land means the dedication of that land to some specific use or uses. *Shoshone-Bannock Tribes v. Reno*, 56 F.3d 1476, 1479 (D.C. Cir. 1995). Most federal land is now reserved. The Supreme Court has upheld the power of Congress to withdraw and reserve public lands. *Light v. United States*, 220 U.S. 523 (1911). Withdrawals and reservations may be temporary or permanent. The concepts would have no particular

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<sup>2</sup> This policy is reflected in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, Pub. L. No. 94-579, 90 Stat. 2743 (Oct. 21, 1976), 43 U.S.C. §§ 1701–1782. Section 102(a)(1) of the act declares it to be the policy of the United States that “the public lands be retained in Federal ownership, unless . . . it is determined that disposal of a particular parcel will serve the national interest.” 43 U.S.C. § 1701(a)(1).

relevance to land that is newly acquired now or in the future for a specific purpose.<sup>3</sup>

Withdrawal is usually accomplished by an act of Congress, which may be specific or may delegate the power to the President or to an executive department. If Congress chooses to delegate, it may prescribe the method by which the authority is to be exercised. *Lutzenhiser v. Udall*, 432 F.2d 328 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1970); *Mountain States Legal Foundation v. Andrus*, 499 F. Supp. 383 (D. Wyo. 1980).

The executive branch has long asserted the inherent authority of the President to make withdrawals, and some significant withdrawals have been accomplished by executive order. Prior to 1976, congressional acquiescence in the executive's assertions of an implied power of withdrawal was seen as confirming the power's existence. *United States v. Midwest Oil Co.*, 236 U.S. 459 (1915); *Portland General Electric Co. v. Kleppe*, 441 F. Supp. 859 (D. Wyo. 1977); 40 Op. Att'y Gen. 73 (1941). In an uncodified section of the FLPMA, Pub. L. No. 94-579, § 704(a), Congress expressly repealed "the implied authority of the President to make withdrawals and reservations resulting from acquiescence of the Congress." However, the FLPMA was prospective only, preserved all existing executive withdrawals (Pub. L. No. 94-579, § 701(c)), and gave the Secretary of the Interior express new withdrawal authority to be exercised in accordance with statutory procedures (*id.* § 204, 43 U.S.C. § 1714).<sup>4</sup>

An exception to the FLPMA withdrawal authority is 43 U.S.C. § 156, under which a withdrawal or reservation of public land of more than 5,000 acres "for any one defense project or facility of the Department of Defense" requires an act of Congress. The 1958 enactment of 43 U.S.C. § 156, like FLPMA itself nearly 20 years later, was prospective only and did not

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<sup>3</sup> "Acquired lands" are sometimes distinguished from public domain lands. *See, e.g.*, 30 U.S.C. § 351. The former are lands granted or sold to the United States by a state or private party whereas public domain lands "were usually never in state or private ownership." *Watt v. Alaska*, 451 U.S. 259, 264 n.7 (1981), *citing Wallis v. Pan American Petroleum Corp.*, 384 U.S. 63, 65 n.2 (1966); [B-203504, July 22, 1981](#). For purposes of our discussion, it is sufficient to note that the distinction exists.

<sup>4</sup> A brief summary of these developments may be found in *Lujan v. National Wildlife Federation*, 497 U.S. 871, 875-79 (1990). For a more detailed discussion, see David H. Getches, *Managing the Public Lands: The Authority of the Executive to Withdraw Lands*, 22 Nat. Resources J. 279 (1982).

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invalidate prior withdrawals by executive action. *Mollohan v. Gray*, 413 F.2d 349 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1969).

Another statute that grants explicit reservation authority is the so-called Antiquities Act, enacted in 1906, 16 U.S.C. § 431:

“The President of the United States is authorized, in his discretion, to declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States to be national monuments, and may reserve as a part thereof parcels of land, the limits of which in all cases shall be confined to the smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected. When such objects are situated upon a tract covered by a bona fide unperfected claim or held in private ownership, the tract, or so much thereof as may be necessary, for the proper care and management of the object, may be relinquished to the Government, and the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to accept the relinquishment of such tracts in behalf of the Government of the United States.”

The courts have consistently upheld the exercise of Presidential authority under the Antiquities Act in the face of a variety of challenges. Some recent examples include *Tulare County v. Bush*, 306 F.3d 1138 (D.C. Cir. 2002), *cert. denied*, 540 U.S. 813 (2003); *Mountain States Legal Foundation v. Bush*, 306 F.3d 1132 (D.C. Cir. 2002), *cert. denied*, 540 U.S. 812 (2003); and *Utah Ass’n of Counties v. Bush*, 316 F. Supp. 2d 1172 (D. Utah 2004). For additional discussion of the President’s authority under the Antiquities Act, see Memorandum Opinion for the Solicitor, Department of the Interior, the General Counsel, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the General Counsel, Council on Environmental Quality, *Administration of Coral Reef Resources in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands*, OLC Opinion, Sept. 15, 2000; Harold H. Bruff, *Executive Power and the Public Lands*, 76 U. Colo. L. Rev. 503 (2005).



The last significant body of federal land subject to disposal is in Alaska. Under several statutes,<sup>5</sup> much federal land in Alaska will ultimately be conveyed to the state of Alaska and to Alaska natives. While the federal government's conveyance of land to the state of Alaska and Alaskan natives continues, some serious conflicts have arisen with Alaska native allotments and preexisting rights-of-way. *See* GAO, *Alaska Native Allotments: Conflicts with Utility Rights-of-way Have Not Been Resolved through Existing Remedies*, GAO-04-923 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2004). For a more general discussion of Alaskan land disposal, see GAO, *Alaska Land Conveyance Program: A Slow, Complex, and Costly Process*, GAO/RCED-84-14 (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 1984).

Today, all federally owned land, regardless of the specificity with which it has been withdrawn and reserved, is under the jurisdiction of some federal agency.<sup>6</sup> Four agencies—the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Energy, and Defense—manage approximately 99 percent of federally owned land. Interior has jurisdiction of by far the greatest portion, approximately two-thirds. Within Interior, the bureaus with the greatest land responsibilities are the National Park Service (national parks and monuments), the Fish and Wildlife Service (National Wildlife Refuge System), the Bureau of Reclamation (reclamation water projects), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The lands managed by BLM, comprising nearly half of all federal land, are the most difficult of all to describe. As the policy of disposal galloped along during the nineteenth century, much of the public domain that was best suited for uses such as farming and timber was quickly put to these uses. What was left was used mostly for grazing. Under the “benign neglect” of the time, use too often became overuse and abuse. The land was withdrawn from the public domain by a series of statutes and executive orders starting with the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. When BLM was established in 1946, it received jurisdiction over this land. For lack of a

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<sup>5</sup> Alaska Statehood Act, Pub. L. No. 85-508, 72 Stat. 339 (July 7, 1958), 48 U.S.C. note prec. § 21; Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Pub. L. No. 92-203, 85 Stat. 688 (Dec. 18, 1971), *codified at* 43 U.S.C. §§ 1601–1629h; Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Pub. L. No. 96-487, 94 Stat. 2371 (Dec. 2, 1980), *codified at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 3101–3233.

<sup>6</sup> Real property management in the executive branch operates under the policies set forth in Executive Order No. 13327, *Federal Real Property Asset Management*, 69 Fed. Reg. 5897 (Feb. 4, 2004), 40 U.S.C. § 121 note, discussed hereafter.

better designation, the lands are best referred to by the simple if nondescriptive term “BLM lands.”

The Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, has jurisdiction over the approximately 25 percent of federal land which comprises the National Forest System. The Department of Energy controls property acquired, mostly during the World War II and Cold War eras, in connection with the development, production, and testing of nuclear weapons.

The Defense Department has jurisdiction over a small (approximately 3 percent) but important segment consisting of defense installations and civil water projects managed by the Army Corps of Engineers.

An agency with control over only a tiny percentage of federal land but with major responsibilities is the General Services Administration (GSA). GSA has a variety of functions under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 and the Public Buildings Act of 1959, some of which will be described later in this chapter. In terms of the work space in which federal agencies carry out the day-to-day functions of government, GSA is the “government’s landlord.”

A term we have already encountered on several occasions is the “public domain.” Although the term is still commonly used, in the traditional sense of “open land”—federal land you could obtain for homesteading or upon which you could graze your cattle (and, in the grand tradition of classic American westerns, chase off those pesky farmers and shepherders) free from regulation—the “public domain” no longer exists.

A related term is “public lands.” There is a common-law definition and a statutory definition. The common-law definition is lands which are subject to sale or other disposal under the general land laws of the United States. *Newhall v. Sanger*, 92 U.S. 761, 763 (1875); *Columbia Basin Land Protection Ass’n v. Schlesinger*, 643 F.2d 585, 602 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981); *United States v. Kipp*, 369 F. Supp. 774, 775 (D. Mont. 1974); [19 Comp. Gen. 608, 611 \(1939\)](#). The courts have tended to regard “public domain” as synonymous with “public lands” as defined by *Sanger* and its progeny. *E.g.*, *Barker v. Harvey*, 181 U.S. 481, 490 (1901); *United States v. Holliday*, 24 F. Supp. 112, 114 (D. Mont. 1938). The statutory definition is found in section 103(e) of the FLPMA. For purposes of the FLPMA, “public lands” means, with certain exceptions, “any land and interest in land owned by the United States within the several States and administered by the Secretary of the Interior through the Bureau of Land Management, without regard to

how the United States acquired ownership,” in other words, what we earlier referred to as the “BLM lands.” 43 U.S.C. § 1702(e). The relationship between the statutory and common-law definitions is not without controversy. *Compare Columbia Basin*, 643 F.2d at 601–02 (FLPMA essentially incorporated the traditional definition) *with Sierra Club v. Watt*, 608 F. Supp. 305, 336–38 (E.D. Cal. 1985) (strongly suggesting that its governing circuit’s *Columbia Basin* decision was incompatible with prevailing Supreme Court precedents).

Nothing in life is static. The federal government will continue to acquire land and it will continue to dispose of land. However, apart from the eventual transfer of the Alaska lands, the massive acquisitions and disposals of earlier times appear unlikely to recur. The emphasis is now, and will almost certainly remain, on the complex issues of classification, economic use, and conservation—in brief, on public land management.<sup>7</sup>

Up to this point, our discussion has focused on land *per se*. Of course, real property is much more than the land itself and generally includes “anything growing on, attached to, or erected on” land. *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 1254 (8<sup>th</sup> ed., 2004). It will come as no surprise that the federal government has vast holdings of real property assets of various kinds in the United States and throughout the world. More than 30 federal agencies control about \$328 billion in real property assets worldwide.<sup>8</sup> This includes about 3.3 billion square feet of building floor area that the government owns or leases in roughly a half-million buildings.<sup>9</sup> Given the breadth of these holdings and reported difficulties in accounting for them, GAO included federal real property management on its 2003 “high-risk list” of the most serious challenges facing the federal government. GAO-03-122. This report observed:

“Long-standing problems in the federal real property area include excess and underutilized property, deteriorating facilities, unreliable real property data, and costly space.

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<sup>7</sup> Although GAO remains active in these areas from the audit perspective, they are beyond the scope of this publication.

<sup>8</sup> GAO, *Federal Real Property: Further Actions Needed to Address Long-standing and Complex Problems*, GAO-05-848T (Washington, D.C.: June 22, 2005), at 1.

<sup>9</sup> GAO, *Federal Real Property: Excess and Underutilized Property Is an Ongoing Problem*, GAO-06-248T (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 6, 2006), at 2.

These factors have multibillion-dollar cost implications and can seriously jeopardize the ability of federal agencies to accomplish their missions. Federal agencies also face many challenges securing real property due to the threat of terrorism. Given the persistence of these problems and various obstacles that have impeded progress in resolving them, GAO is designating federal real property as a new high-risk area.”

GAO-03-122, at 1. The designation was continued when the high-risk list was updated in 2007. GAO, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-07-310 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2007), at 6.

GAO also testified that the conditions underlying the high-risk designation persist:

“Many of the assets in the government’s vast and diverse portfolio of real property are not effectively aligned with, or responsive to, agencies’ changing missions and are therefore no longer needed. Furthermore, many assets are in an alarming state of deterioration; agencies have estimated restoration and repair needs to be in the tens of billions of dollars. Additionally, a heavy reliance on costly leasing, instead of ownership, to meet new needs is a pervasive and ongoing problem. These problems have been exacerbated by underlying obstacles that include competing stakeholder interests in real property decisions, various legal and budget-related disincentives to businesslike outcomes, and the need for better planning by real property-holding agencies.”

GAO-06-248T, at 1.

The executive branch has also recognized the seriousness of the federal government’s challenges here. On February 4, 2004, the President issued Executive Order No. 13327 on this subject.<sup>10</sup> Among other things, it requires agencies to designate senior-level real property management officers who shall identify and categorize all real property that the agency

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<sup>10</sup> Exec. Order No. 13327, *Federal Real Property Asset Management*, 69 Fed. Reg. 5897 (Feb. 6, 2004), 40 U.S.C. § 121 note.

owns, leases, or manages, and prioritize actions to improve the operational and financial management of the agency's real property inventory. Exec. Order No. 13327, §§ 3(a), 3(b)(i) & (ii). In addition, a federal real property asset management initiative has been added to the President's Management Agenda.<sup>11</sup>

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## B. Acquisition of Real Property for Government Use

If the federal government needs private property, it will normally try to acquire it in the same manner as a private citizen, through negotiation and purchase. Purchase negotiations, however, do not always succeed. The parties may be unable to agree on the price, or perhaps the owner wants to impose conditions that the acquiring agency thinks are unacceptable. In such a situation, the government always holds the ultimate trump card—the power of eminent domain.

Eminent domain is one of the government's most far-reaching powers, and GAO has cautioned against its overzealous application. *See* GAO, *The Federal Drive to Acquire Private Lands Should Be Reassessed*, GAO/CED-80-14 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 1979). In reviews of particular programs, GAO has been critical of excessive and unnecessary land acquisition by the federal government and has recommended in such instances that the land be returned to private ownership. *E.g.*, GAO, *Lands in the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area Should Be Returned to Private Ownership*, GAO/CED-81-10 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 22, 1981); *The National Park Service Should Improve Its Land Acquisition and Management at the Fire Island National Seashore*, GAO/CED-81-78 (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 1981).<sup>12</sup>

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### 1. The Fifth Amendment

Any discussion of property acquisition by the United States must start with the eminent domain clause or so-called “takings clause” of the Fifth

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<sup>11</sup> *See* [www.whitehouse.gov/results/agenda/real\\_property.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/results/agenda/real_property.html) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> In 2005, Congress mandated that GAO conduct a nationwide study of the use of eminent domain by state and local governments. Pub. L. No. 109-115, div. A, title VII, § 726, 119 Stat. 2396, 2494–95 (Nov. 30, 2005). GAO reported that the lack of centralized or aggregate national or state data on the use of eminent domain precluded GAO from any national or statewide assessments of, among other things, how frequently eminent domain is used for private-to-public or private-to-private transfers of property and the purposes of these transfers. GAO, *Eminent Domain: Information about Its Uses and Effect on Property Owners and Communities Is Limited*, GAO-07-28 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 30, 2006).

Amendment to the United States Constitution. As relevant here, the Fifth Amendment says that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, “nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.” U.S. Const. amend. V.

The Fifth Amendment is not an affirmative grant of the power to take private property. The Supreme Court has noted on many occasions that the power of eminent domain is inherent in the sovereign. It is a necessary incident or attribute of sovereignty and needs no specific grant in the Constitution or elsewhere. *E.g.*, *Albert Hanson Lumber Co. v. United States*, 261 U.S. 581, 587 (1923); *United States v. Gettysburg Electric Railway Co.*, 160 U.S. 668, 681 (1896); *United States v. Jones*, 109 U.S. 513, 518 (1883). The Court noted in *United States v. Carmack*, 329 U.S. 230, 241–42 (1946), that the Fifth Amendment tacitly recognizes a preexisting power to take private property for public use. Thus, the Fifth Amendment is not the source of the government’s power of eminent domain. Rather, it is a limitation on the use of that power.<sup>13</sup> As the Supreme Court recently observed:

“As its text makes plain, the Takings Clause does not prohibit the taking of private property, but instead places a condition on the exercise of that power. In other words, it is designed not to limit the governmental interference with property rights *per se*, but rather to secure *compensation* in the event of otherwise proper interference amounting to a taking.”

*Lingle v. Chevron U.S.A., Inc.*, 544 U.S. 528, 536–37 (2005) (emphasis in original; citations and internal quotation marks omitted).

While consent of the state in which the land is located may be relevant to the type of jurisdiction the federal government acquires (see discussion of the federal enclave in section D of this chapter), the acquisition of land requires no such consent unless Congress has expressly provided otherwise. *North Dakota v. United States*, 460 U.S. 300, 310 (1983); *Kohl v. United States*, 91 U.S. 367, 374 (1876). Examples of statutes requiring state

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<sup>13</sup> However, the fact that the United States has the inherent power of eminent domain does not mean that any federal agency can exercise it without further authority. The need for statutory authority is discussed in section B.3 of this chapter.

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consent are 16 U.S.C. §§ 515 (national forest system acquisitions under the Weeks Act) and 715f (Migratory Bird Conservation Act).<sup>14</sup>

Issues arising under the Eminent Domain Clause can be grouped under three major headings:

- *What is a “taking” for purposes of the Fifth Amendment?* The concept of taking is not limited to condemnation actions initiated by the government that result in the transfer of title or possession, but has been construed to embrace a wide variety of government actions that adversely affect the rights of a property owner. Takings of the latter kind are often referred to as “inverse condemnations” because it is the property owner, rather than the government, who initiates a claim or lawsuit based on an alleged interference with property rights. Examples include so-called “regulatory takings,” which involve government restrictions on the use of property, as well as physical encroachments on property such as flooding from government dams or overflights by government aircraft. The Supreme Court’s opinion in *Lingle* describes the development of the inverse condemnation concept.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the type of taking involved, the purpose of the eminent domain clause of the Fifth Amendment is to “ba[r] Government from forcing some people alone to bear public burdens which, in all fairness and justice, should be borne by the public as a whole.” *Lingle*, 544 U.S. at 537, quoting *Armstrong v. United States*, 364 U.S. 40, 49 (1960); see also *Connolly v. Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation*, 475 U.S. 211, 227 (1986).
- *What is a “public use”?* Contrary to what the words may seem to imply, public use does not mean for use by, or accessible to, members of the general public. According to the Supreme Court, virtually

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<sup>14</sup> Cases discussing and applying the requirement of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act include *United States v. 1,216.83 Acres of Land*, 573 F.2d 1054 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1976); *Swan Lake Hunting Club v. United States*, 381 F.2d 238 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1967).

<sup>15</sup> For additional background, see GAO, *Regulatory Takings: Agency Compliance with Executive Order on Government Actions Affecting Private Property Use*, GAO-04-120T (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 16, 2003); *Regulatory Takings: Implementation of Executive Order on Government Actions Affecting Private Property Use*, GAO-03-1015 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 19, 2003); Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), *The Constitutional Law of Property Rights “Takings”*: An Introduction, No. RS20741 (Dec. 19, 2006); CRS, *Takings Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court: A Chronology*, No. 97-122 (Oct. 19, 2005).

anything the Congress is empowered to do is a public use sufficient to invoke the power of eminent domain. *E.g.*, *Berman v. Parker*, 348 U.S. 26, 33 (1954) (“Once the object is within the authority of Congress, the right to realize it through the exercise of eminent domain is clear.”). The Supreme Court’s decision in *Kelo v. City of New London*, 545 U.S. 469 (2005), reenforces the breadth of the power of eminent domain. In *Kelo*, the Court upheld the City of New London’s authority to take land from individual homeowners as part of an economic development plan to use the land for a variety of commercial and recreational purposes.<sup>16</sup> The Court reaffirmed that “the sovereign may not take the property of A for the sole purpose of transferring it to another private party B”; nor may the government “be allowed to take property under the mere pretext of a public purpose, when its actual purpose was to bestow a private benefit.” *Kelo*, 545 U.S. at 477–78. Beyond this, however, the opinion indicated that the Fifth Amendment permits government officials wide leeway in deciding what constitutes a “public use” and does not lend itself to bright-line rules. Specifically, the Court rejected the petitioners’ proposal to adopt a rule that economic development does not qualify as a public use:

“Putting aside the unpersuasive suggestion that the City’s plan will provide only purely economic benefits, neither precedent nor logic supports petitioners’ proposal. Promoting economic development is a traditional and long accepted function of government. There is, moreover, no principled way of distinguishing economic development from the other public purposes that we have recognized.”

*Id.* at 484. *Kelo* was a controversial decision. Indeed, Justice O’Connor, writing for the four dissenters, observed:

“To reason, as the Court does, that the incidental public benefits resulting from the subsequent ordinary use of private property render economic development takings ‘for public use’ is to wash out any distinction between private and public use of property—and thereby effectively to

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<sup>16</sup> While *Kelo* did not involve a taking by the federal government, the decision applied the “federal baseline” standards under the Fifth Amendment. The opinion noted that state constitutions can and have imposed stricter “public use” restrictions than the federal baseline. *Kelo*, 545 U.S. at 489.



delete the words ‘for public use’ from the Takings Clause of the Fifth Amendment.”

*Id.* at 494. *Kelo* has proven to be controversial outside the Court as well, prompting legislative proposals to restrict the exercise of eminent domain.<sup>17</sup> One such proposal was enacted as section 726 of the Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-115, div. A, title VII, 119 Stat. 2396, 2494–95 (Nov. 30, 2005). Section 726 prohibited the use of funds appropriated in that act to support federal, state, or local projects seeking to use eminent domain for other than a “public use” and provided that “public use” shall not be construed to include “economic development that primarily benefits private entities.”<sup>18</sup>

- *What constitutes “just compensation”?* As a general proposition, just compensation in a straightforward condemnation action is the fair market value of the property at the time of the taking. It is the price a willing and knowledgeable buyer would pay to a willing and knowledgeable seller, both free from mistake or coercion, without regard to increases or decreases attributable to the project for which the property is being acquired. *E.g., United States v. Reynolds*, 397 U.S. 14 (1970); *United States v. Miller*, 317 U.S. 369, 376–77 (1943). *See also* 18 Comp. Gen. 245 (1938); B-193234, Dec. 8, 1978. With respect to takings other than straightforward condemnations, it is sometimes difficult to define the property interests affected and to put a price on the interference with them. One general principle is that just compensation is measured by the property owner’s loss rather than the government’s gain. *See, for example, Brown v. Legal Foundation of Washington*, 538 U.S. 216, 235–36 (2003), and cases cited. Thus, it may be, as it was in *Brown*, that no compensation is due even where some sort of a taking has occurred.

The federal power of eminent domain extends to Indian tribal lands. *E.g., United States v. 21,250 Acres of Land*, 161 F. Supp. 376 (W.D. N.Y. 1957). It also extends to land owned by states. *E.g., Oklahoma ex rel. Phillips v.*

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<sup>17</sup> See CRS, *Condemnation of Private Property for Economic Development: Kelo v. City of New London*, No. RS22189 (July 11, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> See CRS, *Condemnation of Private Property for Economic Development: Legal Comments on the House-Passed Bill (H.R. 4128) and Bond Amendment*, No. RL33208 (Jan. 20, 2006).

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*Guy F. Atkinson Co.*, 313 U.S. 508, 534 (1941). The Supreme Court has said that the term “private property” in the Fifth Amendment encompasses the property of state and local governments, and that the same principles of just compensation presumptively apply. *United States v. 50 Acres of Land*, 469 U.S. 24, 31 (1984). The rules may differ, however, in the case of properties, such as roads, which are normally not bought and sold in the open market. *Id.* at 30.

Each of these issues has generated a raft of litigation, with the scope of the regulatory taking concept being particularly active. Further detail is beyond our present scope and our statements above are intended to do nothing more than suggest the applicable principles.<sup>19</sup>

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## 2. Federal Land Acquisition Policy

The Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970 became law on January 2, 1971, and was amended in 1987.<sup>20</sup> The major portion of the law, Title II, deals with relocation assistance and is covered in section C of this chapter. Title III, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4651–4655, is entitled “Uniform Real Property Acquisition Policy.” The policy provisions of Title III are independent of the relocation provisions of Title II and apply regardless of whether anyone will be displaced by the acquisition. *City of Columbia, South Carolina v. Costle*, 710 F.2d 1009 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983).

The main section for our purposes is section 301, codified at 42 U.S.C. § 4651. It begins by stating four congressional objectives:

- to encourage and expedite acquisition by voluntary rather than involuntary means,
- to avoid litigation,
- to assure consistent treatment of property owners, and
- to promote public confidence in federal land acquisition practices.

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<sup>19</sup> The publications cited in footnote 15 provide a useful starting point for further exploration.

<sup>20</sup> Pub. L. No. 91-646, 84 Stat. 1894 (Jan. 2, 1971), *amended by* Uniform Relocation Act Amendments of 1987, Pub. L. No. 100-17, title IV, 101 Stat. 132, 246 (Apr. 2, 1987).

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Section 301 then goes on to state 10 congressional “policies,” designated as sections 301(1) through (10). They are:

*Subsection (1).* Agencies should make “every reasonable effort” to acquire property by negotiated sale before resorting to involuntary acquisition. This of course does not mean that the negotiations must succeed. What it means is that the agency is expected to negotiate reasonably and in good faith. See [B-179059, Oct. 11, 1973](#).

A device the National Park Service has used to encourage voluntary sale when acquiring single-family residential property is to permit the owner to retain a “right of use and occupancy” for a specified term of years or for the life of the owner and spouse. The owner pays a fee for this retained interest, determined actuarially in the case of a life estate, which is deducted from the purchase price. The fee has traditionally been set below market as an additional inducement. The device, primarily from the valuation perspective, is discussed in [B-125035-O.M., May 7, 1976](#).

*Subsection (2).* Property should be appraised before the negotiations start, and the owner should be given the opportunity to accompany the appraiser during the inspection. The agency may waive the appraisal for property with a “low fair market value.” The statute does not define this term. However, regulations generally governing any acquisition of real property for a direct federal program or project permit waiver if an agency determines that the valuation is uncomplicated and the anticipated value is estimated at \$10,000 or less. 49 C.F.R. § 24.102(c)(2)(ii).

To the extent appropriate, appraisals should follow the *Uniform Appraisal Standards for Federal Land Acquisitions* promulgated by the Interagency Land Acquisition Conference (2000).<sup>21</sup> 49 C.F.R. § 24.103(a).

*Subsection (3).* This subsection, which deals with the amount of compensation, includes several distinct points:

- The acquiring agency should establish the “just compensation” amount before the negotiations start.

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<sup>21</sup> The *Uniform Appraisal Standards*, a compendium of federal eminent domain appraisal laws, regulations, and practices, can be found online at [www.usdoj.gov/enrd/land-ack/](http://www.usdoj.gov/enrd/land-ack/) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

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- This amount should not be less than the agency’s approved appraisal.<sup>22</sup>
  - The negotiations should start with an offer of this amount.
  - The acquiring agency should provide the owner with a written statement summarizing the basis for the amount offered.
  - Increases or decreases in fair market value attributable to the federal project or to the likelihood of acquisition are to be disregarded. This was a codification of existing case law. See the discussion of what constitutes “just compensation,” above. For a further discussion of this principle, referred to by the courts as the “scope-of-the-project rule,” see *United States v. Land*, 213 F.3d 830, 834–36 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2000), *cert. denied*, 532 U.S. 904 (2001).

The legislative history emphasizes that genuine negotiations are expected rather than a “take it or leave it” (or perhaps more appropriately, “take it or we’ll condemn it anyway”) approach. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 22.

Subsection (3) is designed to be fair both to the property owner and to the taxpayer. Thus, although the statute contemplates that the ultimate purchase price might end up higher than the agency’s appraisal, the property owner should not receive a windfall. [B-193234, Dec. 8, 1978](#). Also, as long as there is no pressure or coercion, there is nothing to prevent an owner from agreeing to accept less than the government’s initial offer. [58 Comp. Gen. 559, 566 \(1979\)](#); [B-148044, Dec. 9, 1976](#).

Where the wrong amount is paid through mutual mistake, the negotiations may be reopened to effect an appropriate adjustment. The decision [B-197623, June 4, 1980](#), involved acquisitions by the National Park Service. After some land had been acquired, it was discovered that two states in which the acquired lands were located had passed certain zoning restrictions which resulted in lowering property values. Since the zoning restrictions were viewed as a consequence of the federal project, the reduction in value should have been disregarded. The Comptroller General

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<sup>22</sup> What if the agency thinks the appraisal is excessive? The House Public Works Committee cautioned: “If the amount of just compensation as determined by the head of the Federal agency is less than the agency’s approved appraisal, it would appear that an in-depth review of the methods employed in determining the amount of just compensation or in making the appraisal is called for.” H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 23 (1970).

agreed that the Park Service could reopen the transactions and reappraise the property using the proper criteria.

If there is a substantial delay between the appraisal and the acquisition, the agency should consider updating the appraisal or getting a new one. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 23; [B-193234, Dec. 8, 1978](#).

The Uniform Relocation Act applies to the acquisition of easements as well as the acquisition of fee simple title. If the taking of an easement benefits the remainder of the landowner's property, the accruing benefit may be set off against the value of the property interest actually taken. If these accruing benefits exceed the value of the easement taken, there is no requirement for additional monetary compensation. [58 Comp. Gen. 559](#). A [case](#) discussing application of several of the policy elements to the acquisition of scenic easements is [B-179059, Oct. 11, 1973](#).

*Subsection (4)*. The owner should not be required to surrender possession until the agency has either (a) paid the agreed purchase price, in the case of a negotiated purchase, or (b) deposited the appropriate amount with the court, in the case of a condemnation.

*Subsection (5)*. Insofar as possible, no person lawfully occupying real property (residence, business, or farm) should be required to move without at least 90 days' written notice.

*Subsection (6)*. If the acquiring agency permits an owner or tenant to remain on the premises on a rental basis, rent should not exceed the property's fair rental value.

*Subsection (7)*. The acquiring agency should take no action (*e.g.*, advance or defer the time of condemnation) to coerce or compel an agreement as to price.

*Subsection (8)*. If involuntary acquisition becomes necessary, the agency should institute formal condemnation proceedings. An agency should never intentionally make it necessary for the property owner to go to court to establish the taking under an inverse condemnation theory (see section B.5.b(6) of this chapter).

*Subsection (9)*. If the agency needs only part of the property but partial acquisition would leave the owner with an uneconomic remnant, the agency should offer to acquire the entire property. The statute defines

“uneconomic remnant” as a remaining interest which the acquiring agency determines “has little or no value or utility to the owner.”

*Subsection (10).* An owner who has been “fully informed of his right to receive just compensation” may choose to donate all or part of the property to the government.

These, then, are the elements of federal land acquisition policy. Always on the lookout for catchy phrases, we would be tempted to refer to 42 U.S.C. § 4651 as the “property owner’s bill of rights,” except for one thing—section 4651 does not create any rights. Another provision of the Uniform Relocation Act, section 102, 42 U.S.C. § 4602, provides:

“(a) The provisions of section 4651 of this title create no rights or liabilities and shall not affect the validity of any property acquisitions by purchase or condemnation.

“(b) Nothing in this chapter shall be construed as creating in any condemnation proceedings brought under the power of eminent domain, any element of value or of damage not in existence immediately prior to January 2, 1971.”

By virtue of 42 U.S.C. § 4602, the 10 policy elements of 42 U.S.C. § 4651 are guidelines only. There is a considerable body of case law to the effect that section 4651 does not create rights in favor of property owners which are enforceable in court. *E.g., Rhodes v. City of Chicago*, 516 F.2d 1373 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1975); *Zoeller v. United States*, 65 Fed. Cl. 449 (2005); *Boston v. United States*, 424 F. Supp. 259 (E.D. Mo. 1976); *Nall Motors, Inc. v. Iowa City*, 410 F. Supp. 111 (S.D. Iowa 1975), *aff’d*, 533 F.2d 381 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1976); *Barnhart v. Brinegar*, 362 F. Supp. 464 (W.D. Mo. 1973).<sup>23</sup> If the statute did not create rights enforceable in court, it followed that GAO, when it had claims settlement authority, could not consider monetary claims for alleged violations of section 4651. B-215591, Sept. 5, 1984.

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<sup>23</sup> See also *Paramount Farms, Inc. v. Morton*, 527 F.2d 1301 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1975); *United States v. 416.81 Acres of Land*, 525 F.2d 450 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1975); *Bunker Properties, Inc. v. Kemp*, 524 F. Supp. 109 (D. Kan. 1981); *Nelson v. Brinegar*, 420 F. Supp. 975 (E.D. Wis. 1976); *Rubin v. Department of Housing & Urban Development*, 347 F. Supp. 555 (E.D. Pa. 1972); *Will-Tex Plastics Manufacturing, Inc. v. Department of Housing & Urban Development*, 346 F. Supp. 654 (E.D. Pa. 1972), *aff’d mem.*, 478 F.2d 1399 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1973).

The policy elements of 42 U.S.C. § 4651 are intended to apply to federally funded state acquisitions as well as to direct federal acquisitions. Federal agencies are directed by 42 U.S.C. § 4655(a)(1) not to approve any grant, contract, or agreement to or with a state agency under which federal money will be available for all or any part of any program or project which will result in the acquisition of real property, unless the state agency provides “satisfactory assurances” that it will “be guided, to the greatest extent practicable under State law,” by the policies of section 4651.<sup>24</sup>

One court has found that, although the policy elements of 42 U.S.C. § 4651 are not binding in and of themselves, they may become binding if included in a contract. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) entered into a “contract” with a county for a grant under the Housing Act. In the agreement, the county represented that it would follow the policies of 42 U.S.C. § 4651. Plaintiffs alleged that the county failed to follow several of the policy elements, for example, by not giving some owners the opportunity to accompany the appraisers during their inspection. The court found that the plaintiff-landowners were “donee third party beneficiaries” of the contract between HUD and the county. The court therefore enjoined the county from prosecuting condemnation proceedings, and enjoined HUD from providing any federal money, until the county complied with the items found to be in violation. *Bethune v. United States*, 376 F. Supp. 1074 (W.D. Mo. 1972).

We mention the *Bethune* case because it has never been overruled. It is, however, of doubtful precedential value. The same court (different judge) rejected the third-party beneficiary theory a year later, without mentioning *Bethune*, in *Barnhart*, 362 F. Supp. 464. The *Barnhart* case, because of its exhaustive analysis of legislative history, has become one of the leading cases in the area. Courts which have considered both cases have rejected *Bethune* and followed *Barnhart*. *E.g.*, *Boston*, 424 F. Supp. at 264–65; *Nall Motors*, 410 F. Supp. at 114–15.

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<sup>24</sup> Title II of the Uniform Relocation Act contains a similar provision with the “satisfactory assurance” language. 42 U.S.C. § 4630. That provision is noted later in section C.3.e of this chapter with case citations to the effect that a satisfactory assurance does not mean a guarantee.

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### 3. Need for Statutory Authority

Before any federal agency can purchase real property, it must have statutory authority. Congress originally enacted this requirement in 1820,<sup>25</sup> and it is found today, unchanged, in 41 U.S.C. § 14: “No land shall be purchased on account of the United States, except under a law authorizing such purchase.” This is one of the oldest principles of our government. The Attorney General said well over a century ago that “[t]here never was a time in the history of this Government when the purchase of land on account of the United States without authority of law was a legal act on the part of the Executive.” 11 Op. Att’y Gen. 201, 203 (1865). A similar requirement is found in 10 U.S.C. § 2664(a), applicable to the military departments.<sup>26</sup>

As discussed below, not all acquisitions are subject to 41 U.S.C. § 14. Where the statute does not apply, the authority for the expenditure is determined “in accordance with the usual rules of appropriation law construction,” that is, by applying the necessary expense theory of purpose availability. 38 Comp. Gen. 782, 785 (1959); B-12021, Sept. 7, 1940.

#### a. Applicability

The requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 14 applies to acquisition by condemnation as well as acquisition by voluntary purchase. 41 Comp. Gen. 796 (1962). Condemnation is essentially an enforced sale; the government is still a “buyer.” This does not mean that the authorizing statute must specify “condemnation.” As we will see later, a statute authorizing purchase is sufficient. To restate, although the statute need not specify condemnation, there must be a statute.

Several decisions have established that 41 U.S.C. § 14 applies not only to the acquisition of fee simple title, but also to the acquisition of lesser estates or interests in land, such as permanent easements or rights-of-way. 17 Comp. Gen. 204 (1937); 21 Comp. Dec. 326 (1914); B-55105, Feb. 26, 1946; A-88061, Aug. 3, 1937; A-31494, May 8, 1930; A-24745, Oct. 13, 1928. Looking at it from another angle, the purchase of a permanent easement or right-of-way over land constitutes the purchase of land for purposes of 41 U.S.C. § 14.

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<sup>25</sup> Act of May 1, 1820, ch. 52, § 7, 3 Stat. 567, 568.

<sup>26</sup> Section 2664(a) excludes from its application the acceptance of property acquired through certain exchanges of government property.



The statute applies as well to the acquisition of a leasehold. 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 56 (1937); 28 Op. Att’y Gen. 463 (1910). This includes acquisition for consideration other than money as long as the consideration is more than nominal. 35 Op. Att’y Gen. 183 (1927). A lease will normally place the lessee under an obligation, upon termination of the lease, to restore the property to the condition it was in when the lease began. A federal agency in temporary occupancy of real property under such an obligation cannot purchase (or condemn) the property unless 41 U.S.C. § 14 has been satisfied, even though acquiring fee title would be cheaper than restoration. [24 Comp. Gen. 339 \(1944\)](#). *See also* 26 Comp. Dec. 242 (1919).

The statute applies to the acquisition of new land, not to land already owned by the government. Thus, it does not apply to the transfer of excess property to another agency. [38 Comp. Gen. 782 \(1959\)](#). *See also* [B-71849, Jan. 7, 1948](#). The statute has also been held inapplicable to transactions in the nature of “unvouchered expenditures,” that is, transactions funded from appropriations that were specifically provided to be “expended at the discretion of the President.” 9 Comp. Dec. 805, 806 (1903).

(1) Debt security

The statute does not prevent acquisition of land where acquired as security for a debt, nor does it apply to collecting debts by enforcing such security interests. In this connection, the Supreme Court has said:

“[I]n our judgment [41 U.S.C. § 14] does not prohibit the acquisition by the United States of the legal title to land, without express legislative authority, when it is taken by way of security for a debt. . . . To deny [appropriate government officials] the power to take security for a debt on account of the United States, according to the usual methods provided by law for that end, would deprive the government of a means of obtaining payment, often useful, and sometimes indispensably necessary. That such power exists as an incident to the general right of sovereignty, and may be exercised by the proper department if not prohibited by legislation, we consider settled . . . .”

*Neilson v. Lagow*, 53 U.S. (12 How.) 98, 107 (1851). *See also* *Van Brocklin v. Tennessee*, 117 U.S. 151, 154 (1886); 35 Op. Att’y Gen. 474 (1928).

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Citing *Neilson*, the Comptroller General held in [34 Comp. Gen. 47 \(1954\)](#) that 41 U.S.C. § 14 did not preclude the Secretary of Agriculture from protecting the government's interests under a second mortgage, either by bidding at a prior lienholder's foreclosure sale, or, if the prior lienholder foreclosed, by redeeming the property under state law. Once it was determined that 41 U.S.C. § 14 did not stand in the way and that there was no other applicable prohibition, the question was simply one of applying the necessary expense theory of purpose availability—the Secretary could make the expenditure if it was administratively determined to be in reasonable furtherance of the relevant appropriation. *See also* [36 Comp. Gen. 697 \(1957\)](#).

(2) Donated property/funds

An early decision held that 41 U.S.C. § 14 does not apply to land donated to the United States, provided that the donation does not involve an expenditure of public funds. 19 Comp. Dec. 1 (1912). In reaching this conclusion, the Comptroller of the Treasury cited two 1910 opinions of the Attorney General reaching the same result, 28 Op. Att'y Gen. 413 and 28 Op. Att'y Gen. 463. In the former opinion, the Attorney General expressed the view that the phrase “on account of the United States” as used in 41 U.S.C. § 14 means the same thing as “at the expense of” or “to be paid for by” the United States. 28 Op. Att'y Gen. at 416.

If an agency has authority to accept donations of both land and money, it may use donated funds to purchase land, without regard to 41 U.S.C. § 14, if the funds were donated for the same general purpose for which the land is desired. [2 Comp. Gen. 198 \(1922\)](#). In that case, the state of Colorado donated a sum of money to the Interior Department for “general park purposes” in the Rocky Mountain National Park. Interior has authority, now found at 16 U.S.C. § 6, to accept land or money donated for the purposes of the national park and monument system. GAO advised that Interior could use the donated funds to purchase a tract of land within the park boundaries which was needed as a site for park administration and maintenance buildings, without the need for further statutory authority. *See also* B-40087, Feb. 28, 1944.

(3) Options

An option to purchase land is an agreement in which the owner of the land gives a prospective buyer the right to purchase the land at a fixed price within a stated time period. The party receiving the option is under no

obligation to exercise it. If consideration is given, the option is binding. If there is no consideration, the owner may revoke the option at any time prior to its exercise. An option may be viewed as a “continuing offer” to sell. The offer is accepted by exercise of the option within the time period for which it was granted. Purchase options may be advantageous to the government as a means of inhibiting price escalation.

A purchase option is not the purchase of land or an interest in land. Thus, 41 U.S.C. § 14 does not apply to the *acquisition* of an option, although it does apply to the *exercise* of the option. [38 Comp. Gen. 227 \(1958\)](#); [36 Comp. Gen. 48 \(1956\)](#).

Notwithstanding the nonapplicability of 41 U.S.C. § 14, other decisions have held that appropriated funds may not be used to acquire an option without statutory authority. [A-17267, June 28, 1927](#); 9 Comp. Dec. 569 (1903).<sup>27</sup> The prohibition has not been applied to options given without monetary consideration. *See, e.g.*, [B-103967, July 7, 1972](#); [A-59458, Jan. 15, 1935](#).

When you combine these two concepts—the need for statutory authority and the nonapplicability of 41 U.S.C. § 14—the result is that you need statutory authorization to use appropriated funds to acquire an option on land, but it does not have to be tied to the particular transaction. Several agencies have obtained statutory authority to acquire options. Examples are:

- 7 U.S.C. § 428a(b): The Department of Agriculture may acquire purchase options on land. Specific authority is needed if the cost of the option is more than \$1.
- 10 U.S.C. § 2677: Military departments may acquire options on real property at a cost of not more than 12 percent of the property’s appraised fair market value.
- 16 U.S.C. § 460l-10b: The Interior Department may acquire options on land to be included in the national park system, up to a maximum

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<sup>27</sup> The two decisions used different rationales. The 1927 GAO decision was based on the purpose restriction of 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a). The 1903 decision of the Comptroller of the Treasury used as its rationale an interpretation of the advance payment statute, 31 U.S.C. § 3324.

aggregate cost of \$500,000 per year. The option must be for a minimum of 2 years, and the option cost must be credited toward the purchase price.

- The General Services Administration has received authority in annual appropriation acts by virtue of language making the Federal Buildings Fund appropriation available for “acquisition of options to purchase buildings and sites.” *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 110-161, 121 Stat. 1844, 2000 (Dec. 26, 2007) (fiscal year 2008).

A purchase option may be acquired by itself or it may be included in a lease. The decisions in this area do not appear to have applied the statutory authority requirement to options included in leases, although we could find no clear statement. Where inclusion of an option is authorized, it may provide for its exercise at the end of the basic term of the lease, at the end of any renewal term, or at staggered periods during the basic term or any renewal term. [B-137279, Nov. 10, 1958, \*aff’g\*, 38 Comp. Gen. 227 \(1958\)](#). Lease transactions present their own complications and are treated separately later in this chapter.

(4) Indian tribal funds

Indian tribal funds are trust funds administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The purchase of land using Indian tribal funds is not a purchase “on account of the United States.” Thus, 41 U.S.C. § 14 does not apply, even where title to the land is to vest in the United States to be held in trust for the particular tribe. [19 Comp. Gen. 175 \(1939\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 661 \(1926\)](#). *See also* [B-126095, Mar. 7, 1956](#); [A-51705, Nov. 12, 1942](#).

b. Types of Statutory Authority

(1) Express versus implied authority

For the most part, land acquisition authority tends to be unmistakably explicit—that is, it will contain language such as “purchase land” or “acquire land.” This is of course preferable, but it is not absolutely required. It is clear from the decisions, both administrative and judicial, that 41 U.S.C. § 14 may be satisfied by implication to a limited extent. The question seems to have arisen most often in connection with the construction of various facilities or public improvements. Given the existence of 41 U.S.C. § 14, deriving authority to purchase land by implication requires a somewhat more rigid test than the “reasonable relationship” standard used under the necessary expense theory. Responding to the question of whether congressional authorization for

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construction carries with it the implied authority to acquire land, the Comptroller General stated the test as follows:

“[W]hile each individual case must of necessity be determined on the basis of the specific facts and circumstances pertaining thereto, an authorization for construction may be deemed to imply authority to acquire land therefor when such land is so necessary and essential for that construction that the acquisition thereof must have been contemplated by the Congress.”

B-115456, July 16, 1953, at 7.

In determining whether authority to purchase land may be derived by implication, it is relevant to examine any pattern Congress may have developed in similar legislation. To illustrate, in 7 Comp. Dec. 524 (1901), something called the “Fish Commission” had an appropriation for the “erection of buildings” in connection with the establishment of a fishery station. The Commission wanted to know if it could use the appropriation to purchase land for the station. The Comptroller of the Treasury noted that a pretty good case could be made based on that appropriation standing alone. However, the Comptroller also noted that “the country is dotted with stations established by virtue of acts of Congress” (7 Comp. Dec. at 525), and that these other statutes almost invariably included the specific authority to purchase land. Viewing this particular appropriation in light of the established pattern in similar statutes, the Comptroller concluded that the purchase of land was not authorized. *See also* 2 Comp. Gen. 558, 560 (1923); B-115456, July 16, 1953.

Other authorities supporting the proposition that the authority required by 41 U.S.C. § 14 may be derived by implication in appropriate circumstances include *United States v. Threlkeld*, 72 F.2d 464 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 293 U.S. 620 (1934); *Burns v. United States*, 160 F. 631 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1908); *State of Nevada v. United States*, 547 F. Supp. 776 (D. Nev. 1982), *aff’d*, 731 F.2d 633 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1984); 21 Comp. Dec. 326, 328 (1914); 11 Comp. Dec. 132 (1904); B-34805, June 15, 1943; 40 Op. Att’y Gen. 69 (1941).

(2) Forms of express authority

It was long ago recognized that no “specific formula of language” is required to authorize land acquisition. 11 Comp. Dec. 132, 139 (1904). To meet the varying needs of different agencies and programs, Congress has

used a number of different statutory configurations to confer land acquisition authority.

Some agencies have general land acquisition authority in the form of permanent provisions found in the United States Code which may be agencywide or limited to a particular bureau or program. Examples are:

- 38 U.S.C. § 2406: authorizes Department of Veterans Affairs to acquire land for national cemeteries;
- 38 U.S.C. § 8103(a)(1): authorizes Veterans Affairs to acquire land for medical facilities;
- 40 U.S.C. §§ 3304(b) and 3305(b)(1)(B): authorize General Services Administration (GSA) to acquire land for purposes of carrying out its responsibilities for the acquisition, construction, and alteration of public buildings;
- 42 U.S.C. § 1502(b): authorizes acquisition of land for defense housing by Departments of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Housing and Urban Development; and
- 42 U.S.C. § 2473(c)(3): general land acquisition authority for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

These statutes make no mention of funding. Since they do not authorize the incurring of obligations in advance of appropriations, specific acquisitions under them must be funded through the normal budget and appropriations process. While acquisitions under these statutes are dependent upon the availability of appropriations, there is no general legal requirement that there also be a specific authorization of appropriations. [B-173832, Aug. 1, 1975, \*aff'd\*, B-173832, July 16, 1976](#). GAO stressed in both of these letters that it was venturing no opinion as to whether a point of order might lie, but was addressing only the legality of the appropriation if enacted.

A variant includes a general reference to the availability of appropriations. An example is 7 U.S.C. § 428a(a), which authorizes the Department of Agriculture to acquire land “as may be necessary to carry out its authorized work,” but only when provided for “in the applicable appropriation or other law.” As with 41 U.S.C. § 14 itself, this statute has been construed as not

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applying to land already owned by the government. [38 Comp. Gen. 782, 784–85](#) (1959).

Another example is 14 U.S.C. § 92(f), which provides general land acquisition authority for the Coast Guard “for which an appropriation has been made.” This too requires an appropriation which is itself available for land acquisition. [B-148989-O.M., June 18, 1962](#) (at the time of this opinion, section 92(f) read, “within the limits of appropriations made therefor”). A third example is 43 U.S.C. § 36b, which authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to purchase land for use by the Geological Survey in “gaging” streams “when funds have been appropriated by Congress.” There is little substantive difference between this variant and the statutes previously noted because a general reference to the availability of appropriations merely serves to emphasize what the law requires anyway.

Another variant includes an authorization of appropriations. These tend to be specific program statutes, and the authorization may include restrictions as well as monetary authorizations. Examples are:

- 16 U.S.C. § 1246(e): authorizes land acquisition by the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to implement the National Trails System Act. The authorization of appropriations is found in 16 U.S.C. § 1249.
- 16 U.S.C. § 1277(a): authorizes land acquisition by the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to implement the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The authorization of appropriations is found in 16 U.S.C. § 1287. The provision is discussed generally in [B-125035-O.M., May 21, 1979](#).

Once again, an actual acquisition requires an available appropriation, in this case one made pursuant to the authorization.

Another form of legislative authority is a statute which authorizes land acquisition and identifies the appropriation to be charged. An example is 10 U.S.C. § 2663(d). The land acquisition needs of the military departments are usually addressed in the annual National Defense Authorization Acts. However, if land is needed in the interest of national defense and to maintain the “operational integrity” of a military installation, and the urgency of the situation does not permit inclusion in the next authorization act, 10 U.S.C. § 2663(d) authorizes military departments to use military construction appropriations to acquire the land. The secretary of the military department must notify the Senate and House Armed Services Committees within 10 days following a determination to acquire land under



this section. 10 U.S.C. § 2263(d)(2). The military departments also have authority to use appropriations available for maintenance or construction to acquire any interest in land needed for national defense purposes and which does not cost more than \$750,000 or to an interest in land costing not more than \$1.5 million if necessary to correct a deficiency that threatens life, health, or safety. 10 U.S.C. § 2663(c).

Another statute of this type is 16 U.S.C. § 555, which authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to purchase land for national forest headquarters, ranger stations, and other sites required for authorized activities of the Forest Service, up to a maximum of \$50,000 a year, chargeable not to a specifically named appropriation but to “the appropriation applicable to the purpose for which the land is to be used.” Decisions applying this statute are [6 Comp. Gen. 437 \(1927\)](#) (an earlier version of the statute) and [B-125390, Oct. 6, 1955](#).

If you have one of these statutes, the only other thing you need is a sufficient amount of available funds in the appropriation to be charged.

A final category we may note consists of statutes which are essentially procedural and which GAO has viewed as not constituting sufficient authority for the purchase of land. Under these, you still need separate acquisition authority as well as an available appropriation. Examples are:

- 10 U.S.C. § 2663(a) & (b): gives the military departments what appears to be general condemnation and purchase authority. GAO’s view is that “this provision is procedural in nature and merely provides the method whereby land may be acquired where there exists a separate authorization to acquire and pay for such land,” as well as an available appropriation. [B-115456, July 16, 1953](#), at 6.
- 10 U.S.C. § 9773: GAO reached the same conclusion in the same decision with respect to this statute, which authorizes the Secretary of the Air Force to determine sites for establishment and enlargement of air bases, and to acquire fee simple title to any land deemed necessary for this purpose.
- 40 U.S.C. § 581(c)(1): land acquisition by GSA. GAO’s view of this provision as merely procedural was based on legislative history and an established congressional pattern of providing specifically for acquisitions by GSA. Even if the provision were regarded as general



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authority, acquisitions would still require available appropriations. [B-137755-O.M., Dec. 30, 1958.](#)

It is apparent from our survey that Congress has used a variety of approaches to satisfy the basic requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 14. Typically, there is some form of authorization, general or specific, which is then implemented, with few exceptions, through the normal budget and appropriations process. The one constant is the need for an available appropriation. *See, e.g.,* [41 Comp. Gen. 796, 798 \(1962\)](#); [38 Comp. Gen. 227, 229 \(1958\)](#). Setting aside the question of whether such a provision would be subject to a point of order, authorization and appropriation could be combined in an appropriation act; that is, the appropriation itself could be the source of the acquisition authority. *E.g.,* *United States v. Mock*, 476 F.2d 272, 274 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1973); *Polson Logging Co. v. United States*, 160 F.2d 712, 714 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1947). The appropriation does not have to specifically address the tract to be acquired. A lump-sum appropriation, one of whose purposes is land acquisition, will be sufficient if it can be demonstrated through legislative history, budget submission materials, *etc.*, that the lump-sum is available for the specific acquisition in question. The case most often cited for this proposition is *United States v. Kennedy*, 278 F.2d 121 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1960). *See also* *United States v. Right to Use and Occupy 3.38 Acres of Land*, 484 F.2d 1140 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1973) (Army research and development appropriation); *Perati v. United States*, 352 F.2d 788 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1965), *cert. denied*, 383 U.S. 957 (1966) (National Park Service); *Seneca Nation of Indians v. Brucker*, 262 F.2d 27 (D.C. Cir. 1958), *cert. denied*, 360 U.S. 909 (1959) (Corps of Engineers general construction appropriation); *United States v. 0.37 Acres of Land*, 414 F. Supp. 470 (D. Mont. 1976) (Land and Water Conservation Fund).

An appropriation which itself provides for “purchase of land as authorized by law” will generally be ineffective without separate statutory authorization. [19 Comp. Gen. 758 \(1940\)](#). However, authority sufficient to satisfy the basic requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 14, such as a lump-sum appropriation demonstrably available for the specific acquisition, will also satisfy the “authorized by law” language in the appropriation act. *3.38 Acres*, 484 F.2d at 1142–43; *0.37 Acres*, 414 F. Supp. at 471–72.

The terms of the legislation will define the extent of the agency’s acquisition authority. Naturally, the authority will be circumscribed by any restrictions contained in the legislation. *E.g.,* *Maiatico v. United States*, 302 F.2d 880 (D.C. Cir. 1962).

Similarly, depending on those terms, the agency may or may not be authorized to acquire less than fee title or fee title subject to various reservations or covenants. It has been held that the simple authority to purchase land does not include the authority to purchase that land subject to reservations or covenants restricting the use of the land (such as timber or mineral reservations) and which might impede subsequent sale or disposition by the government. [10 Comp. Gen. 320 \(1931\)](#); [A-34970, Feb. 20, 1931](#); [A-25156, Dec. 15, 1928](#). In addition, the Attorney General will probably not approve the title. *See* 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 431, 435–36 (1982); 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 337, 339 (1979). Congress, of course, can authorize acquisition subject to reservations. *See, e.g.,* [15 Comp. Gen. 910 \(1936\)](#). The authority to acquire “lands, easements and rights-of-way” has been construed as such authority. 40 Op. Att’y Gen. 431 (1945). There are also nonstatutory exceptions based largely on common sense. Thus, where acquisition of land for a parkway would end up cutting a farmer’s land in half, there could be no objection to his reserving the right to cross the parkway to get from one part of his farm to the other. [A-34970, May 15, 1931](#). In another case, where the land to be acquired contained buildings which the government neither needed nor wanted, there was no objection to reserving title to the buildings in the vendor along with a requirement to remove them within a specified time. [22 Comp. Gen. 165 \(1942\)](#).

In any event, care must be taken in this regard because acceptance of a deed subject to certain covenants may end up binding the government. *E.g., Mississippi State Highway Commission v. Cohn*, 217 So. 2d 528 (Miss. 1969) (covenant to construct cattle underpass); [B-210361, Aug. 30, 1983](#) (covenant to pay homeowners’ association assessment).<sup>28</sup>

What the agency can or cannot do also depends on the scope of its acquisition appropriations, which in turn depends on the rules of statutory and appropriations law construction (purpose, time, and amount). For example, construction of the Bonneville Dam by the Army Corps of Engineers resulted in the flooding of certain Forest Service facilities. While the Army had appropriations to acquire land necessary for the Bonneville project, it could not use those funds to purchase land on which to relocate

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<sup>28</sup> This of course would not apply to illegal covenants like the infamous “white people only” covenant, an example of which is stated in [10 Comp. Gen. 320 \(1931\)](#). The Justice Department advises that racial and religious covenants should simply be ignored because they are unenforceable. U.S. Department of Justice, *Regulations of the Attorney General Promulgated in Accordance With the Provisions of Public Law 91-393*, Order No. 440-70, § 5(d) (Oct. 2, 1970).

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the Forest Service facility since those lands were not required for that project. 17 Comp. Gen. 791 (1938). The decision was based on two statutes: 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), which restricts appropriations to their intended purposes, and 41 U.S.C. § 14 itself, since “such purchase”—purchase of land for use by another agency—had not been authorized. Similarly, the established rules regarding the exclusivity of specific appropriations apply equally to land acquisition appropriations. *E.g.*, B-10122, July 28, 1950; B-10122, May 20, 1940.

c. Effect of Noncompliance

It will be apparent by now that our discussion of 41 U.S.C. § 14 has cited very few recent cases. The reason is that there are very few recent cases. Most issues under the statute are pretty well settled, and most agencies with significant land acquisition responsibilities have worked out the necessary legislative framework with their oversight committees. Perhaps at least in part because of this, there is very little authority on the question of what happens if an agency purchases or condemns land without having complied with 41 U.S.C. § 14.

One early case said that a purchase in contravention of 41 U.S.C. § 14 was void. *United States v. Tichenor*, 12 F. 415 (C.C.D. Ore. 1882). *Tichenor* cited an 1865 opinion of the Attorney General, 11 Op. Att’y Gen. 201 (which used the term “illegal,” not “void”), and was in turn cited by the Comptroller of the Treasury in 6 Comp. Dec. 791, 793 (1900).

A 1908 case, *Burns v. United States*, 160 F. 631 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1908), concluded, without citing *Tichenor*, that 41 U.S.C. § 14 “should not be construed to apply to executed contracts, and so the United States be prevented from claiming that for which it has paid.” *Id.* at 634.

Our research has disclosed no indication that the issue has ever been addressed by the Comptroller General, by the Attorney General subsequent to the 1865 opinion, or by any court subsequent to *Burns*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Burns* was quoted for purposes of analogy in *Nevada v. United States*, 547 F. Supp. 776, 780 (D. Nev. 1982). While the decision was affirmed on appeal, 731 F.2d 633 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1984), the court of appeals criticized that portion of the district court’s opinion as unnecessary *dicta*, and indicated that, had the district court gone much further, it would have vacated that portion of the opinion. Thus, the 1982 district court opinion cannot be viewed as especially helpful.

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## 4. Title Considerations

### a. Title Approval

When you as a private citizen bought your house, a major consideration, and one which you probably took pretty much for granted, was the assurance that the people you bought it from actually owned it. Suppose they did not, or suppose there were “clouds” on the title you did not know about, such as outstanding tax liens or judgment liens. You could very well be stuck. You might have a wonderful cause of action against the sellers, assuming you could catch them and assuming they still had some money left. It should be obvious that this is an unacceptable risk. If you financed your house the way most of us do, with a mortgage, the bank did the worrying for you. Banks do not like to take unacceptable risks, and most of them are not about to lend you money unless they are reasonably sure their investment is safe. This is why one of the things you paid for at closing was title insurance.

These same considerations are there when the government buys real estate. There is one important difference in that the government pays directly; it does not take out mortgages. Nevertheless, the government would indeed look stupid if it bought land from someone who did not own it. More realistic possibilities are the acquisition of land which could not be used for the desired purposes, or the incurring of additional expenses to clear a defective title.

There is a statute designed to address this problem, 40 U.S.C. § 3111. Section 3111(a) provides: “Public money may not be expended to purchase land or any interest in land unless the Attorney General gives prior written approval of the sufficiency of the title to the land for the purpose for which the Federal Government is acquiring the property.” Section 3111(b)(1) authorizes the Attorney General to delegate title approval responsibility to other departments and agencies, to be exercised subject to the Attorney General’s supervision and in accordance with regulations prescribed by the Attorney General. Section 3111(b)(2) provides that departments and agencies with such delegated responsibility may request opinions and other assistance from the Attorney General on title issues.

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As with 41 U.S.C. § 14, the cases involving 40 U.S.C. § 3111 tend to be older ones.<sup>30</sup> There are few relevant GAO decisions from recent decades, and the statute is hardly mentioned in the published opinions of the Attorney General since 1940. This would tend to suggest that the operation of the statute is reasonably well settled.

The purpose of 40 U.S.C. § 3111 is, quite simply, “to protect the United States against the expenditure of money in the purchase or improvement of land to which it acquired a doubtful or invalid title.” 10 Op. Att’y Gen. 353, 354 (1862), *quoted in* 18 Comp. Gen. 727, 732 (1939). The statute assigns the responsibility to the Attorney General.<sup>31</sup> 40 U.S.C. § 3111(a). Thus, as far as the “accounting officers” are concerned, the Attorney General’s opinion on the sufficiency of title under 40 U.S.C. § 3111 is conclusive. 3 Comp. Dec. 195 (1896); B-78097, June 26, 1950. This would also be true with respect to the validity of mortgage releases upon which the Attorney General had conditioned his approval. 1 Comp. Dec. 348 (1895). For this reason, GAO has relied heavily on the opinions of the Attorney General when considering questions involving 40 U.S.C. § 3111.

Prior to 1970, the statute was worded in terms of the purchase of land for the purpose of erecting public buildings. *See* 40 U.S.C. § 255 (1964). Thus, many early decisions centered around the use to which the land was to be put. *E.g.*, 9 Comp. Gen. 75 (1929). However, the Attorney General, the Comptroller of the Treasury, and Comptroller General liberally construed the statute to apply to acquisitions for public works or public improvements of virtually any sort. Further, the fact that the acquiring agency did not intend to erect anything on the land was often viewed as irrelevant. *See, e.g.*, 18 Comp. Gen. 727 (1939); 18 Comp. Gen. 372 (1938); 3 Comp. Dec. 530 (1897); B-80025, Oct. 1, 1948; 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 73 (1937).

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<sup>30</sup> The current provision 40 U.S.C. § 3111 was 40 U.S.C. § 255 prior to the codification of title 40 of the United States Code in 2002. Pub. L. No. 107-217, § 1, 116 Stat. 1062, 1144 (Aug. 21, 2002). Thus, the cases described here use that citation.

<sup>31</sup> Within the Department of Justice, the implementation of 40 U.S.C. § 3111 is the responsibility of the Environment and Natural Resources Division (formerly Land and Natural Resources Division). 28 C.F.R. § 0.66. That division has developed regulations (unpublished) outlining its standards for title approval, entitled *Regulations of the Attorney General Promulgated in Accordance With the Provisions of Public Law 91-393*, Order No. 440-70 (Oct. 2, 1970). *See* 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 431 (1982); 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 337 (1979). The 1970 regulations also are referenced in the Justice Department’s *Title Standards 2001* guide, cited in note 40, *infra*.

So broad was this construction that early cases often stated the following general propositions:

- 40 U.S.C. § 3111 applies “to all land purchased by the United States for whatever purpose.” [9 Comp. Gen. 421, 422 \(1930\)](#); [1 Comp. Gen. 625, 626 \(1922\)](#). Both decisions cite 28 Op. Att’y Gen. 413 (1910). *See also* 28 Op. Att’y Gen. 463 (1910).
- 40 U.S.C. § 3111 “enters into, and forms part of” every contract for the purchase of land by the government. 9 Op. Att’y Gen. 100, 101 (1857), *cited in* 9 Comp. Gen. at 422 *and* 1 Comp. Gen. at 626.

A 1970 revision of the statute, Pub. L. No. 91-393, 84 Stat. 835 (Sept. 1, 1970), removed any doubt over the validity of these broad statements. The statute now refers simply to the “purchase [of] land or any interest in land.” The current view therefore remains that 40 U.S.C. § 3111 applies in the absence of an express statutory exception. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 431 (1982); 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 337 (1979).

As one might expect from the foregoing, 40 U.S.C. § 3111 has been applied to a wide variety of situations. Examples are:

- Acquisitions under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, 16 U.S.C. §§ 715–715r. [40 Comp. Gen. 153 \(1960\)](#); [16 Comp. Gen. 856 \(1937\)](#); 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 73 (1937).
- Land purchased for development into forest, grazing, and recreational areas and wildlife conservation refuges. [15 Comp. Gen. 539 \(1935\)](#).
- Land acquired for public parks. *See Cole v. United States*, 28 Ct. Cl. 501, 511 (1893).
- Flowage easements acquired by the Corps of Engineers. [B-139566, June 5, 1959](#).
- Acquisition of land or an interest in land by the Department of Energy in order to develop, operate, or maintain the Strategic Petroleum Reserve under the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, 42 U.S.C. § 6239. 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 337 (1979).

The statute has been held applicable to purchases for nominal consideration,<sup>32</sup> to acquisition by donation,<sup>33</sup> and to acquisition by exercise of a purchase option.<sup>34</sup> One situation in which 40 U.S.C. § 3111 has been found not applicable is monetary contributions by the Department of Defense for common-use North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) facilities financed under multilateral cost-sharing agreements. [B-114107, Apr. 27, 1953](#).

A number of early decisions concluded that 40 U.S.C. § 3111 did not apply where an agency had specific authority to acquire land by purchase or condemnation. An example was the Reclamation Act of 1902, 43 U.S.C. § 421. The theory was that such authority gave the acquiring agency discretion to either purchase or condemn, and incidentally to determine whether title was sufficiently clear to warrant purchase rather than condemnation. [10 Comp. Gen. 115 \(1930\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 953 \(1926\)](#); [12 Comp. Dec. 691 \(1906\)](#); [A-39589, Dec. 30, 1931](#). The theory was discredited in [18 Comp. Gen. 727, 734–35 \(1939\)](#) as not being “too strongly supported by reason.” In case anybody missed the point, GAO, in agreement with the views of the Department of Justice, made it clear the following year that the old theory would no longer be applied. [19 Comp. Gen. 739 \(1940\)](#). The reason, which we will cover later in section B.5 of this chapter, is that, since 1888, every agency with statutory authority to acquire land by purchase is also authorized to resort to condemnation.<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 744. Subsequently, the Attorney General determined specifically that acquisitions under the Reclamation Act were subject to 40 U.S.C. § 3111. See [B-80025, Oct. 1, 1948](#), for citations to and discussion of Attorney General’s letters relating to this subject.

Prior to the 1970 revision, 40 U.S.C. § 3111 included a provision authorizing the Attorney General to waive the approval requirement with regard to easements and rights-of-way upon determining that waiver would not jeopardize the interests of the United States. *See, e.g.*, [21 Comp. Gen. 125](#)

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<sup>32</sup> [15 Comp. Gen. 539](#); [39 Op. Att’y Gen. 99 \(1937\)](#).

<sup>33</sup> [36 Comp. Gen. 616 \(1957\)](#); [5 Comp. Dec. 682, 684 \(1899\)](#).

<sup>34</sup> [1 Comp. Gen. 752 \(1922\)](#); [1 Comp. Gen. 625 \(1922\)](#).

<sup>35</sup> A further reason to reject the old theory, which did not exist at the time of these decisions, is the strong federal policy in favor of purchase embodied in 42 U.S.C. § 4651, discussed previously in section B.2. The decision whether to purchase or condemn is no longer supposed to be purely discretionary.



(1941). The 1970 revision dropped the waiver provision. However, the statute still provides flexibility in that it requires not that title be perfect in all instances, but that it be sufficient for the purpose for which the property is being acquired.<sup>36</sup>

The process of obtaining title approval naturally takes time, and until it is done, the statute prohibits payment of the purchase price. This does not necessarily mean that payment must await the Attorney General's final approval. For example, in [40 Comp. Gen. 153 \(1960\)](#), GAO agreed that payment could be made for purchases under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, 16 U.S.C. § 715–715r, based on a “preliminary title opinion” in which the Attorney General stated that valid title would vest in the United States when specified requirements and objections had been met and a deed to the United States recorded, provided that the requirements and objections involved only routine questions of fact and not questions of law. Of course, should a question arise as to whether a particular condition had been properly satisfied, payment should await the Attorney General's final approval. Somewhat similarly, GAO agreed in an earlier case that payment could be made for purchases under the Reclamation Act, 43 U.S.C. § 421, prior to receipt of the Attorney General's formal opinion where the only objections disclosed by the title examination were those that would be satisfied out of the purchase price. [B-80025, Oct. 1, 1948](#). It should go without saying that in both of these cases the Justice Department had also agreed that the proposals could be considered as being in compliance with 40 U.S.C. § 3111.

Congress in a few instances has provided exceptions from 40 U.S.C. § 3111. Section 3111(d) itself makes an exception for certain land acquisitions by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Another example is 42 U.S.C. § 1502(b) relating to defense housing. Where 40 U.S.C. § 3111 does not apply, the acquiring agency should nevertheless determine, in the exercise of sound discretion, that the title being acquired is adequate to protect the interests of the government. *Cf.* [21 Comp. Gen. 125 \(1941\)](#) (agency discretion under former waiver provision). To take the obvious illustration, payment would

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<sup>36</sup> There are two other obsolete provisions which should be disregarded when reading the older cases. First, a provision requiring consent of the state legislature was deleted in 1940. The successor to this provision is noted later in our discussion of federal enclaves in section D of this chapter. Second, a provision, formerly found at 40 U.S.C. § 256 (1964), requiring that legal services in connection with procuring title to public building sites be rendered by United States Attorneys, was repealed as part of the 1970 legislation.



never be justified to “persons having no color of right, interest, or title in the land to convey.” *Id.* at 131.

Congress may also authorize the acquiring agency to commence its use of the land prior to receipt of the Attorney General’s approval. Such a provision is not an exemption from the basic requirement of the statute but merely a deviation from the otherwise applicable time sequence. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 431 (1982).

b. Title Evidence

The traditional form of evidence upon which title opinions are based is the “abstract of title.” This is a rather cumbersome document which summarizes each transaction and occurrence over a given time period which may affect title to the property. At one time, real estate lawyers spent much of their lives squirreled away in the local registry of deeds, charged with the boring task of making title searches. In the early decades of the twentieth century, free enterprise came to the rescue of those poor, lost lawyers in the form of title companies. Title companies employ professional abstracters to prepare the abstract, on the basis of which the company issues a “certificate of title” certifying that title is free and clear except as shown on the certificate. Another development has been the growth of title insurance. This is exactly what it sounds like—a policy issued by an insurance company insuring against title defects.

In 1930, Congress amended the statute that is now 40 U.S.C. § 3111 to authorize the Attorney General to accept certificates of title as satisfactory title evidence.<sup>37</sup> The statute was amended again in 1940 to permit acceptance of any other evidence which the Attorney General deems satisfactory.<sup>38</sup> When the statute was revised in 1970,<sup>39</sup> the Justice Department reported that more than 93 percent of titles it approved were based on title certificates or title insurance. S. Rep. No. 91-1111, at 5 (1970). Thus, although the abstract of title is still the document from which other forms of title evidence spring, the typical government attorney these

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<sup>37</sup> Act of June 28, 1930, ch. 710, 46 Stat. 828.

<sup>38</sup> Act of Oct. 9, 1940, ch. 793, 54 Stat. 1083, 1084.

<sup>39</sup> Pub. L. No. 91-393, § 1, 84 Stat. 835 (Sept. 1, 1970).

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days seldom sees one.<sup>40</sup> The point to note is that older cases, to the extent they mention only title abstracts, should now be read to include other forms of title evidence that the Attorney General deems acceptable.

Appropriations are available for other forms of title evidence to the same extent as for title abstracts. [A-39589, Jan. 29, 1932](#); [A-39589, Dec. 30, 1931](#).<sup>41</sup> See also [14 Comp. Gen. 318 \(1934\)](#).

c. Title Evidence Expenses

(1) Purchase

Section 3111(c) of title 40, United States Code, provides:

“Except where otherwise authorized by law or provided by contract, the expenses of procuring certificates of title or other evidences of title as the Attorney General may require may be paid out of the appropriations for the acquisition of land or out of the appropriations made for the contingencies of the acquiring department or agency of the Government.”

Actually, this provision reflects what the decisions have held for 150 years: expenses of procuring title evidence incident to the purchase of real property are chargeable to the appropriation from which the purchase price is to be paid.

When the predecessor of 40 U.S.C. § 3111 was originally enacted in 1841,<sup>42</sup> it contained no mention of the use of land acquisition funds. It contained only the reference to “contingency appropriations,” a type of appropriation common at the time. Nevertheless, the Comptroller of the Treasury held

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<sup>40</sup> The Justice Department has published a booklet entitled *Title Standards 2001: A Guide for the Preparation of Title Evidence in Land Acquisitions by the United States* (Dec. 29, 2000), which is intended to apply both to the Justice Department and to agencies which have been delegated title approval responsibility. Section 5 of this guide presents and discusses the title insurance policy adopted in 1991 by the Justice Department and the American Land Title Association. A copy of this guide can be found online at [www.usdoj.gov/enrd/Legal\\_Topics/Legal\\_Docs\\_Title\\_Standards.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/enrd/Legal_Topics/Legal_Docs_Title_Standards.html) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> As noted earlier in section B.4.a of this chapter, this decision has been repudiated to the extent it found 40 U.S.C. § 3111 not applicable. However, it remains valid for the point cited in the text.

<sup>42</sup> Joint Resolution No. 6, 5 Stat. 468 (Sept. 11, 1841).

that the cost of procuring title evidence incident to purchase was chargeable to land acquisition appropriations, and commented that this had been “the established practice for many years—probably over fifty.” 3 Comp. Dec. 216, 217 (1896).

The Comptroller went on to explain the statutory reference to contingency appropriations. The 1841 enactment, the first general requirement of its type, directed the Attorney General to examine the titles not only to land to be purchased in the future, but also to land which had already been purchased. With respect to previously purchased land, the purchase appropriations for the most part would have already lapsed. Thus, the reference to contingency appropriations was intended to provide a source of funds for title expenses relating to previously purchased land for which no other appropriations were currently available. 3 Comp. Dec. at 217.

The reference in 40 U.S.C. § 3111 to land acquisition appropriations was added in 1940.<sup>43</sup> By then, the rule of 3 Comp. Dec. 216 had become established beyond dispute.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the 1940 amendment formalized the existing case law, and the reference to contingency appropriations should be viewed as obsolete. There has been little need to discuss the rule since 1940 because, in addition to the decisions, it now has a clear statutory basis. *See* 21 Comp. Gen. 744 (1942); B-142862, June 21, 1960. The rule applies equally in situations where 40 U.S.C. § 3111 does not apply. 25 Comp. Dec. 195 (1918).

Land acquisition appropriations are available exclusively. General operating appropriations may not be used. A-33604, Oct. 11, 1930, *aff'd on reconsideration*, A-33604, Nov. 14, 1930.

Several of the early decisions mention a statute enacted in 1889 which required the seller to furnish title evidence, without expense to the government, if the land was to be used as the site for a public building. *E.g.*, 8 Comp. Dec. 212 (1901). It was carried for many years as part of 40 U.S.C. § 256. It was repealed in 1961. Pub. L. No. 87-277, 75 Stat. 577 (Sept. 22, 1961).

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<sup>43</sup> Act of Oct. 9, 1940, ch. 793, 54 Stat. 1083, 1084.

<sup>44</sup> Some of the cases are 8 Comp. Gen. 308 (1928); 3 Comp. Gen. 569 (1924); 9 Comp. Dec. 569 (1903); A-97769, Sept. 20, 1938; A-47693, Mar. 31, 1933; A-39589, Dec. 30, 1931; A-26824, Apr. 25, 1929.

(2) Donation

Persons who donate land to the United States are often unwilling to bear the expense of furnishing proof of their title. If the receiving agency has an appropriation available for the purchase of land for the same purpose as that for which the donation is being made, the cost of title evidence is chargeable to that appropriation. [A-97769, Sept. 20, 1938](#); [A-47693, Mar. 31, 1933](#); [A-26824, Apr. 25, 1929](#). If the agency has no such appropriation available, the cost of title evidence may be charged to the current Salaries and Expenses appropriation. [A-47693, Mar. 31, 1933](#).

We noted previously in our discussion of 41 U.S.C. § 14 that an agency with authority to accept donations of both land and money may use donated funds to purchase land if the funds were donated for the general purpose for which the land is desired. [2 Comp. Gen. 198 \(1922\)](#). As a logical extension of this principle, the funds are also available for the procurement of necessary title evidence with respect to donated land. [A-26824, Apr. 25, 1929](#).

(3) Condemnation

An early line of GAO decisions addressed the use of Justice Department appropriations to pay the costs of condemnation proceedings. Although the decisions have never been overruled or modified, legislative developments have rendered them largely obsolete. Those early GAO decisions held that the cost of obtaining title evidence for use in condemnation proceedings is chargeable to appropriations of the Department of Justice. *E.g.*, [8 Comp. Gen. 308 \(1928\)](#).<sup>45</sup> In fact, almost every decision discussing title evidence incident to purchase points out that the rule for purchase does not apply in condemnation situations. When those decisions were rendered, the holding was viewed simply as an application of the general proposition that the Justice Department receives appropriations to conduct its litigation, and expenses necessarily incurred incident to that litigation are chargeable to those appropriations.

There were exceptions even under the early decisions. Thus, land acquisition appropriations of the acquiring agency were held available for procuring title evidence incident to condemnation proceedings where the

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<sup>45</sup> *See also* [9 Comp. Dec. 569 \(1903\)](#); [3 Comp. Dec. 216 \(1896\)](#); [B-142862, June 21, 1960](#); [B-98346, Oct. 9, 1950](#); [A-47693, Mar. 31, 1933](#); [A-39589, Dec. 30, 1931](#).

governing legislation authorized the handling of condemnation proceedings jointly by the Justice Department and the acquiring agency (21 Comp. Gen. 744 (1942)); where 40 U.S.C. § 3111 was not applicable (25 Comp. Dec. 195 (1918)); where the title evidence was to be used “primarily or in the first instance” to attempt to negotiate a settlement without proceeding to judgment (22 Comp. Gen. 20 (1942)); and where the land acquisition appropriation was expressly available for expenses incidental to the acquisition (*see* B-55181, Feb. 15, 1946). Justice Department appropriations were also held unavailable where the title evidence was needed for matters subsequent to the final judgment of condemnation. 23 Comp. Dec. 53 (1916).

The provision that is now 40 U.S.C. § 3111(c), quoted above in connection with purchase, was traditionally viewed as applicable to purchase and not to condemnation, both before and after the 1940 amendment which added the reference to land acquisition funds, notwithstanding that its language is broad enough to encompass condemnation. 21 Comp. Gen. 744, 748 (1942); 23 Comp. Dec. 53, 56 (1916). Thus, while there was an apparent willingness to find exceptions at the drop of a hat, the “general rule” remained that title evidence for use in condemnation proceedings was an expense of litigation chargeable to Justice Department funds.

Our research has disclosed no mention of this issue after 1960. However, a subsequent legislative development appears to have changed things. Earlier in this chapter, in section B.2, we reviewed federal land acquisition policy under the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4651–4655. Under 42 U.S.C. § 4651(1), it is now the established federal policy that agencies are to make every reasonable effort to acquire real property by negotiation and purchase before resorting to condemnation.

When an agency is budgeting for its land acquisition needs, it must generally do so on the assumption that purchase negotiations will succeed. In other words, it must be prepared to meet the expenses it will have to bear incident to purchase. One of these, as we have seen, is the cost of obtaining title evidence. In the typical situation where an agency resorts to condemnation because purchase negotiations did not succeed, it may be said that Congress has provided for title evidence expenses to be borne by the agency’s land acquisition funds. In this situation, shifting the expense to the Justice Department could be viewed as augmenting the acquiring agency’s appropriation.

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With no decisions for guidance, it is impossible to define with any degree of certainty those situations in which the expenses might still be a proper charge to Justice Department appropriations. Nevertheless, the policy of the Uniform Relocation Act has largely eliminated any basis for distinguishing between purchase and condemnation on this particular issue, and it seems safe to conclude that, at least with respect to acquisitions subject to the policy guidance of 42 U.S.C. § 4651, what was once the rule is now the exception.

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## 5. Methods of Acquisition

### a. Purchase

As we have seen, voluntary negotiation and purchase is the preferred method of federal land acquisition.<sup>46</sup> To do this, an agency needs statutory authority (41 U.S.C. § 14), an available appropriation, and title approval (40 U.S.C. § 3111). The transaction itself follows the same steps as one between private parties—a Purchase-and-Sale Agreement followed by a closing at which the deed is delivered.

The Purchase-and-Sale Agreement, although certainly a contract, is not governed by the Contract Disputes Act because the Contract Disputes Act does not apply to “the procurement of . . . real property in being.” 41 U.S.C. § 602(a)(1). This exemption does not extend to newly created lease agreements, which remain subject to the Contract Disputes Act. *Forman v. United States*, 767 F.2d 875 (Fed. Cir. 1985); *Industry Associates, Inc. v. United States Postal Service*, 133 F. Supp. 2d 194 (E.D.N.Y. 2001).

No law prohibits the government from purchasing property encumbered by liens. 12 Comp. Dec. 691, 697 (1906); 10 Op. Att’y Gen. 353 (1862). However, at or before closing, the liens must either be fully satisfied or “adequate provision should be made therefor.” Department of Justice, *Regulations of the Attorney General Promulgated in Accordance With the Provisions of Public Law 91-393*, § 6(a) (1970). One way to “adequately provide” is to withhold an appropriate amount from the purchase price. 10 Op. Att’y Gen. at 354–55.

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<sup>46</sup> For step-by-step procedural guidance and an appendix of forms, see Land [now Environment] and Natural Resources Division, U.S. Department of Justice, *A Procedural Guide for the Acquisition of Real Property by Government Agencies* (1972).

A question applicable to government acquisitions as well as private transactions is who bears the risk of loss if the property is damaged or destroyed between the time the Purchase-and-Sale Agreement is signed and the deed delivered, where the loss or damage is not the fault of either party. This can result from such things as fire, soil erosion, or various forms of natural disaster. It is impossible to give a simple answer because the government's rights are determined by the law of the state in which the property is located. *See, e.g., Preseault v. Interstate Commerce Commission*, 494 U.S. 1, 20 (1990) (O'Connor, J., concurring); *Foster v. United States*, 607 F.2d 943, 948 (Ct. Cl. 1979); *United States v. Fallbrook Public Utility District*, 165 F. Supp. 806, 822 (S.D. Cal. 1958).

Several states have adopted the Uniform Vendor and Purchaser Risk Act, under which the party in possession bears the risk of loss, if title has not yet passed from the seller to the buyer. *E.g., Acree v. Hanover Insurance Co.*, 561 F.2d 216, 219 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1977) (Oklahoma); *Long v. Keller*, 163 Cal. Rptr. 532 (Cal. Ct. App. 1980) (California). In states which still apply the common law, the majority rule places the risk of loss on the purchaser on the theory that "equitable title" passes when the contract of sale is executed. *E.g., Zitzelberger v. Salvatore*, 458 A.2d 1021 (Pa. Super. Ct. 1983) (Pennsylvania); *Utah State Medical Ass'n v. Utah State Employees Credit Union*, 655 P.2d 643 (Utah S.Ct. 1982) (Utah); *Ridenour v. France*, 442 N.E.2d 716 (Ind. App. 1982) (Indiana). Other states place the risk on the seller. *E.g., Laurin v. DeCarolus Construction Co.*, 363 N.E.2d 675 (Mass. 1977) (Massachusetts). In one GAO decision, the government had entered into a contract to acquire an easement, in a state which followed the majority rule, when erosion caused some of the land to cave into a river. Since the risk of loss had passed to the government, the government was liable under the contract. [B-148823, July 24, 1962](#). In any jurisdiction, the parties can control the issue by specifically addressing it in the contract of sale.

Once the deed is recorded and legal title passes to the United States, the government owns the property and must bear any risk of loss even though it may not yet have taken possession or paid the purchase price. [23 Comp. Gen. 323 \(1943\)](#).

The same risk-of-loss rules apply where the government is the seller. [37 Comp. Gen. 700 \(1958\)](#); [36 Comp. Gen. 90 \(1956\)](#); [B-148823, July 24, 1962](#); [B-137673, Oct. 31, 1958](#).

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It is presumed that the consideration specified in the deed is the total agreed-upon purchase price. However, this presumption can be overcome by “clear and convincing” evidence to the contrary, which may entitle the seller to compensation greater than that specified in the deed alone. [7 Comp. Gen. 107 \(1927\)](#). See also [4 Comp. Gen. 21 \(1924\)](#).

b. Involuntary Acquisition

(1) Overview

We saw earlier in this chapter that the power of eminent domain is inherent in the United States. It has been termed “essential to a sovereign government.” *United States v. Carmack*, 329 U.S. 230, 236 (1946). See also *Albert Hanson Lumber Co. v. United States*, 261 U.S. 581, 587 (1923) (the power of eminent domain “is an attribute of sovereignty”). The reason should be obvious. If the power did not exist, private citizens could block urgent and necessary federal projects by simply refusing to sell. *Kohl v. United States*, 91 U.S. 367, 371 (1875); *Norwood v. Horney*, 853 N.E.2d 1115, 1129–30 (Ohio 2006).

The power of eminent domain is vested in the legislative branch. Congress may exercise it directly, or may delegate it to other federal entities to be exercised in any manner that does not violate the Constitution. *E.g.*, *Ferriera V. United States 2,953.15 Acres of Land v. United States*, 350 F.2d 356 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1965).

A federal entity exercises the delegated power of eminent domain by what is called “condemnation.” There are two types of condemnation, direct and inverse. In a direct condemnation the United States brings a lawsuit, resulting in transfer to the United States of title to the property and in payment of just compensation to the owner. *United States v. Clarke*, 445 U.S. 253, 255 (1980). Direct condemnation is accomplished either through a “complaint only” filing in a court or a “declaration of taking” in a court, both discussed below in more detail. In an inverse condemnation, the property owner brings a lawsuit, asserting that some action by the government has sufficiently infringed upon a private property right so as to create a right to “just compensation.” See, *e.g.*, *First English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Glendale v. Los Angeles County*, 482 U.S. 304 (1987); *Pierce v. Northeast Lake Washington Sewer and Water District*, 870 P.2d 305 (Wash. 1994). It differs from direct condemnation in that the government did not intend to take the property. The concepts and case law for both types of condemnation are discussed below in greater detail. Whichever form is used, condemnation always involves a court proceeding. There is no such thing as administrative condemnation.



In all condemnation actions, either direct or inverse, cost limitations in the authorizing legislation or appropriation do not affect either the authority to condemn or the judicial determination of just compensation. *Hanson Lumber*, 261 U.S. at 586–87; *Shoemaker v. United States*, 147 U.S. 282, 302 (1893); *United States v. Certain Real Estate Lying on the South Side of Broad Street*, 217 F.2d 920, 925 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1954).

If land taken by eminent domain is no longer needed, the former owner stands in the same position as any other member of the public. There is no automatic right of repurchase. [B-165511, Mar. 21, 1978](#). Of course, Congress can always provide such a right in a particular context. Also, the deed conveying the property to the government may specify a right of repurchase. *Id.*

(2) Legislative taking

When Congress exercises the power of eminent domain directly, it is called a “legislative taking.” Congress can accomplish legislative taking simply by enacting a statute which declares that title to the property will vest in the United States as of a specified date, usually the date of enactment. *Kirby Forest Industries v. United States*, 467 U.S. 1, 5 (1984); *Paulson v. City of San Diego*, 475 F.3d 1047, 1048 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2007). An example is the legislation establishing the Redwood National Park, 16 U.S.C. §§ 79c, 79c-1. Another example is the 1988 legislation which expanded the Manassas National Battlefield Park, 16 U.S.C. § 429b(b). *See also* Preservation of Mt. Soledad Veterans Memorial, Pub. L. No. 109-272, 120 Stat. 770 (Aug. 14, 2006) (transferred title of the Memorial from San Diego, California, to the United States).

In a legislative taking, since the actual taking is accomplished by statute, the only thing for the court to do is determine the amount of compensation. Court action remains necessary even in a legislative taking because, in any Fifth Amendment taking situation, the determination of just compensation is a judicial function. *Monongahela Navigation Co. v. United States*, 148 U.S. 312, 327 (1893); [59 Comp. Gen. 380 \(1980\)](#).

The legislative taking device is infrequently used. With respect to national parks, the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs has stated a policy that “legislative taking is an extraordinary measure which should be invoked only in those instances in which the qualities which render an area suitable for national park status are imminently threatened with

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destruction.” S. Rep. No. 93-875, at 5 (1974), *quoted in* [B-125035-O.M., Apr. 21, 1976](#), at 2.

This classic use of the term “legislative taking” involves the actual acquisition of title by the United States. Courts have begun to use the term in a somewhat broader sense, to describe situations in which a statute, by its very enactment, deprives a private party of some lesser interest. An example is *Whitney Benefits, Inc. v. United States*, 926 F.2d 1169 (Fed. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 502 U.S. 952 (1991), holding that the enactment of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, by prohibiting certain surface mining, effectively “took” the plaintiff’s coal mining rights. When the government activity does not constitute a physical taking of property but instead limits the use a property owner may make of the property, the basic analytical tool for determining whether a taking has occurred is a three-part test focusing on:

- the character of the governmental action,
- the economic impact on the claimant, and
- the extent to which the governmental action has interfered with distinct investment-based expectations.

*See Lingle v. Chevron U.S.A., Inc.*, 544 U.S. 528, 538–40 (2005); *Tahoe-Sierra Preservation Council, Inc. v. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency*, 535 U.S. 302 (2002); *Penn Central Transportation Co. v. City of New York*, 438 U.S. 104 (1978).

### (3) Sources of authority

Executive branch agencies may condemn property only if they have statutory authority to do so. 41 U.S.C. § 14. A question that was once open to some debate was whether an executive agency’s statutory authority to acquire land by purchase also granted the agency power to condemn property, or whether the authorizing statute needed to specifically grant authority to condemn. *See, e.g., Kohl v. United States*, 91 U.S. 367, 374 (1875). To remove any doubt, Congress enacted a statute in 1888,<sup>47</sup> sometimes called the General Condemnation Act of 1888 and now found at

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<sup>47</sup> Act of August 1, 1888, ch. 728, § 1, 25 Stat. 357.

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40 U.S.C. § 3113,<sup>48</sup> which authorizes any federal agency with authority to purchase land to use condemnation also. It provides:

“An officer of the Federal Government authorized to acquire real estate for the erection of a public building or for other public uses may acquire the real estate for the Government by condemnation, under judicial process, when the officer believes that it is necessary or advantageous to the Government to do so . . . .”

Note that 40 U.S.C. § 3113 is not an independent grant of land acquisition authority. That must exist elsewhere. If an agency has statutory authority to purchase land, 40 U.S.C. § 3113 supplements it and permits the agency to use condemnation. *United States v. Carmack*, 329 U.S. 230, 235 (1946); *Albert Hanson Lumber Co. v. United States*, 261 U.S. 581, 587 (1923). The constitutionality of 40 U.S.C. § 3113 has long been settled. *Chappell v. United States*, 160 U.S. 499 (1896).

The significance of 40 U.S.C. § 3113 is that it makes no difference whether the legislation authorizing a particular acquisition says “purchase or condemnation” or merely “purchase” or “acquire.” If the authorizing legislation does not specify condemnation, the authority exists anyway by virtue of 40 U.S.C. § 3113. Of course, Congress is always free to limit an acquisition statute to voluntary purchase, in which event 40 U.S.C. § 3113 would be subordinated. *United States v. 16.92 Acres of Land*, 670 F.2d 1369, 1371–72 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982).

Some agencies have their own condemnation authority. Examples are 10 U.S.C. § 2663 (military departments), 33 U.S.C. §§ 591–594 (Secretary of the Army for river and harbor improvements), and 43 U.S.C. § 421 (Secretary of the Interior under the Reclamation Act of 1902). Although there is little case law, these statutes stand side-by-side with 40 U.S.C. § 3113. Hence, an agency with overlapping statutes can elect which one to proceed under in a given case. See *Hanson Lumber*, 261 U.S. at 585–86; *In re Military Training Camp in Prince George County, Virginia*, 260 F. 986, 990–91 (E.D. Va. 1919); *Chappell v. United States*, 81 F. 764, 766 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1897); [B-98346, Oct. 9, 1950](#). (*Hanson* and [B-98346](#) involve the river and

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<sup>48</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 257.

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harbor legislation; *Chappell* and *Training Camp* involve the predecessor of what is now 10 U.S.C. § 2663.)

In sum, every federal agency which is authorized to acquire real property is authorized to resort to condemnation. The authority may be in the form of an agency-specific or program-specific grant of condemnation authority, or it may be in the form of purchase authority, with the condemnation authority derived from 40 U.S.C. § 3113.

(4) “Complaint only” condemnation

The first way a federal agency can condemn property directly is by filing a complaint initiating a court action. This is sometimes called a “complaint only” or “straight” condemnation. A complaint only condemnation is different from a Declaration of Taking Act proceeding, described in the next section, in several essential respects: there is no deposit of funds with the court to be used for compensation, no immediate vesting of title, and no irrevocable commitment on the part of the United States to pay the award.

The agency initiates a complaint only condemnation by filing a complaint in the United States district court for the district where the land is located. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1358, 1403. Procedures are contained in Rule 71A of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure,<sup>49</sup> and the United States is the plaintiff. The main purpose of the proceeding is to determine the amount the government will have to pay if it chooses to acquire the property. The government may abandon the proceeding, and is under no obligation to take the land or pay the award. The award amounts to an offer which the government may accept by tendering payment. Of course, title does not pass unless and until the compensation is paid. The proceeding also gives the landowner the opportunity to contest the taking. Once the award is made, the decision of whether or not to consummate the condemnation is solely in the government’s hands.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure* are available at [www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf](http://www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> The summary in the text has been distilled from a number of cases: *Kirby Forest Industries, Inc. v. United States*, 467 U.S. 1, 3–5 (1984); *Danforth v. United States*, 308 U.S. 271 (1939); *Barnidge v. United States*, 101 F.2d 295 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1939); *United States v. 6,667 Acres of Land*, 142 F. Supp. 198 (E.D. S.C. 1956); *United States v. One Parcel of Land*, 131 F. Supp. 443 (D.D.C. 1955); *United States v. Certain Parcel of Land*, 51 F. Supp. 726 (E.D. N.Y. 1943); *United States v. Certain Lands*, 46 F. Supp. 386 (S.D. N.Y. 1942).

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If the government abandons the proceeding or chooses not to consummate the condemnation, it must nevertheless compensate the landowner for any public use made of the property. *E.g.*, *United States v. 14,770.65 Acres of Land*, 616 F. Supp. 1235, 1251 (D. S.C. 1985).

It has been held that, in a complaint only proceeding under 40 U.S.C. § 3113, no officer of the United States has authority to consent to the entry of a money judgment against the United States, and a judgment purporting to obligate the government is “void and unenforceable.” *Moody v. Wickard*, 136 F.2d 801, 803 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 220 U.S. 775 (1943). This follows from principles of sovereign immunity and the requirements of the appropriations clause. Thus, under section 3113—

“an award in condemnation is [merely] an offer subject to acceptance by the [United States]. The judgment entered is conditional only. The Government gets no title until payment, . . . and if the award is for more than it is prepared to pay, the proceeding may be abandoned at any time before payment and transfer of title.”

*Id.* (citations omitted).

(5) Declaration of Taking Act

The Declaration of Taking Act, enacted in 1931 and found at 40 U.S.C. §§ 3114–3115,<sup>51</sup> provides a procedure under which federal agencies may condemn and get immediate title to property. The proceeding begins in a manner identical to that for a “complaint only” taking described in the previous section—that is, with the government’s filing of a complaint in the United States district court for the district in which the land is located. To initiate a Declaration of Taking Act condemnation, the government files with the court a “declaration of taking” in addition to the original complaint. The “declaration of taking” document may be filed simultaneously with the original complaint, or the government may file such a declaration at any time before judgment. The contents of the declaration are set out in 40 U.S.C. § 3114(a). Along with the declaration, the acquiring agency must deposit its estimated just compensation with the

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<sup>51</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 258a–258e. The legislation was proposed by the Attorney General in a December 1930 letter, quoted in full in *United States v. Parcel of Land*, 100 F. Supp. 498, 502 n.5 (D.D.C. 1951).

court. Under this statute, once the declaration is filed and the deposit made, two things happen: (1) title to the land, or lesser interest if specified in the declaration, vests in the United States, that is, the land is “taken”; and (2) the right to just compensation vests in the former owner and the United States becomes irrevocably committed to payment of the ultimate award. *Id.* § 3114(b).

The court may order the money on deposit paid over immediately or during the course of the proceedings, on application of the parties in interest. If the ultimate award exceeds the amount of the deposit, the court enters a deficiency judgment against the United States. *Id.* § 3114(c). If the ultimate award is less than the amount paid over from the deposit, the United States is entitled to recover the overpayment, and a judgment to this effect may be entered in the same proceeding. *United States v. Miller*, 317 U.S. 369, 380–82 (1943); Fed. R. Civ. P. 71A(j).<sup>52</sup>

Once the declaration has been filed and the court deposit made, the agency may proceed to demolish existing structures or erect new ones, provided that the Attorney General is of the opinion that title has vested in the United States or that all interested parties will be bound by the final judgment. 40 U.S.C. § 3115(b). Also, once title passes to the government, any rentals accruing from the property are payable to the United States, not to the former owner. 15 Comp. Gen. 740 (1936).

The purposes of the Declaration of Taking Act are (1) to permit the government to take immediate possession while simultaneously reducing costs by avoiding liability for interest on the amount of the deposit, and (2) to give the former owner with clear title immediate cash compensation to the extent of the government’s estimate. *Miller*, 317 U.S. at 381.

The Declaration of Taking Act is not an independent grant of acquisition authority or condemnation authority. It merely provides procedures which may be used where the acquiring agency already has the requisite authority to acquire the land in the first place. *United States v. Dow*, 357 U.S. 17, 23 (1958); *Catlin v. United States*, 324 U.S. 229, 240 (1945). The constitutionality of the statute has been upheld. *E.g.*, *Travis v. United States*, 287 F.2d 916 (Ct. Cl.), *cert. denied*, 368 U.S. 824 (1961).

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<sup>52</sup> The *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure* are available at [www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf](http://www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf) (last visited Mar. 25, 2007).

Apart from issues of just compensation, judicial review is limited to determining that the taking is for a statutorily authorized purpose and that it is for a public use. *Catlin*, 324 U.S. at 240–43; *United States v. Acquisition of 0.3114 Cuerdas*, 753 F. Supp. 50, 53 (D. P.R. 1990). In performing this review, the courts will not “second-guess governmental agencies on issues of necessity and expediency” but will essentially look only at “the bare issue of whether the limits of authority were exceeded.” *United States v. 162.20 Acres of Land*, 639 F.2d 299, 303 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 454 U.S. 828 (1981).

As a general proposition, when several tracts are being acquired in a single proceeding, the deposit with the court should be allocated by tract. *United States v. 355.70 Acres of Land*, 327 F.2d 630 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1964). The ultimate award may exceed the allocation for some parcels but be below it for others. As long as the money came from the same appropriation, the excess amounts may be used to pay the deficiencies. [19 Comp. Gen. 634 \(1940\)](#). *See also* [A-88947, Dec. 7, 1937](#).

As the preceding paragraph suggests, the treatment of money deposited with the court but not needed for whatever reason for its original purpose is governed by the usual rules applicable to the obligation and availability of appropriated funds. Thus, for example, unused funds could not be reobligated after expiration of the original period of availability to acquire a tract not encompassed by the original obligation. [A-88947, Oct. 2, 1937](#).

An area which appears not to have been explored to any great extent is the relationship of the Declaration of Taking Act to the Antideficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. § 1341, which prohibits making obligations or expenditures in excess or advance of appropriations. An important provision in this connection is 40 U.S.C. § 3115(a):

“Action under section 3114 of this title irrevocably committing the Federal Government to the payment of the ultimate award shall not be taken unless the head of the executive department or agency or bureau of the Government empowered to acquire the land believes that the ultimate award probably will be within any limits Congress prescribes on the price to be paid.”

Just months after the Declaration of Taking Act was enacted, an agency needed to acquire a piece of property and was authorized to do so by purchase or condemnation, subject to a monetary cost ceiling. The agency

had obtained three appraisals, all of which were within the cost ceiling. The property owner had demanded a price higher than the appraisals and in excess of the statutory ceiling. The agency thought the owner's asking price was excessive, and that a condemnation award would be more in line with the appraisals and within the appropriation limit. The agency asked GAO whether the Antideficiency Act would preclude it from filing a declaration of taking, since there was no guarantee that the ultimate court award would not exceed the appropriation limit. Since the Declaration of Taking Act does not require absolute certainty (indeed it could not since the judicial determination is beyond the control of the acquiring agency), but merely requires that the agency be of the opinion that the award will "probably" be within applicable limits, the Comptroller General advised that the agency could proceed with the condemnation. [A-37316, July 11, 1931](#). Thus, the mere fact that a final award exceeds an applicable limit does not produce an Antideficiency Act violation, and to this extent the Declaration of Taking Act may be said to authorize the overobligation.<sup>53</sup>

This, however, should not be taken to mean that an agency can act indiscriminately. GAO and the Justice Department have both held that 40 U.S.C. § 3115(a) prohibits the initiation of Declaration of Taking Act proceedings when the agency knows or believes that the award will exceed an applicable ceiling.<sup>54</sup> [57 Comp. Gen. 591 \(1978\)](#); [2 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 96 \(1978\)](#). While the specific limitation involved in these two cases no longer exists, the basic point remains valid. Accordingly, while we have found no cases precisely on point, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that compliance with 40 U.S.C. § 3115(a), as was clearly the case in the 1931 decision, [A-37316](#), discussed above, is an important factor in evaluating compliance with the Antideficiency Act. In other words, compliance with section 3115(a) should insulate an agency against Antideficiency Act violations, whereas an agency which violates section 3115(a) should not be so insulated.

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<sup>53</sup> There are statements in two later decisions, one flatly stating and the other strongly implying, that the Antideficiency Act is violated by an overobligation resulting from a Declaration of Taking Act proceeding. [54 Comp. Gen. 799, 801 \(1975\)](#); [17 Comp. Gen. 664, 669 \(1938\)](#). However, neither decision analyzes what the agency did as opposed to what the court did, and these statements would therefore seem of limited value as guidance.

<sup>54</sup> A monetary ceiling in a statute which specifies only purchase will apply to condemnation as well unless the statute provides otherwise. [10 Comp. Gen. 418 \(1931\)](#); [6 Comp. Gen. 145 \(1926\)](#).



This in turn leads to the question of what constitutes compliance with 40 U.S.C. § 3115(a), and this too is not always clear. Courts have generally been unwilling to impose a good faith test on the amount of the agency's deposit. *United States v. Cobb*, 328 F.2d 115 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1964); *In re United States of America*, 257 F.2d 844 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), cert. denied, 358 U.S. 908 (1958). One court has gone so far as to suggest that 40 U.S.C. § 3115(a) is satisfied by virtue of the acquiring agency's request to the Attorney General to initiate condemnation proceedings. *United States v. 40.75 Acres of Land*, 76 F. Supp. 239, 245–46 (N.D. Ill. 1948). However, the courts are not unanimous. The Second Circuit has assumed that it can act when the government's estimate is made in bad faith. *United States v. 44.00 Acres of Land*, 234 F.2d 410, 415 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir.), cert. denied, 352 U.S. 916 (1956). The Fourth Circuit was "puzzled" by the actions of an agency in depositing one dollar as its estimate of just compensation after offering \$180,000 to purchase the land, but resolved the case without having to address the good faith issue. *United States v. 45.33 Acres of Land*, 266 F.2d 741 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1959).

Condemnation "extinguishes all interests in a piece of property and vests absolute title in the government." *Schoellkopf v. United States*, 11 Cl. Ct. 447, 450 (1987) (emphasis omitted). The United States acquires title "free from all liens or claims whatsoever." *United States v. 150.29 Acres of Land*, 135 F.2d 878, 880 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1943). Previous interests "are obliterated." *United States v. 25.936 Acres of Land*, 153 F.2d 277, 279 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1946). This applies alike to outstanding mortgages (*Schoellkopf*), tax liens (*150.29 Acres*, *25.936 Acres*), and judgment liens (10 Comp. Dec. 852 (1904)). While some jurisdictions may give the creditor a right of action against the former property owner (see *Schoellkopf*, 11 Cl. Ct. at 450), the general rule is that the funds deposited with the court take the place of the property itself and any liens attach to the funds and not to the property. *E.g.*, *150.29 Acres*, 135 F.2d at 880; *United States v. 17,380 Square Feet of Land*, 678 F. Supp. 443, 445 (S.D. N.Y. 1988); *United States v. Certain Property*, 225 F. Supp. 498, 504 (S.D. N.Y. 1963). Even where there is no declaration of taking, the recommended procedure if outstanding liens are known is to either make payment to the registry of the court or require the owner to satisfy the liens. 11 Comp. Gen. 498 (A-42973, June 28, 1932).

In view of the necessity for a judicial determination, there should be little, if any, occasion to consider administrative claims in connection with a Declaration of Taking Act condemnation. An exception occurred in [B-79080, Oct. 12, 1948](#), allowing a claim for the value of structures which had been removed prior to, and were not included in, the judicial award of

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just compensation. As a general proposition, however, there is no basis to administratively consider a claim which could have been raised before the court but was not. *E.g.*, [B-107841, Apr. 18, 1952](#).<sup>55</sup>

It should be apparent that whether to use a declaration of taking or a complaint only procedure depends on two main factors: the urgency of the government's need for possession and the availability of funds. In view of the nature of the proceeding, the insufficiency of funds is not a bar to initiating a complaint only condemnation. [A-5473, Nov. 22, 1924](#). However, the status of funding is not wholly irrelevant. The United States does not have an infinite amount of time to respond to the award. In order not to erode the concept of just compensation, the United States must act within a reasonable time or risk dismissal of the proceeding. *Miller v. United States*, 57 F.2d 424 (D.C. Cir. 1932). In the case cited, the proceeding was dismissed where there was no available appropriation at the time of the award and, a year later, no appropriation had been made nor was a bill pending.

(6) Inverse condemnation

The term “inverse condemnation” (sometimes called “reverse condemnation”) encompasses a variety of situations with only one thing in common: they involve government acts, other than an affirmative act of eminent domain, which the courts view as takings of some interest in private property for which just compensation is payable under the Fifth Amendment. The Supreme Court has called it “a shorthand description of the manner in which a landowner recovers just compensation for a taking of his property when condemnation proceedings have not been instituted.” *United States v. Clarke*, 445 U.S. 253, 257 (1980).

The Court of Federal Claims has used the following definition: “Inverse condemnation, therefore, ‘is a legal label for effective expropriation of private property, the sovereign acting indirectly without benefit of formal eminent domain proceedings in condemnation; thus, sovereign acts incompatible with an owner’s present enjoyment of his property rights.’” *Schultz v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 412, 415 (1984), quoting *Wilfong v. United States*, 480 F.2d 1326, 1327 n.2 (Ct. Cl. 1973). The concept is thus an

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<sup>55</sup> In that case, the government returned part of the condemned property to the former owner who then filed a claim for damages which allegedly occurred during government occupancy.

umbrella which covers a wide variety of situations ranging from the actual physical seizure of property to various lesser forms of “invasion.”

Inverse condemnation claims are based on the Fifth Amendment. Thus, the jurisdiction of the courts derives from the Tucker Act, under which claims not exceeding \$10,000 may be brought either in the district courts or in the Court of Federal Claims, while claims in excess of \$10,000 must be brought in the Court of Federal Claims. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(a)(2), 1491.

At one time, it was commonplace to say that the United States may exercise its power of eminent domain in either of two ways—by instituting formal condemnation proceedings or by simply taking physical possession with the owner having a remedy under the Tucker Act. *E.g.*, *United States v. Dow*, 357 U.S. 17, 21 (1958). As the Supreme Court noted in *Kirby Forest Industries v. United States*, 467 U.S. 1, 5 (1984), this is still true in the sense that land acquisition by inverse condemnation remains within the power of the United States, and the parties end up in the same place either way. However, it has been federal policy since enactment of the Uniform Relocation Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4601–4655, that formal condemnation proceedings should be instituted if a voluntary purchase cannot be negotiated, and that an agency should never intentionally force a property owner to bring an inverse condemnation suit.<sup>56</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 4651(8). If agencies pay due regard to this established policy, inverse condemnation cases involving the intentional acquisition of title should largely disappear, and situations like the one described in *Althaus v. United States*, 7 Cl. Ct. 688 (1985), should no longer happen.<sup>57</sup>

In view of this, while one still encounters the statement that private property can be taken by inverse condemnation, it is more likely to be

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<sup>56</sup> An agency might be tempted to do this, for example, if it thought it could get a “free ride” by having the judgment paid from the permanent judgment appropriation, 31 U.S.C. § 1304. This is the policy basis for the position that certain inverse condemnation judgments should be paid from agency land acquisition funds, the same as direct condemnations. Within the realm of direct condemnations, the Uniform Relocation Act does not purport to regulate whether to use a declaration of taking or complaint only. *Kirby*, 467 U.S. at 6.

<sup>57</sup> In *Althaus*, a government representative allegedly threatened landowners to get them to sell cheaply. There was no recording of what was actually said, but the court summarized its findings at 7 Cl. Ct. 691–92. Paraphrasing the court’s language, the agent, in effect, told the landowners: “We are going to offer you 30 cents on the dollar and if you don’t take it, we’ll condemn the land anyway and you’ll have to hire an expensive lawyer from the big city who’ll take a third of what you get, plus you’ll have to pay the court costs.” Somehow, he forgot to add “. . . and your little dog, too!”

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found in the context of some form of regulatory taking. *E.g.*, *Palazzolo v. Rhode Island*, 533 U.S. 606, 615 (2001). In this connection, Executive Order No. 12630, *Governmental Actions and Interference With Constitutionally Protected Property Rights*, Mar. 15, 1988, instructs executive agencies to carefully evaluate their activities to prevent unnecessary takings. *See generally* GAO, *Regulatory Takings: Implementation of Executive Order on Government Actions Affecting Private Property Use*, GAO-03-1015 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 19, 2003).

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## 6. Obligation of Appropriations for Land Acquisition

### a. Voluntary Purchase

As we have noted, the typical transaction follows the same path as one between private parties. The government enters into a purchase contract with the seller, which is later followed by the execution of a deed. When a formal purchase contract is used, the obligation occurs when the contract is executed. [17 Comp. Gen. 664, 668 \(1938\)](#); [A-76119, July 3, 1936](#); [A-59458, Jan. 15, 1935](#). GAO stated the principle as follows: “Ordinarily, a contract for the purchase of real property to supply an existing need executed in good faith prior to the expiration date of an appropriation is considered sufficient to obligate the appropriation . . .” [A-59458, at 2](#). Since we are dealing with a contract, the obligation is recorded under 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a)(1).

If there is no formal purchase contract, the obligation occurs when the deed is executed. [17 Comp. Gen. at 668](#); [4 Comp. Gen. 371 \(1924\)](#); [A-76119, July 3, 1936](#).

Where a purchase option is involved, and the government accepts the option in accordance with its terms and within the option period, assuming it has not been sooner revoked, the obligation occurs upon acceptance of the option. [17 Comp. Gen. at 668](#). The reason is that acceptance of the option in these circumstances constitutes a contract. [56 Comp. Gen. 351, 352 \(1977\)](#); [A-76119, July 3, 1936](#); [A-59458, Jan. 15, 1935](#).

Once the money is properly obligated, as with any other obligation, it remains available to liquidate the obligation until the account is closed. Thus, in [56 Comp. Gen. 351](#), GAO advised that there was nothing objectionable in a proposal to spread payment out over 4 years, as long as

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the full amount of the purchase price was obligated in the year the purchase agreement was executed.<sup>58</sup>

b. Condemnation

A long line of decisions has established that, in a condemnation case, the obligation occurs when the acquiring agency makes the request to the Attorney General to institute the condemnation proceedings. *E.g.*, [34 Comp. Gen. 418, 423 \(1955\)](#); [34 Comp. Gen. 67, 68 \(1954\)](#); [17 Comp. Gen. 664, 668 \(1938\)](#); [17 Comp. Gen. 631, 632 \(1938\)](#); [17 Comp. Gen. 111, 113 \(1937\)](#).<sup>59</sup> The fact that the Attorney General may not actually initiate the proceedings until the following fiscal year is irrelevant. The reason is that an appropriation can be obligated only by the agency to which it was made. *E.g.*, [4 Comp. Gen. 206, 207 \(1924\)](#).

Where the land acquisition appropriation is available for “expenses incidental” to the acquisition, the obligation for the condemnation award may be viewed as also encompassing necessary expenses incident to the condemnation proceeding, even where the expense is not actually incurred until the following fiscal year. [B-55181, Feb. 15, 1946](#) (title evidence); [A-88353, June 18, 1938](#) (technical studies, *etc.*).

The exercise of a purchase option followed by condemnation complicates the picture. This can happen, for example, if the seller’s title turns out to be defective and must be cleared through condemnation. In this situation, the agency may retain the original obligation, recorded when the purchase option was accepted, or it may deobligate and record a new obligation when the request for condemnation is made. If the agency retains the original obligation and the condemnation award exceeds the available appropriation, the excess may be charged to appropriations current when the condemnation proceedings were requested. [17 Comp. Gen. 664](#). This decision was “amplified” by [19 Comp. Gen. 944 \(1940\)](#), to emphasize that the administrative choice is not absolute. The agency has the election

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<sup>58</sup> At the time of [56 Comp. Gen. 351](#), obligated balances remained available, in one form or another, to liquidate the obligation indefinitely. While the result of that case remains the same, an agency should agree to an extended period of time to pay out the balance of the purchase price only after considering the provisions of 31 U.S.C. §§ 1551–1555 (account closing statute).

<sup>59</sup> A couple of early decisions—[1 Comp. Gen. 735 \(1922\)](#) and [21 Comp. Dec. 870 \(1915\)](#)—intimated that the obligation arises when the proceeding is actually commenced. Read in the context of later decisions, although not modified expressly by these decisions, these cases should not be construed as selecting actual commencement over the request for obligation purposes.

outlined in 17 Comp. Gen. 664 only where “the condemnation proceedings reasonably may be viewed as a continuation of, and incident to, the land acquisition transaction initiated by the option acceptance.” 19 Comp. Gen. at 947. In making this determination, the lapse of time between option acceptance and the condemnation request is relevant but not conclusive.<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 947–48. Although there are no decisions, it would seem rather obvious that the principle of these two decisions should apply equally where the original obligation is a formal purchase contract rather than an option acceptance.

The preceding paragraph is best illustrated by a hypothetical example. Suppose an agency has \$1,000,000 in fiscal year 2007 money to acquire a piece of property. Before the end of fiscal year 2007, the agency exercises an option or enters into a formal purchase contract for \$1,000,000, and records the obligation against its fiscal year 2007 appropriation. In fiscal year 2008, the agency discovers that the seller’s title is defective and promptly asks the Attorney General to initiate condemnation. At this point, the agency has a choice. It may retain the original obligation, or it may deobligate the fiscal year 2007 money and record a new obligation against its fiscal year 2008 land acquisition appropriation (assuming it has one). If the agency retains the 2007 obligation and the condemnation award turns out to be \$1,200,000, it may charge the \$200,000 deficiency to its 2008 funds.

The basic rule for obligating in condemnation cases—that the obligation occurs when the Attorney General is asked to initiate the proceedings—clearly applies when a declaration of taking is used. 34 Comp. Gen. at 423; 34 Comp. Gen. 67. Indeed, the statutory basis for recording obligations in this context—31 U.S.C. § 1501(a)(6), liability resulting from pending litigation—was intended to address precisely this situation. 35 Comp. Gen. 185, 187 (1955). The rule also clearly applies where an agency is operating under condemnation authority, such as 33 U.S.C. § 594 (Army Corps of Engineers), which authorizes the taking of immediate possession

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<sup>60</sup> Unreasonable delay may have other consequences as well. In one case, an agency accepted a purchase option and, after a largely unexplained 2-year delay, filed a condemnation complaint with declaration of taking. The court threw out the option price and permitted the landowner to establish a current (and higher) market value as of the declaration of taking. But for this delay, the option price would have been binding. *United States v. 813.96 Acres of Land*, 45 F. Supp. 535 (W.D. Ark. 1942), *aff’d*, 140 F.2d 941 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1944). See also *United States v. 2,974.49 Acres of Land*, 308 F.2d 641 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1962); *United States v. 74.12 Acres of Land*, 81 F.R.D. 12 (D. Mass. 1978).

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contingent upon the making of adequate provision for the payment of just compensation. *See* 1 Comp. Gen. 735 (1922).

In a “complaint only” condemnation, however, the obligational aspects are different. To be sure, an agency whose acquisitions are funded by fiscal year appropriations may well find itself in a bind. In many cases, the agency will already have received appropriations for the acquisition, and they may expire if they cannot be obligated until after the award is determined.<sup>61</sup> *E.g., United States v. Oregon Railway & Navigation Co.*, 16 F. 524, 530 (C.C.D. Ore. 1883) (recognizing that funds previously appropriated for the acquisition in question may already have lapsed). Be that as it may, while we have found no decision which directly addresses the distinction between declaration of taking and complaint only condemnation for obligational purposes, it seems apparent, consistent with the theory underlying 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a), that a recordable obligation in a complaint only condemnation does not arise until the government tenders payment because the United States is not obligated to pay the award.

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## 7. Expenses Incident to Real Property Acquisition

### a. Expenses Incident to Title Transfer

Various expenses in addition to the purchase price arise in connection with the acquisition of real property. We have previously discussed one in section B.4.c of this chapter—the cost of procuring evidence of title. The Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4601–4655, provides for several others. Section 303 of the Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4653, directs acquiring agencies to reimburse property owners, “to the extent the head of such agency deems fair and reasonable,” for certain expenses which are “necessarily incurred.”

Subsection (1) of 42 U.S.C. § 4653 provides that one category of expenses is “recording fees, transfer taxes, and similar expenses incidental to conveying such real property to the United States.” Recording fees had

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<sup>61</sup> If, as 42 U.S.C. § 4651 directs, you must try to purchase before you resort to condemnation, the money must be available to obligate in case the purchase negotiations succeed. Of course, no-year appropriations, or multiple year appropriations with an adequate period of availability, will solve the problem.



long been recognized as an authorized expense, chargeable to the appropriation from which the purchase price is paid. [A-33604, Oct. 11, 1930](#). A state tax on gain from the sale of property, in the nature of a capital gains tax, is not reimbursable, either as a “transfer tax” or as a “similar expense.” *Collins v. United States*, 946 F.2d 864 (Fed. Cir. 1991).

Section 4653(2) authorizes “penalty costs for prepayment of any preexisting recorded mortgage entered into in good faith encumbering such real property.” This assumes an actual prepayment of a mortgage which provides a prepayment penalty. It does not apply to expenses incident to a “renegotiation” entered into as an alternative to prepaying a low-interest loan. *Schoellkopf v. United States*, 11 Cl. Ct. 447 (1987).

Section 4653(3) authorizes the payment of “the pro rata portion of real property taxes paid which are allocable to a period subsequent to the date of vesting title in the United States, or the effective date of possession of such real property by the United States, whichever is the earlier.”

As a general proposition, land owned by the United States is exempt from state and local property taxes. *Van Brocklin v. Tennessee*, 117 U.S. 151 (1886). The inclusion of subsection (3) in 42 U.S.C. § 4653 evolved from the way most jurisdictions assess property taxes. Commonly, the process begins on a specified date, with a lien attaching as of that date, even though the precise amount of the assessment has not yet been determined. Thus, when the United States purchases real property, there may already be a tax lien covering some period beyond the date of title transfer.

In *United States v. Alabama*, 313 U.S. 274 (1941), the Supreme Court held that the lien could not be enforced against the United States, but that it nevertheless remained valid. The result was that the United States did not have clear title, a problem if the land was later to be sold. The Comptroller General held in a series of decisions, both before and after *Alabama*, that (1) the question of whether to discharge a prior lien in order to obtain a more marketable title was within the discretion of the acquiring agency, and (2) if the agency determined that discharge of the lien by payment of the taxes would further the purpose for which the land was acquired, the land acquisition appropriation was available. [See 19 Comp. Gen. 768 \(1940\)](#); [B-108401, Apr. 7, 1952](#); [B-46548, Jan. 26, 1945](#); [B-21817, Feb. 12, 1942](#).

The governmentwide regulations issued by the Department of Transportation instruct agencies, whenever feasible, to pay the items listed



in 42 U.S.C. § 4653 directly rather than having the owner pay and then seek reimbursement. 49 C.F.R. § 24.106(b).

Taxes attributable to time periods prior to title transfer are the responsibility of the former owner, not the government. GAO, however, has approved a consensual arrangement whereby, in order to qualify the deed for recording, the acquiring agency would pay the outstanding taxes directly, deduct the amount paid from the purchase price, and then pay the balance to the seller. [10 Comp. Gen. 92 \(1930\)](#). GAO has also approved outright payment of the taxes in a few situations where payment by the former owner was not a realistic option. [15 Comp. Gen. 179 \(1935\)](#) (property, mortgaged to government to secure a loan, obtained by foreclosure); [6 Comp. Gen. 587 \(1927\)](#) (property purchased at execution sale to satisfy judgment against former owner); [B-65104, May 19, 1947](#) (donated property).

b. Expenses Incident to  
Litigation

(1) Attorney's fees

Attorney's fees and expenses are not viewed as an element of just compensation. *E.g., Dohany v. Rogers*, 281 U.S. 362 (1930). Thus, attorney's fees and expenses are recoverable from the United States in condemnation cases only to the extent authorized by statute. Compensation is "a matter of legislative grace rather than constitutional command." *United States v. Bodcaw Co.*, 440 U.S. 202, 204 (1979). Currently, two statutes authorize fee recovery in condemnation cases in specified situations—section 304 of the Uniform Relocation Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4654, and the Equal Access to Justice Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d).

Under 42 U.S.C. § 4654(a), a property owner can recover reasonable costs actually incurred in condemnation proceedings, including reasonable attorney, appraisal, and engineering fees, in two situations: (1) if the final judgment is that the federal agency cannot acquire the real property by condemnation (for example, if the court finds the condemnation unauthorized), or (2) if the United States abandons the proceedings. Awards made under 42 U.S.C. § 4654(a) are paid from the appropriations of the acquiring agency. 42 U.S.C. § 4654(b).

Under 42 U.S.C. § 4654(c), the successful plaintiff in an inverse condemnation suit, whether by judgment or settlement, can recover the same types of fees and expenses as under section 4654(a). Awards under section 4654(c) are generally payable from the permanent judgment appropriation (31 U.S.C. § 1304). The standards the Court of Federal

Claims applies in making awards under section 4654(c) are discussed in *Foster v. United States*, 3 Cl. Ct. 738 (1983), *aff'd*, 746 F.2d 1491 (Fed. Cir. 1984), *cert. denied*, 471 U.S. 1053 (1985). The court has been critical of section 4654(c)'s potential for excessive and disproportionate awards, suggesting that another look by Congress might be in order. *Cloverport Sand & Gravel Co. v. United States*, 10 Cl. Ct. 121, 127 (1986).<sup>62</sup>

Subsections (a) and (c) of 42 U.S.C. § 4654 are distinct attorney fee authorizations that do not overlap. Thus, property owners who prevailed on an inverse condemnation claim were entitled to attorney fees under subsection (c); however, this entitlement did not extend to attorney fees they incurred in an earlier unsuccessful attempt to challenge the validity of the taking. *See Preseault v. United States*, 52 Fed. Cl. 667 (2002). Had they won their initial challenge, presumably the attorney fees for that action would have been recoverable under subsection (a). Another distinction between the two subsections is that subsection (a) applies only to real property while subsection (c) applies to personal property as well as real property. *Pete v. United States*, 569 F.2d 565 (Ct. Cl. 1978).

Fees and expenses under 42 U.S.C. § 4654 are not available in the case of a legislative taking since the taking of the property must have been done by a federal agency which is defined in the Uniform Relocation Assistance Act as “any department, agency, or instrumentality in the executive branch of the Government.” 42 U.S.C. § 4601. *See Rocca v. United States*, 500 F.2d 492 (Ct. Cl. 1974); *Georgia-Pacific Corp. v. United States*, 640 F.2d 328, 367 (Ct. Cl. 1980); *Miller v. United States*, 620 F.2d 812, 840–41 (Ct. Cl. 1980); *Hedstrom Lumber Co. v. United States*, 7 Cl. Ct. 16, 34 (1984).<sup>63</sup>

In direct condemnation cases where the United States gets the land, section 4654 does not apply, but fees may be awarded in certain cases under the Equal Access to Justice Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d). For a landowner to be entitled to fees and expenses under 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d), the following tests must be met:

<sup>62</sup> *Cloverport* awarded \$9,000 as just compensation and over \$76,000 in fees and expenses. *Foster* is another example (\$28,000 just compensation, \$186,000 fees and expenses).

<sup>63</sup> For additional background on this attorney's fee provision, see James Lockhart, *Award of Costs and Attorney's Fees Under § 304 of the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970* (42 U.S.C.A. § 4654), 172 A.L.R. Fed. 507 (2001).

- The landowner must meet the eligibility criteria of 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(B), one of which is that the individual's net worth did not exceed \$2 million at the time the action was filed. *See Broaddus v. United States Army Corps of Engineers*, 380 F.3d 162 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004).
- The landowner must be the prevailing party. The term “prevailing party” has a special definition for eminent domain cases—the party whose valuation testimony in court is closer to the amount of the ultimate award. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(H).
- The court must find that the position of the United States was not substantially justified. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(A).
- The case must proceed to final judgment. Settlements are expressly excluded. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(H).

Awards under 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d) are paid from the appropriations of the acquiring agency. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(4).

(2) Litigation expenses

Litigation expenses are those expenses incurred by the United States (as opposed to expenses incurred by the opposing party which may be assessed against the United States) in preparing and conducting litigation, such as expenses of witnesses, court fees, process serving expenses, document printing and reproduction expenses, cost of transcripts, *etc.* The general rule is that litigation expenses are chargeable to the agency conducting the litigation, which is usually the Department of Justice.

The rule applies equally to litigation relating to real property acquisition, such as condemnation proceedings<sup>64</sup> and actions to quiet title.<sup>65</sup> Where litigation expenses are chargeable to Justice Department appropriations under this rule, appropriations of the acquiring agency are not available. As noted earlier in this chapter, the rule no longer applies to the expenses of obtaining title evidence.

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<sup>64</sup> *E.g.*, 18 Comp. Gen. 592, 593–94 (1939); 12 Comp. Dec. 304 (1905); 10 Comp. Dec. 538 (1904); 9 Comp. Dec. 793 (1903).

<sup>65</sup> 32 Comp. Gen. 118 (1952); 18 Comp. Gen. 592 (1939).

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The fees and expenses of expert witnesses in land condemnation cases appointed by the court under Rule 706 of the *Federal Rules of Evidence*,<sup>66</sup> are regarded as litigation expenses payable by the Justice Department, or by the agency conducting the litigation where Justice is not involved. [58 Comp. Gen. 259 \(1979\)](#). See also [59 Comp. Gen. 313 \(1980\)](#); 1 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 175 (1977); 1 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 168 (1977).

Under Rule 71A(h) of the *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure*,<sup>67</sup> the court in a condemnation case may direct that the issue of just compensation be determined by a panel of land commissioners. If the proceeding is recorded, attendance fees of the court reporter (*see* 28 U.S.C. § 753) are not litigation expenses but are payable by the Administrative Office of the United States Courts from judiciary appropriations. [55 Comp. Gen. 1172 \(1976\)](#). The cost of transcripts furnished to the court or to the land commissioners is considered covered by the reporter's salary or, for contract reporters, is determined under the provisions of the governing contract. *Id.*

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## C. Relocation Assistance

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### 1. Uniform Relocation Act: Introduction and Overview

In government usage, the term “relocation assistance” can mean two different things—(1) allowances payable to federal employees incident to change of duty station, or (2) assistance to persons forced to relocate as a result of federal or federally financed programs or projects. Our concern here is the second type.

When private property is taken by eminent domain, hardship often follows. Neighborhoods may be disassembled; businesses may be forced to close. At an absolute minimum, individuals and businesses may be uprooted against their will. The “just compensation” mandated by the Fifth Amendment often does not and cannot provide adequate redress. For

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<sup>66</sup> The *Federal Rules of Evidence* are available at [www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/evid2005.pdf](http://www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/evid2005.pdf) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> The *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure* are available at [www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf](http://www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

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example, a tenant renting a house or apartment from month to month would most likely get nothing except an eviction notice.

While relatively few government agencies conduct or finance programs which produce significant displacements, the consequences of these activities by those which do are widespread. In fiscal year 1972, for example, a GAO study found that programs administered by the Federal Highway Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Army Corps of Engineers (which together accounted for 99 percent of federal and federally funded displacements for that year) resulted in the relocation of approximately 119,000 people. GAO, *Differences in Administration of the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970*, B-148044 (Washington, D.C.: June 7, 1973), at 6.

Congress has long recognized that the federal government has a major responsibility in the treatment of those displaced by federal programs or federal dollars. Prior to 1970, it approached the problem piecemeal by including relocation assistance provisions in a number of different program statutes. Although this was better than nothing, treatment under the various provisions was far from uniform. Uniformity is important because, from the perspective of the person or business being uprooted, it makes very little difference which federal agency or program is on the administering end of the boot.

In early 1971, after a decade of study, Congress enacted an important piece of legislation with an awkward but descriptive title: the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970 (Uniform Relocation Act or URA), Pub. L. No. 91-646, 84 Stat. 1894 (Jan. 2, 1971). The law was amended substantially by the Uniform Relocation Act Amendments of 1987, Pub. L. No. 100-17, title IV, 101 Stat. 132, 246 (Apr. 2, 1987), which went into effect in April 1989.

The URA consists of three titles. Title I (42 U.S.C. §§ 4601–4605) is entitled “General Provisions.” Section 101, 42 U.S.C. § 4601, defines a number of terms used in the act. Several of the more important ones—“displaced person,” “comparable replacement dwelling,” “federal financial assistance”—will be discussed in detail later. Title III (42 U.S.C. §§ 4651–4655), consisting primarily of federal real property acquisition policy and the authorization for the payment of various expenses, has been covered previously in section B.2 of this chapter.

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Title II (42 U.S.C. §§ 4621–4638) is entitled “Uniform Relocation Assistance.”<sup>68</sup> It starts with section 201, 42 U.S.C. § 4621, which sets forth congressional findings and establishes the underlying policy and purpose of the legislation. Section 4621(b) provides:

“This [title] establishes a uniform policy for the fair and equitable treatment of persons displaced as a direct result of programs or projects undertaken by a Federal agency or with Federal financial assistance. The primary purpose of this [title] is to ensure that such persons shall not suffer disproportionate injuries as a result of programs and projects designed for the benefit of the public as a whole and to minimize the hardship of displacement on such persons.”

The stated intent is to provide equal treatment for persons similarly situated, while also taking into account their “unique circumstances.” 42 U.S.C. § 4621(c)(2).

The remainder of Title II consists of the operational provisions, which outline the types of assistance authorized. The key “benefit provisions” are:

- section 202 (42 U.S.C. § 4622)—moving and related expenses,
- sections 203 and 204 (42 U.S.C. §§ 4623 and 4624)—replacement housing for homeowners and tenants, respectively,
- section 205 (42 U.S.C. § 4625)—relocation planning, assistance coordination, and advisory services, and
- section 206 (42 U.S.C. § 4626)—housing replacement by federal agency as “last resort.”

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<sup>68</sup> Much of Title II was patterned after the relocation provisions of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1968, which the URA repealed. See 23 U.S.C. §§ 501–511 (1964; Supp. V 1969). Interpretive case law arising during the brief life of these provisions may therefore still be useful. *Lathan v. Volpe*, 455 F.2d 1111, 1123 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1971). See also *Bourne v. Schlesinger*, 426 F. Supp. 1025 (E.D. Pa. 1977); 52 *Comp. Gen.* 300 (1972).

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Section 210, 42 U.S.C. § 4630, extends the provisions of 42 U.S.C. §§ 4622–4625 (but not 4626) to any nonfederal entity (state, local, private) operating with federal financial assistance. Section 216, 42 U.S.C. § 4636, provides that Title II payments are not to be considered income for purposes of federal income taxation or for determining eligibility for assistance under the Social Security Act or any other federal law except low-income housing assistance.

The original law focused on displacements resulting from eminent domain acquisitions. Experience showed that, if the goal was to help displaced individuals, families, and businesses, this was too narrow. The 1987 amendments broadened the scope to embrace virtually all federal or federally assisted acquisitions, as well as certain nonacquisition displacements.

A significant weakness of the 1970 law was its failure to provide for centralized administration. Initially, the President assigned the role of providing some centralized guidance and coordination to the Office of Management and Budget, transferring this role to the General Services Administration in 1973, subject to OMB's policy oversight. Nevertheless, since no single agency had the legal authority to centrally direct and oversee governmentwide relocation procedures, each agency was free to develop its own regulations, and the uniformity which the 1970 legislation sought was not achieved.<sup>69</sup> In 1985, the President assigned lead responsibility to the Department of Transportation. However, there was still no legal basis for Transportation to regulate the other agencies so, the following year, the executive branch turned to a “common rule” (set of regulations published verbatim by 17 different agencies in 17 different places in the Code of Federal Regulations). 51 Fed. Reg. 7000 (Feb. 27, 1986). Congress came to the rescue in the 1987 amendments by statutorily designating Transportation as “lead agency” (42 U.S.C. § 4601(12)) and by enacting a new 42 U.S.C. § 4633 directing Transportation to issue uniform implementing regulations. Those regulations are found at 49 C.F.R. part 24. Within Transportation, the responsibility is assigned to the Federal Highway Administration. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(16).

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<sup>69</sup> See GAO, *Changes Needed in the Relocation Act to Achieve More Uniform Treatment of Persons Displaced by Federal Programs*, GGD-78-6 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 8, 1978); *Differences in Administration of the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970*, B-148044 (Washington, D.C.: June 7, 1973).

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## 2. The Threshold Determination: Meaning of “Displaced Person”

Section 101(6) of the Uniform Relocation Act (URA), 42 U.S.C. § 4601(6), defines “displaced person.” This is the threshold test that must be met before applying any of the operational provisions. In other words, before you can determine whether you are entitled to moving expenses or replacement housing benefits, you must first qualify as a displaced person under the statutory definition. Of course you must be a “person” before you can be a displaced person, so the statute first defines person to mean “any individual, partnership, corporation, or association.” 42 U.S.C. § 4601(5).

Section 4601(6) then defines displaced person as “any person who moves from real property, or moves his personal property from real property” in two types of situations. First is “as a direct result of a written notice of intent to acquire or the acquisition of such real property in whole or in part for a program or project undertaken by a Federal agency or with Federal financial assistance.” The second type of situation is permanent displacement of a person who is a residential tenant, operates a small business or a farm, or erects and maintains outdoor advertising billboards, “as a direct result of rehabilitation, demolition, or such other displacing activity as the lead agency may prescribe, under a program or project undertaken by a Federal agency or with Federal financial assistance.” The original 1970 definition was limited to acquisitions, essentially the first part of the current definition. The 1987 amendments added the nonacquisition activities.

Note that there are several elements to the definition. First, you must either move from real property or move personal property from real property. Second, the move must result directly from a written notice of intent to acquire, or the actual acquisition of, the real property, or from an authorized nonacquisition activity. Third, the displacing activity must be in connection with a program or project undertaken, or financially assisted by, a federal agency. All of these elements must be present. *See also* 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(9).

When the displacing activity is acquisition, this typically will mean the acquisition of fee simple title, that is, outright ownership. Routine leasing transactions are not included. Thus, where a building is leased to the government in an open market transaction without condemnation or the threat of condemnation, tenants whose leases are not renewed or whose tenancies are terminated by their landlord are not displaced persons for purposes of the URA. [54 Comp. Gen. 841 \(1975\)](#). Restated, an open-market lease is not an “acquisition” within the scope of 42 U.S.C. § 4601(6).



Similarly, if acquisition generally contemplates transfer of title, then the acquisition of easements normally will not produce displaced persons. *See, e.g., 58 Comp. Gen. 559 (1979).*

Although a lease is normally not an acquisition for purposes of the URA, a lease-construction transaction may be. The legislative history of the 1970 enactment makes it clear that persons displaced by government lease-construction projects are intended to be covered. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 4-5 (1970).<sup>70</sup> The concept is illustrated in *51 Comp. Gen. 660 (1972)*. The General Services Administration had signed an agreement to lease a building to be constructed on a tract of land in Alexandria, Virginia. The land had been used as a trailer park. Shortly after the agreement was signed, the owner of the land notified the tenants to vacate. It was held that the transaction amounted to a government lease-construction project for URA purposes, and that tenants who vacated after the agreement was signed qualified as displaced persons. The decision was discussed and explained further in *B-173882, June 8, 1972*. However, tenants who had moved from the trailer park before the agreement was signed could not qualify. *54 Comp. Gen. 819 (1975)*. They were not displaced by a written order to vacate,<sup>71</sup> nor were they displaced “as a result of the acquisition” of the property. URA benefits are not available to “persons who vacate property in the mere anticipation or expectation that there may be an acquisition by the United States.” *Id.* at 822.

Section 4601(6) refers to acquisition “in whole or in part.” The court in *Beaird-Poulan v. Department of Highways*, 441 F. Supp. 866 (W.D. La. 1977), *aff’d per curiam*, 616 F.2d 255 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 449 U.S. 971 (1980), found that this referred to spatial divisions rather than components of ownership. The state highway department had taken a portion of a tract of land owned by Beaird-Poulan, a chain saw manufacturer. The taking severed the property into two roughly equal tracts. Although no part of the existing manufacturing facility was located on the lands actually taken, the company was able to establish that it had previously made management decisions to substantially expand its physical plant due to increased

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<sup>70</sup> This is the report of the House Public Works Committee on the bill which became the URA. It contains much useful explanatory material and has been cited frequently both by GAO and by the courts.

<sup>71</sup> Under the 1970 legislation, entitlement to benefits was triggered by actual acquisition or by a written order to vacate. The 1987 revision changed “written order to vacate” to “written notice of intent to acquire.”

production needs, but that it was now forced to relocate in order to do so, as a result of the taking. In these circumstances, the court held that Beard-Poulan was a displaced person.

Under the statutory definition, when acquisition is the displacing activity, displacement must result from either the actual acquisition of the property or a written notice of intent to acquire. If displacement occurs as a result of a written notice of intent to acquire, failure to ultimately acquire the real property will not defeat the entitlement to benefits, as long as the notice was generated by a proposed acquisition. See *Alexander v. Department of Housing & Urban Development*, 441 U.S. 39, 59 (1979); H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 4.<sup>72</sup>

The acquisition or notice must be for a federal or federally funded program or project. In *Alexander*, the Supreme Court held that, when the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) acquires property upon default on federally insured loans, tenants displaced by the acquisition are not displaced persons within the meaning of 42 U.S.C. § 4601(6). Random default acquisitions are not intended to further a federal program or project. *Alexander*, 441 U.S. at 63 and 65. Similar lower court decisions are *Caramico v. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development*, 509 F.2d 694 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1974), and *Blount v. Harris*, 593 F.2d 336 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979). As the *Caramico* court pointed out, default acquisitions represent the failure of the program rather than its desired result. *Caramico*, 509 F.2d at 699. The URA, noted the court, “contemplates normal government acquisitions, which are the result of conscious decisions to build a highway here or a housing project or hospital there.” *Id.* at 698.

As noted previously, persons who move without a written notice of intent to acquire and prior to actual acquisition, based on a mere expectation of acquisition, will not qualify as displaced persons. 54 Comp. Gen. 819 (1975). A case making essentially the same point is *Messer v. Virgin Islands Urban Renewal Board*, 623 F.2d 303 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1980). However, there are situations in which a move without a written notice and prior to actual acquisition will qualify. In a 1975 decision, for example, GAO concluded that a person who moves after the government has made a firm purchase

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<sup>72</sup> These authorities address the issue in the context of the now obsolete “order to vacate” language. There is no reason why the 1987 change to “notice of intent to acquire” should produce a different result.

offer may be said to have moved “as a result of the acquisition” of the property if the acquisition is subsequently completed by purchase or condemnation. 55 Comp. Gen. 595 (1975). Once the offer is made, there is more of a commitment by the United States to acquire the property. The decision pointed out, however, that the mere authorization and appropriation of funds for the acquisition is not sufficient “commitment” by the United States to justify a move under section 4601(6). *Id.* at 596–97. See also *Lowell v. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development*, 446 F. Supp. 859 (N.D. Cal. 1977) (agency regulation excluding from eligibility persons who moved prior to execution of federal contract or federal approval of project budget upheld). The Department of Transportation (DOT) regulations recognize the concept of 55 Comp. Gen. 595 by including in the definition of displaced person one who moves as a direct result of the initiation of negotiations for acquisition of the property. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(9)(i)(A). The regulations generally define initiation of negotiations to mean delivery of the agency’s initial written offer. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(15)(i).

The case of *Lathan v. Volpe*, 455 F.2d 1111 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1971), illustrates a different type of acquisition. DOT had provided by regulation for “hardship acquisitions” in highway projects. Under this procedure, once the state had selected a corridor, a property owner could request immediate purchase of his property by the state upon a showing that undue hardship would result from following the standard procedure of deferring acquisition until after federal approval of the design. Applying the agency’s regulations, the court viewed the hardship sale as an acquisition for purposes of 42 U.S.C. § 4601(6), notwithstanding that the government had not yet committed itself to the project.

Under the original 1970 legislation, a long line of cases established that the displacement must be by a governmental entity (federal, state, or local); a person displaced by a nongovernmental entity (private party) was not a displaced person and therefore not entitled to URA benefits, even though the program or project was federally funded. *E.g.*, *Conway v. Harris*, 586 F.2d 1137 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1978); *Moorer v. Department of Housing & Urban Development*, 561 F.2d 175 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1977), *cert. denied*, 436 U.S. 919 (1978). The 1987 amendments changed the focus of the inquiry by adding the nonacquisition activities and by expanding the definition of displacing agency (42 U.S.C. § 4601(11)) to include anyone carrying out a program or project with federal financial assistance, regardless of the presence or absence of the power of eminent domain. Thus, for acquisition-based

displacements, the key question is no longer the identity of the party acquiring the property, but whether it received federal financial assistance.

In assessing the continued validity of cases decided under the pre-1987 law, it is therefore necessary to apply the revised definitions and the appropriate version of the DOT regulations. *Conway*, for example, had found the URA inapplicable to residential tenants displaced from property acquired by a private party who intended to rehabilitate the property with Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) “section 8” financial assistance. Under the revised law, the acquisition itself still would not qualify as a displacing activity because it was privately funded. However, since rehabilitation is one of the authorized nonacquisition activities that can trigger entitlement to benefits, the *Conway* plaintiff would presumably now be covered. Other cases in this category include *Isham v. Pierce*, 694 F.2d 1196 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982) (tenant displaced by private owner for rehabilitation to be financed by loan from HUD), and *Devines v. Maier*, 665 F.2d 138 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 836 (1984) (tenants evicted from housing found to be unfit for human habitation under federally assisted housing code enforcement program).

It is significant that the plaintiffs in the three cases cited in the preceding paragraph were tenants, not owners. The conference report on the 1987 amendments stressed that the expanded definitions are not intended to confer benefits on an owner who voluntarily sells in a noncoercive sale. In contrast, the tenant who is involuntarily evicted as a result of that sale is covered. H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 100-27, at 246 (1987).

Two cases which appear to remain valid under the revised analysis are *Austin v. Andrus*, 638 F.2d 113 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981), and *Parlane Sportswear Company, Inc. v. Weinberger*, 381 F. Supp. 410 (D. Mass. 1974), *aff’d*, 513 F.2d 835 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 423 U.S. 925 (1975). *Austin* denied the claim of members of the Navajo Indian tribe who were forced to relocate when the tribe leased to a coal mining company mining rights on a portion of the reservation. In the *Parlane* case, Tufts University owned a building in Boston and had leased several floors to a clothing manufacturer. Upon expiration of the lease, Tufts evicted its tenant in order to establish a Cancer Research Center funded by grants from the then Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The clothing manufacturer was held not entitled to URA benefits. Even under the new analysis, there was neither an acquisition by anyone nor an authorized nonacquisition activity. As another court put it in a somewhat different context, there will always be some losses, and the URA is intended as a supplement, not a guarantee.

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*Pietroniro v. Borough of Oceanport*, 764 F.2d 976, 980 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 474 U.S. 1020 (1985).

The Comptroller General considered an unusual variation in [B-213033, Aug. 7, 1984](#). A private organization proposed to purchase some land and then donate it to the Veterans Administration to be used for the expansion of a VA cemetery. The organization would clear the land of all structures prior to transfer of title. The question was whether existing property owners and tenants would be entitled to claim relocation benefits from the VA. Based on the URA's legislative history and available precedents, GAO said yes, concluding that the transaction could be viewed as an acquisition of property for a federal program.

Thus far, we have been talking about being displaced from the actual property that is being acquired, rehabilitated, *etc.* The statute recognizes situations in which the property from which you move and the property which is being acquired or rehabilitated do not have to be the same. Under the statutory definition of displaced person, a person can qualify for two of the URA benefits—moving expenses and advisory service—if that person moves from real property, or moves his personal property from real property, as a direct result of the federal or federally funded acquisition of, or authorized nonacquisition activity on, some *other* real property on which that person conducts a business or farm operation. 42 U.S.C.

§ 4601(6)(A)(ii). An example from the 1970 legislative history is “the acquisition of right-of-way for a highway improvement in a remote locality [which] may include a general store and gas station, but exclude the operator’s nearby dwelling or storage facility.” H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 5 (1970). Another example is *Forman’s Dairy Palm Nursery v. Florida Department of Transportation*, 608 So. 2d 76 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 1992) (land used by tree nursery reclaimed by owner as result of taking for highway construction).

Finally, what about absentee landlords? If the absentee landlord has personal property to be moved from the acquired or otherwise affected real property, then he would be covered under the plain terms of 42 U.S.C. § 4601(6). However, the statute does not specify how much personal property there has to be. Thus, an absentee landlord who had left a garden rake on the acquired premises would presumably qualify. This being the case, GAO thought it inequitable to deny benefits to an absentee landlord who did not have some minimal amount of personal property to move, and found in [B-148044, Mar. 5, 1975](#), that the nonresident owner of an apartment building could be considered a displaced person even with no

personal property located on the acquired real property. A state court reached a seemingly opposite conclusion in *City of Mishawaka v. Knights of Columbus Home Association*, 396 N.E.2d 948 (Ind. Ct. App. 1979). DOT regulations also seem to contemplate that there be some personal property to move for a nonoccupant to qualify as a displaced person. The basic definition of displaced person in the regulations covers only those who move themselves or those who move personal property from the real property. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(9)(i).

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### 3. Types and Payment of Benefits

#### a. Moving and Related Expenses

Section 202 of the Uniform Relocation Act (URA), 42 U.S.C. § 4622, authorizes the payment of moving and certain related expenses “[w]henever a program or project to be undertaken by a displacing agency will result in the displacement of any person.” The types of benefits vary according to whether the displacement is residential or commercial.

##### (1) Residential displacements

A person displaced from a dwelling is entitled to receive “actual reasonable expenses” incurred in moving self, family, and personal property. 42 U.S.C. § 4622(a)(1). The types of expenses allowable are further spelled out in 49 C.F.R. § 24.301. Alternatively, the person may elect to receive a fixed “expense and dislocation allowance.” 42 U.S.C. § 4622(b). The 1970 legislation prescribed the actual amounts payable. The 1987 amendment deleted the specific amounts, providing instead for the amount to be determined according to a schedule established by the Department of Transportation (DOT). *Id.* DOT regulations provide for the allowance to be determined “according to the Fixed Residential Moving Cost Schedule approved by the Federal Highway Administration and published in the Federal Register on a periodic basis.” 49 C.F.R. § 24.302. The Federal Highway Administration derives its schedule from data submitted by the various state highway agencies and, as noted, publishes the schedule as a Notice in the *Federal Register*. The Federal Highway Administration also publishes the schedule on its Web site at [www.fhwa.dot.gov/realestate/fixsch96.htm](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/realestate/fixsch96.htm) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008). The current online version is dated June 15, 2005.

Neither the statute nor the DOT regulations specifically address persons who move themselves rather than hire commercial movers, but there is no reason they should be excluded. The self-mover presumably has the same election as anyone else.

A person who moves onto the property after its acquisition for a project is not eligible for benefits. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(9)(ii)(B); [B-148044, Jan. 7, 1974](#). The reason is that the person cannot be said to have been displaced as the result of the acquisition. An agency regulation to this effect was upheld in *Lewis v. Brinegar*, 372 F. Supp. 424 (W.D. Mo. 1974). However, a regulation purporting to disqualify persons who began occupancy after the initiation of negotiations was invalidated as exceeding statutory authority in *Tulloch v. State Highway Commission*, 507 F.2d 712 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1974).

## (2) Commercial displacements

A person displaced from a place of business or farm also has a choice. Under 42 U.S.C. § 4622(a), the displaced person can receive moving expenses including (1) actual reasonable moving expenses, (2) actual direct losses of tangible personal property, (3) actual reasonable expenses in searching for a replacement business or farm,<sup>73</sup> and (4) actual reasonable expenses, not to exceed \$10,000, in reestablishing a farm, small business, or nonprofit organization. The specific items allowable are spelled out in 49 C.F.R. §§ 24.301 through 24.305. Payment for losses of personal property is authorized even where the property is not relocated or the business is discontinued, not to exceed the cost of actual relocation. 42 U.S.C. § 4622(a)(2). As the legislative history points out, there may be situations where the property is not suitable at the new location, or where moving it would be impractical or uneconomical. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 6–7 (1970).

Alternatively, the person may elect to receive a fixed payment under 42 U.S.C. § 4622(c), determined in accordance with the Department of Transportation regulations, of not less than \$1,000 nor more than \$20,000. In order for a business to receive a fixed payment under section 4622(c) of the statute, the agency must determine, among other things, that:

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<sup>73</sup> The regulations limit this item to \$2,500. 49 C.F.R. § 24.301(g)(17). There is no comparable allowance in any amount for residential displacements. 49 C.F.R. § 24.301(h)(9) (expressly excluding expenses of searching for a replacement dwelling).

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- the business cannot be relocated without a substantial loss of its existing patronage;
  - the business is not part of a commercial enterprise having at least three other entities not being acquired which are under the same ownership and engaged in the same or similar business; and
  - the business contributed materially to the displaced person's income during the two taxable years prior to displacement.

49 C.F.R. § 24.305(a). The various administrative determinations are designed to keep the program from becoming a giveaway, and the courts will generally uphold an agency's decisions under them as long as they are not arbitrary or capricious. In *Starke v. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development*, 454 F. Supp. 477 (W.D. Okla. 1977), for example, the court upheld the denial of relocation benefits to a lawyer who had moved his office to a location only three blocks from his former office and in fact closer to the courthouses in which he practiced.

The fixed payment will be equal to the average annual net earnings of the business or farm, calculated as prescribed in 49 C.F.R. § 24.305(e), subject to the statutory maximum and minimum. For a nonprofit, the payment is based on "the average of 2 years annual gross revenues less administrative expenses." 49 C.F.R. § 24.305(d). (The net earnings formula, as with some of the administrative determinations, used to be specified in the statute; the detail was dropped from the statute in 1987 and is now carried in the regulations.)

The rental of real property is included in the definition of "business" in 42 U.S.C. § 4601(7) and, prior to the 1987 amendments, could qualify for a fixed payment under 42 U.S.C. § 4622(c) as long as the required determinations could be made. [B-148044, Nov. 18, 1975](#). While the amendments did not affect this portion of 42 U.S.C. § 4601(7), they added language to 42 U.S.C. § 4622(c) to expressly disqualify persons "whose sole business at the displacement dwelling is the rental of such property to others." The disqualification applies only to the fixed payment option and does not affect entitlement to actual expenses under 42 U.S.C. § 4622(a).

A displaced owner-occupant of a multifamily dwelling who receives income from the dwelling is displaced both from his dwelling and from his place of business for purposes of section 4622, and can receive appropriate benefits



in both capacities (H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 8), subject to the fixed payment disqualification described above if applicable.

We have previously noted that an absentee landlord may be considered a displaced person. Naturally, if he does not move, he cannot claim actual moving expenses, but he could claim other authorized expenses as and to the extent applicable. *See* B-148044, Mar. 5, 1975. (The landlord in that case was the absentee owner of an apartment building and would no longer be eligible for the fixed payment option, but the general proposition remains valid.)

b. Replacement Housing Benefits

In addition to the moving expenses authorized by 42 U.S.C. § 4622, the Uniform Relocation Act (URA) authorizes monetary payments to help displaced persons obtain adequate replacement housing. These replacement housing benefits are contained in 42 U.S.C. §§ 4623 and 4624, applicable to homeowners and tenants, respectively. As with the moving expense payments, replacement housing benefits are available only to those who qualify as displaced persons, and are in addition to any “fair market value” payments received under the eminent domain authority.

(1) Homeowners

Under 42 U.S.C. § 4623(a)(1), a person displaced from a dwelling which he owned and occupied for at least 180 days prior to the initiation of negotiations for acquisition of the property is eligible for a supplemental payment of up to \$22,500. The payment consists of the following elements:

- The difference, if any, between the acquisition cost (the eminent domain “fair market value” payment) and the reasonable cost of a comparable replacement dwelling. 42 U.S.C. § 4623(a)(1)(A).
- An “interest differential” if the cost of new financing exceeds the interest rate on the homeowner’s existing mortgage. To qualify for this payment, there must have been a valid mortgage on the acquired property for at least 180 days prior to the initiation of acquisition negotiations. 42 U.S.C. § 4623(a)(1)(B). The regulations provide guidance on computing the differential. *See* 49 C.F.R. § 24.401(d) and appendix A to 49 C.F.R. part 24, at § 24.401.
- Reasonable expenses for evidence of title, recording fees, and other closing costs (but not including prepaid expenses) incident to purchase of the replacement dwelling. 42 U.S.C. § 4623(a)(1)(C).

Where displacement is based on an authorized nonacquisition activity, “initiation of negotiations” means the notice to the person that he or she will be displaced or, if there is no such notice, the date the person actually moves from the property. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(15)(ii).

In order to qualify for payment under section 4623(a)(1), the displaced person must purchase and occupy a replacement dwelling within 1 year from the date he received the final payment for acquisition, or the date the agency provided referrals to replacement housing, whichever is later. 42 U.S.C. § 4623(a)(2). The agency can extend the 1-year deadline for good cause. *Id.* Good cause generally means some event beyond the displaced person’s control, such as acute or life threatening illness, bad weather preventing the completion of construction, or physical modifications required for reasonable accommodation of a replacement dwelling. *See* 49 C.F.R. § 24.401(a)(2), app. A.

Section 4623 is based on the premise that “a displaced homeowner should not be left worse off economically than he was before displacement, and should be able to relocate in a comparable dwelling which is decent, safe and sanitary, and adequate to accommodate him.” H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 8 (1970). An acquired dwelling is owned if the displaced person held fee title, a life estate, a land contract, a 99-year lease, a lease including extension options with at least 50 years to run from the date of acquisition, or an interest in a cooperative housing project which includes the right to occupy a dwelling. 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(20)(i).

The cost of a comparable replacement dwelling establishes the upper limit of the benefit payment. 49 C.F.R. § 24.403(a). *See also* [B-203827-O.M., Oct. 8, 1981](#) (same point under prior version of regulations). To promote uniformity, the law defines “comparable replacement dwelling” as a dwelling that is—

“(A) decent, safe, and sanitary; (B) adequate in size to accommodate the occupants; (C) within the financial means of the displaced person; (D) functionally equivalent; (E) in an area not subject to unreasonable adverse environmental conditions; and (F) in a location generally not less desirable than the location of the displaced person’s dwelling with respect to public utilities, facilities, services, and the displaced person’s place of employment.”

42 U.S.C. § 4601(10).

The “decent, safe, and sanitary” standard is defined in 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(8). Guidance on applying the “functionally equivalent” standard may be found in the conference report to the 1987 amendments, which added the definition. H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 100-27, at 247–48 (1987).

In order to qualify for the “interest differential,” it is not necessary that the displaced person be required to obtain a mortgage on the replacement house, only that he in fact do so. In a Louisiana case, a person displaced from his dwelling for highway construction received enough from the eminent domain payment so that he could have paid cash for his replacement house. Instead, he chose to obtain a mortgage on the replacement house at an interest rate higher than that on his old mortgage. The court found that 42 U.S.C. § 4623 does not restrict eligibility to cases where there is not enough cash left over after the taking with which to purchase a replacement dwelling. The homeowner in this case was therefore entitled to an interest differential payment, subject of course to the statutory ceiling. *Louisiana Department of Highways v. Coleman*, 444 F. Supp. 151 (M.D. La. 1978).

The regulations recognize a “constructive occupancy” concept (49 C.F.R. § 24.403(d)), and the courts have strongly encouraged it. One court has gone so far as to suggest that the “fair and equitable treatment mandate” of the URA requires application of a constructive occupancy exception in appropriate cases. *Nagi v. United States*, 751 F.2d 826, 830 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985). An illustrative case is *Ledesma v. Urban Renewal Agency*, 432 F. Supp. 564 (S.D. Tex. 1977). The Ledesmas had built a house in their hometown of Edinburg, Texas, but Mr. Ledesma could not find sufficient work in Edinburg to enable them to pay for the house. They moved to a nearby town where Mr. Ledesma found work and rented a house. They always intended to return to the Edinburg house as soon as they could afford to do so. They retained sole control of the Edinburg house, left their furniture and household goods there, and permitted no one else to live or even stay briefly in that house. The court found that the Ledesmas owned the house for the requisite 180-day period but, due to circumstances beyond their control, did not physically occupy it during that period. Under these facts, the court found them entitled to a replacement housing payment. The constructive occupancy concept is an attempt to “mitigate what might possibly be harsh and unfair results if the 180-day requirement were blindly or mechanically imposed.” *Id.* at 567.

In *Seeherman v. Lynn*, 404 F. Supp. 1318 (M.D. Pa. 1975), the Department of Housing and Urban Development had applied a constructive occupancy

exception in order to authorize the payment of replacement housing benefits to homeowners who did not physically occupy their homes immediately prior to acquisition because they had been displaced by a flood. The court upheld the refusal to apply the same exception to a husband and wife who had been building a house at the time of the flood but were not “displaced” from it because they had never occupied it in the first place. *Id.* at 1322.

(2) Tenants and “90-day homeowners”

In enacting the Uniform Relocation Act (URA), Congress recognized that the lack of adequate and affordable rental housing for displaced lower income individuals and families “presents the most difficult of all relocation problems.” H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 12 (1970). These are the persons who would generally receive nothing from the eminent domain taking. Section 204 of the Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4624, attempts to address this problem.

Under 42 U.S.C. § 4624, benefits are payable to a displaced person who (1) is not eligible to receive payments under 42 U.S.C. § 4623, and (2) lawfully occupied the dwelling from which displaced for at least 90 days prior to the initiation of the acquisition negotiations. In the case of an authorized nonacquisition displacing activity, the initiation of negotiations has the same meaning as it does for purposes of 42 U.S.C. § 4623.

The amount payable is the amount necessary to enable the displaced person to lease or rent a comparable replacement dwelling for up to 42 months, not to exceed \$5,250. 42 U.S.C. § 4624(a). Payment may be in a lump sum or in periodic installments, in the agency’s discretion. *Id.* The regulations, 49 C.F.R. § 24.402(b), prescribe the method of calculating the amount of the benefit. The displaced person, at his or her election, may use the money as a down payment on the purchase of a “decent, safe, and sanitary replacement dwelling,” in which event the agency, in its discretion, may pay the maximum amount allowable without regard to any calculations. 42 U.S.C. § 4624(b); 49 C.F.R. § 24.402(c). This latter option is designed to encourage home ownership. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 12.

If a displaced tenant wishes to purchase a replacement home and seeks down payment assistance under 42 U.S.C. § 4624(b), eligibility is not affected by the fact that the tenant plans to purchase the home as co-owner with some other person who is not entitled to URA benefits. [B-148044, June 18, 1975.](#)

Benefits under 42 U.S.C. § 4624 are available not only to rental tenants but also to homeowners who cannot meet the 180-day test for benefits under 42 U.S.C. § 4623 but who have owned and occupied the displacement dwelling for at least 90 days prior to the initiation of negotiations. Ninety-day homeowners who elect to purchase a replacement home cannot receive more than they would have received under 42 U.S.C. § 4623 if they had met the 180-day test. 42 U.S.C. § 4624(b).

Mobile homes present complications and are treated in 49 C.F.R. part 24, subpart F. Mobile homes are considered real property in some states and personal property in others. Also, a person may own a mobile home and rent the land on which it sits, or vice-versa, and in choosing a replacement dwelling may buy one and rent the other. While there may thus be two different property interests involved, the displaced person should not receive greater benefits than the displaced owner of a stationary home in comparable circumstances. [57 Comp. Gen. 613 \(1978\)](#).

c. Advisory Services

Section 205 of the Uniform Relocation Act (URA), 42 U.S.C. § 4625, requires agencies to provide a relocation assistance advisory program for displaced persons. The advisory services may extend to persons occupying property immediately adjacent to acquired property (42 U.S.C. § 4625(b)), and to short-term tenants who would not otherwise qualify as displaced persons (42 U.S.C. § 4625(f)). The advisory assistance and related activities provided for in section 205 of the URA were viewed as “key elements” of a successful relocation program. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 13 (1970). Thus, the responsibility of an agency is not limited to merely paying appropriate benefits when claimed. There is an affirmative requirement to help persons who have been or are going to be displaced, by developing and making available a variety of relocation information and assistance.

The statute lists the types of services to be included in the advisory program, and directs agencies to cooperate with one another and to coordinate their relocation activities. For example, the program should “provide current and continuing information on the availability, sales prices, and rental charges of comparable replacement dwellings for displaced homeowners and tenants and suitable locations for businesses and farm operations.” 42 U.S.C. § 4625(c)(2).

There is relatively little case law construing the advisory service requirements of 42 U.S.C. § 4625. One of the required services is to “assist a person displaced from a business or farm operation in obtaining and becoming established in a suitable replacement location.” 42 U.S.C.

§ 4625(c)(4). This, said one court, “requires only assistance, not assistance guaranteeing a successful result.” *American Dry Cleaners and Laundry, Inc. v. United States Department of Transportation*, 722 F.2d 70, 73 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983). Another court has noted that the existence of a file folder that contains lists of available housing and general information brochures on relocation assistance does not satisfy the statute. *United Family Farmers, Inc. v. Kleppe*, 418 F. Supp. 591, 602 (D. S.D. 1976), *aff’d*, 552 F.2d 823 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1977).

d. “Last Resort” Replacement Housing

The Uniform Relocation Act (URA) places considerable emphasis on adequate replacement housing. Under 42 U.S.C. § 4625(c)(3), one of the elements agencies are to address in their advisory programs is the assurance that people will not be forced to move without first being given a reasonable opportunity to relocate to comparable housing. However, as anyone who is less than wealthy well knows, providing adequate and affordable housing is easier said than done.

Section 206 of the URA, 42 U.S.C. § 4626, has rightly been termed an “innovative” provision. Catherine R. Lazuran, *Annotation, Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970 (42 U.S.C. §§ 4601–4655)*, 33 A.L.R. Fed. 9, 30 (1977). Under 42 U.S.C. § 4626(a), if a federal or federally assisted project “cannot proceed on a timely basis because comparable replacement dwellings are not available,” the agency head is authorized to “take such action as is necessary or appropriate to provide such dwellings by use of funds authorized for such project.” This may include the direct construction of new housing, the acquisition and rehabilitation of existing housing, the relocation of existing housing, and the stimulation of housing development through the use of “seed money” loans. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 15 (1970); 49 C.F.R. § 24.404(c)(1). Section 4626(a) also expressly authorizes agencies to exceed the payment ceilings of 42 U.S.C. §§ 4623 and 4624, but only on a case-by-case basis and for good cause in accordance with the Department of Transportation (DOT) regulations. DOT has emphasized that “housing of last resort is not an independent program, but is merely an extension of the replacement housing function.” DOT, *Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Regulation for Federal and Federally Assisted Programs*, 53 Fed. Reg. 27598, 27604 (July 21, 1988) (supplementary information statement on proposed uniform regulations).

An agency cannot require a displaced person to accept agency-provided housing in lieu of applicable monetary payments (just compensation payment, if any, and supplemental payment under 42 U.S.C. §§ 4623 or

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4624). This can be done only if the displaced person agrees. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 14–15; 49 C.F.R. § 24.404(b).

Section 4626(b) states: “No person shall be required to move from his dwelling on account of any program or project undertaken by a Federal agency or with Federal financial assistance, unless the head of the displacing agency is satisfied that comparable replacement housing is available to such person.” The statute itself is not an absolute guarantee of adequate replacement housing; it provides merely that the agency head must be satisfied that it is available, whatever that means. The regulations take it a step further, however. In a paragraph entitled “Basic rights of persons to be displaced,” the regulations state flatly that “no person shall be required to move from a displacement dwelling unless comparable replacement housing is available to such person.” For emphasis, the next sentence states that “[n]o person may be deprived of any rights the person may have under the Uniform Act or this part.” 49 C.F.R. § 24.404(b).

The URA does not require that comparable replacement housing be located in the immediate neighborhood of the displacement housing, *Mejia v. Department of Housing and Urban Development*, 518 F. Supp. 935, 938 (N.D. Ill. 1981), *aff’d*, 688 F.2d 529 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982), or even in the same county, *Katsev v. Coleman*, 530 F.2d 176, 180–81 n.7 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1976). Thus, the lack of suitable replacement housing in the immediate neighborhood is not sufficient to trigger the “last resort” housing authority. *Mejia*, 518 F. Supp. at 938.

Clearly, one effect of the replacement housing program can be to change the displaced person’s status from tenant to homeowner. *E.g.*, 42 U.S.C. § 4624(b). The reverse possibility raises a very thorny problem. In [B-148044, July 18, 1977](#), GAO considered this question: Does 42 U.S.C. § 4626 amount to a guarantee of continued home ownership, or may rental housing be considered appropriate replacement housing for displaced homeowners? GAO surveyed agencies with the most relocation experience, and found considerable disagreement. GAO also found both the statute and the legislative history ambiguous. On balance, the decision concluded that the use of rental housing under 42 U.S.C. § 4626 when home

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ownership is not feasible is not legally precluded, although it is obviously an undesirable option and should not be encouraged.<sup>74</sup>

e. Federally Assisted  
Programs and Projects

The relocation benefits we have been discussing apply not only to federal programs but also to nonfederal programs carried out with federal financial assistance. With respect to nonfederal programs, the federal agency providing the assistance has a limited oversight role. Under section 210 of the Uniform Relocation Act (URA), 42 U.S.C. § 4630, a nonfederal displacing agency must provide “satisfactory assurances” that it will comply with 42 U.S.C. §§ 4622 (moving and related expenses), 4623 and 4624 (replacement housing benefits), and 4625 (advisory services) as a condition of any grant, contract, or agreement under which federal dollars will be available to pay all or any part of the cost of any program or project which will displace anyone. 42 U.S.C. §§ 4630(1) and (2). It must also provide satisfactory assurances that, except for certain emergency situations, comparable replacement housing will be available within a reasonable time prior to displacement. 42 U.S.C. § 4630(3).

A satisfactory assurance for purposes of this provision requires some reasonable factual basis, but it does not mean a guarantee that the housing in fact exists. *Katsev v. Coleman*, 530 F.2d 176, 181 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1976); *Battison v. City of Niles*, 445 F. Supp. 1082, 1090–91 (N.D. Ohio 1977).

To trigger 42 U.S.C. § 4630, it is not necessary that federal dollars be used for the specific acquisition. It is sufficient that the displacing agency’s program or project which will result in the acquisition (or authorized nonacquisition activity) is federally assisted. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 4 (1970); *Lake Park Home Owners Association v. Department of Housing and Urban Development*, 443 F. Supp. 6 (S.D. Ohio 1976). As the same court explained a few years later, however, the mere existence of federal assistance is not enough. There must be “some present nexus” between the federally assisted program or project and the displacing activity. *Day v. City of Dayton*, 604 F. Supp. 191, 197 (S.D. Ohio 1984).

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<sup>74</sup> The decision also involved the question of whether 42 U.S.C. § 4626 is subject to the monetary ceiling of 42 U.S.C. § 4623, a question on which there also was considerable disagreement and which was resolved in the 1987 amendments to the statute. See 42 U.S.C. § 4626(a) (“The head of the displacing agency may use this section to exceed the maximum amounts which may be paid under [section] 4623 . . . on a case-by-case basis for good cause as determined in accordance with such regulations as the head of the lead agency shall issue . . .”).



A 1976 decision, [B-180812, Mar. 25, 1976](#), discussed the application of 42 U.S.C. § 4630 to waste treatment facility grants by the Environmental Protection Agency. The decision made two important points:

- Section 4630 does not require that URA benefits be strictly limited to cases where displacement occurs after the commitment of federal financial assistance. Rather, the state or municipal grantee should be required to provide relocation benefits to those displaced from any site that, at the time of acquisition (or at any time thereafter prior to actual displacement), was planned as the site of a federally assisted facility. GAO recognized the risk to the grantee in that relocation costs will not be reimbursed if the assistance is ultimately not granted. However, this approach was viewed as most consistent with the intent of the URA.
- If a grant application is received from a state or municipality that has already acquired property or displaced persons without providing relocation benefits, the applicant should be required to retroactively “cure” the noncompliance. If substantial compliance with the URA cannot be achieved in this manner, the application should be denied.

The 1987 amendments to the URA added an alternative to the “satisfactory assurance” approach of 42 U.S.C. § 4630. A state agency may certify that it will operate in accordance with state laws that accomplish the purpose and effect of the URA. 42 U.S.C. § 4604(a). A federal agency fulfills its responsibility under the URA by accepting this certification. The Department of Transportation, in coordination with the program agency, periodically monitors state compliance. If the state agency violates its certification, the program agency may withhold its approval of financial assistance, or may rescind its approval of the certification. 42 U.S.C. § 4604(c); 49 C.F.R. §§ 24.4(b), 24.603.

“Federal financial assistance” for URA purposes is defined as “a grant, loan, or contribution provided by the United States” but expressly excludes (1) any federal guarantee or insurance, and (2) any interest reduction payment to an individual in connection with the purchase and occupancy of a residence by that individual.<sup>75</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 4601(4); 49 C.F.R. § 24.2(a)(13). Thus, if the only federal financial involvement is in the form of a guarantee or insurance, the URA does not apply regardless of who

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<sup>75</sup> The statute also excludes any annual payment or capital loan to the District of Columbia. 42 U.S.C. § 4601(4).

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displaces whom from what. *E.g.*, *Dawson v. Department of Housing and Urban Development*, 428 F. Supp. 328, 332 (N.D. Ga. 1976), *aff'd*, 592 F.2d 1292 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979) (assistance under section 236 of the National Housing Act is encompassed by the “federal guarantee or insurance” exclusion).

A question lurking in the bushes is the extent to which the term “federal financial assistance” does or does not include block grants. The genesis of the question is a series of cases holding the URA inapplicable where the only federal funds involved were funds provided under the now defunct general revenue sharing program. The reason was that revenue sharing funds were intended to be provided with no “federal strings”; they were not associated with any particular project, but could be used by the states as they saw fit. *Goolsby v. Blumenthal*, 590 F.2d 1369 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 444 U.S. 970 (1979); [B-148044, Dec. 10, 1973](#); [B-130515-G.94, Mar. 7, 1979](#).

It is arguable that this analysis applies, at least to some extent, to block grant programs. For example, one court has found the URA inapplicable where the federal assistance consisted of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, stating that “the URA is only applicable when the federal financial assistance is provided . . . for a specific program or project.” *Isham v. Pierce*, 694 F.2d 1196, 1204 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982). *See also Young v. Harris*, 599 F.2d 870, 878 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 444 U.S. 993 (1979). Other cases have involved CDBG funds without addressing the issue. *E.g.*, *Gomez v. Chody*, 867 F.2d 395 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1989).

Relocation costs incurred directly by a federal agency are treated simply as part of the cost of the program or project. Relocation costs incurred by a nonfederal displacing agency are reimbursable from the federal agency which is providing the financial assistance “in the same manner and to the same extent” as other program or project costs. 42 U.S.C. § 4631(a). Thus, for example, if the relevant program legislation has a matching fund requirement, it will apply to allowable relocation costs. H.R. Rep. No. 91-1656, at 17 (1970). However, if state eminent domain law provides for payments which “have substantially the same purpose and effect” as URA benefits, those payments will not constitute allowable program or project costs. 42 U.S.C. § 4631(b). The 1987 amendments extended this anti-duplication provision to apply the “substantially the same purpose and effect” concept to other federal payments as well. Examples may be found in H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 100-27, at 255 (1987).

Under 42 U.S.C. § 4631(c) grants and contracts with state agencies executed prior to the effective date of the URA must be amended to include

URA benefits. In [51 Comp. Gen. 267 \(1971\)](#), the Comptroller General advised the Department of Housing and Urban Development that contracts which provided for full federal funding of certain relocation costs authorized by the Housing Act still had to be amended to reflect the new URA benefits, but did not have to include the cost-sharing requirements of 42 U.S.C. § 4631(a). However, where existing contracts did not include relocation payments, the amended contracts would have to reflect the section 4631(a) cost-sharing requirements. B-173957, Sept. 7, 1972.

f. Procedures and Payment

The payment of benefits under the Uniform Relocation Act (URA) is not automatic; the displaced person must apply to the proper agency. The regulations try to be user-friendly in this regard, placing the initial burden on the displacing agency. The agency is directed to give written notification to persons scheduled to be displaced, including a general description of the types of payments for which the person may be eligible and applicable procedures. 49 C.F.R. § 24.203(a). Agencies are also directed to provide reasonable assistance to help persons file their claims. 49 C.F.R. § 24.207(a). Specific procedures are up to the individual agency.

Subject to waiver for good cause, claims should be filed within 18 months after the date of displacement in the case of tenants, or, in the case of owners, the date of displacement or the date of the final payment for acquisition, if applicable, whichever is later. 49 C.F.R. § 24.207(d). The regulations further instruct agencies to review claims “in an expeditious manner” and to make payment “as soon as feasible” after receipt of sufficient documentation to support allowance. 49 C.F.R. § 24.207(b).

Any sound claims settlement system should include an administrative appeal process, the objective being to maximize administrative resolution and minimize the need to go to court. In the case of the URA, an appeal process is required. 42 U.S.C. § 4633(b)(3); 49 C.F.R. § 24.10. If a claim is denied in whole or in part for any reason, the agency must notify the claimant in writing, setting out the agency’s appeal procedures. 49 C.F.R. § 24.207(e). If the appeal is denied in whole or in part, the agency must again provide written notification, this time advising the claimant of his or her right to seek judicial review. 49 C.F.R. § 24.10(g).

The URA authorizes advance payments in two situations. First, a federal agency, upon determining that it is necessary for the expeditious completion of a program or project, may advance the federal share of authorized relocation costs to a state agency. 42 U.S.C. § 4631(c). Second, a displaced person, in hardship cases and upon proper application, may

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receive advance payment of applicable relocation benefits. 42 U.S.C. § 4633(b)(2). Advance payment under section 4633(b)(2) should be “subject to such safeguards as are appropriate to ensure that the objective of the payment is accomplished.” 49 C.F.R. § 24.207(c).

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#### 4. Public Utilities

A public utility will typically have two different types of facilities which it may be required to relocate. First, like any other business entity, it will have business offices—office space which it may own or lease, with desks, file cabinets, *etc.* With respect to these business offices, the Uniform Relocation Act (URA) applies to the utility the same as it applies to any other business entity. *Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority v. Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co.*, 464 U.S. 30, 35 (1983).

Unlike most other business entities, however, the utility has a second type of property—facilities for the transmission of telephone service, electric power, natural gas, *etc.*, to the consumer. Perhaps the most familiar example is the ubiquitous telephone pole. With respect to these “utility facilities,” the situation is more complicated. There is a common-law rule and several statutory exceptions, all of which exist side-by-side.

##### a. The Common Law

When a utility wishes to place transmission facilities on public property, it must first obtain permission to do so in the form of a grant of an appropriate right-of-way. A right-of-way may be in various forms, such as a license, a franchise, or an easement. The traditional form of right-of-way for utility lines has been a franchise, a form of special privilege which is more than a mere license but less than an easement. *E.g., Artesian Water Co. v. Delaware Department of Highways & Transportation*, 330 A.2d 432, 440 (Del. Super. Ct. 1974), *modified and aff'd*, 330 A.2d 441 (Del. 1974).

Under the common-law approach, the governmental entity which grants a special privilege can take it away when some paramount public need so requires. A utility receiving a franchise does so with this understanding. “[W]hen [the utility] located its pipes it was at the risk that they might be, at some future time, disturbed, when the state might require for a necessary public use that changes in location be made.” *New Orleans Gas Light Co. v. Drainage Commission*, 197 U.S. 453, 461 (1905). Permission to locate utility facilities on public property “does not create an irrevocable right to have such . . . facilities remain forever in the same place.” *Tennessee v. United States*, 256 F.2d 244, 258 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1958). Within this framework developed the “long-established common law principle that a utility forced to relocate from a public right-of-way must do so at its own

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expense.” *Norfolk Redevelopment & Housing Authority v. Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co.*, 464 U.S. 30, 34 (1983) (citing and following *New Orleans Gas Light Co.*). For more recent judicial decisions applying this rule, see *Northern States Power Co. v. Federal Transit Administration*, 358 F.3d 1050, 1053 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004); *AT&T Corp. v. Lucas County*, 381 F. Supp. 2d 714, 717 (N.D. Ohio 2005).

The earliest GAO decision applying this rule appears to be 10 Comp. Gen. 331 (1931). Underground construction of various distribution lines from the Capitol power plant to congressional office buildings necessitated the relocation of utility lines in the District of Columbia. The Comptroller General advised the Architect of the Capitol that relocation costs could not be charged to the construction appropriation, stating:

“Rights of way or franchises granted by municipalities or by State or Federal authorities to public utility corporations, in public streets, etc., to operate their business are usually coupled with reservations that the public utility company will, upon demand of the granting authority, vacate the streets, etc., or relocate or divert its conduits, lines, etc., to meet the needs of the granting authority as they arise.”

[10 Comp. Gen. at 331.](#)

Another early decision, [A-38299, Sept. 8, 1931](#), quoted in [44 Comp. Gen. 59, 60–61](#) (1964), stated the rule as follows:

“The placing of [utility] lines on public lands must be understood as subject to the paramount needs of the United States, and when their removal becomes necessary because of interference therewith the expenses of such removal may not be charged to the United States in the absence of specific statutory authority to that effect.”

[A-38299, at 2.](#)

A later decision advised the Architect of the Capitol that there was no authority to reimburse the local electric company for relocation costs incident to construction of a Library of Congress building. [51 Comp. Gen. 167](#) (1971). The Comptroller General discussed the rule in some detail in [18 Comp. Gen. 806](#) (1939), a case involving the relocation of telephone lines incident to the construction of a highway on government-owned land.

The relocation of utility lines is the exercise by the United States of its inherent regulatory authority over its property. The United States has the same “police power” over federal land that the states have over state land. The legitimate exercise of a police power, at least in this context, is not a taking of a property interest for purposes of the constitutional requirement of just compensation. Thus, as long as the relocation is required for a valid public purpose, the utility must bear the cost. The decision treated the distinction between a franchise and a license as essentially immaterial. 18 Comp. Gen. at 807.

While reaffirming the general rule stated in the foregoing decisions, GAO more recently distinguished those decisions in holding that appropriated funds were available to pay certain relocation costs. [B-300538, Mar. 24, 2003](#). In this case, the Architect of the Capitol required the Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) to relocate some of its facilities from one part of the Capitol grounds to another in order to accommodate construction of the Capitol Visitor Center. PEPCO sought payment from the Architect for its relocation costs and a related fee. The utility facilities in question were not part of PEPCO’s overall infrastructure for its customer base, but existed only to serve the needs of the federal government at the Capitol. GAO viewed this as a crucial difference from the cases applying the common-law rule to preclude reimbursement where the relocated facilities are part of a utility’s general operating network. In the PEPCO situation, GAO reasoned, the sole purpose of the relocation was to better serve the needs of the federal government:

“[W]e believe there is a distinction between the federal government’s role as the sovereign granting access to the utility company to federal lands and the federal government’s role as a consumer of utility services. We view utility relocation costs, when the utility facilities are present to serve the federal government alone and not as part of the utility company’s general operating network, as a necessary expense of the project requiring the relocation of the utility facilities. Therefore, we do not object to the use of appropriations to pay the costs of utility relocations requested by the government for the benefit of the government in its role as customer.”

*Id.* at 5. The PEPCO decision thus represents a limited exception to the common-law rule arising from the unique facts in that case. Keeping it in

mind, we now return to the great majority of the decisions applying the common-law rule.

If, under the common-law rule, the government can not pay for relocating utility lines, how about relocating or altering the government facility? As you may have guessed, there is a decision on that, too. If an agency's appropriations are not available to pay a utility's relocation costs in a particular situation, they are equally unavailable for relocating or altering the government facility as an alternative. [B-33911, May 5, 1943](#). This point is little more than the application of common sense. The decision also points out that, for purposes of the rule, it makes no difference whether the government facility was in existence when the license or permit was originally granted, or was subsequently erected.

The common-law rule has been applied with respect to all types of public lands: land in a national park, [A-36464, July 22, 1931](#); land in a national forest, [A-38299, Sept. 8, 1931](#); land acquired by a federal agency for a specific project, [18 Comp. Gen. 806](#); and unreserved public land, [B-11161, Aug. 21, 1940](#). However, in [19 Comp. Gen. 608 \(1939\)](#), it was found inapplicable to certain Indian lands. The land in question was Pueblo land in New Mexico, title to which, unlike the more typical reservation, was held communally by the Indians. GAO found that the lands were not "public lands" as that term had been judicially defined. [19 Comp. Gen. at 611, citing, e.g., Lane v. Pueblo of Santa Rosa, 249 U.S. 110, 113 \(1919\)](#). Therefore, the United States did not have a right paramount to that of the utility, and project appropriations were available to pay utility relocation costs.

A few not very recent decisions considered licenses granted by the then Federal Power Commission (FPC) under the Federal Power Act of 1920, as amended, 16 U.S.C. §§ 791a–823d. Generally, the common-law rule regarding utility relocation expenses applies. The fact that the FPC charged the licensee a fee under the statute was not material. [B-33911, May 5, 1943](#); [A-44362, Dec. 1, 1932](#). In a 1955 case, however, the FPC determined that, under the terms and conditions of the specific license involved, the licensee was not obligated to bear the relocation expenses, and reimbursement was permitted under a "necessary expense" rationale. [B-122171, Apr. 5, 1955](#).

For purposes of determining whether an agency can pay utility relocation costs, the difference between a franchise and a license is largely immaterial. This is not true with respect to an easement, however, which,



unlike a license or a franchise, is generally viewed as creating a compensable interest in land.<sup>76</sup> *E.g.*, *Artesian Water Co.*, 330 A.2d at 440. In [36 Comp. Gen. 23 \(1956\)](#), GAO recognized the distinction and held that the United States could participate in utility relocation costs where the utility had been granted an easement under 43 U.S.C. § 961 over a specific location where there had been no preexisting government facility. Of course, the government can always condemn the easement. *See* [B-13574, Dec. 2, 1940](#). *See also* [42 Comp. Gen. 177 \(1962\)](#) (relocation costs denied because the terms of a special use permit granted by the National Park Service were regarded as prevailing over an easement which had been granted to a utility by the party from whom the government acquired the property).

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), Pub. L. No. 94-579, 90 Stat. 2743 (Oct. 21, 1976), has its own right-of-way provisions, found at 43 U.S.C. §§ 1761–1771. With certain exceptions, they apply generally to land and interests in land owned by the United States and administered by the Interior Department’s Bureau of Land Management, and to land within the National Forest System under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of Agriculture. 43 U.S.C. §§ 1702(e), 1761(a). Along with the enactment of these provisions, the FLPMA repealed a number of pre-existing right-of-way statutes, including 43 U.S.C. § 961, insofar as they apply to lands covered by the FLPMA. Pub. L. No. 94-579, § 706(a). The FLPMA defines right-of-way as including “an easement, lease, permit, or license” (43 U.S.C. § 1702(f)), a definition consistent with the consolidation of provisions addressing these various forms of right-of-way. Accordingly, cases like [36 Comp. Gen. 23](#), apart from the fact that they continue to apply to non-FLPMA lands, would appear to remain valid under FLPMA. In any event, the essence of [36 Comp. Gen. 23](#) is the nature of the utility’s property interest and not the statute under which it was granted.

A key factor in establishing the government’s liability in [36 Comp. Gen. 23](#) was that the easement was for a specific location. The significance of this can be illustrated by a case involving the reverse situation—relocation of power lines owned by the government. The Bonneville Power Administration had acquired by condemnation an easement for power lines on land owned by a railway company. Expansion of the railway

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<sup>76</sup> An interest in land greater than an easement is of course also compensable. For a case distinguishing between a leasehold interest (compensable) and a license (noncompensable), see *Potomac Electric Power Co. v. Fugate*, 180 S.E.2d 657 (Va. 1971).



necessitated relocation of the power lines, and the question was whether Bonneville or the railway should pay for the relocation. The government's easement was a general easement to maintain the lines, not tied in to any specific location, and unconditional acquiescence by the railway could not be established. In these circumstances, the government—analogue to the public utility in the more typical case—had to bear the expense. *United States v. Oregon Electric Railway Co.*, 195 F. Supp. 182 (D. Or. 1961).

b. Statutory Exceptions

(1) Uniform Relocation Act

The original enactment of the Uniform Relocation Act (URA) in 1970 did not address public utilities, and the Supreme Court held that, with respect to “utility facilities” as opposed to normal business offices, they were not covered. In *Norfolk Redevelopment & Housing Authority v. Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co.*, 464 U.S. 30 (1983), the Court held that a public utility forced to relocate telephone transmission facilities as a result of a federally funded urban renewal project was not a “displaced person” under the URA. Applying the principle that a statute should not be construed to repeal or displace the common law unless the intent to do so is expressed in clear and explicit language, the Court said:

“Our analysis of the statute and its legislative history convinces us that in passing the Relocation Act Congress addressed the needs of residential and business tenants and owners, and did not deal with the separate problem posed by the relocation of utility service lines. We hold, therefore, that the Relocation Act did not change the long-established common law principle that a utility forced to relocate from a public right-of-way must do so at its own expense; it is not a ‘displaced person’ as that term is defined in the Act.”

*Norfolk Redevelopment*, 464 U.S. at 34. See also *Consumers Power Co. v. Costle*, 615 F.2d 1147 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1980).

The 1987 amendments to the URA added a provision, 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d), to authorize limited relocation assistance to public utilities forced to relocate their facilities incident to a program or project undertaken by a displacing agency, as long as the program or project is not one whose purpose is to relocate or reconstruct the facility. The facility to be displaced may be publicly, privately, or cooperatively owned, but must be located on public property or property over which a state or local government has an easement or right-of-way, and must be operating under a franchise or

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similar agreement (or state statute which serves the same purpose). The authorized payment is limited to the amount of “extraordinary costs” incurred by the utility in connection with the relocation, “less any increase in the value of the new utility facility above the value of the old utility facility and less any salvage value derived from the old utility facility.” 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d)(1). Extraordinary costs are nonroutine relocation expenses of the type that the owner “ordinarily does not include in its annual budget as an expense of operation.” 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d)(2)(A).

There is an important difference between 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d) and the other benefit provisions of the URA: while the other provisions are cast in mandatory language, section 4622(d) is discretionary—the displacing agency “may” make the relocation payments. In preparing the uniform implementing regulations for this provision (now found at 49 C.F.R. § 24.306), the Department of Transportation was urged—probably by the utilities—to make the benefits of section 4622(d) mandatory. It expressly refused to do so, stating that “[i]t would not be appropriate to make mandatory by regulation that which was left clearly permissive by statute.” Department of Transportation, *Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Regulations for Federal and Federally Assisted Programs*, 54 Fed. Reg. 8912, 8923 (Mar. 2, 1989) (Supplementary Information).

The regulations direct agencies that choose to make payment under section 4622(d) to reach a prior agreement with the utility owner on the nature of the relocation work to be done, the allocation of responsibilities, and the method of determining costs and making payment. 49 C.F.R. § 24.306(c). For guidance in reaching agreement, agencies should follow the utility relocation regulations of the Federal Highway Administration, 23 C.F.R. part 645, subpart A. See 49 C.F.R. app. A to part 24 at § 24.306.

The conference report on the 1987 amendments emphasized that the new section 4622(d) should “not be construed to supersede 23 U.S.C. 123 or any other Federal law.” H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 100-27, at 251 (1987).

(2) 23 U.S.C. § 123

Highway construction is one of the most common causes of utility displacement. Under 23 U.S.C. § 123, originally enacted in 1958, states may be reimbursed for utility relocation expenses paid in connection with federally aided highway construction, if those payments are authorized under state law. Reimbursement is to be in the same proportion as other

project costs. The availability of 23 U.S.C. § 123 to a given state depends on the extent to which that state follows or has departed from the common-law rule.

The statute is not self-executing and does not itself create an obligation to reimburse. A state's right to reimbursement depends on project approval by the Federal Highway Administration in accordance with 23 U.S.C. § 106 and applicable regulations. Approval creates a contractual obligation. *Arizona v. United States*, 494 F.2d 1285 (Ct. Cl. 1974).

In determining the cost of relocation for purposes of section 123, any increase in the value of the new facility and any salvage value derived from the old facility must be deducted. 23 U.S.C. § 123(c). (As noted above, the discretionary authority of 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d) incorporates this concept.) Cost determinations under section 123 must be made on the basis of a specific project. Statewide determinations do not satisfy the statute. [B-149833, Jan. 2, 1964](#); [B-149833-O.M., June 24, 1963](#); [B-149833-O.M., Nov. 9, 1962](#).

The purpose of reimbursement under 23 U.S.C. § 123 is to make the utility whole, not to confer a profit. Thus, where a parent corporation owned two subsidiaries, one of which earned a profit for the parent on purchases from it by the other, GAO concluded that the "intercompany profit" should not be a reimbursable item of cost under section 123. However, reimbursement would be permissible if it could adequately be shown that the sales for relocation purposes displaced a substantially equivalent amount of regular sales which would otherwise have been made. [B-154937, Dec. 16, 1964](#), modified by [B-154937, May 25, 1965](#).<sup>77</sup>

### (3) Other statutory provisions

Several other statutes scattered throughout the United States Code address utility relocation in various specific contexts, some of which are quite narrow in scope. Others may exist in addition to those noted below. These statutes, as with 23 U.S.C. § 123, were unaffected by the 1987 enactment of 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d).

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<sup>77</sup> These decisions concerned the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and its subsidiaries prior to the divestiture of the 1980s. While the decisions may no longer have direct application to "Mother Bell" and her family, the underlying concepts would appear to remain nonetheless valid.

One example is section 2 of the Flood Control Act of 1938, as amended, 33 U.S.C. § 701c-1. This statute authorizes the Secretary of the Army to acquire, and to reimburse states and municipalities for the acquisition of, lands, easements, and rights-of-way, expressly including “utility relocation,” deemed necessary in connection with authorized flood control projects. The statute has been construed as authorizing the Army to pay utility relocation expenses wholly independent of any right-of-way acquisition. [B-134242, Dec. 24, 1957.](#)

Another example is section 14 of the Reclamation Project Act of 1939, 43 U.S.C. § 389, which provides comparable authority to the Secretary of the Interior “in connection with the construction or operation and maintenance of any project.” The measure of compensation for utility relocation is the replacement cost of the facility less an allowance for depreciation of the old facility. *See* [B-125045-O.M., Sept. 21, 1959.](#)

Still another is 16 U.S.C. § 580b, enacted in 1949, under which the Forest Service may use its appropriations to correct inductive interference on Forest Service telephone lines caused by transmission lines constructed by organizations financed by Rural Electrification Administration loans. GAO had previously advised that statutory authority was generally necessary to overcome the common-law prohibition in this context. [B-33911, May 5, 1943;](#)<sup>78</sup> [B-33911, B-62187, July 15, 1948.](#) *See also* [B-62187, Dec. 3, 1946](#) (exception recognized where the work “was prompted by reasons of expediency wholly unconnected with the prevention or correction of inductive interference from electric power transmission lines”).

Finally, whenever construction of a project administered through the International Boundary and Water Commission (United States and Mexico) necessitates the alteration or relocation of structures or other property “belonging to any municipal or private corporation, company, association, or individual,” the Secretary of State may pick up the tab. 22 U.S.C. § 277e. This provision has been held sufficient to overcome the common-law prohibition. [B-129757, Nov. 29, 1956;](#) [B-5441, Aug. 29, 1939.](#) Conspicuously absent from the statutory listing of owners are “states.” Therefore, the statute does not encompass agreements with the state of Texas comparable

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<sup>78</sup> This decision dealt with both revocable licenses and easements. With respect to licenses, the application of the common-law rule and the concomitant need for statutory authority are still valid. As to easements, however, the decision relied on [20 Comp. Gen. 379 \(1941\)](#), which was effectively, although not explicitly, modified in this respect by [36 Comp. Gen. 23 \(1956\)](#), discussed earlier in section C.4.a of this chapter.

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to the types of agreements authorized under statutes such as 33 U.S.C. § 701c-1 or 43 U.S.C. § 389. [B-76531, Sept. 13, 1948.](#)

In sum, when considering whether a federal agency may use its appropriated funds to pay all or part of the costs of utility relocation, the first question to ask is whether the situation is covered by some specific relocation statute such as 23 U.S.C. § 123 or one of those noted directly above. If so, then the authorities and limitations of that specific statute, and any regulations under it, will govern. If not, the next thing to consider is the availability of the discretionary authority of the Uniform Relocation Act, 42 U.S.C. § 4622(d). If that authority is not available or if the displacing agency declines to exercise its discretion in favor of the utility, the matter is governed by the common-law principles discussed.

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## D. Jurisdiction over Federal Land: The Federal Enclave

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### 1. Acquisition of Federal Jurisdiction

Almost all federally owned land is within the boundaries of one of the 50 states. This leads logically to the question: who controls what? When we talk about jurisdiction over federal land, we are talking about the federal-state relationship. The first point is that, whether the United States has acquired real property voluntarily (purchase, donation) or involuntarily (condemnation), the mere fact of federal ownership does not withdraw the land from the jurisdiction of the state in which it is located. *E.g., Silas Mason Co. v. Tax Commission*, 302 U.S. 186, 197 (1937); *Coso Energy Developers v. County of Inyo*, 19 Cal. Rptr. 3d 669 (2004), and cases cited. Acquisition of land and acquisition of federal jurisdiction over that land are two different things.

Federal jurisdiction can range from “exclusive jurisdiction” at one extreme, in which the federal government displaces the state as the governing authority, to “proprietary jurisdiction” at the other extreme, in which the United States has basically the same authority as it does with respect to other nonfederal land in that state and the property “is subject to the legislative authority and control of the States equally with the property of private individuals.” *Fort Leavenworth Railroad Co. v. Lowe*, 114 U.S. 525, 531 (1885). Thus, “where the United States is the [proprietary] owner

of land within a state and does not have exclusive jurisdiction over the land, the state may generally tax private possessory interests in, or private property situated on, such land.” *Coso*, 19 Cal. Rptr. 3d at 674. In between exclusive and proprietorial interests, as one study has reported, federal control “can and does vary to an almost infinite number of degrees.”<sup>79</sup> During the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the United States obtained exclusive federal jurisdiction over most of the land it acquired.<sup>80</sup>

There are two ways in which the United States can acquire exclusive federal jurisdiction: consent and cession.<sup>81</sup> The first method, consent, is provided for by article I, section 8, clause 17 of the Constitution, the so-called Jurisdiction Clause, which states that the Congress shall have power—

“to exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over [the District of Columbia], . . . and to exercise like Authority over all Places purchased by the consent of the Legislature of the State in which the Same shall be, for the Erection of Forts, Magazines, Arsenals, dock-Yards, and other needful Buildings.”

The term “exclusive legislation” means “exclusive jurisdiction.” *James v. Dravo Contracting Co.*, 302 U.S. 134, 141 (1937); *Surplus Trading Co. v. Cook*, 281 U.S. 647, 652 (1930). Or, perhaps more clearly, “exclusive jurisdiction to legislate.” The term “other needful buildings” includes “whatever structures are found to be necessary in the performance of the functions of the federal government.” *Silas Mason*, 302 U.S. at 203; *Dravo*, 302 U.S. at 143. Legislative consent to the purchase may be given before, at the time of, or after the purchase. 13 Op. Att’y Gen. 411 (1871). Consent may be in the form of a general consent statute or consent to a particular acquisition. *United States v. State Tax Commission of Mississippi*,

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<sup>79</sup> Report of the Interdepartmental Committee for the Study of Jurisdiction Over Federal Areas Within the States, *Jurisdiction Over Federal Areas Within the States*, part I (1956), at 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Id.* at 8–10.

<sup>81</sup> There is a third method, but it is unlikely to be used with any frequency in the future. Congress can reserve federal jurisdiction over federal land within a state at the time the state is admitted to the Union. *Fort Leavenworth*, 114 U.S. at 526–27; *State v. Galvan-Cardenas*, 799 P.2d 19, 21 (Ariz. Ct. App. 1990); *Coso*, 19 Cal. Rptr. 3d at 674.

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412 U.S. 363, 372 n.15 (1973). The Jurisdiction Clause has not been strictly construed, and Justice Frankfurter once commented that its “course of construction . . . cannot be said to have run smooth.” *Offutt Housing Co. v. County of Sarpy*, 351 U.S. 253, 256 (1956).

The second method, cession, is also accomplished by an enactment of the state legislature and was recognized by the Supreme Court over a century ago in the leading case of *Fort Leavenworth*, 114 U.S. 525. Some years later, the Court emphasized that the Jurisdiction Clause “is not the sole authority for the acquisition of jurisdiction. There is no question about the power of the United States to exercise jurisdiction secured by cession, though this is not provided for by clause 17.” *Collins v. Yosemite Park & Curry Co.*, 304 U.S. 518, 529 (1938). For similar statements, see *Kleppe v. New Mexico*, 426 U.S. 529, 542 (1976); *Paul v. United States*, 371 U.S. 245, 264 (1963); and *United States v. Gliatta*, 580 F.2d 156, 158 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 439 U.S. 1048 (1978).

Apart from procedural distinctions, the differences between consent and cession are slight, and there appears to be little practical difference resulting from which method is used. At one time, cession was viewed as useful primarily in cases where the Jurisdiction Clause was thought inapplicable, for example, acquisition by condemnation. See generally *Fort Leavenworth*, 114 U.S. 525. In more recent cases, however, the Supreme Court has said that “purchase” for purposes of the Jurisdiction Clause includes condemnation. *State Tax Commission of Mississippi*, 412 U.S. at 372 n.14. The Court has also held that donation is a purchase for purposes of the Jurisdiction Clause. *Humble Pipe Line Co. v. Waggonner*, 376 U.S. 369, 371–73 (1964). Thus, no practical distinction seems to flow from the method of acquisition of the land or the timing of the state’s “consent.”

The applicability or nonapplicability of the Jurisdiction Clause is still relevant in determining which method must be used in some situations. For example, the clause comes into play only where the land is being acquired for one of the purposes specified in the Jurisdiction Clause. Thus, the Jurisdiction Clause would generally not apply to land acquired for a national park, and cession would therefore be the only method of acquiring federal jurisdiction. In another leading case, *Collins*, 304 U.S. 518, the Supreme Court established that jurisdiction by cession is not limited to the purposes specified in the Jurisdiction Clause. Thus, the United States can acquire the same jurisdiction over, say, a national park by cession that it could acquire over a military installation by a Jurisdiction Clause consent.

Another area in which distinctions once thought important have become blurred is the extent to which a state may qualify its consent or cession. Even in the early days, “exclusive jurisdiction” was rarely absolute. For example, the states, with the express approval of the Supreme Court, typically reserved the power to serve civil and criminal process. This was necessary in order to avoid having federal land become a sanctuary for fugitives, and does not diminish the exclusiveness. *Fort Leavenworth*, 114 U.S. at 533. See also *Cornman v. Dawson*, 295 F. Supp. 654, 657 n.5 (D. Md. 1969), *aff’d*, 398 U.S. 419 (1970); 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 155, 156 (1938); 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 341, 347–48 (1935).<sup>82</sup> However, for several decades, it was thought that a state’s power to qualify its consent was broader under a cession than under a Jurisdiction Clause consent. By the exercise of simple logic, the Supreme Court laid this thought to rest in still another leading case, *Dravo*, 302 U.S. 134. There was no question that a state could refuse consent at the time of acquisition, and then later cede jurisdiction subject to qualifications. Why then, reasoned the Court, couldn’t the state consent to the acquisition with the same qualifications in the first place? *Dravo*, 302 U.S. at 147–49.

It has become settled since *Dravo* that a state can qualify either a Jurisdiction Clause consent or a cession, as long as the qualifications are not inconsistent with federal law or federal use. The theory is clearly stated in *Collins*, 304 U.S. at 528 (footnotes omitted):

“The States of the Union and the National Government may make mutually satisfactory arrangements as to jurisdiction of territory within their borders and thus in a most effective way, cooperatively adjust problems flowing from our dual system of government. Jurisdiction obtained by consent or cession may be qualified by agreement or through offer and acceptance or ratification. It is a matter of arrangement. These arrangements the courts will recognize and respect.”

Thus, acquisition of federal jurisdiction is not an “all or nothing” proposition. It has become commonplace to define federal jurisdiction in terms of four general kinds of federal jurisdiction over federal lands: “exclusive legislative jurisdiction, concurrent legislative jurisdiction,

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<sup>82</sup> Examples of the operation of this principle at the state level include *State v. Lane*, 771 P.2d 1150, 1153 (Wash. 1989), and *People v. Dowdell*, 440 N.Y.S.2d 528, 529 (Onondaga Cty. Ct. 1981).



partial legislative jurisdiction and proprietary legislative jurisdiction.” *State ex rel. Cox v. Hibbard*, 570 P.2d 1190, 1192 (Or. Ct. App. 1977). *See also Cornman*, 295 F. Supp. at 656 n.4. The terms “concurrent” and “partial” in this context are self-explanatory and mean exactly what they imply.<sup>83</sup>

To summarize what we have said so far:

- The United States can acquire exclusive federal jurisdiction over land either by consent of the state legislature under the Jurisdiction Clause, or by cession from the state. Both methods get you essentially to the same place.
- Whichever method is used, the state may retain partial or concurrent jurisdiction as long as the powers retained are not inconsistent with federal law or use.

As noted earlier, the state consent we have been talking about relates to jurisdiction rather than the acquisition itself. For many years prior to 1940, there was also a statutory requirement for consent of the state legislature when land was acquired by the United States for certain purposes. This provision was eliminated in 1940 and replaced by 40 U.S.C. § 3112,<sup>84</sup> which says several important things:

- The obtaining of exclusive jurisdiction is not required.
- If the United States obtains exclusive or partial jurisdiction by consent or cession, there must be a formal acceptance by the United States, either by filing a notice of acceptance with the state governor or as otherwise provided under state law.
- If the United States has not formally accepted jurisdiction as prescribed, it is “conclusively presumed” that the jurisdiction does not exist.

Although the statute mentions only exclusive and partial jurisdiction, it applies to concurrent jurisdiction as well. *Adams v. United States*,

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<sup>83</sup> *Jurisdiction Over Federal Areas Within the States*, at 14, *supra* note 79.

<sup>84</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 255.

319 U.S. 312 (1943). As *Adams* also established, the statute means exactly what it says—formal acceptance of federal jurisdiction as prescribed in 40 U.S.C. § 3112 is a legal prerequisite to the exercise of that jurisdiction. See also *Hankins v. Delo*, 977 F.2d 396 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992); *DeKalb County v. Henry C. Beck Co.*, 382 F.2d 992 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1967).

A state may not unilaterally revoke its consent once it has been given and accepted. *North Dakota v. United States*, 460 U.S. 300, 313 n.16 (1983), citing *United States v. Unzeuta*, 281 U.S. 138, 142–43 (1930).

Based on the concepts discussed above, a working definition of “federal enclave” may be framed as follows: A federal enclave is an area of land owned by the United States, with respect to which the United States has obtained exclusive, partial, or concurrent jurisdiction from the state in which the land is located, either by consent under the Jurisdiction Clause or by cession.<sup>85</sup>

Regardless of the existence or type of federal jurisdiction, some state law may apply in a federal enclave even without either a specific reservation or a federal statute making it applicable. The Supreme Court has recognized that every area within the United States should have a developed legal system. Thus, state law protecting private rights which is in existence at the time of the consent or cession remains applicable in the enclave as long as it does not interfere with the federal use and is not inconsistent with federal law, unless and until Congress acts to make it inapplicable. This principle is called “assimilation.” The opposite is true for state laws enacted after the consent or cession: they do not apply in the enclave unless Congress acts to make them applicable. *James Stewart & Co. v. Sadrakula*, 309 U.S. 94 (1940).<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Some judicial definitions limit the term to exclusive jurisdiction. *E.g.*, *Cooper v. General Dynamics*, 378 F. Supp. 1258, 1261 (N.D. Tex. 1974), *rev'd on other grounds*, 533 F.2d 163 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1976), *cert. denied*, 433 U.S. 908 (1977); *Thiele v. City of Chicago*, 145 N.E.2d 637, 638 (Ill.), *cert. denied*, 355 U.S. 957 (1958). However, the Supreme Court has used the term in the broader sense. *E.g.*, *North Dakota v. United States*, 495 U.S. 423 (1990). In addition, the United States may obtain federal jurisdiction over leased property as well as property it owns. *Jurisdiction Over Federal Areas Within the States*, *supra* note 80, at 2.

<sup>86</sup> This assimilated state law is sometimes referred to as “federalized” state law. *E.g.*, *Board of Supervisors of Fairfax County v. United States*, 408 F. Supp. 556, 563 (E.D. Va. 1976), *appeal dismissed mem.*, 551 F.2d 305 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1977). The concept has no application to a concurrent jurisdiction enclave. *Sylvane v. Whelan*, 506 F. Supp. 1355, 1361 (E.D. N.Y. 1981).

One example involved the applicability of the Florida right-to-work law on two exclusive jurisdiction enclaves in Florida, Patrick Air Force Base (AFB) and Cape Canaveral Air Force Station (AFS). Finding that the Florida law was enacted before the transfer of sovereignty for Cape Canaveral AFS but after the transfer of sovereignty for Patrick AFB, the district court held the Florida law applicable on the former but not the latter. On appeal, the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit affirmed as to Patrick but reversed as to Canaveral, finding that the Florida law was in conflict with the National Labor Relations Act. *Lord v. Local Union No. 2088*, 481 F. Supp. 419 (M.D. Fla. 1979), *aff'd in part, rev'd in part*, 646 F.2d 1057 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981), *cert. denied*, 458 U.S. 1106 (1982). Another example is *Snow v. Bechtel Construction Inc.*, 647 F. Supp. 1514, 1521 (C.D. Cal. 1986), finding that an employee of a government contractor working on an exclusive jurisdiction enclave did not have a cause of action for wrongful termination because the state wrongful termination law “was enacted well after the land became a federal enclave.” *See also Pacific Coast Dairy, Inc. v. Department of Agriculture of California*, 318 U.S. 285, 294 (1943); *Macomber v. Bose*, 401 F.2d 545 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1968); *Economic Development & Industrial Corp. of Boston v. United States*, 546 F. Supp. 1204 (D. Mass. 1982), *rev'd on other grounds*, 720 F.2d 1 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1983); *Vincent v. General Dynamics Corp.*, 427 F. Supp. 786, 794–95 (N.D. Tex. 1977).

Sometimes the United States does not acquire all land within the exterior boundaries of a project because it is not needed. When this happens, there may be privately owned tracts within and surrounded by federal land, in what may be termed a “checkerboard” pattern. By analogy from cases dealing with federal land, the courts have held that the United States can acquire by cession the same types of exclusive, partial, or concurrent jurisdiction over these privately owned tracts. *E.g.*, *Macomber*, 401 F.2d 545; *Petersen v. United States*, 191 F.2d 154 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 342 U.S. 885 (1951); *United States v. 319.88 Acres of Land*, 498 F. Supp. 763 (D. Nev. 1980).

As a general proposition, if the United States disposes of enclave property, legislative jurisdiction reverts to the state (also called “re-vesting” or “retrocession”), although the situation can become complicated by the nature of the particular transaction. *See S.R.A., Inc. v. Minnesota*, 327 U.S. 558 (1946) (retention by United States of legal title as security interest does not prevent reverter); *Humble Pipe Line Co.*, 376 U.S. 369 (lease by United States to commercial interests not sufficient to produce reverter); *United States v. Goings*, 504 F.2d 809 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1974) (retention by United States of

right of emergency use does not prevent reverter). The military departments have specific statutory authority to “retrocede” federal legislative jurisdiction, in whole or in part, to the state, if considered desirable. 10 U.S.C. § 2683.

One of the conditions a state may attach to its consent or cession is that legislative jurisdiction (title too, if the land was donated) revert to the state if the property ceases to be used for the purpose for which jurisdiction was ceded. Illustrative cases are *United States v. Johnson*, 994 F.2d 980 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir.), *cert denied*, 510 U.S. 959 (1993); and *Economic Development and Industrial Corp. of Boston v. United States*, 13 Cl. Ct. 590 (1987). Absent such reservation or condition, federal jurisdiction is not diminished by the fact that a portion of the land is put to some use different from that for which it was acquired. *Benson v. United States*, 146 U.S. 325, 331 (1892); *Baltimore Gas & Electric Co. v. United States*, 133 F. Supp. 2d 721 (D. Md. 2001); *United States v. Fallbrook Public Utility District*, 108 F. Supp. 72, 85 (S.D. Cal. 1952).

Totally apart from the question of reservation of state powers, it is fair to say that exclusive federal jurisdiction is not nearly as exclusive as it used to be. Congress has enacted a number of statutes, which may be characterized as “partial retrocessions,” which have the effect of returning portions of jurisdiction to the states or incorporating state law in particular subject areas. Two of the more important ones, the Buck Act and the Assimilative Crimes Act, will be discussed in section D.2 of this chapter. Some others are:

- In cases of wrongful death on federal enclaves, the right of action provided by state law exists as if the enclave were under state jurisdiction. 16 U.S.C. § 457. This includes changes in applicable state law as they may occur from time to time. *E.g.*, *Ferebee v. Chevron Chemical Co.*, 736 F.2d 1529 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 1062 (1984); *Vasina v. Grumman Corp.*, 644 F.2d 112 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1981); *Adams v. Alliant Techsystems, Inc.*, 218 F. Supp. 2d 792 (W.D. Va. 2002). Of course, this statute does not affect the operation of the Federal Tort Claims Act in cases where it is applicable. *E.g.*, *Morgan v. United States*, 709 F.2d 580, 582 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983).
- State unemployment compensation laws apply on federal enclaves. 26 U.S.C. § 3305(d).

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- State workers' compensation laws apply on federal enclaves. 40 U.S.C. § 3172.<sup>87</sup> The statute merely makes state law applicable to private employers on federal land; it does not create any federal liability. *Peak v. Small Business Administration*, 660 F.2d 375, 376 n.1 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981). The constitutionality of 40 U.S.C. § 3172 was upheld in *Wallach v. Lieberman*, 366 F.2d 254 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1966).<sup>88</sup> Section 3172 applies equally to federal facilities that are not enclaves. *Goodyear Atomic Corp. v. Miller*, 486 U.S. 174, 182 n.4 (1988).

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## 2. Specific Areas of Concern

### a. Taxation

As a general proposition, a state cannot tax private property in a federal enclave unless it has reserved the power to do so at the time of consent or cession. *Humble Pipe Line v. Wagoner*, 376 U.S. 369 (1964); *Collins v. Yosemite Park & Curry Co.*, 304 U.S. 518 (1938); *James v. Dravo Contracting Co.*, 302 U.S. 134 (1937); *Surplus Trading Co. v. Cook*, 281 U.S. 647 (1930); *Fort Leavenworth Railroad Co. v. Lowe*, 114 U.S. 525 (1885).

Congress has modified this rule somewhat by statute. Under the Buck Act of 1940, currently codified at 4 U.S.C. §§ 105–110, states may levy sales, use, and income taxes within federal enclaves. The Buck Act has generated its share of litigation. One type of question that has arisen is whether various forms of state and local taxation are sales, use, or income taxes for purposes of the Buck Act. *E.g.*, *United States v. State Tax Commission of Mississippi*, 412 U.S. 363, 378–79 (1973); *Howard v. Commissioners of The Sinking Fund*, 344 U.S. 624 (1953). *See also* [30 Comp. Gen. 28 \(1950\)](#) (permit fee charged by city for construction on exclusive jurisdiction enclave not a “tax” within scope of state’s reservation of jurisdiction in deed of cession). One court has held a local occupation tax to be an “income tax” for Buck Act purposes. *United States v. Lewisburg Area School District*, 398 F. Supp. 948 (M.D. Pa. 1975).

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<sup>87</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 290.

<sup>88</sup> It would appear that the question was not especially close, as the district judge, referred to the case as “worthless litigation.” *Wallach v. Lieberman*, 219 F. Supp. 247, 249 (S.D. N.Y. 1963).

The Buck Act permits sales, use, and income taxes, but not property taxes. Thus, in B-159835, Feb. 2, 1976, the Comptroller General advised that a county in Utah had no power to impose an *ad valorem* tax on private property within the United States Defense Depot, a federal enclave in Ogden, Utah, where there had been no reservation of taxing power at the time of cession.

Another statute, 4 U.S.C. § 104, authorizes the imposition of state motor fuel taxes on fuel sold on “United States military or other reservations” if the fuel is not for the exclusive use of the United States. This includes national parks. 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 522 (1936). The purpose of this statute was to enhance highway improvement by increasing state revenues which could be used as matching funds under the federal-aid highway program. *Minnesota v. Keeley*, 126 F.2d 863, 864 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1942); *Sanders v. Oklahoma Tax Commission*, 169 P.2d 748, 750–51 (Okla.), *cert. denied*, 329 U.S. 780 (1946).

Still another statute, 10 U.S.C. § 2667(f), permits state and local taxation of the interests of lessees of property leased by a military department under the authority of 10 U.S.C. § 2667.

The preceding paragraphs address the power of a state to reach into a federal enclave to tax private property, private instrumentalities, or the income of federal employees. Neither the concept of reservation of powers nor the Buck Act affects the immunity of the United States from state and local taxation, covered in Chapter 4, section C.15. In fact, the Buck Act expressly preserves the immunity of the United States. 4 U.S.C. § 107. A case applying section 107 is *United States v. Tax Commission*, 421 U.S. 599 (1975).

## b. Criminal Law

The punishment of crimes committed on federal enclaves has been a subject of congressional attention since the First Congress.<sup>89</sup> At the present time, the criminal law structure for federal enclaves consists of several specific statutes and one general one.

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<sup>89</sup> As a bit of historical trivia, murder on federal enclaves was made a federal crime as early as 1790 by the Act of April 30, 1790, ch. IX, §§ 3–4, 1 Stat. 112, 113. Punishment was death, and if that wasn’t enough, the court could order that the body of the offender, presumably already executed, “be delivered to a surgeon for dissection.” Sort of “death plus.”

Congress has enacted a number of criminal statutes, found in title 18 of the United States Code, dealing with criminal offenses on federal enclaves. *See, e.g.*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 81, 113, 114, 661, 662, 1111–1113. These are generally the “major” crimes such as murder, rape, arson, *etc.* About a dozen are listed in *United States v. Sharpnack*, 355 U.S. 286, 289 n.5 (1958). The statutes use the phrase “special maritime and territorial jurisdiction of the United States,” which, as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 7, would include federal enclaves. These specific statutes naturally take precedence over state law.

Offenses not covered by one of these specific statutes are covered by the Assimilative Crimes Act, 18 U.S.C. § 13, under which offenses committed on federal enclaves which are not otherwise provided for by Congress are punishable as federal crimes if and to the extent that they are punishable by the laws of the state in which the enclave is situated. *See generally Lewis v. United States*, 523 U.S. 155 (1998); *United States v. Souza*, 392 F.3d 1050 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004); *United States v. Burruel*, No. CR 05-605 TVC DCB (D. Ariz. May 12, 2006).

The state law applicable under the Assimilative Crimes Act is the law in effect at the time of the offense, which includes laws enacted after consent or cession. The constitutionality of the Assimilative Crimes Act was upheld in the *Sharpnack* case, 355 U.S. 286.

A defendant accused of a crime on a federal enclave may be tried before a magistrate. There is no requirement that trial be before an Article III court. *United States v. Jenkins*, 734 F.2d 1322 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 1217 (1985).

Indian reservations are not federal enclaves. However, under 18 U.S.C. § 1152, the federal enclave criminal statutes apply to “Indian country” unless otherwise provided by law, and except for offenses committed by one Indian against another Indian, offenses committed within Indian country by an Indian who has been punished by the local law of the tribe, and cases where exclusive jurisdiction is secured for the tribe by treaty stipulation. The historical development of this statute is discussed in *United States v. Cowboy*, 694 F.2d 1228 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982).

### c. State Regulation

Another area of potential conflict is the extent to which a state can extend its regulatory arm into a federal enclave. Older cases tend to involve economic regulation such as licensing laws, permit requirements, price-fixing laws, *etc.* Many of the more recent cases involve environmental regulation. Depending on the interplay of certain key rules, the state

regulatory action may be invalid on all federal property, nonenclave as well as enclave, valid on both, or valid on some but not all.

State regulatory action will be invalid to the extent that it violates the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution (art. VI, clause 2), which provides that laws of the United States which are within the constitutional power of the federal government are the “supreme law of the land” and prevail over inconsistent state laws. State law can violate the Supremacy Clause by directly regulating the federal government or discriminating against it and those with whom it does business (thus violating principles of intergovernmental immunity) or by conflicting with valid enactments of Congress (thus invoking a congressional preemption analysis). *North Dakota v. United States*, 495 U.S. 423, 434 (1990). If a given action is found to violate the Supremacy Clause, it is irrelevant whether the federal land or installation in question has enclave status.

An illustration is *Leslie Miller, Inc. v. Arkansas*, 352 U.S. 187 (1956). The Air Force entered into a contract for construction work on a base which was not a federal enclave. The contractor was charged and convicted in state court for failure to obtain a license under state law. The Supreme Court reversed the conviction, finding that the state licensing law conflicted with the procuring agency’s duty under federal procurement law to determine the responsibility of bidders. Similarly, in *Paul v. United States*, 371 U.S. 245 (1963), the Court found that California price control regulations on milk conflicted with federal procurement policy in that “the federal procurement policy demands competition [while] the California policy . . . effectively eliminates competition.” *Id.* at 253. In neither case was the status of the particular federal installations a relevant factor.

Two GAO decisions involved contracts for mortuary services at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. In both cases, a disappointed bidder protested that the firm receiving the award, the low bidder, did not have a Delaware mortuary license. Based primarily on *Leslie Miller*, GAO upheld the contract awards in both cases. [B-161723, Aug. 1, 1967](#); [B-159723, Sept. 28, 1966](#). Both decisions note that Dover was an exclusive jurisdiction enclave, but this factor was not crucial to the result.

The Supreme Court distinguishes between direct and indirect regulation for purposes of intergovernmental immunity analysis under the Supremacy Clause. As the plain meaning of the term suggests, “direct regulation” involves attempts to regulate federal entities themselves. States can directly regulate federal installations and activities only pursuant to “clear



and unambiguous” congressional (statutory) authorization. *Goodyear Atomic Corp. v. Miller*, 486 U.S. 174, 180 (1988); *EPA v. California*, 426 U.S. 200, 211 (1976); *Hancock v. Train*, 426 U.S. 167, 179 (1976); [B-286951, Jan. 10, 2002](#). “Indirect regulation” is the regulation of private parties (who may be government contractors or suppliers) which has an incidental effect on the government by, for example, causing it to pay higher prices. *North Dakota*, 495 U.S. at 434–35.<sup>90</sup> Like direct regulation, indirect regulation must be neutral (nondiscriminatory) in order to survive the Supremacy Clause.<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at 435.

The validity of state regulation is also a question of congressional preemption.<sup>92</sup> *North Dakota*, 495 U.S. at 435; *Goodyear Atomic Corp.*, 486 U.S. at 180 n.1. The three major categories of preemption analyses are summarized in *English v. General Electric Co.*, 496 U.S. 72, 78–79 (1990). Preemption occurs when Congress explicitly defines the extent of preemption, when a state regulates conduct in a field that Congress intended the federal government to occupy exclusively, or when state law actually conflicts with federal law. *Id.* Federal agencies regulating within the scope of their delegated authority may also preempt state regulation. *Louisiana Public Service Commission v. FCC*, 476 U.S. 355 (1986).

Once you get by the Supremacy Clause hurdles of intergovernmental immunity and preemption—that is, once it is established that the state law or regulation does not attempt to impermissibly tax or regulate the federal government and does not conflict with valid federal law and does not attempt to impermissibly tax or regulate the federal government—the jurisdictional status of the federal property becomes relevant.<sup>93</sup> The state law or regulation will then apply to nonenclave property (there is no longer a reason why it should not), and may or may not apply to enclaves,

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<sup>90</sup> Other cases recognizing the distinction include *Hancock v. Train*, 426 U.S. 167, 179–80 (1976); *Mayo v. United States*, 319 U.S. 441, 447 (1943); *Penn Dairies, Inc. v. Milk Control Commission of Pennsylvania*, 318 U.S. 261, 270 (1943).

<sup>91</sup> The direct-indirect distinction is easier to state than it is to apply. Compare, for example, the plurality and dissenting opinions in *North Dakota* to see how two groups of four United States Supreme Court justices each can read the same cases very differently.

<sup>92</sup> For more information, see the discussion of federalism presumptions in Chapter 2, section D.7.c.

<sup>93</sup> Some courts reverse the analytical sequence and look first at the enclave issue and then invoke the Supremacy Clause if necessary. Either approach should get you to the same place.

depending on factors previously discussed such as the types of jurisdiction the state may have reserved at the time of consent or cession and whether the law was in existence when the property achieved enclave status.

For example, in *Pacific Coast Dairy, Inc. v. California Department of Agriculture*, 318 U.S. 285 (1943), the Supreme Court held that a California statute requiring the licensing of milk distributors and establishing uniform prices for the sale of milk did not apply to sales on a federal enclave because the statute was enacted after the transfer of sovereignty. But the Court, on the same day, upheld a similar Pennsylvania statute regulating milk prices because it affected a military encampment on state land rather than a federal enclave. *Penn Dairies*, 318 U.S. at 270. By the time the Court again had occasion to consider the California milk laws in *Paul*, 371 U.S. 245, the intervening enactment of the Armed Services Procurement Act of 1947 and the promulgation of implementing regulations brought the state law into direct conflict with federal procurement policy, with the result that *Paul* was primarily decided on the basis of the Supremacy Clause rather than the enclave status of the military installations.

The Supremacy Clause resolved purchases to be made from appropriated funds. However, some of the milk in *Paul* was to be purchased with nonappropriated funds (military clubs and post exchanges). Since the federal procurement statutes and regulations did not apply to nonappropriated funds, there was no conflict with respect to these purchases. Accordingly, the applicability of the state law to nonappropriated fund purchases on exclusive jurisdiction enclaves depended on whether the state law was in effect when the United States acquired jurisdiction, a result “on all fours” with *Pacific Coast*. *Paul*, 371 U.S. at 268–69.

GAO has considered problems in this area on several occasions. The questions usually arise incident to the award of federal procurement contracts. In [42 Comp. Gen. 704 \(1963\)](#), the question was whether a contract for furnishing dairy products on a federal enclave could be awarded to the low bidder who had not complied with certain aspects of the state “fair trade” law. GAO found that the state law had been enacted after the transfer of jurisdiction, and that it was in conflict with federal procurement policy. Therefore, based largely on the Supreme Court’s decisions in *Paul* and *Pacific Coast*, GAO found the contract award to be proper. Similar cases are [27 Comp. Gen. 782 \(1948\)](#) and [B-151686, July 2, 1965](#). More recently, GAO found a solicitation for a contract to privatize

utilities on a federal enclave valid in the face of an effort by a state agency to exert regulatory restrictions, a decision upheld in district court on grounds including both immunity and preemption. [B-285209, Aug. 2, 2000](#); *Baltimore Gas & Electric Co. v. United States*, 133 F. Supp. 2d 721 (D. Md. 2001).<sup>94</sup>

If none of these approaches applies—that is, you are dealing with an exclusive jurisdiction enclave and state law enacted after the acquisition of federal jurisdiction—the state law can apply only pursuant to “specific congressional action.” *Paul*, 371 U.S. at 263. *See also Black Hills Power & Light Co. v. Weinberger*, 808 F.2d 665, 668 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987), *cert. denied*, 484 U.S. 818l.

Precisely how specific the congressional authority must be is somewhat unsettled. To rephrase the question: Is a federal statute which is sufficiently specific to allow a state law to survive a Supremacy Clause challenge also sufficiently specific to permit the application of that law on an enclave or must it explicitly address enclaves? *Offutt Housing Co. v. County of Sarpy*, 351 U.S. 253, 260 (1956), is capable of being read to suggest that it does not have to explicitly mention enclaves. But again, compare *West River Electric Ass’n v. Black Hills Power & Light*, 918 F.2d 713, 717–20 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990) (Congress did not provide necessary clear authorization to cede its exclusive jurisdiction over an Air Force base; court distinguished *Offutt* because in that case the state tax at issue was directed against a private party who leased land on an Air Force base). *See also Tacoma Dept of Public Utilities v. United States*, 28 Fed. Cl. 637, 646 (1993), *aff’d*, 31 F.3d 1130 (Fed. Cir. 1994).

For an example of how this plays out in GAO case law, see 64 Comp. Gen. 813 (1985). This was a bid protest in which a statute required federal agencies to comply with local requirements on the control and abatement of solid waste “in the same manner, and to the same extent, as any person is subject to such requirements.” *Id.* at 815, quoting the requirements in the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, at 42 U.S.C. § 6961(a). That language, the Comptroller General held, “expressly requires federal agencies to obtain waste disposal services from local governments” when

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<sup>94</sup> The court also noted that even if a state law or regulation is assimilated by virtue of having been in existence at the time of an enclave’s creation, it becomes “federal law subject to federal jurisdiction.” *Baltimore Gas*, 133 F. Supp. 2d at 744 n.27. As such, the state does not retain jurisdiction to enforce the state law within the enclave. *Id.*

such is required of others. *Id.* In this case, two military facilities were directed to cancel their competitive solicitations in favor of sole source contracts with local governments and their franchisees. A competitive procurement by another base was allowed to stand because the enclave was outside of the local government’s jurisdiction and others so situated were not required to contract with the local authorities. *Id.* at 816. GAO’s logic in this case was later tested in different cases in federal court and upheld. *Parola v. Weinberger*, 848 F.2d 956 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988). *See also Solano Garbage v. Cheney*, 779 F. Supp. 477 (E.D. Cal. 1991); [72 Comp. Gen. 225, 228](#) (1993).

A common battleground for these principles is the area of state liquor control. In *United States v. South Carolina*, 578 F. Supp. 549 (D. S.C. 1983), based on an essentially straightforward application of *Paul* and *Leslie Miller*, the court enjoined the state from implementing a state law requiring federal military installations to purchase alcoholic beverages from wholesalers licensed by the state. The installations in question were exclusive jurisdiction enclaves. *South Carolina*, 578 F. Supp. at 550. On the other hand, in *North Dakota*, 495 U.S. 423, the Supreme Court upheld a state requirement that out-of-state liquor vendors affix labels to each item to be delivered to a federal enclave in the state where the state and federal government exercised concurrent jurisdiction. The Court distinguished this type of indirect regulation, which was permissible even though it incidentally raised costs to the military, from the types of direct regulation encountered in cases like *Paul* and *Leslie Miller*.

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### 3. Proprietorial Jurisdiction

A central theme of our discussion is that a federal enclave is essentially a consensual arrangement. Whether federal jurisdiction is obtained by Jurisdiction Clause<sup>95</sup> consent or by cession, a federal enclave cannot come into being without the consent of the state and acceptance by the United States. Thus, enclave status can be neither coerced from the state nor forced upon the United States.

For the land over which the United States has not obtained exclusive, partial, or concurrent jurisdiction by consent or cession, federal jurisdiction is said to be “proprietary.” This term originated from language in some of the cases to the effect that, absent consent or cession,

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<sup>95</sup> U.S. Const. art. I, § 8, cl. 17. See discussion of this clause in section D.1 of this chapter.

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the United States has “only the rights of an ordinary proprietor.” *E.g., Fort Leavenworth v. Lowe*, 114 U.S. 525, 527 (1885).

While the term proprietorial implies that the United States is in the same position as any private owner, this is not the case. The United States may exercise authority over federal land, enclave or nonenclave, under language in article IV, section 3, clause 2 of the Constitution, the Property Clause: “The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States.”

The full significance of the Property Clause as an alternative to the Jurisdiction Clause does not appear to have been realized until the landmark case of *Kleppe v. New Mexico*, 426 U.S. 529 (1976). A New Mexico rancher had obtained a permit from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) under the Taylor Grazing Act to graze cattle on certain BLM land in New Mexico. The rancher complained to a state agency that wild burros on the BLM land were interfering with his cattle. The state agency rounded up 19 of the wild burros and sold them at auction. The BLM demanded that the state recover and return the burros, claiming that the state’s action violated the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, 16 U.S.C. §§ 1331–1340. New Mexico brought suit, alleging that the statute was unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court held that the wild burro statute was a valid exercise of congressional power under the Property Clause, and that it overrode any inconsistent state law. Congress, said the Court, has the power of a legislature as well as a proprietor over federal land. *Kleppe*, 426 U.S. at 540. That power is “without limitations” (*id.* at 539) and “complete” (*id.* at 540). The Court then squarely addressed the relationship of federal enclaves to the Property Clause:

“Congress may acquire derivative legislative power from a State pursuant to Art. I, § 8, cl. 17, of the Constitution by consensual acquisition of land, or by nonconsensual acquisition followed by the State’s subsequent cession of legislative authority over the land. . . . In either case, the legislative jurisdiction acquired may range from exclusive federal jurisdiction with no residual state police power . . . to concurrent, or partial, federal legislative jurisdiction, which may allow the State to exercise certain authority. . . .

“But while Congress can acquire exclusive or partial jurisdiction over lands within a State by the State’s consent or cession, the presence or absence of such jurisdiction has nothing to do with Congress’ powers under the Property Clause. Absent consent or cession a State undoubtedly retains jurisdiction over federal lands within its territory, but Congress equally surely retains the power to enact legislation respecting those lands pursuant to the Property Clause. . . . And when Congress so acts, the federal legislation necessarily overrides conflicting state laws under the Supremacy Clause.”

*Id.* at 542–43 (citations omitted).

The Supreme Court’s opinion was unanimous. Concurrence of the burros may be presumed.<sup>96</sup>

Both the courts and the Comptroller General have recognized and reflected the significance of the *Kleppe* decision. One illustration is the selection of nuclear waste repository sites. GAO considered the issue in the late 1970s and concluded that a state could not block the establishment of a nuclear waste repository merely by withholding or qualifying consent under the Jurisdiction Clause. Exclusive federal jurisdiction is not a necessary prerequisite to establishing the repository, and Congress has adequate power under the Property Clause. Accordingly, an agreement by the Secretary of Energy purporting to give a state “veto power” over site selection would be unenforceable. [B-192999, May 22, 1979](#). See also [B-164105, June 19, 1978](#), reaching the same conclusion based on the Department of Energy’s organic legislation. Several years later, Congress enacted amendments to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act designating a site in Nevada for possible development as a repository. The state went to court, and the Ninth Circuit held that the legislation was within congressional power under the Property Clause, and that there was no requirement that the site be located on a federal enclave. *Nevada v. Watkins*, 914 F.2d 1545 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990), *cert. denied*, 499 U.S. 906 (1991). See also *Nuclear Energy Institute, Inc. v. EPA*, 373 F.3d 1251 (D.C. Cir. 2004).

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<sup>96</sup> It was subsequently established that damage to private land caused by the wild horses and burros does not amount to a compensable “taking.” *Mountain States Legal Foundation v. Hodel*, 799 F.2d 1423 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986), *cert. denied*, 480 U.S. 951 (1987).

Some other examples follow:

- An individual was fined for hunting ducks in a national park in Minnesota, in violation of National Park Service regulations prohibiting hunting or the possession of loaded firearms in national parks. The regulations had been issued pursuant to a statutory delegation. Even if the state had not ceded jurisdiction to the United States, the regulation was nevertheless valid under the Property Clause and took precedence over conflicting state law. This was equally true with respect to nonfederal waters within the park. *United States v. Brown*, 552 F.2d 817 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 431 U.S. 949 (1977).
- The National Park Service, under a statutory delegation, could issue a regulation requiring use of seat belts in national parks. The Defense Department, although it does not have statutory authority to regulate federal land comparable to that of the Park Service, could also require seat belt use by regulation, at least on land under exclusive federal jurisdiction. [B-216218, Nov. 30, 1984, \*aff'd\*, B-216218, Sept. 6, 1988.](#)
- Regulations for traffic control on Postal Service property are valid under the Property Clause, regardless of presence or absence of enclave jurisdiction. *United States v. Gliatta*, 580 F.2d 156, 160 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 439 U.S. 1048 (1978).
- Federal legislation which authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to regulate grazing in the national forests overrides state open range law. *Bilderback v. United States*, 558 F. Supp. 903 (D. Ore. 1982).

Notwithstanding the very broad language it used in the *Kleppe* decision, the Supreme Court also noted in that case that “the furthest reaches of the power granted by the Property Clause have not yet been definitively resolved.” *Kleppe*, 426 U.S. at 539. It thus seems likely that litigation in this area will continue and that the law will continue to evolve.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> As a final note, the federal government, through legislation under the “necessary and proper” clause of the Constitution (art. I, § 8, cl. 18), may exercise specific types of jurisdiction over property which it merely leases. *E.g.*, *United States v. Burton*, 888 F.2d 682 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1989) (upholding General Services Administration’s authority to enforce anti-handbill regulation in leased building).



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## E. Leasing

If the government needs a building, there are several ways it can go about getting it. It can purchase an existing structure, making payment directly from appropriations available for that purpose; it can have the building constructed to order, again making payment directly from appropriations available for that purpose; it can lease an existing building; or it can use some form of lease-purchase or lease-construction arrangement. This section will address the leasing options.

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### 1. Some General Principles

#### a. Acquisition

A lease in the real property context may be defined as “[a] contract by which a rightful possessor of real property conveys the right to use and occupy the property in exchange for consideration, usu[ally] rent.” *Black’s Law Dictionary* 907 (8<sup>th</sup> ed. 2004). Thus, it includes any agreement that gives rise to a relationship of landlord and tenant. *E.g.*, *National Data Corp. v. United States*, 50 Fed. Cl. 24, 28 (2001); [B-96826-O.M., Feb. 8, 1967](#). General Services Administration (GSA) regulations define the term to mean “a conveyance to the Government of the right of exclusive possession of real property for a definite period of time by a landlord.” 48 C.F.R. § 570.102.

It is generally recognized that, except for depressed real estate markets, leasing is less cost-effective than ownership. *See generally* GAO, *General Services Administration’s Comparison of Space Acquisition Alternatives: Leasing to Lease-Purchase and Leasing to Construction*, GAO/GGD-99-49R (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 1999); *Federal Office Space: Increased Ownership Would Result in Significant Savings*, GAO/GGD-90-11 (Dec. 22, 1989).<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, there are situations in which leasing is clearly the desirable option, such as where the government needs the space only for a short term or where it needs only a small amount of space. GAO/GGD-90-11, at 14–15. Too often, however, the decision whether to lease or buy is driven by budgetary considerations rather than the nature of the government’s need. The problem is that budget authority for purchase or direct construction must be provided “up front,” whereas budget

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<sup>98</sup> *See also United States v. Bedford Associates*, 657 F.2d 1300, 1309 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1981), *cert. denied*, 456 U.S. 914 (1982).



authority for leasing is provided year by year. Not surprisingly, large chunks of money for purchase or construction have traditionally been prime targets for budget-cutting by a Congress under constant pressure to reduce spending. Eliminating tens of millions of dollars to construct or acquire a building produces an immediately visible result, albeit only a short-term one, without angering any program's constituents. Congress has struggled with this problem for many years. The then Public Works Committee's report accompanying the Public Buildings Amendments of 1972<sup>99</sup> stated that direct construction was "the most efficient and economical means of meeting Government building needs," but essentially conceded "the futility of seeking a billion dollars for direct Federal construction . . . in competition with the present spending priorities." H.R. Rep. No. 92-989, at 3 (1972).

Despite the preference for construction and ownership, the government's reliance on leased space has become progressively more pronounced. GAO reported that nearly half (48 percent) of the space controlled by the General Services Administration as of 1994 was leased, costing over \$2 billion a year. GAO, *Federal Office Space: More Businesslike Leasing Approach Could Reduce Costs and Improve Performance*, GAO/GGD-95-48 (Feb. 10, 1995), at 10. More recently, GAO pointed to instances in which the use of operating leases to meet agency space needs instead of construction, purchase, or even lease-purchase arrangements resulted in almost \$1 billion in excess costs. One prime example was a long-term operating lease for the Patent and Trademark Office that was estimated to cost \$48 million more than construction and \$38 million more than lease-purchase. GAO, *Federal Real Property: Reliance on Costly Leasing to Meet New Space Needs Is an Ongoing Problem*, GAO-06-136T (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2005), at 5–6. Indeed, the "pervasive" nature of this problem was one of the major reasons that GAO designated federal real property management a high-risk area in 2003.<sup>100</sup> *Id.* at 5.

As with the acquisition of fee title, the government can acquire a lease voluntarily, or it can acquire it involuntarily. Voluntary acquisition is the preferred method. As we will discuss later in this section, most leasing for the federal government is done by, or under delegation from, GSA. Under a number of statutes and executive branch issuances, GSA plays a central

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<sup>99</sup> Pub. L. No. 92-313, 86 Stat. 216 (June 16, 1972).

<sup>100</sup> See section A of this chapter for more on this high-risk designation.

role in the acquisition of space for federal agencies. It prescribes governmentwide policies on property and acquisition management through the Federal Management Regulation, formerly known as the Federal Property Management Regulations. *See* 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-2.5. GSA's policies are contained primarily in 41 C.F.R. part 102-73. As set forth therein, GSA's stated policy is to lease privately owned space "only when needs cannot be met satisfactorily in Government-controlled space" and leasing is more advantageous than construction or alteration. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.45. As noted above, however, this policy is seriously undercut by budgetary and other practical considerations; thus, GSA will lease when it cannot obtain sufficient budget authority to do anything else.

A lease of real property is subject to the Competition in Contracting Act's (CICA) general requirement for full and open competition.<sup>101</sup> 41 U.S.C. § 253; *see* [B-225954, Mar. 30, 1987](#). The GSA regulations provide as follows: "Executive agencies must obtain full and open competition among suitable locations meeting minimum Government requirements, except as otherwise provided by CICA, 41 U.S.C. 253." 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.100.

The regulations further provide that acquisition by lease must be "on the most favorable basis to the Federal Government, with due consideration to maintenance and operational efficiency, and at charges consistent with prevailing market rates for comparable facilities in the community." 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.55. Specific contracting procedures for acquiring leasehold interests in real property are found in the GSA Acquisition Regulations, 48 C.F.R. part 570.

The evaluation factors in a lease invitation should be as clear and exact as possible, although a high level of precision is not required. "It is sufficient . . . to prescribe general guidelines of acceptability which necessarily must be applied as equitably as possible to the locations of the office spaces tendered." *43 Comp. Gen. 663, 667 (1964), aff'd on reconsideration, B-152768, June 23, 1964.*

An incumbent lessor does not have an exclusive right to negotiate extensions of the lease. *See* [48 Comp. Gen. 722, 724–25 \(1969\)](#); [B-251337.2, Apr. 23, 1993](#). Indeed, there are situations in which the government is not

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<sup>101</sup> CICA does provide exceptions to the general requirement for full and open competition in some circumstances. *See* 41 U.S.C. §§ 253(b), (c), and (g).

even required to include the incumbent lessor in the solicitation for the new lease.<sup>102</sup> [B-251288, Mar. 18, 1993](#).

While a lease is the conveyance of a possessory interest in real property, it is also a contract. *E.g.*, *Keydata Corp. v. United States*, 504 F.2d 1115, 1123 (Ct. Cl. 1974); *Olympia Properties, L.L.C. v. United States*, 54 Fed. Cl. 147, 152 (2002), *aff'd*, 68 Fed. Appx. 976 (Fed. Cir. 2003). Therefore, it does not come into existence unless and until both parties execute the required formalities, that is, sign the lease contract. [B-228279, B-228280, Jan. 15, 1988](#).

Unless required by statute, it is not essential that the lease be recorded in the jurisdiction in which the property is located. [A-19681, Sept. 28, 1927](#). Many states, however, have statutes which require the recording of leases for more than a stated term. The precise effect of these laws is subject to variation from state to state, but they are generally regarded as protecting the rights of the tenant by providing legal notice of the tenancy to subsequent purchasers or lessees.<sup>103</sup> *Id.*; [26 Comp. Gen. 331 \(1946\)](#). In determining whether a lease exceeds the minimum term specified in a recording statute, the period covered by renewal options should be added to the basic lease term. [26 Comp. Gen. 335 \(1946\)](#). While the government's policy has been that the cost of recording a lease should be borne by the lessor, recording fees may be charged to operating appropriations if there is a legitimate reason for the government to pay. [26 Comp. Gen. 331](#).

If the government is unable to meet its leasing needs voluntarily, it can fall back on the power of eminent domain. It has long been settled that the takings clause of the Fifth Amendment applies to “temporary takings” as well as the taking of full title. *E.g.*, *Phelps v. United States*, 274 U.S. 341 (1927). See also [22 Comp. Gen. 1112, 1114 \(1943\)](#), regarding it as “settled law that the use of property can be taken as well as the title to property.”

Involuntary acquisition of a leasehold can take various forms. If there is already an existing lease, the government can simply condemn the entire

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<sup>102</sup> As a general proposition, however, unless a market survey shows that the incumbent lessor will be unable to meet the government's needs for the new lease, full and open competition requires that the incumbent be included. *E.g.*, [B-247910.3, June 8, 1993](#); [B-225954, Mar. 30, 1987](#). See also 48 Comp. Gen. at 725.

<sup>103</sup> This is not always the case. In some states, recording, although required by state law, may not be necessary to protect the tenant's rights. See [B-27717, Aug. 12, 1942](#).

leasehold. *E.g.*, *Almota Farmers Elevator & Warehouse Co. v. United States*, 409 U.S. 470 (1973); *United States v. Petty Motor Co.*, 327 U.S. 372 (1946). If the government needs the property for a shorter term than that of an existing lease, it can condemn only part of the existing lease. *E.g.*, *United States v. General Motors Corp.*, 323 U.S. 373 (1945). Or, if there is no existing lease, the government can employ condemnation to impose one on the property owner. *E.g.*, *Kimball Laundry Co. v. United States*, 338 U.S. 1 (1949). The elements of just compensation vary somewhat depending on which of these scenarios applies. Some of the issues are discussed in the Supreme Court decisions cited in this paragraph.

If the determination of just compensation can be resolved administratively, the government is not required to institute formal condemnation proceedings but should adhere as closely as possible to the just compensation principles laid down by the Supreme Court. [25 Comp. Gen. 1 \(1945\)](#).

Private leases may include a clause, known as an “eminent domain” clause or a “termination on condemnation” clause, which provides that the lease shall terminate if the property is taken by governmental authority. If the government condemns an existing leasehold which is subject to such a provision, the lessee gets nothing. *Petty Motor*, 327 U.S. at 376; *United States v. Advertising Checking Bureau*, 204 F.2d 770, 772–73 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1953); *Bajwa v. Sunoco, Inc.*, 320 F. Supp. 2d 454 (E.D. Va. 2004); *Heir v. Delaware River Port Authority*, 218 F. Supp. 2d 627 (D.N.J. 2002); [35 Comp. Gen. 85, 87 \(1955\)](#); [22 Comp. Gen. at 1114](#). The theory is that tenants who enter into leases with such clauses contract away any rights they otherwise might have had. *Petty Motor*, 327 U.S. at 376; *Checking Bureau*, 204 F.2d at 772. (These cases illustrate two variations of the clause.)

As with any other acquisition of real property, condemnation of a leasehold requires statutory authority. The general condemnation statute, 40 U.S.C. § 3113, discussed earlier in section B.5.b of this chapter, operates in exactly the same manner with respect to leaseholds as it does for fee acquisitions. By virtue of this statute, the authority to condemn is coextensive with the authority to purchase. Thus, GSA’s general authority (40 U.S.C. § 585), in conjunction with 40 U.S.C. § 3113, gives GSA the authority to acquire a leasehold by condemnation. *Checking Bureau*, 204 F.2d 770; *United States v. Fisk Building*, 99 F. Supp. 592 (S.D. N.Y. 1951); *United States v. Midland National Bank of Billings*, 67 F. Supp. 268 (D. Mont. 1946).

In our discussion of 41 U.S.C. § 14 in section B of this chapter, we noted a line of cases establishing the proposition that the authority necessary to satisfy that statute can be found in an appropriation, if it can be shown that the appropriation was intended to be available for the acquisition in question. If that type of authority is sufficient, in conjunction with 40 U.S.C. § 3113, to authorize condemnation of the fee, it should also be sufficient to authorize condemnation of a leasehold, a lesser interest. One case, which appears to stand alone, went so far as to find the basic acquisition authority in a general operation (salaries and expenses) appropriation, with no apparent demonstration that Congress was aware of, much less had approved, the lease in question. *United States v. Hibernia Bank Building*, 76 F. Supp. 18 (E.D. La. 1948). While *Hibernia* does not appear to have been expressly repudiated, it is important to note that it, as well as *Midland Bank* and its progeny, was decided prior to the statutory requirement for prospectus approval which we will cover later in this discussion. Thus, *Hibernia* could not be followed today, at least with respect to a lease within the scope of the prospectus requirement. See *Maiatico v. United States*, 302 F.2d 880 (D.C. Cir. 1962).

Another principle which is the same as for fee acquisitions is the principle that statutory cost limitations on voluntary acquisition do not apply to condemnations. 22 Comp. Gen. 1112. The reason is that just compensation is a constitutional right and cannot be limited by statute. *Id.* at 1114. (The particular limitation in that case no longer exists, but the principle remains valid.)

b. Application of Fiscal Law Principles

A lease, as a contract requiring the obligation and expenditure of appropriated funds, is subject to the various fiscal statutes and principles discussed throughout this publication the same as any other contract. One area meriting some note is the Antideficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. § 1341.<sup>104</sup> There are few areas of government contracting in which the desirability of multiyear commitments is stronger than in the case of real property leases. For the most part, Congress has provided multiyear leasing authority. This is fortunate because it has long been settled that, without either such authority or a no-year appropriation, a multiyear lease would violate the Antideficiency Act by purporting to obligate the government for future years, in advance of appropriations for those years.

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<sup>104</sup> The Antideficiency Act is discussed extensively in Chapter 6, section C.

The story of one such lease will illustrate. A government agency leased space in an office building in 1921, purportedly for 5 years, without statutory authority. At the end of the second year, the government notified the lessor of its intention to terminate the lease and vacate the premises. However, the government's new space was not yet ready, so the agency remained in the leased building and told the lessor that it would continue to pay rent for the period of actual occupancy. The lessor argued that, under state law, it was entitled to rent for at least the full third year. The claim first came to GAO and the answer was no. Since the multiyear lease was unauthorized in the first place, terminating it at the end of the second year could not be a breach. [5 Comp. Gen. 172 \(1925\)](#). The lessor did not like this answer and went to court, by now conceding that it could not establish the lease's validity for the full 5-year period, but still trying to recover for the entire third year. The Court of Claims threw the case out on the grounds that it failed to state a cause of action. *Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. v. United States*, 62 Ct. Cl. 370 (1926), *aff'd*, 276 U.S. 287 (1928).

The lessor, not overly excited with this result either, took it to the Supreme Court. Unfortunately for the lessor, the Supreme Court had just decided a similar case, *Leiter v. United States*, 271 U.S. 204 (1926), clearly establishing that a multiyear lease without statutory authority could bind the government only to the end of the fiscal year in which it was made (or, of course, longer period under a multiple year appropriation). It could be binding in a subsequent year only if there was an available appropriation and if the government took affirmative action—as opposed to mere automatic renewal—to continue the lease. *Leiter*, 271 U.S. at 207.<sup>105</sup> The disposal of Goodyear's appeal was a straightforward application of *Leiter*. *Goodyear*, 276 U.S. 287. “Not having affirmatively continued the lease beyond the actual period of occupancy, the Government cannot, under the doctrine of the *Leiter* case, be bound for a longer term.” *Id.* at 293.

Later GAO decisions applying these principles include [24 Comp. Gen. 195 \(1944\)](#); [20 Comp. Gen. 30 \(1940\)](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 758 \(1940\)](#); and [B-7785, Mar. 28, 1940](#). The sheer number of cases both before and after *Leiter* suggests the strength of the need that ultimately generated the multiyear leasing statutes we will discuss later. Of course, the case law comes back

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<sup>105</sup> Although *Leiter* has come to be cited as the leading case, it broke little new ground. The principle had already become established by the courts and the accounting officers. *E.g.*, *Chase v. United States*, 155 U.S. 489 (1894); *Smoot v. United States*, 38 Ct. Cl. 418 (1903); *McCollum v. United States*, 17 Ct. Cl. 92 (1881); [5 Comp. Gen. 522 \(1926\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 355 \(1925\)](#); [1 Comp. Gen. 10 \(1921\)](#). For more on *Leiter*, see Chapter 6, section C.2.b(4).

into play in any situation not covered by one of the statutes, or if the government were to attempt to enter into a lease for a time period in excess of that authorized by statute.

The objection, based on the Antideficiency Act, to indefinite or open-ended indemnification agreements by the government applies fully to indemnity provisions included in a lease. [35 Comp. Gen. 85 \(1955\)](#).

The existence of multiyear leasing authority by itself does not necessarily tell you how to record obligations under a lease. Some agencies have specific statutory direction. For example, the General Services Administration is to obligate funds for its multiyear leases one year at a time. 40 U.S.C. § 585(a)(2). So are the military departments with respect to leases in foreign countries. 10 U.S.C. §§ 2675 (leases for military purposes other than family housing) and 2828(d) (military family housing). Absent such authority, you fall back on the general rule that obligations are chargeable in full to appropriations current at the time they are incurred. Thus, in [B-195260, July 11, 1979](#), GAO advised the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which had no-year appropriations but no statutory direction comparable to 40 U.S.C. § 585(a)(2) or 10 U.S.C. § 2675, that it could enter into a multiyear lease under its no-year appropriation but that it had to obligate the full amount of its obligations under the lease at the time the lease was signed. Actual payments, of course, would be made periodically over the term of the lease.

The constitutional immunity of the United States from state and local taxes imposed on property which the government owns does not extend to property which the government leases. Taxes imposed on the owner are simply part of the consideration or rent which the government, as tenant, agrees to pay. 24 Comp. Dec. 705 (1918). However, there is no authority for the government to increase its rent payments to compensate for tax increases unless there is also some other modification or amendment to constitute legal consideration. [B-169004, Mar. 6, 1970](#). Indeed, the current regulations require inclusion of a clause explicitly stating that no adjustment will be made to cover increased taxes. 48 C.F.R. § 552.229-70.

### c. Rights and Obligations

While the Contract Disputes Act does not apply to contracts for “the procurement of . . . real property in being” (41 U.S.C. § 602(a)(1)), this exemption has not been construed as applying to leases. Therefore, claims and disputes arising under a lease are governed by the requirements and procedures of the Contract Disputes Act. *Forman v. United States*, 767 F.2d 875 (Fed. Cir. 1985) (the leading case); *Jackson v. United States*



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*Postal Service*, 799 F.2d 1018 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *reh'g denied*, 803 F.2d 717 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986); *The Federal Group, Inc. v. United States*, 67 Fed. Cl. 87, 96–97 (2005); *United States v. Black Hawk Masonic Temple Ass'n*, 798 F. Supp. 646 (D. Colo. 1992); *Goodfellow Bros., Inc.*, AGBCA No. 80-189-3, 81-1 B.C.A. ¶ 14,917 (1981); *Robert J. DiDomenico*, GSBCA No. 5539, 80-1 B.C.A. ¶ 14,412 (1980).<sup>106</sup> However, as with other types of government contracts, the Contract Disputes Act does not extend to protests against the award of, or failure to award, a lease. *Arthur S. Curtis*, GSBCA No. 8867-P-R, 88-1 B.C.A. ¶ 20,517 (1988) (government in that case was lessor).

The traditional view among the courts, boards of contract appeals, and GAO has been that rights and obligations under a lease to which the federal government is a party are questions of federal, rather than state, law. *E.g.*, *Forman*, 767 F.2d 875; *Girard Trust Co. v. United States*, 161 F.2d 159 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1947); *Keydata Corp. v. United States*, 504 F.2d 1115 (Ct. Cl. 1974); *Brooklyn Waterfront Terminal Corp. v. United States*, 90 F. Supp. 943 (Ct. Cl. 1950), *cert. denied*, 340 U.S. 931 (1951); *Goodfellow Bros., Inc.*, 81-1 B.C.A. ¶ 14,917; 49 Comp. Gen. 532, 533 (1970); B-174588, May 17, 1972, *aff'd on reconsideration*, B-174588, Sept. 6, 1972. The same is true with respect to lease formation. *E.g.*, *United States v. Bedford Associates*, 657 F.2d 1300, 1309–10 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1981), *cert. denied*, 456 U.S. 914 (1982). Under this approach, the decision maker is free to choose what it regards as the better view when state laws are not uniform. *E.g.*, *Keydata*, 504 F.2d at 1122–24.

There is also a line of cases involving United States Postal Service leases which, while recognizing their power to apply federal law, decline to do so and instead apply state landlord-tenant law. *Powers v. United States Postal Service*, 671 F.2d 1041 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982); *Reed v. United States Postal Service*, 660 F. Supp. 178 (D. Mass. 1987); *Jackson v. United States Postal Service*, 611 F. Supp. 456 (N.D. Tex. 1985).<sup>107</sup> The advantage of using state law is that

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<sup>106</sup> But see *Coconut Grove Entertainment, Inc. v. United States*, 46 Fed. Cl. 249 (2000), holding that the Contract Disputes Act exemption did apply to a suit involving a lease where the government agency did not enter into the lease directly but, through a property acquisition, had succeeded to the landlord's interest under a pre-existing lease between two private parties.

<sup>107</sup> One court recognized the conflict between the *Forman* and *Powers* lines of cases, but found it unnecessary to take sides since the outcome in its case was the same under both state and federal law. *Kerin v. United States Postal Service*, 116 F.3d 988, 990–91 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1997).



every state has an established body of landlord-tenant law whereas federal courts deal with these issues infrequently. It is no coincidence that these cases, from the district courts and numbered circuits, all involve Postal Service leases because federal lease cases involving agencies other than the Postal Service would mostly go on appeal to the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. *Forman*, 767 F.2d at 880 n.6; *Reed*, 660 F. Supp. at 181. Indeed, since appeals under the Contract Disputes Act go to the Federal Circuit, the Postal Service Board of Contract Appeals follows its governing circuit (the *Forman* case) and applies federal law. *N.J. Hastetter, Trustee*, PSBCA No. 3064, 92-3 B.C.A. ¶ 25,189 (1992).

As with contracts in general, rights and obligations under a lease are determined primarily by reference to the terms the parties agreed upon, as embodied in the lease agreement. *E.g.*, *Girard Trust Co.*, 161 F.2d at 161. A number of contract clauses used in General Services Administration leases are described in 48 C.F.R. subpart 570.6. In addition, there are certain “implied covenants” that the courts will read in unless the lease expressly provides otherwise.

For example, the landlord is frequently obligated to keep the premises in good repair. *See* 48 C.F.R. §§ 570.603 and 552.270-6 (clause). If the landlord violates this provision, the government can make the repairs and deduct their cost from rent payments. 48 C.F.R. § 552.270-10. In addition, every lease includes an “implied covenant of quiet enjoyment.” *United States v. Bedford Associates*, 548 F. Supp. 732, 740 (S.D.N.Y. 1982), *modified on other grounds and aff’d*, 713 F.2d 895 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1983). Significant breach of the repair clause or the implied covenant can trigger the government’s right to terminate the lease under a default clause if the lease contains one or, if the lease does not contain a default clause, under the common-law concept of “constructive eviction.”

A constructive eviction is wrongful conduct by the lessor which (1) renders the premises unfit for the purpose leased or (2) deprives the tenant of the beneficial use and enjoyment of the premises. *David Kwok*, GSBCA No. 7933, 90-1 B.C.A. ¶ 22,292 (1989), *aff’d mem.*, 918 F.2d 187 (Fed. Cir. 1990); *Hugh L. Nathurst III*, GSBCA No. 9284, 89-3 B.C.A. ¶ 22,164 (1989); *J.H. Millstein and Fanny Millstein*, GSBCA Nos. 7665 and 7904, 86-3 B.C.A. ¶ 19,025 (1986). A constructive eviction requires more than some minor deviation. For a vivid example of facts supporting a constructive eviction, see *Kwok*, 90-1 B.C.A. at ¶ 111,959. Under a constructive eviction, the government’s obligation to pay rent ceases, but the government, as tenant, must vacate the premises within a reasonable time. *Bedford*

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*Associates*, 548 F. Supp. at 741; *Richardson v. United States*, 17 Cl. Ct. 355, 357 (1989). Disruption incident to the making of repairs is not a constructive eviction. *Millstein*, 86-3 B.C.A. at ¶ 96,084. Conversely, continued occupancy in reliance on the lessor's promise of repair does not waive the government's right to assert a constructive eviction. *Nathurst*, 89-3 B.C.A. at ¶ 111,541.

A lease may require the lessee to restore the premises to the condition they were in at the beginning of the lease, reasonable wear and tear excepted. As with the "good repair" clause, even in the absence of an express provision in the lease, there is an implied covenant which may produce much the same result. Unless the lease expressly provides otherwise, every lease includes an implied covenant against voluntary waste, under which the government can be held liable for negligent damage to the premises. *United States v. Bostwick*, 94 U.S. 53 (1876); *New Rawson Corp. v. United States*, 55 F. Supp. 291 (D. Mass. 1943); *Mount Manresa v. United States*, 70 Ct. Cl. 144 (1930); *Italian National Rifle Shooting Society v. United States*, 66 Ct. Cl. 418 (1928). This covenant "also requires restoration of the premises to the lessor in the same condition as received, reasonable wear and tear excepted" when "construed with reference to the intended use of the property by the lessee." *Brooklyn Waterfront Terminal Corp. v. United States*, 90 F. Supp. 943, 949 (Ct. Cl. 1950), *cert. denied*, 340 U.S. 931 (1951). *See also United States v. Jordan*, 186 F.2d 803, 806 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1951), *aff'd per curiam*, 342 U.S. 911 (1952). By virtue of the covenant against voluntary waste, appropriate restoration costs are a proper charge to appropriated funds. [26 Comp. Gen. 585 \(1947\)](#); [25 Comp. Gen. 349 \(1945\)](#).

A provision whose status is somewhat clouded is the Termination for Convenience ("T for C") clause required in government procurement contracts generally. The government has regarded the "T for C" clause as inappropriate in leases of real property, and General Services Administration (GSA) leases do not include a "T for C" clause. The reason, the GSA Board of Contract Appeals has suggested, is that the clause "would enable the Government to cancel the lease at any time without liability for future rent, and would therefore so vitiate the agreement on a fixed lease term that it might render the apparent lease agreement nugatory." *Yucca, A Joint Venture*, GSBICA Nos. 6768, 7319, 85-3 B.C.A. ¶ 18,511 (1985) at ¶ 92,969.

One practical consequence of this is the inability to recommend termination where a lease is found to have been improperly awarded. *E.g.*,

72 Comp. Gen. 335, 339 (1993); B-214648, Dec. 26, 1984. However, one court has stated that a termination for convenience clause is incorporated in a lease of real property by operation of law. *Aerolease Long Beach v. United States*, 31 Fed. Cl. 342, *aff'd*, 39 F.3d 1198 (Fed. Cir. 1994). Whether a lease could expressly disclaim the “T for C” authority does not yet appear to have been addressed.

Wholly apart from the presence or absence of a termination for convenience clause, paragraph 4 of the U.S. Government Lease for Real Property, Standard Form 2 (June 2, 2003),<sup>108</sup> provides as follows: “The Government may terminate this lease at any time by giving at least \_\_\_ days’ notice in writing to the Lessor and no rental shall accrue after the effective date of termination.” The parties then insert the desired notification period. This provision has occasionally been stricken from the lease, essentially for the same reason there is no “T for C” clause—the apparent inconsistency with the fixed term of the lease. *E.g.*, *David Kwok*, GSBGA No. 7933, 90-1 B.C.A. ¶ 22,292 (1989) at ¶ 111,960. However, where the provision is used, it becomes part of the contract and is enforced as such. *Darrel Stebbins*, AGBCA No. 91-164-1, 93-1 B.C.A. ¶ 25,236 (1992); *Capricorn Enterprises, Inc.*, AGBCA No. 89-125-1, 90-1 B.C.A. ¶ 22,587 (1990).

d. Payment of Rent

“The primary obligation of a tenant is to pay rent.” *Jackson v. United States Postal Service*, 611 F. Supp. 456, 460 (N.D. Tex. 1985). Rent has been defined as “compensation for the use, enjoyment and occupation of real estate.” B-106578, Aug. 29, 1952, at 3. The lease (paragraph 3 of the U.S. Government Lease for Real Property, Standard Form 2<sup>109</sup>) will state the amount of rent and the intervals at which it is to be paid. Where rent is paid monthly, the monthly amount, unless the lease specifies differently, is one-twelfth of the annual rental regardless of variations in the number of days from month to month. 24 Comp. Gen. 838 (1945).

The government pays by electronic funds transfer. *See* 48 C.F.R. §§ 532.908(b)(2) and 552.232-76. The Prompt Payment Act applies to leases. 31 U.S.C. § 3901(a)(6). GSA’s regulations incorporating this requirement are 48 C.F.R. §§ 532.908(b)(1) and 552.232-75. Under the terms

<sup>108</sup> This form is available at [www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/formslibrary.do?formType=SF](http://www.gsa.gov/Portal/gsa/ep/formslibrary.do?formType=SF) (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

<sup>109</sup> *Id.*

of the lease provision, however, Prompt Payment Act interest penalties do not apply where the delay in payment is due to a dispute concerning the government's liability. *Modeer v. United States*, 68 Fed. Cl. 131, 144 (2005), *aff'd*, 183 Fed. Appx. 975 (Fed. Cir. 2006).

(1) Advance payment

By virtue of the general prohibition against advance payments found in 31 U.S.C. § 3324(b), the United States cannot make rental payments in advance but must pay in arrears. The prohibition applies to the lease of “naked lands” as well as buildings. 23 Comp. Dec. 653 (1917). The General Services Administration's regulations provide that rent will be paid monthly “in arrears” and is due on the first workday of each month. 48 C.F.R. § 552.232-75(a)(1). Thus, the payment covers the month that has just ended rather than the month that is beginning. *GPA-I, LP v. United States*, 46 Fed. Cl. 762, 769–71 (2000).

The same nonstatutory exceptions apply in the case of leases as apply to advance payments in general. Thus, where the lessor is a state, rent may be paid in advance because the possibility of loss is regarded as sufficiently remote. 57 Comp. Gen. 399 (1978). See also B-207215, Mar. 1, 1983, applying the exception to a National Park Service lease from a statutorily created nonprofit foundation whose governing board included the Secretary of the Interior and the Director of the Park Service. That decision also emphasized that, in view of the *bona fide* needs rule, payment in advance means advance for the fiscal year (or other fixed term of the paying appropriation). Rent being paid pursuant to a condemnation award may be paid in advance to the extent necessary to satisfy the award. 22 Comp. Gen. 1112 (1943).

In addition, Congress may legislate exceptions to the advance payment prohibition and has done so in a number of instances. Examples are 22 U.S.C. § 2670(h) (State Department leases for the use of the Foreign Service abroad) and 10 U.S.C. § 2661(b)(1) (certain military leases).

(2) Payment to legal representative

The common-law rule is that rent which has accrued prior to the lessor's death is payable to the executor or administrator; rent which accrues after the lessor's death vests in the heir (intestate succession) or devisee (person named in will), unless otherwise provided by statute or will or unless the property has been formally brought into administration proceedings prior

to accrual of the rent. [B-116413, Aug. 19, 1953](#). For an example of a state statute which modifies the common-law rule by requiring payment of posthumous rent to the legal representative, see [B-36636, Sept. 14, 1943](#). Of course, the common-law rule does not apply in the case of property held jointly with right of survivorship, such as property owned by a husband and wife as tenants by the entirety, in which case rent is payable to the surviving co-owner. [B-140816, Oct. 27, 1959](#).

Where rent is being paid to an executor or administrator, the voucher should include a statement to the effect that the payee is continuing to serve in that capacity. [9 Comp. Gen. 154 \(1929\)](#); [B-127362, Apr. 13, 1956](#). The purpose is to safeguard against making payment to someone who has been discharged as legal representative, an improper payment which could put a certifying officer at risk. This does not mean that the certifying officer has to run to the courthouse every month before certifying the payment voucher. While this would not eliminate the potential for personal liability, the lessor can be required to submit a statement to be attached to the voucher. [B-57612, June 18, 1946](#).

Before entering into a new lease with an executor or administrator, the agency must be careful to determine that the executor or administrator is authorized to lease the decedent's property. This usually requires the permission of the probate court. In [16 Comp. Gen. 820 \(1937\)](#), an executor leased property to the government at a rent lower than that authorized by the court. Since the executor had exceeded his authority, no binding lease resulted and the government was liable for the fair rental value of the property.

### (3) Assignment of Claims Act

The Assignment of Claims Act—31 U.S.C. § 3727 and 41 U.S.C. § 15—prohibits the assignment of claims against the United States except under fairly restrictive conditions, prohibits the transfer of government contracts, and authorizes the assignment of contract proceeds to financing institutions. This legislation impacts the payment of rent under leases in several ways. Starting with 31 U.S.C. § 3727, the prohibition on assignments applies to a lessor's right to receive rent. The government is not bound to recognize an assignment not in compliance with the statute. *E.g., Webster Factors, Inc. v. United States*, 436 F.2d 425 (Ct. Cl. 1971); [B-204237, Oct. 13, 1981](#).

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To avoid problems under the anti-assignment legislation, early decisions<sup>110</sup> developed the following guidelines for payment:

- If an agent executes the lease on behalf of the principal under a proper power of attorney, rent may be paid to the agent.
- Rent may be paid to an agent if the lease itself so specifies.
- If neither of the above applies, the check for rent must be drawn payable to the principal, although it may be delivered to an agent.
- If payment to an agent is authorized to begin with, it may be made to a successor agent. [6 Comp. Gen. 737 \(1927\)](#); [B-36636, Sept. 14, 1943](#).

Application of the Assignment of Claims Act to leases is essentially the same as in other contexts. Thus, the prohibition applies to voluntary assignments and not to assignments by operation of law. *E.g.*, *Keydata Corp. v. United States*, 504 F.2d 1115 (Ct. Cl. 1974) (assignment under court order). Also, since the prohibition is for the government's protection, the government can choose to waive the statute and recognize an assignment. *Freedman's Saving & Trust Co. v. Shepherd*, 127 U.S. 494 (1888). *See also* [11 Comp. Gen. 278 \(1932\)](#). As with government contracts in general, the government can include a provision authorizing the assignment of rent payments to a financing institution, and will then be bound by a proper assignment. *See Webster Factors*, 436 F.2d 425.

The prohibition in 41 U.S.C. § 15 on the transfer of contracts comes into play when the lessor of property leased to the government sells the property. An early Supreme Court case, *Shepherd*, 127 U.S. at 505, held that the prohibition—

“does not embrace a lease of real estate to be used for public purposes, under which the lessor is not required to perform any service for the government, and has nothing to do, in respect to the lease, except to receive from time to time the rent agreed to be paid. The assignment of such a lease is not within the mischief which Congress intended to prevent.”

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<sup>110</sup> [16 Comp. Gen. 867 \(1937\)](#); [10 Comp. Gen. 31 \(1930\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 749 \(1926\)](#); [9 Comp. Dec. 611 \(1903\)](#). (Each case does not include every point.)

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There is no reason this holding would not remain valid under the stated conditions. Especially with respect to buildings, however, many modern leases are different. The General Services Administration (GSA) Board of Contract Appeals has held that the principle of the *Shepherd* case does not apply to—

“a contemporary GSA lease, involving a host of services and supplies to be provided by the lessor. The transfer of this lease without the consent of the Government might not only subject the Government to multiple litigation with unknown parties, but might, at each turn, subject the Government to detrimental alteration in the performance of contractual services.”

*Broadlake Partners*, GSBCA No. 10713, 92-1 B.C.A. ¶ 24,699 (1991), at ¶ 123,270. Of course, as with assignments under 31 U.S.C. § 3727, the government can consent to the transfer. *See Albert Ginsberg*, GSBCA No. 9911, 91-2 B.C.A. ¶ 23,784 (1991).

In 1992, subsequent to the *Broadlake Partners* decision, GSA amended its “successors bound” clause to read as follows: “This lease shall bind, *and inure to the benefit of*, the parties and their respective heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns.” 48 C.F.R. § 552.270-11 (emphasis added). This clause is required in larger leases and optional in smaller ones. 48 C.F.R. § 570.603. The 1992 amendment added the italicized language.<sup>111</sup> While there appear to be no published decisions interpreting the amendment, it is at least arguable that the clause amounts to a blanket consent. *See United States v. Jordan*, 186 F.2d 803, 808 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1951), *aff’d per curiam*, 342 U.S. 911 (1952).

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## 2. Statutory Authorities and Limitations

### a. Federal Property and Administrative Services Act

The major portion of the federal government’s leasing is done by the General Services Administration (GSA), which serves as the government’s

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<sup>111</sup> GSA, *General Services Administration Acquisition Regulation: Real Property Leasing Clauses*, 57 Fed. Reg. 37889, 37892 (Aug. 21, 1992).

chief “leasing agent.”<sup>112</sup> As a general proposition, an agency which needs space must get it through GSA. The agency may do its own leasing only if it has specific statutory authority to do so, or upon a delegation from GSA. [B-309181, Aug. 17, 2007](#) (“Without a delegation from the General Services Administration or independent statutory authority to enter into a lease, neither GovWorks (a Department of the Interior franchise fund) nor the Counterintelligence Field Activity . . . of the Department of Defense . . . had authority to obtain office space through a third-party lease.”); [B-202206, June 16, 1981](#) (the Northern Mariana Islands Commission on Federal Laws, an independent entity in the legislative branch, may not rent office space on its own unless it receives a delegation from GSA).

We begin our discussion of GSA’s authorities with a brief note on citations. GSA’s leasing authority is the combined product of several provisions of law. The primary original source of these provisions was the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81-152, 63 Stat. 377 (June 30, 1949) (Property Act), which also created GSA. These provisions, with their amendments over the years, were located in title 40 of the United States Code. They are still in title 40; however, Congress recently codified title 40 into positive law. Pub. L. No. 107-217, 116 Stat. 1062 (Aug. 21, 2002). The codification repealed most of the Property Act and reassigned its provisions to new sections of title 40, usually retaining the same substance but making minor wording changes. While the following discussion cites the current provisions, we will also include the pre-codification citations since virtually all the cases we will discuss reference the former sections.

Section 585 of title 40<sup>113</sup> authorizes the Administrator of GSA to enter into leases for terms of up to 20 years. Specifically, section 585(a) provides:

“(1) Authority.—The Administrator of General Services may enter into a lease agreement with a person, copartnership, corporation, or other public or private entity for the accommodation of a federal agency in a building (or improvement) which is in existence or being erected by the

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<sup>112</sup> Before GSA was created, many of the government’s real property functions were performed by the Federal Works Agency. *See* [65 Comp. Gen. 722, 725](#) (1986). The functions of this agency, as well as functions from other agencies, were transferred to GSA when it was created in 1949. *See* 40 U.S.C. § 303.

<sup>113</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 490(h), 490d, 490e.



lessor to accommodate the federal agency. The Administrator may assign and reassign the leased space to a federal agency.

“(2) Terms.—A lease agreement under this subsection shall be on terms the Administrator considers to be in the interest of the Federal Government and necessary for the accommodation of the federal agency. However, the lease agreement may not bind the Government for more than 20 years and the obligation of amounts for a lease under this subsection is limited to the current fiscal year for which payments are due without regard to section 1341(a)(1)(B) of title 31 [of the United States Code].”

Shortly after enactment of the Property Act, section 1 of Reorganization Plan No. 18 of 1950, 40 U.S.C. § 301 note, promulgated pursuant to the Reorganization Act of 1949 (5 U.S.C. §§ 901–912), transferred “[a]ll functions with respect to acquiring space in buildings by lease . . . from the respective agencies in which such functions are now vested” to GSA, except for (1) buildings in foreign countries, (2) buildings on military facilities, (3) post office buildings, and (4) “special purpose” space not generally suitable for the use of other agencies, such as hospitals, jails, and laboratories. Another provision, 40 U.S.C. § 582(b),<sup>114</sup> gives the Office of Management and Budget permanent authority to transfer to GSA functions “vested in a federal agency with respect to the operation, maintenance, and custody of an office building” owned or leased by the government, with exceptions similar to those found in the 1950 reorganization plan.

GSA’s leasing authority under 40 U.S.C. § 585 is not limited to the executive branch. This is because the authority applies with respect to “federal agencies,” which term is defined in 40 U.S.C. § 102(5)<sup>115</sup> to mean “an executive agency or an establishment in the legislative or judicial branch of the Government (except the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Architect of the Capitol, and any activities under the direction of the Architect of the Capitol.”

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<sup>114</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(d).

<sup>115</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 472.

Thus, legislative branch entities except those specified must lease office space through GSA absent authority to do otherwise by statute or delegation. [B-202206, June 16, 1981](#). So must the Administrative Office of the United States Courts. [54 Comp. Gen. 944 \(1975\)](#). The Supreme Court building is exempt from GSA's authority, however, because 40 U.S.C. § 6111(a)<sup>116</sup> places it under the control of the Architect of the Capitol. [54 Comp. Gen. at 947](#).

The statute further defines “executive agency” as including wholly owned government corporations. 40 U.S.C. § 102(4). Therefore, by its terms, it does not apply to mixed-ownership government corporations. *See* Chapter 15, section B. Similarly, Reorganization Plan No. 18 is regarded as applicable to wholly owned, but not mixed ownership, government corporations. [38 Comp. Gen. 565 \(1959\)](#).

The 20-year term authorized by 40 U.S.C. § 585(a)(2) refers to the length of time that the government is obligated to pay rent. Thus, a lease-construction agreement which provides for a 2 to 3 year lead time for construction of the building, with the 20-year term of occupancy and the government's obligation to pay rent to begin upon completion of construction, does not violate the statute. [B-191888, May 26, 1978](#).

GSA finances its leasing operations from the Federal Buildings Fund, a revolving fund established by 40 U.S.C. § 592.<sup>117</sup> Money in the Fund is available for expenditure as specified in annual appropriation acts. 40 U.S.C. § 592(c)(1). A recurring general provision authorizes any department or agency to use its operating appropriations to pay GSA's charges for space and services furnished by law. *E.g.*, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-161, § 706, 121 Stat. 1844, 2020 (Dec. 26, 2007). Funds for multiyear leases are obligated one fiscal year at a time. 40 U.S.C. § 585(a)(2).

This funding scheme does not give the tenant agency the same rights against GSA that a commercial tenant would have against a commercial landlord. Thus, GSA is not liable to the tenant agency for damage to the agency's property caused by building defects, although GSA should of course try to recover from the lessor. [57 Comp. Gen. 130 \(1977\)](#). *See also*

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<sup>116</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 13a.

<sup>117</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(f).

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[B-308822, May 2, 2007](#) (operating reserves in the National Archives and Records Administration’s (NARA) records center revolving fund are available to cover the costs of repairing water damage to records that NARA stores for its federal agency customers caused by a GSA building failure; GSA is not required to reimburse NARA for the property damage).

There is still another funding provision on the books, 40 U.S.C. § 1303(e)(1),<sup>118</sup> which predates the Property Act. It provides:

“To the extent that the appropriations of the General Services Administration not otherwise allocated are inadequate for repairs, alterations, maintenance, or operation, the Administrator [of GSA] may require each federal agency to which leased space has been assigned to pay promptly by check to the Administrator out of its appropriation for rent any part of the estimated or actual cost of the repairs, alterations, maintenance, and operation. Payments may be either in advance of, or on or during, occupancy of the space. The Administrator shall determine and equitably apportion the total amount to be paid among the agencies to whom space has been assigned.”

While the creation of the Federal Buildings Fund has diminished the significance of 40 U.S.C. § 1303(e)(1), it remains as a backup. It does not, however, alter or expand the availability of the tenant agency’s appropriations. [B-62051, Jan. 17, 1947](#).

If GSA enters into a lease under its statutory authorities, GSA, not the tenant agency, must make any necessary amendments or modifications. A lease executed by GSA may not be amended or modified by an agreement between the tenant agency and the lessor. [38 Comp. Gen. 803 \(1959\)](#); [32 Comp. Gen. 342 \(1953\)](#).

It is possible that the tenant agency’s needs might change such that it no longer needs the leased premises for the full term of the lease. Should this happen, the unexpired term of the lease can be declared “excess,” in which event other government agencies should be canvassed, the same as with other forms of excess property, to see if any other agency needs the

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<sup>118</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 304b, 304c.

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premises. If not, GSA can declare the unexpired term “surplus” and sublet the premises, depositing rental receipts to the Federal Buildings Fund to be used to provide services to the new tenant or to pay rent to the original lessor. 40 U.S.C. § 585(b)(2). Alternatively, depending on a variety of circumstances, it may be in the government’s interest to invoke whatever cancellation terms the lease provides. See [B-119782, July 9, 1954](#), in which cancellation was the cheapest alternative.

GSA implements its leasing authority in the Federal Management Regulation, specifically 41 C.F.R. part 102-73, subpart B. Subject to certain exceptions, GSA is authorized to delegate, and to authorize successive redelegation of, functions transferred to or vested in it. 40 U.S.C. § 121(d).<sup>119</sup> This includes leasing, and the GSA regulations provide for a wide variety of delegations. In this regard, the regulations state in general: “Federal agencies, upon approval from GSA, must perform all functions of leasing building space, and land incidental thereto, for their use except as provided in this subpart.” 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.75. The regulations spell out, at 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.140, terms and conditions that apply to agencies leasing space pursuant to GSA delegations of authority:

- Agencies may do their own leasing, for terms of not more than 1 year, when space is leased for no rental or a nominal rental of \$1 a year. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.140(b).
- GSA may grant specific delegations upon request. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.140(c).
- GSA may grant categorical delegations, under which any agency may do its own leasing for specified purposes.<sup>120</sup> 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.140(d).
- GSA may grant “special purpose” delegations for space not generally suitable for use by other agencies. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.140(e). Special purposes delegations are described in 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.160 and are listed in 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-73.170–73.225

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<sup>119</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 486, 486a.

<sup>120</sup> Generally speaking, all agencies are authorized to acquire the types of space covered by categorical delegations. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.150. These types of space are listed in 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.155 and included greenhouses, hangars, hospitals, housing, and ranger stations.

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Since what is being delegated is the authority GSA possesses under 40 U.S.C. § 585, the delegation includes the authority to enter into multiyear leases for terms of up to 20 years, “except as otherwise noted.” 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.165.

b. Prospectus Requirement

The acquisition of real property, including leaseholds, requires legislative authorization. For major leases, a component of this authorization is the prospectus approval requirement of 40 U.S.C. § 3307.<sup>121</sup> As relevant to leases, it provides that no appropriation shall be made to lease space for a public purpose at an average annual rental exceeding \$1.5 million unless the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Work and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure adopt resolutions approving the purpose for which the appropriation is made. 40 U.S.C. § 3307(a).

Section 3307(b) states that GSA shall seek committee consideration and approval under section 3307(a) by transmitting a prospectus of the proposed facility to the Congress. The section goes on to specify that the prospectus shall include, among other things: a brief description of the space to be leased, the location of the space, an estimate of the maximum cost to the United States, a comprehensive plan addressing the space needs of all government employees in the locality, and a statement of how much the government is already spending to accommodate the employees who will occupy the space to be leased.<sup>122</sup>

The application of section 3307 to leases originated in the Public Buildings Amendments of 1972, Pub. L. No. 92-313, § 2, 86 Stat. 216, 217 (June 16, 1972). It was the outgrowth of appropriation act provisions used throughout most of the 1960s to control lease-construction arrangements. *See Merriam v. Kunzig*, 476 F.2d 1233, 1237–39 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 414 U.S. 911 (1973). As enacted, however, the requirement applies “to all

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<sup>121</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 606.

<sup>122</sup> Section 3307 applies the prospectus requirement to three distinct types of undertakings that meet specified dollar thresholds: (1) construction, acquisition, or alteration of public buildings, (2) leasing, and (3) alteration of leased space. The first and third are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. To minimize duplication, we have consolidated our coverage of material which applies equally to all three types, including the effect of noncompliance, later in section F.1.c of this chapter. Apart from the prospectus requirement for most leases whose annual rental exceeds \$1.5 million, 40 U.S.C. § 3307(f) generally prohibits leases for certain purposes that exceed the threshold. This prohibition is subject to limited exceptions under section 3307(f)(2).

leases, and not merely to leases for buildings to be erected by the lessor.” *Id.* at 1239. The threshold, originally \$500,000, was raised to \$1,500,000 by the Public Buildings Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-678, § 2, 102 Stat. 4049 (Nov. 17, 1988). GSA can adjust the threshold amount annually in the manner and to the extent authorized in 40 U.S.C. § 3307(g).<sup>123</sup>

The monetary threshold applies to the “average annual rental.” GSA and GAO agree that “rental” in this context means the amount of consideration for use of the land and buildings, or portions of buildings, during the firm term of the lease, excluding the cost of any services such as heat, light, water, and janitorial services. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.230 (threshold applies to “net” annual rental, excluding services and utilities). *See also 52 Comp. Gen. 230 (1972)*. Apart from 40 U.S.C. § 3307(d), which authorizes the rescission of approval if an appropriation has not been enacted within one year, the statute does not impose time limits on the approval process. However, delay may have adverse consequences. One court has held that delay by GSA in obtaining prospectus approval, during a time when construction costs were increasing rapidly, excused the lessor from any duty to renovate the premises. *United States v. Bedford Associates*, 548 F. Supp. 732, 737 (S.D. N.Y. 1982), *modified on other grounds and aff’d*, 713 F.2d 895 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1983).

Since the statute requires GSA to submit the prospectus, an agency which is doing its own leasing under a delegation from GSA must submit its prospectus to GSA who will in turn submit it to the Congress. 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.230.

c. Site Selection

It is, as it should be, up to the leasing agency to determine where those premises should be located, and that determination should not be second-guessed as long as it has a rational basis. *59 Comp. Gen. 474, 480 (1980); B-190730, Sept. 26, 1978*. For example, GAO regards geographical restrictions, such as “city limits” restrictions, based on considerations of employee travel time, as reasonable. *B-230660, May 26, 1988; B-227849, Sept. 28, 1987*. The GSA regulations likewise give leasing agencies discretion within the overall statutory and regulatory framework:

<sup>123</sup> GSA’s regulations, 41 C.F.R. § 102-73.35, note that the current annual thresholds can be found on GSA’s Web site, [www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov) by searching under “prospectus thresholds” (last visited Mar. 25, 2008).

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“Each Federal agency is responsible for identifying the delineated area within which it wishes to locate specific activities, consistent with its mission and program requirements, and in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, and Executive Orders.”

41 C.F.R. § 102-83.25. Of course, the leasing of real property, like virtually every other form of federal contract, is designed to serve various social and economic purposes in addition to meeting the government’s needs.

One such purpose is the preservation of historic properties. The National Historic Preservation Act directs agencies to seek out and use, to the maximum extent feasible, “historic properties available to the agency” before leasing other buildings. 16 U.S.C. § 470h-2(a)(1). Another provision of law directs the General Services Administration (GSA) to “acquire and utilize space in suitable buildings of historical, architectural, or cultural significance, unless use of the space would not prove feasible and prudent compared with available alternatives.” 40 U.S.C. § 3306(b)(1).<sup>124</sup> “Historical, architectural, or cultural significance” for the most part means buildings listed or eligible to be listed on the National Register established under the Historic Preservation Act. *Id.* § 3306(a)(4). While one court has held that 40 U.S.C. § 3306 does not apply to properties which GSA is leasing for other agencies, the same court noted that the policy has been incorporated into an executive order which does apply to leased properties. *Birmingham Realty Co. v. GSA*, 497 F. Supp. 1377, 1384–86 (N.D. Ala. 1980), *citing to* Exec. Order No. 12072, *Federal Space Management*, 43 Fed. Reg. 36,869 (Aug. 16, 1978), *reprinted at* 40 U.S.C. § 121 note. The GSA regulations explicitly affirm that the preference for historic properties applies when leasing space. 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-73.30, 102-83.125. The GSA regulations provide for preferences to be given to historic buildings. Under a clause prescribed for major leases, the historic building will get the award if it meets the terms and conditions of the solicitation, and if the rental is no more than 10 percent higher than the lowest otherwise acceptable offer. 48 C.F.R. §§ 570.602, 552.270-2. *See also* Exec. Order No. 13006, *Locating Federal Facilities on Historic Properties in Our Nation’s Central Cities*, 61 Fed. Reg. 26,071 (May 21, 1996); 41 C.F.R. pt. 102-78. A solicitation of offers for a lease should state how the historic building preference will be applied. 62 Comp. Gen. 50 (1982).

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<sup>124</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 601a(a).

None of the authorities thus far noted purport to address the consequences of disregarding the historic building preference. In the *Birmingham Realty* case cited above, the court found that GSA had failed to comply with the executive order, but that the unsuitability of the historic building for the purposes for which the space was needed outweighed the noncompliance. *Birmingham Realty*, 497 F. Supp. at 1386–87.

The choice between urban and rural locations introduces additional requirements. A provision enacted as part of the Rural Development Act of 1972, now found at 7 U.S.C. § 2204b-1(b), designed to improve rural economic and living conditions, requires federal agencies to give “first priority to the location of new offices and other facilities in rural areas.” Section 1-103 of Executive Order No. 12072, designed to strengthen cities, requires federal agencies to “give first consideration to a centralized community business area and adjacent areas of similar character” when meeting space needs in urban areas. “First consideration” means preference. *City of Reading v. Austin*, 816 F. Supp. 351, 362 (E.D. Pa. 1993).

While these preferences may seem incompatible, they are not. Because it is statutory, the rural preference must be considered first. The central business area preference comes into play only after it is determined that the need must be met in an urban area. 59 Comp. Gen. 474, 480 (1980); 59 Comp. Gen. 409, 414 (1980). Also, the applicable definitions of urban area and rural area produce an overlap such that a community with a population between 10,000 and 50,000 is both. 59 Comp. Gen. at 414; B-95136, Mar. 10, 1980.

The *City of Reading* court held that the city’s complaint of noncompliance with Executive Order No. 12072 was subject to judicial review. However, the court noted that Executive Order No. 12072 “provides no meaningful benchmarks for a court to effectively evaluate GSA’s ultimate decision,” and that the decision involves “managerial and economic choices dependent on GSA’s special expertise . . . not readily subject to judicial review.” *City of Reading*, 816 F. Supp. at 360. Therefore, the review should not be a review of the merits of the decision, but should seek “to ensure a fully informed and well-considered decision.” *Id.* Citing *City of Reading*, the court in *City of Albuquerque v. Department of the Interior*, 379 F.3d 901 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004), also concluded that a challenge based on noncompliance with Executive Order No. 12072 and the GSA regulations in terms of locating in central business areas was subject to judicial review.



In *HG Properties A, L.P.*, [B-284170](#), Mar. 3, 2000, 2000 CPD ¶ 36, GAO considered but denied a protest alleging, among other things, that a federal agency's city-wide solicitation for a lease for office space violated the central business area preferences in Executive Order No. 12072 and the GSA regulations. The decision concluded that the agency met its consultation obligations under the executive order and regulations and that its solicitation complied with the applicable substantive standards. Specifically, the agency appropriately concluded that restricting the solicitation to the central business area would unduly limit competition and impinge upon its mission requirements. Considering the effects on competition is consistent with the GSA regulations. See 41 C.F.R. § 102-83.35.

A final area which may affect the location decision, at least for major leases, is environmental impact. The National Environmental Policy Act does not, by express terms, either include or exclude leasing actions. The case of *S.W. Neighborhood Assembly v. Eckard*, 445 F. Supp. 1195 (D.D.C. 1978), held that a congressionally approved 5-year \$11 million lease of a 9-story office building to be built in an industrial/residential neighborhood and which would involve the relocation of over 2,000 federal employees was a "major Federal action" for purposes of 42 U.S.C. § 4332, and that the government therefore was required to prepare an environmental impact statement. In *Birmingham Realty*, 497 F. Supp. at 1383–84, on the other hand, the court found reasonable a GSA policy to categorically exclude leases of less than 20,000 square feet from environmental impact statement requirements.

d. Parking

As discussed in section C.13.j(1) of Chapter 4, a government employee does not have a right to a parking space, with or without charge, and an agency is under no obligation to furnish one. See *American Federation of Government Employees v. Freeman*, 498 F. Supp. 651, 654–55 (D.D.C. 1980) (government employee does not have a "property interest in free parking"); [B-168096](#), Dec. 6, 1975 (furnishing of parking is not a right but a privilege). Nevertheless, the government may choose to provide parking facilities as an aid to operating efficiency and the hiring and retention of personnel. *E.g.*, [63 Comp. Gen. 270, 271](#) (1984); [B-168096](#), Jan. 5, 1973 (nondecision letter). From the availability of appropriations perspective, it makes no difference whether the employees work in government-owned space or in leased space. [B-152020](#), July 28, 1970.

When GSA is leasing office space pursuant to its statutory authority in 40 U.S.C. § 585, it may include parking facilities, and the tenant agency's

appropriations are available to reimburse GSA for the parking space to the same extent as for the office space itself. [72 Comp. Gen. 139 \(1993\)](#); [55 Comp. Gen. 897 \(1976\)](#). *See also* [49 Comp. Gen. 476 \(1970\)](#); [B-168946, Feb. 26, 1970](#) (same point prior to establishment of Federal Buildings Fund).

GSA will not require an agency to accept and pay for parking space it does not need. [55 Comp. Gen. at 901](#). If an agency has parking space which is excess to its needs, it may relinquish that space in accordance with procedures in GSA's Federal Management Regulation, specifically [41 C.F.R. part 102-75](#). *Id.*

In some cases, the office space lease may not include parking, or the agency's needs may change over time. As with leasing in general, an agency may not lease its own parking facilities unless it has specific statutory authority (an example relating to NASA is discussed in [B-155372-O.M., Nov. 6, 1964](#)) or a delegation of authority from GSA. [B-162021, July 6, 1977](#). At one time, an agency that needed parking accommodations not included in the basic office space lease would simply make the request to GSA and GSA would lease the space on behalf of the agency subject to reimbursement. *See* [55 Comp. Gen. 1197, 1200 \(1976\)](#); [B-162021, July 6, 1977](#). Under current procedures, the agency must first make a request to GSA to determine if any government-controlled space (owned or leased) is available. If such space is not available, the agency may then, without any further authorization from GSA, "use its own procurement authority to acquire parking by service contract." [41 C.F.R. § 102-73.240](#). This operates as a blanket delegation.

The agency is no longer required to certify to GSA that the parking is needed for purposes of employee retention or operating efficiency, although it is still expected to use the same standard. [72 Comp. Gen. 139, 141 \(1993\)](#); [63 Comp. Gen. at 271](#).

The government has the discretionary authority under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act to charge employees for parking space furnished for their use. *American Federation of Government Employees v. Carmen*, 669 F.2d 815 (D.C. Cir. 1981). *See also* [55 Comp. Gen. 897 \(1976\)](#); [52 Comp. Gen. 957, 960-61 \(1973\)](#); [B-155817, Mar. 11, 1966](#). The *Carmen* case involved a plan, subsequently withdrawn, to phase out free parking as an energy conservation measure.

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An airport parking permit, renewable annually, procured for use by staff on official travel as a cost savings measure, which does not reserve any particular space or in fact guarantee any space at all if the parking lot is full, is not a lease for purposes of the Federal Property Act and regulations. [B-259718, Aug. 25, 1995](#). The purchase is permissible under the “necessary expense” doctrine. *Id.*

e. Repairs and Alterations

The following definitions are taken from [20 Comp. Gen. 105, 109 \(1940\)](#) and the specific examples from [20 Comp. Dec. 73, 74 \(1913\)](#):

- *Repair* means “to mend, to restore to a sound state whatever has been partially destroyed, to make good an existing thing, restoration after decay, injury, or partial destruction,” in plain English, to fix something that needs to be fixed. Examples are replacing a broken pane of glass in a window or fixing broken stairs.
- *Alteration* means “a change or substitution in a substantial particular of one part of a building for another part of a building different in that particular” or “an installation that becomes an integral part of the building and changes its structural quality.” Examples are erecting a partition dividing one room from another, closing up a door or window, or cutting a new door or window.

In addition, the cited decisions define a third term, *improvement*, to mean “a valuable and useful addition, something more than a mere repair or restoration to the original condition,” for example, strengthening the foundation or walls or putting on a new roof. It should be apparent that these are merely working definitions, not rigid demarcations. Many “alterations,” for example, are also “improvements.”<sup>125</sup>

Before funding comes into play, the first question to ask is whether the given item of work is the responsibility of the lessor or the lessee. The guiding principle is the rather obvious one that the government should not be paying for something which is the landlord’s obligation under the lease. *E.g.*, [17 Comp. Gen. 739, 740 \(1938\)](#). *See also* [B-198629, July 28, 1980](#).

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<sup>125</sup> Any discussion of repairs and alterations must necessarily implicate the general rule against using appropriated funds to make permanent improvements to private property. That rule and its application to leased property are discussed later in section G of this chapter. The remainder of this section presupposes that, for whatever reason, the rule does not pose an impediment.

The terms of the lease should allocate responsibilities, at least in general terms. For example, under one clause commonly found in government leases, the lessor agrees, except for damage resulting from the government's negligence, to maintain the premises in good repair and condition suitable for the government's use and capable of supplying heat, air conditioning, light, and ventilation. 48 C.F.R. § 552.270-6. A provision of this type imposes a continuing obligation on the lessor to make needed repairs or provide the specified services throughout the life of the lease in connection with the purpose for which the space was rented. *United Post Offices Corp. v. United States*, 80 Ct. Cl. 785 (1935); *United Post Offices Corp. v. United States*, 79 Ct. Cl. 173 (1934); 38 Comp. Gen. 803 (1959); 20 Comp. Gen. 327 (1940); 15 Comp. Gen. 483 (1935); 6 Comp. Gen. 250 (1926). If the lessor fails or refuses to meet this obligation, the government can have the necessary work done and deduct the cost from future rent. *E.g.*, 80 Ct. Cl. at 792; 6 Comp. Gen. at 251–52.

Alterations are of two general types: those necessary at the outset of the lease to make the space suitable for the government's needs (such as converting space from one use to another) and those which may become necessary from time to time over the course of the lease to meet changing needs. As with repairs, appropriated funds are not available to make alterations if and to the extent the lessor has assumed the obligation under the lease. 17 Comp. Gen. 739 (1938). More often, however, the cost of alterations will be the government's responsibility. A clause the General Services Administration (GSA) uses to give the government the right to make alterations during the course of the lease is found at 48 C.F.R. § 552.270-12. The clause addresses alterations and should not be used to assume the cost of items which are more properly classed as repairs which are the lessor's responsibility. 1 Comp. Gen. 723 (1922). Conversely, alterations are not an obligation of the lessor under the "good repair" clause. 39 Comp. Gen. 304, 307 (1959).

Alterations that are the responsibility of GSA are financed from the Federal Buildings Fund, a revolving fund established by 40 U.S.C. § 592.<sup>126</sup> Money in the Fund is available as and to the extent specified in annual appropriation acts. 40 U.S.C. § 592(c)(1). The Federal Buildings Fund appropriation typically includes several distinct line items, two of which are "repairs and alterations" and "rental of space." *See, e.g.*, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-161, 121 Stat. 1844, 2001–03 (Dec. 26, 2007).

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<sup>126</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(f).

Lump-sum payments for initial space alterations, whether done by the landlord or some other contractor, are payable from the repairs and alterations appropriation; alterations made by the landlord and amortized over the life of the lease are payable from the rental of space appropriation. [B-95136, Aug. 8, 1979](#). In addition, as with GSA's leasing operations in general, 40 U.S.C. § 1303(e)(2)<sup>127</sup> exists as backup authority for GSA to charge the cost of alterations to the tenant agency. *See* [B-141560, Jan. 15, 1960](#).

Major alteration projects require congressional approval under 40 U.S.C. § 3307. When this provision was originally enacted as part of the Public Buildings Act of 1959,<sup>128</sup> it applied to alterations to government-owned buildings but not to leased buildings. [65 Comp. Gen. 722 \(1986\)](#). Congress amended the provision in the Public Buildings Amendments of 1988<sup>129</sup> to extend the approval requirement to lease alterations costing more than \$750,000. The requirement that the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure adopt resolutions approving the appropriation for such alterations appears at 40 U.S.C. § 3307(a)(3). Approval is secured by submitting a prospectus to the appropriate committees. 40 U.S.C. § 3307(b).<sup>130</sup>

Alterations within the general scope of the lease will normally be acquired through a modification to the lease. 48 C.F.R. § 570.501(a). Beyond-scope alterations may be acquired through a separate contract, a supplemental lease agreement, or by having the work performed by government employees. *Id.* § 570.501(b). If the lease is within GSA's responsibility, the tenant agency has no authority to modify the lease without prior authorization from GSA. [38 Comp. Gen. 803, 805 \(1959\)](#). Where the tenant agency violates this principle, it may nevertheless be possible to pay for the alterations on a *quantum meruit* basis. *See* [B-155200-O.M., Nov. 24, 1964](#). GSA's current procedures for obtaining reimbursable space alterations, described under the rubric of "asset services," are contained in 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-74.105–102-74.150.

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<sup>127</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 304c.

<sup>128</sup> Pub. L. No. 86-249, § 7, 73 Stat. 479, 480 (Sept. 9, 1959).

<sup>129</sup> Pub. L. No. 100-678, § 3(a), 102 Stat. 4049 (Nov. 17, 1988).

<sup>130</sup> See section F.1.c of this chapter for further detail.

f. Rental in District of  
Columbia

Originally enacted in 1877 (19 Stat. 370), 40 U.S.C. § 8141<sup>131</sup> provides:

“A contract shall not be made for the rent of a building, or part of a building, to be used for the purposes of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia until Congress enacts an appropriation for the rent. This section is deemed to be notice to all contractors or lessors of the building or a part of the building.”

Early decisions viewed this provision as “too plain to need interpretation.” 4 Comp. Dec. 139, 141 (1897). *See also* 9 Comp. Dec. 551, 552 (1903). The accounting officers and the Attorney General uniformly held in holding that space rentals in the District of Columbia without explicit statutory authority were illegal.<sup>132</sup>

The enactment of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act in 1949, which provided the General Services Administration (GSA) the broad leasing authority now contained in 40 U.S.C. § 585 and discussed in section E.2 of this chapter, considerably diminished the impact of 40 U.S.C. § 8141. GAO commented as follows in [B-159633, May 20, 1974](#), at 2:

“[T]he Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 . . . authorizes GSA to enter into leasing agreements for the benefit and accommodation of Federal agencies. . . . We consider the language of [40 U.S.C. § 585] together with its legislative history as authorizing the Administrator of GSA to lease buildings and parts of buildings in the District of Columbia . . . . [I]f the Administrator of GSA had authorized the formation of this rental agreement, the statutory requirement of 40 U.S.C. [§ 8141] . . . would have been satisfied.”<sup>133</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 34; originally enacted in the Act of March 3, 1877, ch. 106, 19 Stat. 363, 370.

<sup>132</sup> *E.g.*, 2 Comp. Gen. 722 (1923); 2 Comp. Gen. 214 (1922); 26 Comp. Dec. 155 (1919); 17 Op. Att’y Gen. 87 (1881); 15 Op. Att’y Gen. 274 (1877).

<sup>133</sup> The decision in [B-159633](#) was overruled in part by [54 Comp. Gen. 1055 \(1975\)](#), but the partial overruling involves a separate issue and has no effect on the point discussed in the text.

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Thus, the rule has developed that 40 U.S.C. § 8141 is satisfied where GSA arranges for the space under authority of 40 U.S.C. § 585 or delegates the authority to the renting agency. [B-159633, May 20, 1974](#). *See also* [56 Comp. Gen. 572 \(1977\)](#); [B-114827, Oct. 2, 1974](#); [B-159633, Sept. 10, 1974](#); [B-157512-O.M., Sept. 1, 1972](#).

A 1975 GAO decision provided another significant clarification. Earlier decisions had construed 40 U.S.C. § 8141 as a comprehensive ban applicable to all space rentals for government use, no matter how temporary, and therefore fully applicable to the rental of short-term meeting or conference facilities. *E.g.*, [46 Comp. Gen. 379 \(1966\)](#); [35 Comp. Gen. 314 \(1955\)](#),<sup>134</sup> [11 Comp. Dec. 678 \(1905\)](#). GSA subsequently issued a regulation treating the procurement of short-term conference facilities as a service contract rather than a rental contract. GAO considered this regulation in [54 Comp. Gen. 1055 \(1975\)](#) and, based on it, modified the prior decisions. “Federal agencies may now procure the short-term use of conference and meeting facilities [without regard to 40 U.S.C. § 8141] providing they comply with the requirement of [the GSA regulations].” *Id.* at 1058.

For situations where an agency subject to the Act attempts to contract directly rather than through or under delegation from GSA, 40 U.S.C. § 8141 remains in force. Payment in violation of the statute can put a certifying officer at risk. *See* [46 Comp. Gen. 135 \(1966\)](#). Many of the earlier interpretations, therefore, are still valid although they now apply to a smaller universe.

The first point to note is that the statute is expressly limited to rentals in the District of Columbia. It has no effect on, nor is there any similar restriction to, rentals elsewhere, even a few minutes away in the suburbs of Maryland or Virginia. [B-140744, Oct. 1, 1959](#); [B-204730-O.M., July 26, 1982](#). It applies to all space rentals for governmental purposes. This includes space for storage. [6 Comp. Gen. 685 \(1927\)](#); [27 Op. Att’y Gen. 270 \(1909\)](#). Although, as noted above, it is no longer regarded as applicable to short-term conference facilities, the “service contract” concept cannot be

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<sup>134</sup> This case illustrates what used to be a somewhat bizarre, although probably intended, consequence of 40 U.S.C. § 8141. The statute had been construed as applicable to the District of Columbia government. *See also* [34 Comp. Gen. 593 \(1955\)](#); [17 Comp. Gen. 424 \(1937\)](#); [10 Comp. Dec. 117 \(1903\)](#). Therefore, prior to home rule, the government of the District of Columbia could not rent space in the District of Columbia without specific congressional authorization.



extended to include lodging accommodations, which remain subject to 40 U.S.C. § 8141. [56 Comp. Gen. 572 \(1977\)](#); *see also* 41 C.F.R. § 301-74.17(a).

When the statute applies, it requires an “express provision for the rent of a building, or language equivalent thereto.” 10 Comp. Dec. 178, 180 (1903). Obviously, express language in an appropriation act authorizing renting or leasing in the District of Columbia will do the job. *E.g.*, 13 Comp. Dec. 644 (1907). Just as clearly, burying the item in budget justification materials is not sufficient. [46 Comp. Gen. 379, 381 \(1966\)](#). In 9 Comp. Dec. 831 (1903), an appropriation for “every other necessary expense” in connection with the storage of certain records was, given the context of the appropriation, viewed as sufficiently specific. However, 11 Comp. Dec. 678 (1905) reached the opposite result where similar language was used in a context which did not clearly imply the need for space acquisition. The requisite authority need not be in an appropriation act. It may be contained in the agency’s enabling or program legislation. [23 Comp. Gen. 859 \(1944\)](#). For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s authority to lease property “wherever situated” is sufficient. [B-195260, July 11, 1979](#).

An interesting “common sense” exception occurred in 6 Comp. Dec. 75 (1899). The building which housed the Department of Justice had become “unsafe, overcrowded, and dangerously overloaded.” 6 Comp. Dec. at 77. Congress made an appropriation to construct a new building on the site of the old building, but there was no mention of interim facilities. Reasoning that rental of temporary quarters was “absolutely necessary” to fulfilling the purpose of the appropriation, and that Congress could not possibly have intended for the Department to cease operations during the construction period, the Comptroller of the Treasury held that the construction appropriation was available for the rental of temporary quarters while the new building was being erected. “This statute [40 U.S.C. § 8141] will well be fulfilled by any appropriation for a purpose which necessarily implies renting a building.” *Id.* at 78–79. However, as the Comptroller explained a few years later, the necessary implication theory requires more than mere inconvenience. A rigid interpretation in 6 Comp. Dec. 75 “would have put the Department of Justice, with its records, in the street.” 9 Comp. Dec. 551, 552 (1903). A similar holding is *Rives v. United States*, 28 Ct. Cl. 249 (1893), finding 40 U.S.C. § 8141 inapplicable where the Public Printer purchased certain material under statutory direction but, having insufficient storage space available, simply left it where it was until more space could be obtained.



The statute similarly does not apply in situations which amount to inverse condemnations. *Semmes & Barbour v. United States*, 26 Ct. Cl. 119 (1891) (government continued to occupy property after expiration of lease).

An agency may not avoid 40 U.S.C. § 8141 by entering into a cost reimbursement contract with someone else to procure space that it could not do by a direct leasing arrangement. 49 Comp. Gen. 305, 308 (1969). This is nothing more than an application of the fundamental tenet that an agency may not do indirectly that which it is prohibited from doing directly. However, GAO advised the National Science Foundation in 46 Comp. Gen. 379 (1966) that it could use donated funds, without regard to 40 U.S.C. § 8141, as long as the rental was in furtherance of an authorized agency purpose.

A related statute is 40 U.S.C. § 8142:<sup>135</sup>

“An executive department of the Federal Government renting a building for public use in the District of Columbia may rent a different building instead if it is in the public interest to do so. This section does not authorize an increase in the number of buildings in use or in the amount paid for rent.”

Our research has disclosed no cases interpreting or applying this provision.

g. Economy Act

It is necessary to make brief mention of a statute which no longer exists because it is found in virtually every case involving a government lease for a period of over 50 years. Section 322 of the Economy Act of 1932, codified prior to 1988 at 40 U.S.C. § 278a (1982), prohibited the obligation or expenditure of appropriated funds (1) for rent in excess of 15 percent of the fair market value of the rented premises as of the date of the lease,<sup>136</sup> and (2) for repairs, alterations, or improvements to the rented premises in excess of 25 percent of the first year’s rent.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 35.

<sup>136</sup> *E.g.*, 57 Comp. Gen. 591 (1978); 21 Comp. Gen. 906 (1942); 12 Comp. Gen. 546 (1933); 12 Comp. Gen. 440 (1932).

<sup>137</sup> *E.g.*, 30 Comp. Gen. 122 (1950); 30 Comp. Gen. 58 (1950); 29 Comp. Gen. 279 (1949); 20 Comp. Gen. 30 (1940).

This statute generated literally dozens of decisions. In a 1984 case, the General Services Administration Board of Contract Appeals described the 15 percent limitation as “a blunt instrument at best,” adding that it “is totally out of harmony with the economic situation” of the times, and had become “a fruitful source of litigation in its own right.” *Northwestern Development Co.*, GSBCA Nos. 6821, 7433, 84-3 B.C.A. ¶ 17,613 (1984), at ¶ 87,749. The 25 percent limitation for alterations and repairs, GAO reported in 1978, was ineffective and should be repealed. GAO, *General Services Administration’s Practices for Altering Leased Buildings Should Be Improved*, GAO/LCD-78-338 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 14, 1978), at 19–22.

The demise of section 322 came about in somewhat byzantine fashion. In a series of continuing resolutions, Congress suspended the 15 percent limitation for fiscal year 1982, renewed the suspension for the following year, made the suspension permanent in 1984, and confirmed the permanency of the suspension in 1987. See *Ralden Partnership v. United States*, 891 F.2d 1575, 1576–77 and 1579 n.5 (Fed. Cir. 1989); [65 Comp. Gen. 302 \(1986\)](#). Then, in 1988, section 322 was repealed outright. Public Buildings Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-678, § 7, 102 Stat. 4049, 4052 (Nov. 17, 1988). Virtually every pre-1988 leasing case cited throughout this discussion includes at least some mention of the Economy Act, and while those cases remain valid for the propositions for which they are cited, the portions dealing with Economy Act issues are now largely obsolete.<sup>138</sup>

#### h. Some Agency-Specific Authorities

The General Services Administration (GSA) does the major portion of the government’s space leasing, but it does not do all of it. A number of other agencies have their own statutory leasing authority, either agencywide or in specific contexts. We present here a sampling of those authorities.

The defense establishment has several provisions. The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of each military department may provide for “[t]he leasing of buildings and facilities.” 10 U.S.C. § 2661(b)(1). Before entering into a lease of real property in the United States whose estimated annual rental is more than \$750,000, military departments must report the

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<sup>138</sup> Under *Ralden*, the Economy Act restrictions continue to apply even after section 322’s repeal to the extent they were incorporated in preexisting lease provisions that remain in effect. *Ralden*, 891 F.2d at 1578. Thus, there may still be some leases with surviving Economy Act restrictions. See *2160 Partners*, GSBCA No. 15973, 03-2 B.C.A. ¶ 32,269 (2003).

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transaction to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees and allow a 30-day waiting period. 10 U.S.C. §§ 2662(a)(1)(B) & (a)(3).

Other provisions address military leases overseas. The military departments are authorized by 10 U.S.C. § 2675 to lease real property in foreign countries that is “needed for military purposes other than for military family housing,” and by 10 U.S.C. § 2828(c) to lease housing facilities in foreign countries in specified circumstances. Both sections generally authorize multiyear leases—up to 10 years—and permit the leases to be obligated year-by-year against annual appropriations. 10 U.S.C. §§ 2675, 2828(d). Both sections permit leases of up to 15 years in Korea.

Some examples from the civilian side of the government are:

- 15 U.S.C. § 78d(b)(3): Securities and Exchange Commission “is authorized to enter directly into leases for real property” and is exempt from GSA’s space management regulations.
- 15 U.S.C. § 2218(b)(3): Federal Emergency Management Agency may lease any property or interest in property “wherever situated” needed for activities under the Federal Fire Prevention and Control Act.
- 22 U.S.C. § 2514(d)(9): Funds available to the Peace Corps may be used for leases abroad not to exceed 5 years.
- 22 U.S.C. § 2670(h): State Department may lease, for terms of up to 10 years, real property in foreign countries for the use of the Foreign Service.
- 38 U.S.C. § 8122(b): Department of Veterans Affairs may lease “necessary space for administrative purposes” in connection with “extending benefits to veterans and dependents.”
- 39 U.S.C. § 401(6): general leasing authority for United States Postal Service.
- 42 U.S.C. § 7256(a): general leasing authority for the Department of Energy.

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### 3. Foreign Leases

Because of differences in law and custom, leases of real property in foreign countries often present problems not found in domestic leases. The first

point to emphasize is that the fiscal laws of the United States apply in full force just as they apply to domestic leases. An agency may not disregard the fiscal laws just because the money is being spent in a foreign country.

One example is the Antideficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. § 1341. As just noted in the preceding section, agencies with significant presence in foreign countries (military departments, State Department, Peace Corps) have been given specific authority to enter into multiyear leases of real property. Absent such authority, leasing activities are subject to the rule that leases are construed as binding only to the end of the fiscal year in which made or to the end of the period of any available no-year or multiyear authority, and require affirmative renewal by the government to extend beyond that point. [5 Comp. Gen. 355 \(1925\)](#); [A-91697, Mar. 3, 1938](#).

Rental escalation clauses purporting to obligate the United States to indeterminate or indefinite liability, or which may cause the rent to exceed a statutory ceiling (*see, e.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 2828(e)), have also been found to violate the Antideficiency Act. GAO, *Leased Military Housing Costs in Europe Can Be Reduced by Improving Acquisition Practices and Using Purchase Contracts*, GAO/NSIAD-85-113 (July 24, 1985), at 7–8. In one such case involving a lease in Italy which did not contain a termination clause, the Navy unilaterally modified the lease so as to keep the rent within the statutory ceiling. GAO advised that if the landlord were able to recover by lawsuit, the amount of any judgment or settlement would not be added to the rent payments for purposes of assessing Antideficiency Act violations. [B-227527, B-227325, Oct. 21, 1987](#).

In a 1986 case, the Air Force was having difficulty inserting in a German lease a provision limiting expenditures to the statutory ceiling. In that case, however, since *bona fide* cost estimates were well within the ceiling, the rent itself was fixed, the only exposure to escalation being maintenance and utility charges, and the lease included a termination for convenience clause, Antideficiency Act considerations did not impede entering into the lease. [66 Comp. Gen. 176 \(1986\)](#).

Another fiscal statute which rears its head in the foreign lease context is 31 U.S.C. § 3324(b), which prohibits advance payments unless specifically authorized. The same agencies with multiyear leasing authority generally also have authority to pay rent in advance. 10 U.S.C. § 2396(a)(2) (military departments); 22 U.S.C. § 2514(d)(9) (Peace Corps); 22 U.S.C. § 2670(h) (State Department). Absent such authority, rent could not be paid in advance. [19 Comp. Gen. 758 \(1940\)](#); [3 Comp. Gen. 542 \(1924\)](#). The

authority for the military departments applies only in accordance with local custom. See [B-194353, June 14, 1979](#). The rental of a grave site in perpetuity, in apparent accord with local custom, is not regarded as an advance payment. [11 Comp. Gen. 498 \(1932\)](#).

The standards for recording obligations, as prescribed by 31 U.S.C. § 1501(a), are the same for foreign leases. See [B-192282, Apr. 18, 1979](#), described more fully in Chapter 7, section B.1.h, for an unusual application based on custom in South Korea. The same is true for the Assignment of Claims Act, 41 U.S.C. § 15. *E.g.*, [11 Comp. Gen. 278 \(1932\)](#) (illustrating the point that the United States can choose to recognize an assignment); [10 Comp. Gen. 31 \(1930\)](#) (rent can be paid to agent bank in United States if specified in lease).

To restate the point, a government agency entering into a lease of real property in a foreign country must adhere to the statutes governing the obligation and expenditure of public funds; deviations require legislative authorization. When it comes to determining rights and liabilities under the lease, however, the situation is somewhat different. Rights and liabilities are governed by the laws of the place where the premises are located and the lease was executed. [B-120286, July 12, 1954](#). As that decision pointed out, the considerations which subordinate state law to federal law in the case of a domestic lease do not apply to a foreign lease.

In [B-120286](#), to illustrate, the government of the Netherlands passed a law permitting all landlords to raise rents by a maximum of 17 percent. The question was whether it was appropriate for a federal agency, as tenant under a lease in the Netherlands, to pay the lessor's demand for the increased rent. If the landlord sued, he would sue in a Dutch court which would apply Dutch law and award the rent increase. Therefore, GAO advised that the voucher should be paid. Applying the same rule in a 1957 case, GAO allowed the claim of a Greek landlord for half the fire insurance premium on property leased in Athens. [B-132152-O.M., June 13, 1957](#).

In [3 Comp. Gen. 864 \(1924\)](#), GAO applied the law of the Province of Quebec to construe the repair clause in a lease of space in Montreal. Under provincial law, repairing an interior wall was a "tenant's repair" unless otherwise specified in the lease. A similar case is [16 Comp. Gen. 639 \(1937\)](#), using Dutch law to allocate repair responsibilities under a lease of property in The Hague.

Currency fluctuations are another source of problems. The lease will specify whether payment is to be made in U.S. dollars or in foreign currency. In a 1946 case, a lease in China stipulated payment in yuan. Extreme inflation in China following World War II so devaluated the yuan that the monthly rental was worth approximately \$2, under which the landlord could not meet his repair and maintenance responsibilities. The State Department wanted to amend the lease to provide for payment in U.S. dollars equivalent to the amount originally bargained for. Concluding that Chinese law would almost certainly grant the landlord equitable relief, GAO concurred with the proposal, as long as sufficient appropriations were available for the increased rent. [B-55649, Feb. 19, 1946.](#)

The extreme case occurred in [B-189121, Nov. 30, 1977, reconsideration denied, B-189121, Apr. 15, 1983.](#) A lease in Cambodia provided for payment in Cambodian riels. For reasons not apparent, the landlord failed or refused to collect the rent checks when they were tendered. By the time the landlord filed a claim, the riel had been abolished and was worthless and there was no basis to direct payment in U.S. dollars.

Providing for payment in U.S. dollars does not guarantee a claim-free existence. In [B-185960, Aug. 19, 1976,](#) an Italian landlord claimed additional rent, alleging financial loss resulting from devaluation of the dollar. Devaluation *per se*, as a sovereign act, could not form the basis of relief. However, the claimant also cited a provision of the Italian Civil Code, the application of which to leases was not clear. GAO advised the agency (the Navy in that case) that it could pay the claim if it determined that the provision of Italian law could be applied. The Armed Services Board of Contract Appeals denied a similar claim in *Alka, S.A.*, ASBCA No. 38005, 91-3 B.C.A. ¶ 24,107 (1991), involving a lease in Athens, Greece, which specified that it would be governed by the laws of the United States, under which the lessor had to bear the risk.

If foreign law is to be considered and applied, the claimant has the burden of “proving” what that law is. It is not the responsibility of the adjudicating tribunal to chase it down. [B-189121, Apr. 15, 1983.](#)

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#### 4. Lease-Purchase Transactions

In the context of government real property, the term “lease-purchase” refers to a transaction in which a building is constructed to government specifications and then leased to the government under a long-term lease during which construction costs are amortized, at the end of which time title passes to the United States. Lease-purchases are also known as

“purchase contracts.” Putting things in budgetary perspective, a Senate committee made the following observation in connection with 1954 lease-purchase legislation:

“It should be made clear that there are generally three methods available for providing space for the permanent activities of the Federal Government. These are (1) by direct construction with appropriated funds, (2) by lease-purchase contracts with annual payments applied to the amortization of the initial cost over a period of years at the end of which title to the property would pass to the United States, and (3) by straight annual or term leasing under which no capital equity would accrue to the Government. Of these three methods, the overall cost of the first would be the lowest, the second would be the next lowest in cost, and the third would be the most costly method.”<sup>139</sup>

A variation is “lease-construction,” which is similar to lease-purchase except that, at the end of the lease, title does not pass to the government. Lease-construction is the most expensive method of all.<sup>140</sup>

The reason the government resorts to lease-purchase or lease-construction arrangements is the same reason we noted earlier that the government often leases space when ownership would be more cost-effective—budgetary constraints. As far back as the 1954 Public Buildings Purchase Contract Act, discussed below, the Senate Public Works Committee, after making the observation quoted above, was forced to say that “no reliable forecast can be made of the time when budgetary considerations would permit the appropriation of the huge sums required to meet these space needs by direct construction.”<sup>141</sup> Thus, while Congress has repeatedly resorted to lease-purchase over the second half of the twentieth century, it has done so with ambivalence.

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<sup>139</sup> S. Rep. No. 83-1084, at 2 (1954). This is the report of the Senate Committee on Public Works on what became the Public Buildings Purchase Contract Act of 1954.

<sup>140</sup> See H.R. Rep. No. 87-2050, 13 (1962), quoted in *Merriam v. Kunzig*, 476 F.2d 1233, 1237 n.3 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1973), and 51 *Comp. Gen.* 573, 575 (1972). This is the report of the House Committee on Appropriations on the Independent Offices Appropriation Act for 1963, Pub. L. No. 87-741, 76 Stat. 716 (Oct. 3, 1962).

<sup>141</sup> S. Rep. No. 83-1084, at 2.



The first major lease-purchase program was the Public Buildings Purchase Contract Act of 1954, Pub. L. No. 83-519, 68 Stat. 518 (July 22, 1954), 40 U.S.C. § 356 (2000), seemingly temporary, stopgap legislation designed to meet the needs of an expanding government in the post-World War II era.<sup>142</sup> The legislation authorized the General Services Administration (GSA) to enter into lease-purchase contracts with terms of at least 10 but not more than 25 years, with title to the property to vest in the United States not later than the expiration of the contract term. 40 U.S.C. § 356(a). The “temporary” nature of this legislation was revealed by a limitation that “no appropriations shall be made” for lease-purchase contracts not congressionally approved within 3 years of the legislation’s enactment. Section 411(e) of the Public Buildings Act of 1949, as added by section 101 of Public Law 83-519. (We will return to section 411(e) below.) The contracts were to provide for equal annual payments to amortize principal and interest, not to exceed limitations specified in appropriation acts. 40 U.S.C. § 356(a). GSA’s practice under this legislation was to first enter into contracts for site acquisition and preparation of plans and specifications, and then enter into either a single three-party contract (government, builder, investor) or separate construction and financing contracts. *See* B-144680, Nov. 7, 1961; [B-130934, June 26, 1957](#).

Several aspects of the 1954 legislation became prototypes for future lease-purchase programs, and many of the decisions therefore remain valid. One provision of the law directed reimbursement to the contractor of certain expenses, including “costs of carrying appropriate insurance.” 40 U.S.C. § 356(d)(3). This did not authorize the government to insure the property in its own right, or to require the contractor to carry insurance for the government’s protection. [35 Comp. Gen. 391 \(1956\)](#). An important element of the program was 40 U.S.C. § 356(h), providing for the property to remain on state and local tax rolls until title passes to the government. The statute did not expressly authorize the government to recover improperly assessed state or local taxes, but the government has this right without the need for statutory authority. *United States v. Dekalb County*, 729 F.2d 738 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1984).

As noted above, section 411(e) of Public Law 83-519 required prospectus approval by congressional oversight committees as a prerequisite to the

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<sup>142</sup> The act, formerly appearing at 40 U.S.C. § 356, was omitted from the 2002 codification of title 40 on the basis that it is now obsolete. *See* Pub. L. No. 107-217, 116 Stat. 1062, 1313, 1319 (Aug. 21, 2002); H.R. Rep. No. 107-479, at 149 (2002).



appropriation of funds. If actual costs exceeded the approved estimate, GAO had advised that there was no need to go back to the committees as long as the variation was “reasonable.” [37 Comp. Gen. 613 \(1958\)](#); [B-129326, Oct. 5, 1956](#). Of course, what is reasonable required a case-by-case evaluation. In [37 Comp. Gen. 613](#), for example, GAO did not regard a 15 percent increase in construction costs as a “reasonable variation.” As also noted above, section 411(e) limited the time for prospectus approval to 3 years after the date of enactment (July 22, 1954). Congressional discomfort with the program was also evident in another provision of the 1954 law, formerly 40 U.S.C. § 357, stating the congressional intent that the program not “constitute a substitute for or a replacement of any program for the construction by the United States of such structures as may be required from time to time by the Federal Government.”

When the 3-year period elapsed, Congress declined to renew the program. In considering what was to become the Independent Offices Appropriation Act of 1959, the House Appropriations Committee cited a GAO study which found that “it costs at least \$1.64 under lease-purchase to buy the same amount of building as \$1.00 does by direct appropriation.” H.R. Rep. No. 85-1543, at 3 (1958). Consequently, that act included a permanent prohibition on the use of funds “in this or any other Act . . . for payment for sites, planning or construction of any buildings by lease-purchase contracts.” Pub. L. No. 85-844, 72 Stat. 1063, 1067 (Aug. 28, 1958). Public Law 85-844 exempted 29 projects started or planned under the 1954 law and authorized one new project. *See* [B-160929, Apr. 20, 1967](#).

The prohibition did not, and of course could not, prevent legislating the occasional exception. *E.g.*, [B-139524, June 1, 1959](#). It also did not prevent GSA from soliciting bids on alternate bases, one of which was lease with option to purchase. [38 Comp. Gen. 703 \(1959\)](#). GSA had found in that case that, without the purchase option, bidders were amortizing construction costs over the first few years of the proposed lease term, so that the government would be paying those costs in any event. In addition, the military departments asserted the authority to use lease-purchase under what is now 10 U.S.C. § 2663(b), which authorizes them to “contract for or buy any interest in land” needed for specified purposes. GAO agreed, especially for projects which had been reported to Congress under 10 U.S.C. § 2662. [B-154420-O.M., July 7, 1964](#).

The prohibition of the Independent Offices Appropriation Act of 1959 applied by its terms to lease-purchase. It therefore did not touch lease-construction which, as we have noted, is even more costly to the taxpayer.

Congress filled this gap by enacting an appropriation rider for nine consecutive years starting with 1963, which prohibited the use of funds for lease-construction projects whose estimated cost exceeded \$200,000 without prospectus approval by the appropriate congressional committees. The provision is quoted in full in several decisions, for example, [45 Comp. Gen. 27, 29 \(1965\)](#) and [44 Comp. Gen. 491, 492 \(1965\)](#). Even though it was one of GSA's general provisions, it applied to all agencies funded under the act in which it appeared. [44 Comp. Gen. 491 \(1965\)](#). It was not governmentwide, however.

The prohibition was not limited to “total or substantially total occupancy” by the government but applied as well to shared occupancy situations. [45 Comp. Gen. 27 \(1965\)](#). However, the fact that an offered building was not actually in existence was not, in and of itself, sufficient to invoke the prohibition. The prohibition was regarded as inapplicable if there was a “*bona fide* intention on the part of the offeror to construct the building offered for lease irrespective of its securing a lease with GSA,” [51 Comp. Gen. 573, 576 \(1972\)](#), or if it was clear that the offeror was acting at its own risk with no promise or commitment by the government to lease the space, [45 Comp. Gen. 506 \(1966\)](#).

The last such prohibition appeared in the Independent Offices Appropriation Act for 1971, Pub. L. No. 91-556, 84 Stat. 1442, 1449 (Dec. 17, 1970). Two years later, Congress amended 40 U.S.C. § 3307 to add the prospectus approval requirement for leases discussed previously in this section. This evolution is described in *Merriam v. Kunzig*, 476 F.2d 1233, 1237–39 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 414 U.S. 911 (1973).

In considering the 1972 public buildings legislation, Congress faced the same problem it had faced in 1954—a backlog of needed federal construction with no foreseeable prospects of being able to appropriate the necessary amounts. Therefore, it again turned to the “stop-gap expedient”<sup>143</sup> of lease-purchase and enacted section 5 of the Public Buildings Amendments of 1972, 40 U.S.C. § 602a (2000).<sup>144</sup> The 1972 law authorized GSA to enter into lease-purchase contracts with up to 30-year terms, with title to the property to vest in the United States at or before the

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<sup>143</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 92-989, at 3 (1972) (report of the House Committee on Public Works).

<sup>144</sup> Like former 40 U.S.C. § 356, section 602a was omitted from the 2002 codification of title 40 on the basis that it was temporary and is now obsolete. See H.R. Rep. No. 107-479, at 153.

expiration of the contract term. 40 U.S.C. § 602a(a). Similar to the 1954 law, the 1972 act gave GSA a 3-year time limit on entering into the contracts. 40 U.S.C. § 602a(g).

Many of the 1972 provisions were patterned after the 1954 Purchase Contract Act. Payments to the contractor include reimbursement for “costs of carrying appropriate insurance,” and the property is to remain on state and local tax rolls until title passes to the United States. 40 U.S.C. §§ 602a(b)(3), 602a(d). Projects were subject to the prospectus approval requirements of 40 U.S.C. § 606(a). 40 U.S.C. § 602a(f).

GSA devised what it called a “dual system” of contracting to implement 40 U.S.C. § 602a. GSA would enter into either a single contract or a series of phased contracts for construction of each project. GSA would then enter into a financing contract for a group of projects with a “trustee,” who would obtain the necessary funds by selling “Participation Certificates” to private investors. GAO concurred that this scheme was within GSA’s authority under section 602a. [52 Comp. Gen. 517 \(1973\)](#); [52 Comp. Gen. 226 \(1972\)](#). GAO also agreed that the statutory 3-year cutoff (June 30, 1975) did not apply to revisions of projects whose basic purchase contract had been entered into prior to the cutoff, as long as the modification did not result in so substantial a change in the project from the one originally approved as to amount to a “new” project. [B-177610, Apr. 26, 1976](#).

GSA considered refinancing purchase contracts entered into under 40 U.S.C. § 602a by paying off the existing debt with funds obtained from the Federal Financing Bank. Since the refinancing would not involve any other project modifications, GAO found the proposal legally unobjectionable. [B-250236, Sept. 9, 1992](#).

Although the authority of 40 U.S.C. § 602a, like its 1954 predecessor, is no longer operative, lease-purchase activity goes on under a variety of other authorities. Congress can always legislate new projects, and has done so in a number of instances. Some examples are:

- Section 103 of the Energy and Water Development Appropriation Act, 1984, Pub. L. No. 98-50, 97 Stat. 247, 249 (July 14, 1983), authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to use lease-purchase to acquire an office building in New Orleans, Louisiana. GAO summarized some of the financial aspects in *Lease-Purchase: Corps of Engineers Acquisition of Building in New Orleans District*, GAO/AFMD-88-56FS (Washington, D.C.: June 7, 1988).

- The 1988 continuing resolution, Pub. L. No. 100-202, 101 Stat. 1329, 1329-405-07 (Dec. 22, 1987), authorized GSA to engage in several lease-purchase projects.
- Another 1987 statute, the Federal Triangle Development Act, 40 U.S.C. §§ 1101–1109 (2000), authorized development of a federal building complex in Washington, D.C., using lease-purchase, with planning and construction under the supervision of the then Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation. This was the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. Financing, discussed in [B-248647.2, Apr. 24, 1995](#), and [B-248647, Dec. 28, 1992](#), was provided by the Federal Financing Bank.
- Legislation enacted in 1989 authorizes the Department of Veterans Affairs to use lease-purchase to provide for the collocation of certain regional offices with medical centers (38 U.S.C. § 316) and to acquire up to three medical facilities (38 U.S.C. § 8103(d)). Both provisions require that obligations be “subject to the availability of appropriations for that purpose,” and therefore do not constitute contract authority. [B-239435, Aug. 24, 1990](#).

GSA’s authority is now found in 40 U.S.C. § 585, in conjunction with the prospectus approval requirement of 40 U.S.C. § 3307. Section 585(a)(1), GSA’s general leasing authority in the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act, authorizes leases of up to 20 years “in a building (or improvement) which is in existence or being erected by the lessor” to accommodate a federal agency. This provision has been regarded as sufficient authority for lease-purchase or lease-construction arrangements, and was in fact used during the time period between the 1954 and 1972 programs. *E.g.*, [38 Comp. Gen. 703 \(1959\)](#); [B-166868, July 15, 1969](#); [B-157423-O.M., Sept. 14, 1965](#); [B-156917-O.M., June 24, 1965](#).

Section 585(c), which first made its appearance in the 1987 continuing resolution, Pub. L. No. 99-500, 100 Stat. 1783, 1783-321 (Oct. 18, 1986), provides: “Amounts made available to the General Services Administration for the payment of rent may be used to lease space, for a period of not more than 30 years in buildings erected on land owned by the Government.” This reflects a continuation of the long-standing policy of the Congress that “no public building shall be erected on land not owned by the United States.” 6 Comp. Dec. 877, 878 (1900).

An aspect of lease-purchase financing that produced controversy in the 1990s is scorekeeping. “Scorekeeping” may be defined as the “process of estimating the budgetary effects of pending legislation” including, of course, appropriation bills, “and comparing them to a baseline, such as a budget resolution, or to any limits that may be set in law.” GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 88. See also the closely related definition of “Scorekeeping Rules” (*id.* at 88–89) and [B-239435, Aug. 24, 1990](#), discussing scorekeeping in the context of lease-purchases. For a number of years, GAO has pointed out the problems scorekeeping rules pose for real property acquisition. See, e.g., GAO, *Budget Issues: Budget Scorekeeping for Acquisition of Federal Buildings*, GAO/T-AIMD-94-189 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 20, 1994); *The Budget for Fiscal Year 1991: Scoring of GSA Lease-Purchases*, GAO/AFMD-91-44 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 15, 1991).

Prior to 1991, lease-purchase was scored the same as a straight lease—spread over the period of the lease, one year’s budget authority at a time. This produced a budgetary bias in favor of the more expensive lease-purchase option. Scoring rules were changed in 1990 to require scoring the full costs of a lease-purchase up front. While this had the benefit of “eliminating the artificial advantage previously given to lease-purchases,” it introduced a new bias in favor of operating leases, still scored one year at a time. GAO/T-AIMD-94-189, at 3.

Concern over the scorekeeping issue is one of the factors in GAO’s designation of real property as a high-risk area since 2003. See section A of this chapter. These rules make operating leases “look cheaper” even though they are more costly than construction or lease-purchases. GAO, *Federal Real Property: Reliance on Costly Leasing to Meet New Space Needs Is an Ongoing Problem*, GAO-06-136T (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 6, 2005), at 7–8. For example—

“for lease-purchase arrangements, the net present value of the government’s legal obligations over the life of the contract is to be scored in the budget in the first year. For construction or purchase, the budget authority for the full construction costs or purchase price is to be scored in the first year. However, for many of the government’s operating leases—including GSA leases, which, according to GSA, account for over 70 percent of the government’s leasing expenditures and are self-insured in the event of cancellation—only the budget authority to cover the

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government's commitment for an annual lease payment is required to be scored in the budget. Given this, while operating leases are generally more costly over time compared with other options, they add much less to a single year's appropriation total than these other arrangements, making operating leases a more attractive option from the agency's budget perspective."

*Id.*

The Office of Management and Budget Circular No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget* (July 2, 2007), addresses the scoring of lease-purchases in some detail in Appendix B. It provides that, for scorekeeping purposes, when an agency is authorized to enter into a lease-purchase, budget authority to cover the total costs expected over the life of the lease is to be scored in the first year of the lease. OMB Cir. No. A-11, app. B, § 1(a). Outlays for a lease-purchase in which the federal government assumes substantial risk are spread across the period during which the contractor constructs, manufactures, or purchases the asset; where the private sector retains substantial risk, outlays are spread across the lease term. *Id.* Where the contract includes a cancellation clause, an amount sufficient to cover the costs associated with cancellation of the contract would be scored. *Id.* It adds in this regard:

"The up-front budget authority required for both lease-purchases and capital leases . . . equals the present value of the minimum lease payments excluding payments for identifiable annual operating expenses . . . discounted . . . using the appropriate interest rate. . . . Additional budget authority equal to Treasury's cost of financing (i.e., the imputed interest cost) plus any annual operating expenses will be recorded on an annual basis over the lease term."

*Id.* § 2(b). However, as noted previously, 40 U.S.C. § 585(a)(2) provides that the obligation of amounts for leases under that section is limited to the current fiscal year for which payments are due notwithstanding the Antideficiency Act. The relationship of these items has yet to be definitively resolved, and the budgetary treatment of lease-purchases is likely to remain a concern.

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## F. Public Buildings and Improvements

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### 1. Construction

#### a. General Funding Provisions (1) 41 U.S.C. § 12

Originally enacted in 1868,<sup>145</sup> 41 U.S.C. § 12 provides: “No contract shall be entered into for the erection, repair, or furnishing of any public building, or for any public improvement which shall bind the Government to pay a larger sum of money than the amount in the Treasury appropriated for the specific purpose.”

This is one of the permanent funding statutes through which Congress implements its control of the public purse, and has often been cited in tandem with other funding statutes such as the purpose statute (31 U.S.C. § 1301(a)) or the Antideficiency Act (31 U.S.C. § 1341). *E.g.*, 42 Comp. Gen. 226, 227 (1962); 41 Comp. Gen. 255, 257–58 (1961); 21 Op. Att’y Gen. 244, 247–48 (1895). Its purpose, as with the other funding statutes, is to prevent the executive from creating obligations beyond those contemplated and authorized by Congress. 38 Comp. Gen. 758, 761 (1959), *citing* 21 Op. Att’y Gen. at 248. A contractor who does work in excess of the amount appropriated can recover only up to the limit of the appropriation, even though the overobligation may have been induced by government error. *Sutton v. United States*, 256 U.S. 575 (1921).

In addition, a government officer or employee who knowingly acts in a way that would violate 41 U.S.C. § 12 “shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than one year,” or both. 18 U.S.C. § 435 (enacted as part of the same 1868 legislation as 41 U.S.C. § 12).<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Act of July 25, 1868, ch. 233, § 3, 15 Stat. 171, 177.

<sup>146</sup> The revision notes for this section state that penalties for such violations were reduced many years ago to avoid having to classify the offender as a felon. 18 U.S.C. § 435 note. Nevertheless, inflation being what it is, the fine for a violation of this provision (a “class A misdemeanor”) now can be up to \$100,000. 18 U.S.C. §§ 3559(a)(6), 3571(b)(5).



For construction within the District of Columbia, 41 U.S.C. § 12 is reinforced by another statute, 40 U.S.C. § 8106,<sup>147</sup> which provides that “[a] building or structure shall not be erected on any reservation, park, or public grounds of the Federal Government in the District of Columbia without express authority of Congress.” While 41 U.S.C. § 12 has spawned numerous decisions, one finds little mention of 40 U.S.C. § 8106 apart from the occasional passing reference such as in [20 Comp. Gen. 272, 275 \(1940\)](#).

Much ink has been spilled trying to decide just what is or is not a “public building” for purposes of 41 U.S.C. § 12. GAO has never attempted a precise definition, but has used more of what one might call a “we know one when we see one” approach. Not that difficult, one decision suggested—“the term ‘building’ . . . instantly calls to mind a structure of some kind having walls and a roof.” [45 Comp. Gen. 525, 526 \(1966\)](#). *See also* [B-119846, July 23, 1954](#) (“structure of brick enclosing a space within its walls and covered with a roof,” which “any average person” would recognize as a building); [B-165289-O.M., Aug. 26, 1969](#) (structure with a foundation, walls, separate rooms, and a roof fits the ordinary meaning of the term).<sup>148</sup> Clearly, the statute applies to public buildings which are more or less permanent, the term “permanent” referring not so much to the mode of construction as to contemplated use. Thus, the following have been treated as public buildings for purposes of 41 U.S.C. § 12:

- Industrial type building with railroad siding for hydrostatic testing, painting, and maintaining specially designed tank cars used for transporting helium. [38 Comp. Gen. 392 \(1958\)](#).
- Quonset hut attached to a poured concrete base to be used for storage purposes. [30 Comp. Gen. 487 \(1951\)](#).
- Frame buildings with cement foundations, cement floors, and shingled roofs, to be used for storage and repair of tools and equipment. [5 Comp. Gen. 575 \(1926\)](#).
- Hangars, shops, and storehouses on landing fields. [2 Comp. Gen. 14 \(1922\)](#), *modified*, [2 Comp. Gen. 133 \(1922\)](#).

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<sup>147</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 68.

<sup>148</sup> Such wisdom is not the exclusive province of GAO. *E.g., In re Amber S.*, 39 Cal. Rptr. 2d 672 (Cal. Ct. App. 1995) (building for purposes of state burglary statute is “any structure which has walls on all sides and is covered by a roof”).



- Pontoon storage shed. 16 Comp. Dec. 685 (1910).

An extension or addition to a public building is also covered. [A-59252, Dec. 28, 1934](#); [A-40231, Jan. 11, 1932](#).

Some examples of structures which have been held not to be “buildings” within the scope of 41 U.S.C. § 12, regardless of permanency, are:

- Automated self-service unit covered by canopy and containing various postal vending machines, weight scales, and a parcel depository unit, to be placed in shopping center. [45 Comp. Gen. 525 \(1966\)](#).
- Large testing chamber with 50-inch concrete walls for use in a research project. [39 Comp. Gen. 822 \(1960\)](#). *See also* [B-50958, Aug. 9, 1945](#) (heavy concrete chamber partly above and partly below ground intended for temporary use in testing explosives).
- Greenhouses. [B-141793-O.M., Feb. 17, 1960](#). Earlier decisions had exempted temporary greenhouses. *E.g.*, [7 Comp. Gen. 629 \(1928\)](#). The 1960 case extended the proposition to greenhouses that were more or less permanent.

With respect to temporary structures, the demarcation between the permissible and the impermissible is not as bright as one might wish. The statement found in numerous decisions over the decades is that 41 U.S.C. § 12 applies to “any structure in the form of a building not clearly of a temporary character.” *E.g.*, [42 Comp. Gen. 212, 214 \(1962\)](#); [9 Comp. Gen. 75, 76 \(1929\)](#); [2 Comp. Gen. 14 \(1922\)](#), *modified*, [2 Comp. Gen. 133 \(1922\)](#). *See also* [B-303145, Dec. 7, 2005](#);<sup>149</sup> [26 Comp. Dec. 829 \(1920\)](#). The decisions thus attempt to strike a balance between the language of the statute, which does not distinguish between permanent and temporary structures (*e.g.*, [10 Comp. Gen. 140, 142 \(1930\)](#)), and a result which could in some cases border on the ridiculous.

As one example, the statute has been found applicable to a temporary shed or storehouse of frame construction with sheet metal siding, to be used to

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<sup>149</sup> This decision raised a similar issue, arising under provisions of title 10, United States Code, of whether the Defense Department was properly using operations and maintenance funds as opposed to construction funds for certain allegedly temporary construction. The decision and these title 10 provisions are discussed further in section F.1.b(1) of this chapter.

house motor vehicles. [6 Comp. Gen. 619 \(1927\)](#). Other examples include “temporary sheds for the shelter of farm animals; portable houses for temporary use of employees; temporary portable buildings for use in the detention and treatment of aliens; barns, sheds, cottages, *etc.*, of frame construction of a temporary nature with dirt floors and contemplated to be destroyed.” [42 Comp. Gen. 212, 214 \(1962\)](#).<sup>150</sup> The fact that a structure is prefabricated and movable is not dispositive. *Id.* at 215.

On the other hand, 41 U.S.C. § 12 has been found inapplicable in the following cases, summarized in [7 Comp. Gen. 629, 630 \(1928\)](#):

- Wood frame shed to house a fumigation tank used in fumigating cotton against the pink Mexican bollworm. [A-17265, Mar. 16, 1927](#).
- A cabinet 30 feet square with glass sides, for use in studying light in relation to certain diseases. [A-18335, May 16, 1927](#).

While these examples do not lend themselves to the formulation of a black-letter rule, it will be easier to find an exception in the case of a structure to be used for a clearly temporary experiment or research project, and correspondingly more difficult to find one where the structure is to be used for either residential or office space for employees. *See* [10 Comp. Gen. 140 \(1930\)](#); [B-50958, Aug. 9, 1945](#). Also, a structure is not temporary merely because the agency calls it temporary. [63 Comp. Gen. 422, 436 \(1984\)](#) (airfields and other military facilities in Honduras); [21 Comp. Dec. 420 \(1914\)](#) (various residential structures).

The “specific purpose” requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 12 applies not only to public buildings but to “public improvements” as well. The term in this context refers to improvements to real property. [45 Comp. Gen. 525, 526 \(1966\)](#). Thus, major alterations or renovations to a public building are public improvements for purposes of 41 U.S.C. § 12. *E.g.*, [39 Comp. Gen. 723 \(1960\)](#). Several cases in this category have involved the conversion of a building to a different use: [38 Comp. Gen. 758 \(1959\)](#) and [38 Comp. Gen. 588 \(1959\)](#) (conversion of hospital building for occupancy by federal agency); [37 Comp. Gen. 767 \(1958\)](#) and [B-135411, Mar. 24, 1958](#)

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<sup>150</sup> The alien case, which somewhat inexplicably does not cite 41 U.S.C. § 12, is [13 Comp. Dec. 355 \(1906\)](#). The other examples in the quoted passage appear to be from unpublished decisions of the Comptroller of the Treasury. *See* [6 Comp. Gen. at 621](#). Unfortunately, the actual texts of these are no longer available as a practical matter.

(conversion of buildings into schools); [B-76841, Aug. 23, 1948](#) (conversion of school building to clinic); [B-170587-O.M., Oct. 21, 1970](#) (conversion of office space into laboratories); and [B-151369-O.M., Nov. 15, 1963](#), and [B-151369-O.M., Sept. 10, 1964](#) (conversion of former bull barn to research laboratory). The work in all of these cases was held subject to 41 U.S.C. § 12.

Similarly, the term “public improvement” as used in 41 U.S.C. § 12 has been held to include the installation of an elevator in a government building ([8 Comp. Gen. 335 \(1929\)](#)); the enlargement and modernization of a cafeteria ([27 Comp. Gen. 634 \(1948\)](#)); and the installation of central air conditioning in a library building ([B-118779, Nov. 14, 1969](#)).

Another line of cases holds that minor structural alterations necessary to accommodate specialized equipment needed in the performance of an authorized function may be funded from general operating appropriations. [16 Comp. Gen. 816 \(1937\)](#); [16 Comp. Gen. 160 \(1936\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 1014 \(1926\)](#); [3 Comp. Gen. 812 \(1924\)](#). While these cases do not mention 41 U.S.C. § 12, the clear implication is that the minor alterations do not rise to the level of public improvements for purposes of the statute. *See* [B-170587-O.M., Oct. 21, 1970](#). The “exception” of [3 Comp. Gen. 812](#) and its progeny is limited to specialized work or equipment, and does not extend to alterations designed to improve a building for office purposes generally. [17 Comp. Gen. 1050 \(1938\)](#).

The temporary *versus* permanent distinction discussed above in the context of public buildings can also be relevant in the case of improvements. If an agency would be authorized to construct a temporary facility without having to comply with 41 U.S.C. § 12, the statute would be equally inapplicable to the repair of an existing government-owned facility for the same temporary use. [B-117124, Oct. 1, 1953](#).

The requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 12 also applies to public improvements which do not involve buildings, such as roads and airfields. [63 Comp. Gen. 422, 435–36 \(1984\)](#); [41 Comp. Gen. 255 \(1961\)](#); [29 Comp. Gen. 235 \(1949\)](#).

Once it is determined that a given building or improvement is within the scope of 41 U.S.C. § 12, the clearest way to satisfy the statute is, naturally, for the item to be explicitly addressed in the relevant appropriation act. However, this degree of explicitness is not absolutely required. *E.g.*, [B-8816, Mar. 9, 1940](#) (appropriation for construction of public works

project is available to construct buildings necessary to the project even though not specified in the appropriation). The essence of 41 U.S.C. § 12 is not that public buildings and improvements are in any way bad or undesirable, but merely that they are sufficiently important—and sufficiently costly—that agencies should not undertake them without congressional sanction. Thus, for example, where (1) the Federal Civil Defense Act authorized an agency to renovate facilities, (2) the relevant appropriation provided a lump sum to “[carry out] the provisions of the Federal Civil Defense Act,” and (3) the agency had included the desired renovations in its budget submission, this was enough to satisfy 41 U.S.C. § 12. [39 Comp. Gen. 723 \(1960\)](#). In a case which included elements (1) and (2) of this formula but not (3), GAO concluded that 41 U.S.C. § 12 was not satisfied and the appropriation was not available, because “it is clear that the [improvement] is an entirely different project or purpose from any made known to the Congress and for which the Congress appropriated funds.” [37 Comp. Gen. 767, 771 \(1958\)](#). Merely burying an item in a budget submission without the required nexus in the appropriation act (item (3) without item (2)) is equally insufficient. [B-76841, Aug. 23, 1948](#).

Short of the “formula” of [39 Comp. Gen. 723](#), or some comparable set of circumstances from which congressional approval can be necessarily implied, general operating appropriations are not available for items within the scope of 41 U.S.C. § 12. The term “necessary expenses” in an appropriation is not enough. [38 Comp. Gen. 758 \(1959\)](#); [4 Comp. Gen. 1063 \(1925\)](#). Similarly, a necessary expense justification as described in Chapter 4, however legitimate, is not enough to overcome the statutory hurdle of 41 U.S.C. § 12. [42 Comp. Gen. 212, 215 \(1962\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 575, 577 \(1926\)](#). *Cf.*, [B-303145, Dec. 7, 2005](#) (making essentially the same point in relation to title 10 United States Code provisions, discussed in section F.1.b(1) of this chapter, that restrict the use of operations and maintenance appropriations for military construction). Exceptions have occurred in a very few cases in which failure to construct the building or improvement would literally “render it impossible to accomplish the purpose for which the appropriation was made.” [10 Comp. Gen. 140, 141 \(1930\)](#). One example is [2 Comp. Gen. 133 \(1922\)](#) (since “it will be impossible to maintain and operate the airplane mail service *via* Chicago during the year for which the appropriation was made without the erection of hangars, shops, and storehouses on the landing field at Chicago, the erection of such facilities is authorized notwithstanding the general restriction on the erection of public buildings and public improvements not specifically appropriated for”). Use of a general operating appropriation in

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disregard of 41 U.S.C. § 12 can result in violation of the Antideficiency Act. *E.g.*, [B-118779, Nov. 14, 1969](#).

The requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 12 attaches not only to a direct payment to a contractor, but as well to an advance or reimbursement to a working capital (or other revolving) fund. [30 Comp. Gen. 453 \(1951\)](#); [B-119846, May 27, 1954](#). In other words, the device of a revolving fund cannot be used to circumvent the statute. However, the statute does not apply to the expenditure of grant funds by a grantee unless so provided in the applicable program legislation, regulations, or terms of the grant agreement. [B-173589, Sept. 30, 1971](#).

A common sense exception is found in [7 Comp. Gen. 472 \(1928\)](#). Legislation authorized the appropriation of \$150,000 toward the erection of a memorial building to be built with a mix of appropriated funds and private donations. The legislation further provided that the appropriation could constitute no more than half of the total cost. The Comptroller General advised that once the appropriation was made and the donations in hand, a contract for the total cost of the building would not violate 41 U.S.C. § 12, even though it would obviously involve “a larger sum [of money] than that appropriated for the specific purpose.” *Id.* at 474.

(2) Contract authority under partial appropriations

A statute originally enacted in 1908, 40 U.S.C. § 3171,<sup>151</sup> recognizes that, for any number of reasons, Congress may not wish to fully fund the construction of a public building up front. It provides:

“Unless specifically directed otherwise, the Administrator of General Services may make a contract within the full limit of the cost fixed by Congress for the acquisition of land for sites, or for the enlargement of sites, for public buildings, or for the erection, remodeling, extension, alteration, and repairs of public buildings, even though an appropriation is made for only part of the amount necessary to carry out legislation authorizing that purpose.”

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<sup>151</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 261 before the codification of title 40.

Thus, if Congress has established the total cost of the construction or renovation of a public building, or of related site acquisition, and subsequently appropriates only part of the money, the General Services Administration (GSA) may enter into a legally binding contract for the full project, not to exceed the total authorized cost.

There is surprisingly little discussion of this statute in the decisions. Our research has disclosed only [20 Comp. Gen. 272, 274 \(1940\)](#), noting almost in passing that 40 U.S.C. § 3171 effectively modifies 41 U.S.C. § 12 to the extent of its terms. What is clear is that, to that extent, 40 U.S.C. § 3171 authorizes GSA to enter into contracts in excess or advance of appropriations, and therefore is an exception to the Antideficiency Act. A contract authorized by 40 U.S.C. § 3171 is “authorized by law” for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 1341(a). *See* [28 Comp. Gen. 163 \(1948\)](#) (construing similar authority appearing in an appropriation act). Without such authority, the contract would have to be made subject to future appropriations and could confer no rights beyond the amount of the partial appropriation. [14 Comp. Dec. 755 \(1908\)](#); [13 Comp. Dec. 478 \(1907\)](#).

### (3) Duration of construction appropriations

Two provisions of law authorize appropriations for the construction of public buildings to remain available beyond the end of the fiscal year in which they are appropriated. First, 31 U.S.C. § 1307 provides as follows: “Amounts appropriated to construct public buildings remain available until completion of the work. When a building is completed and outstanding liabilities for the construction are paid, balances remaining shall revert immediately to the Treasury.”

The second statute is 31 U.S.C. § 1301(c), which prohibits an appropriation contained in a regular, annual appropriation act from being construed to be permanent or available beyond the fiscal year unless it expressly so states or unless it is for one of four specifically named categories—rivers and harbors, lighthouses, public buildings, or the pay of the Navy and Marine Corps.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> There are also some agency-specific statutes which authorize construction appropriations to remain available beyond the end of the fiscal year. *E.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 2860 (military construction); 7 U.S.C. § 2209b (certain Department of Agriculture appropriations); 14 U.S.C. § 656(a) (Coast Guard). Their effect is similar to the general provisions discussed in the text.

Since approximately 1970, most if not all appropriation acts have included a general provision which states that “[n]o part of any appropriation contained in this Act shall remain available for obligation beyond the current fiscal year unless expressly so provided herein.”<sup>153</sup> The key phrase is “unless expressly so provided herein.” The effect of this general provision is to override statutes like 31 U.S.C. § 1307 and to render them little more than authorizations which require specific language in the appropriation if they are to be implemented. [58 Comp. Gen. 321 \(1979\)](#); [50 Comp. Gen. 857 \(1971\)](#). Consequently, in an appropriation act which contains this general provision, a construction appropriation is no different from any other appropriation with respect to duration; it is a 1-year appropriation unless it expressly specifies otherwise.

Prior to the advent of the general provision quoted above, 31 U.S.C. § 1307 had been construed—and given a fairly narrow application—in somewhat over a dozen decisions. If an appropriation act were to be enacted which did not contain the “current fiscal year” general provision or something comparable, 31 U.S.C. §§ 1301(c) and 1307, and the related case law, would come into more direct play.

Essentially, the early decisions found 31 U.S.C. §§ 1301(c) and 1307 applicable only to appropriations which provide for the original construction of public buildings, rejecting attempts to apply the authority broadly to any appropriation somehow related to a construction project. [36 Comp. Gen. 790, 793 \(1957\)](#); [8 Comp. Gen. 519, 520 \(1929\)](#). Thus, the authority does not apply to appropriations for the following because they are not appropriations for the construction of a public building:

- Purchase of land. [17 Comp. Gen. 631 \(1938\)](#).
- Clearance of a site upon which a building would later be constructed. [8 Comp. Gen. 519 \(1929\)](#).
- Preparation of plans or designs. [36 Comp. Gen. 790 \(1957\)](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 702 \(1940\)](#).

<sup>153</sup> See, e.g., Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, Pub. L. No. 121-161, § 603, 121 Stat. 1844, 2013 (Dec. 26, 2007) (“None of the funds appropriated in this Act shall remain available for obligation beyond the current fiscal year, nor may any be transferred to other appropriations, unless expressly so provided herein.”). See also Chapter 2, section C.2.d, for a discussion of this language and its origin.



- Repairs or improvements. 1 Comp. Gen. 435 (1922), *aff'd upon reconsideration*, 1 Comp. Gen. 532 (1922).
- Remodeling and/or enlarging. 10 Comp. Gen. 454 (1931); 7 Comp. Gen. 619 (1928).

The no-year authorization of 31 U.S.C. § 1307 also does not apply, regardless of whether the appropriation is one for public building construction, if the appropriation contains other language restricting it to some definite time period. 24 Comp. Gen. 942 (1945); 23 Comp. Gen. 150 (1943); 18 Comp. Gen. 969 (1939); 6 Comp. Gen. 783 (1927). Nor does it apply to an amount earmarked for construction in a lump-sum Salaries and Expenses appropriation. 37 Comp. Gen. 246 (1957). The earmark has the same obligational availability as the parent appropriation unless expressly provided otherwise. *Id.* at 248; A-25480, Dec. 18, 1928.

In sum, an appropriation (1) for the original construction of a public building, (2) which does not specify any other period of availability, and (3) which is contained in an appropriation act which does not include the “current fiscal year” general provision or some comparable limitation, may be regarded as a no-year appropriation without the need for the traditional “to be available until expended” language. 36 Comp. Gen. at 793–94; B-154459, Dec. 9, 1964.<sup>154</sup>

#### (4) Design fees

Before a shovel ever touches the ground, somebody has to design the building. Just about every construction project includes the services of professional architects and engineers (A&E). Those services range from the preparation of plans and specifications to inspection and supervisory services during actual construction. At one time, there was no authority to hire a private architect to prepare plans for a public building. 21 Comp. Dec. 336 (1914). Today, the United States Code is dotted with statutes authorizing the government to contract for A&E services. Among the more important provisions are 40 U.S.C. § 3308 (General Services Administration), 10 U.S.C. §§ 4540(a), 7212(a), and 9540(a) (Army, Navy, and Air Force, respectively); and 38 U.S.C. § 8106(b) (Veterans Affairs medical facilities).

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<sup>154</sup> Although there was no need for the decisions to so specify at the time, the appropriation acts in these two cases did not include the “current fiscal year” provision.



Contracting for A&E services is governed by 40 U.S.C. §§ 1101–1104,<sup>155</sup> which prescribes a negotiation procedure based on competence as well as price. In this regard, section 1101 provides: “The policy of the Federal Government is to publicly announce all requirements for architectural and engineering services, and to negotiate contracts for architectural and engineering services on the basis of demonstrated competence and qualification for the type of professional services required and at fair and reasonable prices.”

These provisions do not apply merely because part of the contract work will be done by architects or engineers; rather, they apply to a procurement which “uniquely or to a substantial or dominant extent logically requires performance by a professionally licensed and qualified A-E firm.”

[61 Comp. Gen. 377, 378 \(1982\)](#). They also apply to small business set-asides, including those under section 8(a) of the Small Business Act, 15 U.S.C. § 637(a). [59 Comp. Gen. 20 \(1979\)](#); [B-129709, Oct. 14, 1976](#). GAO will not question an agency’s decision to compete an A&E contract rather than negotiate unless the agency’s actions demonstrate a clear intent to circumvent the Act. [62 Comp. Gen. 297 \(1983\)](#). For projects within the definition of “public building” in the Public Buildings Act of 1959, 40 U.S.C. § 3301(a)(5),<sup>156</sup> the A&E procurement is done by the General Services Administration unless delegated to another agency. 40 U.S.C. §§ 3308, 3313.<sup>157</sup>

The Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-106, div. D, § 4105, 110 Stat. 186, 645–49 (Feb. 10, 1996) (often referred to as the “Federal Acquisition Reform Act of 1996”), authorized “two-phase” selection procedures for “design-build” acquisitions. These procedures, codified at 10 U.S.C. § 2305a and 41 U.S.C. § 253m, authorize the use of two-phase selection procedures for entering into a contract for the design and construction a public building, facility, or work. The conference report on the Act indicates that this provision was “not intended to modify the Brooks Architect-Engineers Act [40 U.S.C. §§ 1101–1104].” H.R. Rep. No. 104-450, at 966 (1996). Consequently, the two-phase approach represents an alternative to the “design-bid-build” procedures in 40 U.S.C. §§ 1101–1104. *See Fluor*

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<sup>155</sup> These provisions were formerly known as the “Brooks Architect-Engineers Act” and appeared at 40 U.S.C. §§ 541–544.

<sup>156</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 612(1).

<sup>157</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 609 and 614, respectively.

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*Enterprises, Inc. v. United States*, 64 Fed. Cl. 461 (2005), which discusses at length the interplay between “design-build” acquisitions and the “design-bid-build” procedures. *Fluor* describes the two approaches as follows:

“‘Design-Bid-Build’ and ‘Design-Build’ are industry terms referring to the method by which infrastructure projects are procured. [In] [d]esign-bid-build . . . the services of a design professional are procured first, and the building contractor is selected later, after the design work is completed. Conversely, in the design-build model, both design and construction services are procured from a single entity (which might be a single construction firm with in-house design professionals or a team of construction and design professionals assembled for a project) in a single procurement process.”

*Id.* at 482.

Architects and engineers, like the rest of us, expect to be paid for their services. They should be paid, says the provision in 40 U.S.C. § 1101 quoted above, “at fair and reasonable prices.” In order to keep “fair and reasonable” from becoming excessive, a series of statutes imposes a percentage ceiling on A&E fees. Civilian procurements are governed by 41 U.S.C. § 254(b), enacted as part of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, which provides in relevant part that—

“a fee inclusive of the contractor’s costs and not in excess of 6 percent of the estimated cost, exclusive of fees, as determined by the agency head at the time of entering into the contract, of the project to which such fee is applicable is authorized in contracts for architectural or engineering services relating to any public works or utility project.”

A very similar provision, governing procurements by the armed forces, is found in 10 U.S.C. § 2306(d). The fee limitation of 41 U.S.C. § 254(b) applies to all civilian A&E procurements unless expressly exempted. *E.g.*, [46 Comp. Gen. 183, 189–90](#) (1966) (ceiling applies to A&E services procured under authority of what is now 38 U.S.C. § 513); [B-152306, Jan. 5, 1967](#) (limited exemption under 22 U.S.C. § 296). By its plain terms, 41 U.S.C. § 254(b) applies where A&E services are used even if they are

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only a minor part of the overall contract. *Fluor*, 64 Fed. Cl. at 479–82.<sup>158</sup> The limitation in 10 U.S.C. § 2306(d) applies to the Coast Guard and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as well as the military departments. 10 U.S.C. § 2303.

In addition, the Department of the Army is authorized to procure A&E services “for producing and delivering designs, plans, drawings, and specifications needed for any public works or utilities project of the Department.” 10 U.S.C. § 4540(a). Section 4540(b) then provides: “The fee for any service under this section may not be more than 6 percent of the estimated cost, as determined by the Secretary, of the project to which it applies.” Nearly identical limitations exist for the Navy (10 U.S.C. § 7212(b)) and the Air Force (10 U.S.C. § 9540(b)). See [46 Comp. Gen. 556, 559 \(1966\)](#).

Certain terminology is common to all of the statutes. Thus, the fee is to be based on the *estimated cost* of a *project* relating to *public works or utilities*. GAO has offered the following guidance with respect to “estimated costs”:

“[I]n the absence of definite legislative expression otherwise, the term ‘estimated cost’ of a project may be said to comprehend the reasonable cost of a project erected in accordance with the plans and specifications, and that the inclusion of cost elements generally not covered by the plans and specifications such as furniture and equipment installed for the occupancy and use of a project would appear to be questionable.”

[B-146312-O.M., Nov. 28, 1961](#), at 8. “Project” means the structure or public work “for which the architect-engineer undertakes in his contract to prepare the plans, *etc.*, and not any larger budgetary or other project of which it may form a part.” [40 Comp. Gen. 188, 191 \(1960\)](#). Thus, if the overall project is to erect a complex of three buildings, the “project” for purposes of an A&E contract covering one of the buildings is that one building, not all three. A broader definition “would allow the architect-engineer’s fee to be based on the cost of work for which he rendered no

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<sup>158</sup> The *Fluor* court went on to hold that the A&E portion of the contract in that case was void for failure to comply with the statute, but recovery of A&E fees was allowed on a *quantum meruit* basis. *Fluor*, 64 Fed. Cl. at 495–97.

service.” *Id.* See also 47 Comp. Gen. 61, 67 (1967); B-152306, Jan. 24, 1967; B-115013-O.M., Apr. 28, 1953.

The term “public works” has been addressed under a variety of statutes. The term generally relates to construction work. 17 Comp. Gen. 545 (1938), *modified*, A-90922, Feb. 23, 1938. It has been broadly defined as fixed works or movable property the title to which is vested in the United States. 35 Comp. Gen. 454, 455 (1956); 19 Comp. Gen. 467, 470 (1939). A similarly broad definition is “all fixed works contracted for public use.” 35 Comp. Gen. at 455; 19 Comp. Gen. at 469; 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 418, 422 (1936). The term “utilities” in the construction context “is commonly understood to have reference to such items as sewer and water facilities, heating devices, electric wires and fixtures, *etc.*” 21 Comp. Gen. 167, 170 (1941). While these cases did not involve the A&E fee limitation, the same definitions should nevertheless be applied. B-146312-O.M., Nov. 28, 1961. The Navy statute also includes construction of vessels or aircraft. 10 U.S.C. § 7212(a).

The A&E fee limitation statutes—41 U.S.C. § 254(b), 10 U.S.C. § 2306(b), and the three armed forces statutes, 10 U.S.C. §§ 4540, 7212, and 9540—apply to all contracts regardless of type, cost-plus as well as fixed-price. 46 Comp. Gen. 556 (1966); 46 Comp. Gen. 183 (1966); B-115013-O.M., Apr. 28, 1953.

Differences in the statutory language have produced some controversy over precisely what to include when assessing compliance with the fee limitation, that is, what amounts are included in the total subject to the 6 percent limit. The 1939 statutes authorize the procurement of A&E services for the production and delivery of plans and designs, and the fee limitation in each of the 1939 statutes applies to services “under this section.” Thus, it is clearly the case that, under 10 U.S.C. §§ 4540, 7212, and 9540, the 6 percent limitation relates only to the production and delivery of plans and designs. 46 Comp. Gen. 556, 564 (1966); 22 Comp. Gen. 464 (1942). If the A&E contract includes supervisory services as well as production and delivery, the 6 percent does not apply to those amounts paid to the contractor for the supervisory services. 22 Comp. Gen. at 466. To take a simplified illustration, the 6 percent ceiling on a \$100 construction contract is \$6. If the A&E contract includes \$5 for production and delivery and another \$5 for supervisory services, there is no violation.

The remaining A&E statutes—10 U.S.C. § 2306(d) and 41 U.S.C. § 254(b)—do not include the specific “production and delivery” language. At one

time, GAO was inclined to view the limitation under these statutes as applicable to the total contract price under the A&E contract for whatever services it may have included, not just production and delivery. [46 Comp. Gen. 573 \(1966\)](#) (41 U.S.C. § 254(b)); [46 Comp. Gen. 556, 564–65 \(1966\)](#) (10 U.S.C. § 2306(d)). However, the conclusions were not free from doubt and GAO was in the process of conducting a governmentwide review of A&E contracting, so both decisions said, in effect, to disregard the conclusions pending further developments. In 1982, GAO reviewed those developments and concluded that Congress had effectively affirmed “that the fee limitation relates only to the production of plans, drawings, and specifications.” [B-205793, Jan. 18, 1982](#), at 3. Accordingly, all of the A&E fee limitation statutes now have a uniform interpretation—the 6 percent ceiling applies only to costs relating to the production and delivery of plans and designs. This of course would include the proportionate share of administrative costs attributable to support of production and delivery services. [B-258058, May 8, 1995](#).

The view expressed in [B-205793, Jan. 18, 1982](#), is consistent with the Federal Acquisition Regulation, which provides: “For architect-engineer services for public works or utilities, the contract price or the estimated cost and fee for production and delivery of designs, plans, drawings, and specifications shall not exceed 6 percent of the estimated cost of construction of the public work or utility, excluding fees.” 48 C.F.R. § 15.404-4(c)(4)(B).

Once it is determined which services under the A&E contract “count” against the fee limitation, the total payment to the A&E contractor for those covered services may not exceed 6 percent of the estimated cost of the construction contract, regardless of the type of contract used for the A&E procurement. Thus, if the A&E contract is a cost-plus-fixed-fee contract, the 6 percent relates to the total payment for covered services, not just the fixed fee portion. [21 Comp. Gen. 580 \(1941\)](#), *aff’d*, [B-18126, Mar. 19, 1942](#). It follows that an A&E contract in the form of a cost-plus-fixed-fee, with the total payment including the fixed fee not to exceed a specified dollar amount calculated to remain within the statutory limitation, is legally unobjectionable. [B-106325, Nov. 15, 1951](#).

Unless the contract provides otherwise, a mere increase in the cost of the construction contract—for example, if the lowest bid received exceeds the estimated cost on which the A&E fee was based—does not entitle the A&E contractor to an increase in fee. *Hengel Associates, P.C.*, VABCA No. 3921, 94-3 BCA ¶ 27,080 (1994); *R.M. Otto Co., Inc. & Associates*, VABCA

No. 1526, 82-2 BCA ¶ 15,889 (1982); *Shaw Metz & Associates*, VABCA No. 774, 71-1 BCA ¶ 8679 (1971); *William Cramp Scheetz, Jr.*, ASBCA No. 9501, 1964 BCA ¶ 4340 (1964). As the *Hengel* board in particular emphasized, the 6 percent is a ceiling, not an entitlement, and does not prohibit the parties from contracting for a lower amount. *Hengel*, 94-3 BCA at ¶ 134,965.

Of course, there are situations in which the fee may be increased. If the A&E contract is modified under the “Changes” clause to increase the scope of the work, a fee increase is proper, still subject to the 6 percent ceiling. [B-152306, Jan. 24, 1967](#). See also *Skidmore, Owings & Merrill*, ASBCA No. 6062, 1962 BCA ¶ 3332 (1962). It is also possible to increase the fee without regard to the 6 percent limit, as discussed in the following passage from [47 Comp. Gen. 61, 67 \(1967\)](#):

“The project to which an architect-engineer fee is applicable is the project for which the architect-engineer undertakes in his contract to prepare plans, *etc.* [Citation omitted.] Where the site and nature of a project are so changed as to render virtually useless any [A&E] work done prior to administrative determination to effect such change, it would be unreasonable, in light of the statutory purpose, to carry forward against the new project any charges against the fee limitation incurred under the original project. Although the purpose to be served by a building project may remain unchanged, that is not to say that the conceptual design of the building and its location may be substantially altered without at some point giving rise to a new project for the purpose of applying the fee limitations in question.”

b. Some Agency-Specific Authorities

If construction were governed solely by the appropriated funding requirement in 41 U.S.C. § 12, the funding process would be cumbersome and would afford little flexibility. While 41 U.S.C. § 12 remains the cornerstone of congressional control of major construction projects, Congress has enacted various supplemental provisions for agencies with ongoing construction responsibilities,<sup>159</sup> all of which can be viewed as exceptions to 41 U.S.C. § 12.

<sup>159</sup> For example, consider the Department of Veterans Affairs’ authority to build medical facilities under 38 U.S.C. §§ 8103, 8104, and 8106. Section 8104(a)(2) includes a provision roughly analogous to 41 U.S.C. § 12.

(1) Military construction

Not surprisingly,<sup>160</sup> the most detailed and comprehensive scheme is that applicable to the Defense Department and the military departments. Typically, construction funds are appropriated to each department in a lump sum to be used “as authorized by law,” which means in accordance with authorization acts required by 10 U.S.C. § 114(a)(6).<sup>161</sup> Most of the funds are authorized by installation, in line-item format. In addition, each department receives a lump-sum authorization for “unspecified minor military construction projects.”

Substantive provisions are found in the Military Construction Codification Act,<sup>162</sup> codified chiefly in 10 U.S.C. §§ 2801–2853. “Military construction” is defined broadly as “any construction, development, conversion, or extension of any kind carried out with respect to a military installation, whether to satisfy temporary or permanent requirements.” 10 U.S.C. § 2801(a). A “military construction project” includes all military construction “necessary to produce a complete and usable facility or a complete and usable improvement to an existing facility” or authorized portion thereof. 10 U.S.C. § 2801(b).

Under 10 U.S.C. § 2805(a)(1), “within an amount equal to 125 percent of the amount authorized by law for such purpose”—that is, the lump-sum minor military construction authorization—each department may carry out “unspecified minor military construction projects” that are “not otherwise authorized by law.” An “unspecified minor military construction project” is one “that has an approved cost equal to or less than “1,500,000” or equal or less than \$3,000,000 if the project “is intended solely to correct a deficiency that is life-threatening, health-threatening, or safety-threatening.” *Id.* Projects costing more than \$750,000 must first be reported to Congress.

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<sup>160</sup> The reason it is not surprising is that, as we will see later, the Public Buildings Act does not apply to construction on military installations.

<sup>161</sup> Examples for 2006 are the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-163, div. B, 119 Stat. 3136, 3485 (Jan. 6, 2006) and the Military Quality of Life and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-114, title I, 119 Stat. 2372 (Nov. 30, 2005). As these examples illustrate, the authorization and appropriation acts are occasionally enacted in reverse order.

<sup>162</sup> Pub. L. No. 97-214, 96 Stat. 153 (July 12, 1982). The Act, which is frequently amended, addresses a variety of construction activities, although our coverage here is limited to an outline of the provisions governing minor military construction.



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10 U.S.C. § 2805(b)(2). Section 2805(c)(1) further enhances flexibility by generally permitting unspecified minor military construction projects costing not more than \$750,000 (or \$1,500,000 in the case of life-threatening, *etc.*, projects) to be charged to Operation and Maintenance (O&M), rather than military construction, appropriations. In addition, cost variations are authorized in unusual and unanticipated situations, up to limits specified in 10 U.S.C. § 2853.

The “minor milcon” provisions are simultaneously authorizations and limitations. *See* B-159451, Mar. 20, 1967. Subject to authorized variations, GAO regards the cost of a minor milcon project as the cost at the time it is approved by the appropriate departmental official, regardless of subsequent increases in the statutory ceiling. B-175215, Apr. 20, 1972.

As noted above, a construction project is defined in terms of a “complete and usable facility” unless something less is specifically authorized. It is not permissible to split a single project into smaller projects (sometimes given the fancy name “incremental construction”) in order to stay below the ceiling for using O&M funds. B-234326.15, Dec. 24, 1991; B-213137, Jan. 30, 1986; B-159451, Sept. 3, 1969; B-133316-O.M., Aug. 27, 1962. As most of these references point out, directives of the military departments also prohibit splitting.

In B-303145, Dec. 7, 2005, GAO raised the issue of whether the Defense Department may have violated the forgoing statutory limitations in connection with projects approved as part of the global war on terrorism near the end of fiscal year 2002. The Defense Department provided GAO a memorandum asserting its “longstanding view that O&M funds may be used for construction of a temporary nature in support of certain military operations.” B-303145, at 16–17. While the record was insufficient to permit a specific determination, GAO offered the following general observations:

“We have recognized that construction work of a temporary nature may be funded with DOD’s O&M funds in ‘extremely limited’ circumstances. In particular, in applying the principles derived from our earlier cases interpreting a longstanding prohibition [41 U.S.C. § 12] on using appropriations to fund contracts for construction of ‘public improvements,’ we have held that the military construction statutes do not cover the types of work that are ‘clearly of a temporary nature’ as addressed in those cases. In reviewing



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the limited documentation provided by DOD, we were unable to determine whether the construction components of any of the projects were of such a temporary nature that the military construction statutes would not apply.”

*Id.* at 17–18 (footnotes omitted).

The military departments have traditionally distinguished between “funded costs” and “unfunded costs,” including only the former in calculating costs for purposes of 10 U.S.C. § 2805. Funded costs consist primarily of the costs of labor (other than troop labor), materials, and equipment. Unfunded costs include such things as troop labor and equipment depreciation. GAO has accepted the legitimacy of the distinction. [B-213137, Jan. 30, 1986](#); [B-133316, Oct. 12, 1962](#).

Charging a construction project to O&M funds in excess of the statutory ceiling violates 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a) which prohibits using appropriated funds for other than their intended purpose. It also violates the Antideficiency Act unless unobligated construction funds are available to make an appropriate account adjustment. [63 Comp. Gen. 422, 423–24, 437–38 \(1984\)](#).

(2) Continuing contracts: two variations

Construction projects often must extend beyond a single fiscal year. A device Congress has provided some agencies is the “continuing contract.” For example, the Army Corps of Engineers engages in extensive public works construction activity. A significant authority available to the Corps is 33 U.S.C. § 621: “Any public work on canals, rivers, and harbors adopted by Congress may be prosecuted by direct appropriations, by continuing contracts, or by both direct appropriations and continuing contracts.”

Under a continuing contract, as the term is used in this context, the Corps enters into a multiyear contract for the completion of a construction project, although funds are sought and appropriated only in annual increments to cover work planned for the particular year. *See C.H. Leavell & Co. v. United States*, 530 F.2d 878, 886 (Ct. Cl. 1976). This statute is an exception to both 41 U.S.C. § 12 and the Antideficiency Act. It authorizes the Corps to record the full contract price as an obligation at the time the contract is entered into, even though appropriations to liquidate the obligation have not yet been made. [56 Comp. Gen. 437 \(1977\)](#). The authority of 33 U.S.C. § 621 applies equally to contracts financed by the

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Civil Works Revolving Fund (33 U.S.C. § 576). [B-242974.6-O.M., Nov. 26, 1991.](#)

To the extent applicable, the laws relating to river and harbor improvements—including the “continuing contract” authority of 33 U.S.C. § 621—apply also to the Corps’ shore protection and flood control projects.<sup>163</sup> 33 U.S.C. §§ 426b, 701.

A different type of continuing contract is authorized by a provision found in the Reclamation Act, 43 U.S.C. § 388:

“When appropriations have been made for the commencement or continuation of construction or operation and maintenance of any project, the Secretary may . . . enter into contracts . . . for construction, which may cover such periods of time as the Secretary may consider necessary but in which the liability of the United States shall be contingent upon appropriations being made therefor.”

To an extent 43 U.S.C. § 388 can also be viewed as an exception to the Antideficiency Act. *PCL Construction Services, Inc. v. United States*, 41 Fed. Cl. 242, 251–57 (1998), *aff’d*, 96 Fed. Appx. 672 (Fed. Cir. 2004); [B-72020, Jan. 9, 1948.](#) However, it is a much more limited one than 33 U.S.C. § 621. Under 33 U.S.C. § 621, actual payment must await an appropriation, but the legal obligation arises, and is recordable, when the contract is entered into. Under 43 U.S.C. § 388, legal liability does not come into existence until the appropriation is made and, therefore, the full contract price cannot be recorded as an obligation at the time the contract is entered into.

The distinction is highlighted in [28 Comp. Gen. 163 \(1948\)](#), which compared 43 U.S.C. § 388 with a provision appearing in an appropriation act which appropriated \$1 million for a construction project and, in addition, authorized the Bureau of Reclamation to enter into contracts up to \$1.6 million. The appropriation act provision, analogous to 33 U.S.C. § 621 as construed in [56 Comp. Gen. 437](#), authorized—

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<sup>163</sup> In addition, the Corps is authorized to allocate funds from its annual appropriations, up to specified limits, for the construction of small projects which have not been specifically authorized. 33 U.S.C. §§ 426g (shore protection), 577 (rivers and harbors), 701s (flood control).

“the entering into of a firm contract which fully will obligate the faith and credit of the United States to its payment. The liability of the United States, on proper contracts entered into under its authority, is fixed and clear. It is not contingent in any way on the appropriation necessary to its fulfillment and the Government is fully obligated to satisfy its conditions.”

[28 Comp. Gen. at 165](#). This is the classic concept of contract authority. A contract under 43 U.S.C. § 388 is different, however. The decision continued: “The liability of the United States on contracts entered into pursuant to [43 U.S.C. § 388], on the other hand, ‘shall be contingent upon appropriations being made therefor.’ Under such contracts, no legal obligation exists to pay their amounts unless and until appropriation is made therefor.” [28 Comp. Gen. at 165–66](#). See also [B-72020, Jan. 9, 1948](#).

The rights and obligations of the parties in the event of a funding shortfall will also vary depending on which type of continuing contract is in effect. Under the type of contract which amounts to contract authority such as 33 U.S.C. § 621, the contractor has a legal right to recover and can sue to enforce it. [56 Comp. Gen. at 442](#). While a court can never order Congress to appropriate money, a failure or refusal to appropriate funds to satisfy an obligation authorized by statute will not preclude a court from rendering a judgment. *E.g., New York Airways, Inc. v. United States*, 369 F.2d 743 (Ct. Cl. 1966).

Under the type of contingent contract authorized by 43 U.S.C. § 388, the situation is different. In a case where the contracting agency had requested sufficient funds to finance the contract but Congress appropriated a much smaller amount, the Court of Claims held that as long as the agency allocates the funds on a rational and nondiscriminatory basis, the contractor has no right to recover damages incurred as a result of the funding shortage. *Winston Brothers Co. v. United States*, 130 F. Supp. 374 (Ct. Cl. 1955). A similar holding is *Granite Construction Co.*, IBCA No. 947-1-72, 72-2 BCA ¶ 9762 (1972), denying recovery where the exhaustion of funds was due to a presidential impoundment.

In *S.A. Healy Co. v. United States*, 576 F.2d 299 (Ct. Cl. 1978), however, the court granted an equitable adjustment where the contracting agency’s budget request was “grossly inadequate” to support the funding level it had previously approved under the contract. The difference between *Healy* on the one hand and *Winston* and *Granite* on the other is that the funding

shortfall in *Healy* was at least partly the agency's fault. *Healy*, 576 F.2d at 305.

While there are few cases, it seems fair to say that the extent of the agency's duty to at least ask for the money is still being formed and defined. The *Healy* court was careful to point out that it was not holding that the agency has an absolute contractual obligation to seek adequate funding. More precisely, said the court, if the agency chooses not to seek adequate funding, it can escape liability only if the contract unambiguously places the entire risk on the contractor, and if the agency provides "timely and candid" notification to help the contractor mitigate its loss. *Id.* at 307. *See also San Carlos Irrigation and Drainage District v. United States*, 23 Cl. Ct. 276, 283 (1991). Of course, the question will be foreclosed if the contract explicitly creates the duty. *E.g., Municipal Leasing Corp. v. United States*, 1 Cl. Ct. 771, 774 (1983) (contract clause obligating agency "to use its best efforts to obtain appropriations of the necessary funds to meet its obligations and to continue this contract in force"). Precisely what constitutes "best efforts" has yet to be determined.

(3) 7 U.S.C. § 2250

A Department of Agriculture provision, 7 U.S.C. § 2250, illustrates a different approach:

"The Department of Agriculture is authorized to erect, alter, and repair such buildings and other public improvements as may be necessary to carry out its authorized work: *Provided*, That no building or improvement shall be erected or altered under this authority unless provision is made therefor in the applicable appropriation and the cost thereof is not in excess of limitations prescribed therein."

The purpose of this permanent authorization is to avoid the need for specific authorizations which 41 U.S.C. § 12 would otherwise require. Provision can thus be made in annual appropriation acts without being susceptible to a point of order. The origin and intent of 7 U.S.C. § 2250 are discussed in [B-79640, Oct. 18, 1948](#), and [B-151369-O.M., Nov. 15, 1963](#).

To implement 7 U.S.C. § 2250, the relevant appropriation will typically specify monetary limits on construction activities, plus whatever exemptions from those limits Congress may desire. *See*, for example, the appropriation under the heading Agricultural Research Service, Salaries

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and Expenses in the Agriculture Department’s 2006 appropriation act, Pub. L. No. 109-97, 119 Stat. 2120, 2124 (Nov. 10, 2005). Exceeding an applicable limitation violates 41 U.S.C. § 12. [B-151369-O.M., Nov. 15, 1963.](#)

(4) 15 U.S.C. § 278d

Another permanent authorization is 15 U.S.C. § 278d, applicable to the National Institute of Standards and Technology:

“Within the limits of funds which are appropriated for the Institute, the Secretary of Commerce is authorized to undertake such construction of buildings and other facilities, and to make such improvements to existing buildings, grounds, and other facilities occupied or used by the Institute as are necessary for the proper and efficient conduct of the activities authorized herein.”

This statute at one time included language, dropped in 1992, requiring specific provision in the relevant appropriation in order to construct a building costing over a specified amount. As the statute now stands, it is similar to 7 U.S.C. § 2250 in that it will insulate an appropriation from a point of order under congressional rules requiring prior authorization. It is also similar in that it, standing alone, does not satisfy 41 U.S.C. § 12. There would need to be at least the elements described in [39 Comp. Gen. 723 \(1960\)](#), previously discussed in our coverage of 41 U.S.C. § 12.

The Institute finances its construction from a reimbursable Working Capital Fund pursuant to 15 U.S.C. § 278b. In order to use the Working Capital Fund, however, the appropriation to be charged with the reimbursement must itself be available for construction, that is, it must satisfy 41 U.S.C. § 12. [30 Comp. Gen. 453 \(1951\)](#); 15 U.S.C. § 278b(b). Reimbursement should include indirect as well as direct costs. *See* [B-117622, July 13, 1955](#); 15 U.S.C. § 278b(e).

Section 278d has been construed as applicable only to construction on government-owned land and not to leased property. [B-130564, Mar. 18, 1957](#); [B-124596-O.M., Aug. 26, 1955](#). A separate provision of law now authorizes, in the performance of Institute functions, “the erection on leased property of specialized facilities and working and living quarters when the Secretary of Commerce determines that this will best serve the interests of the Government.” 15 U.S.C. § 278e(g).

c. Public Buildings Act and  
the General Services  
Administration

As noted previously in section E of this chapter, the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 created the General Services Administration (GSA) and centralized a number of the government's housekeeping functions in that agency. Ten years later, Congress enacted the Public Buildings Act of 1959, Pub. L. No. 86-249, 73 Stat. 479 (Sept. 9, 1959), to do essentially the same thing for public buildings acquisition and construction. The act was amended significantly in 1972, 1976, and again in 1988.<sup>164</sup> Most of the act's provisions, along with their amendments, were—and still are—contained in title 40 of the United States Code. As also noted previously, Congress codified title 40 by enacting its provisions into positive law. As a result of the codification, the Public Buildings Act technically no longer exists and most of its provisions have found new homes in different sections of title 40, primarily at 40 U.S.C. §§ 3301–3315. We will refer to the current Code sections in the following discussion. However, we will also identify the prior section numbers since most of the cited cases refer to them.

The statute gives a fairly complicated definition of “public building.” The term means “a building, whether for single or multitenant occupancy, and its grounds, approaches, and appurtenances, which is generally suitable for use as office or storage space or both by one or more federal agencies or mixed ownership Government corporations.” 40 U.S.C. § 3301(a)(5)(A).<sup>165</sup> The definition then goes on to list a number of specific types of buildings and facilities that are included in the general definition. *Id.* § 3301(a)(5)(B). It then lists a number of specific exemptions from the definition, including buildings on the public domain; on military installations; on United States property in foreign countries; on Indian and Eskimo properties held in trust by the United States; on lands used in federal agricultural, recreational, and conservation programs, including related research; on or used in connection with river, harbor, flood control, reclamation, or power projects; used for nuclear production, research, or development projects; on or used in connection with housing or residential projects; on Department of Veterans Affairs installations used for hospital or domiciliary purposes. *Id.* § 3301(a)(5)(C). See also the definition in GSA's Federal Management Regulation at 41 C.F.R. § 102-71-20. Thus,

<sup>164</sup> Public Buildings Amendments of 1972, Pub. L. No. 92-313, 86 Stat. 216 (June 16, 1972); Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act of 1976, Pub. L. No. 94-541, 90 Stat. 2505 (Oct. 18, 1976); Public Buildings Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-678, 102 Stat. 4049 (Nov. 17, 1988).

<sup>165</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 612(1).

wholly apart from specific exemptions Congress may from time to time legislate, the basic statute itself carves out several large exemptions from the definition. What's left is a public building governed by 40 U.S.C. §§ 3301–3315.

Section 3302 of title 40<sup>166</sup> sets the policy by declaring that “Only the Administrator of General Services may construct a public building.” Section 3304 of title 40 of the United States Code deals with site acquisition. GSA is authorized to acquire sites needed for public buildings “by purchase, condemnation, donation, exchange, or otherwise.” 40 U.S.C. § 3304(a).<sup>167</sup> GSA may solicit proposals but is not required to follow the competition requirements of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act or the Federal Acquisition Regulation. 40 U.S.C. § 3304(d)(2); [71 Comp. Gen. 333 \(1992\)](#). The site selected should be the one “most advantageous to the Government, all factors considered.” 40 U.S.C. § 3304(d)(1). Meeting this standard requires “intelligent competition” which includes informing offerors of the evaluation factors to be applied and their relative importance. [B-256017.4, B-256017.5, June 27, 1994](#). There is nothing improper under section 3304 in soliciting expressions of interest and then, if the parties cannot agree to acceptable terms, instituting condemnation proceedings. [71 Comp. Gen. 511 \(1992\)](#). It is similarly within GSA's discretion to reach agreement with the owner after requesting the Attorney General to initiate the condemnation. [B-249131.4, June 24, 1993](#). Condemnation of a site for a public building is “obviously for a public use” for Fifth Amendment purposes. *Certain Land in the City of Washington, D.C. v. United States*, 355 F.2d 825, 826 (D.C. Cir. 1965).

The requirement in Executive Order No. 12072 to give preference to central business areas, discussed previously in section E of this chapter in connection with leasing, applies to site selection under 40 U.S.C. § 3304. Exec. Order No. 12072, *Federal Space Management*, § 1-103, 43 Fed. Reg. 36,869 (Aug. 16, 1978). Therefore, it is within GSA's discretion when soliciting sites for public building construction to limit consideration to a central business area. [B-251581.2, July 13, 1993](#).

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<sup>166</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 601.

<sup>167</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 602, 604.

As noted earlier, any construction project requires architectural and engineering services, and 40 U.S.C. § 3308(a)<sup>168</sup> authorizes GSA to procure those services. However, GSA must retain responsibility for all construction, including interpreting construction contracts, approving contract changes, certifying payment vouchers, and making final contract settlement. 40 U.S.C. § 3308(c). To the maximum extent feasible, construction should comply with one of the nationally recognized model building codes, and should take into consideration state and local zoning laws and laws imposing landscaping, open space, minimum distance, and maximum height requirements. 40 U.S.C. §§ 3312(b), (c).<sup>169</sup>

Artistic concerns are also relevant. GSA regulations provide:

“Federal agencies must incorporate fine arts as an integral part of the total building concept when designing new Federal buildings, and when making substantial repairs and alterations to existing Federal buildings, as appropriate. The selected fine arts, including painting, sculpture, and artistic work in other media, must reflect the national cultural heritage and emphasize the work of living American artists.”

41 C.F.R. § 102-77.10. This provision does not have an explicit statutory basis, but has long been in the regulations. *See* [B-95136, Mar. 26, 1976](#).

Section 3305(b) of title 40<sup>170</sup> authorizes GSA to alter public buildings. “Alter” includes “repairing, remodeling, improving, or extending or other changes in a public building.” 40 U.S.C. § 3301(a)(1)(B). As with construction, the term includes related planning, engineering, architectural work, and similar actions. 41 C.F.R. § 102-71.20. GSA may do the work itself or may carry out any authorized construction or alteration by contract if deemed to be “most advantageous to the Government.” 40 U.S.C. § 3305(c).<sup>171</sup> It may also contract with other agencies, such as the

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<sup>168</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 609(a).

<sup>169</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 619(a), (b).

<sup>170</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 603.

<sup>171</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 608.



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Army Corps of Engineers, under the Economy Act, 31 U.S.C. § 1535. *See* B-172186, Apr. 5, 1971.

GSA may delegate most of its construction functions. 40 U.S.C. § 3313.<sup>172</sup> For projects whose estimated cost does not exceed \$100,000, delegation is mandatory upon request. *Id.*

An important statutory provision is the prospectus approval requirement of 40 U.S.C. § 3307,<sup>173</sup> which provides in part:

“(a) Resolutions required before appropriations may be made.—The following appropriations may be made only if the Committee on Environment and Public Works of the Senate and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure of the House of Representatives adopt resolutions approving the purpose for which the appropriation is made:

“(1) An appropriation to construct, alter, or acquire any building to be used as a public building which involves a total expenditure in excess of \$1,500,000, so that the equitable distribution of public buildings throughout the United States with due regard for the comparative urgency of need for the buildings, except as provided in section 3305(b) of this title, is ensured.”<sup>174</sup>

The “except as provided in section 3305(b)” refers to 40 U.S.C. § 3305(b), which authorizes GSA to alter public buildings and to acquire land necessary to carry out the alterations, and then provides: “Approval under section 3307 of this title is not required for any alteration and acquisition authorized by this section for which the estimated maximum cost does not exceed \$1,500,000.”

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<sup>172</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 614.

<sup>173</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 606.

<sup>174</sup> Section 3307 also includes approval requirements for leases and for alterations to leased buildings, covered elsewhere in this chapter. The discussion in the text, unless the context clearly indicates differently, applies equally to all three.

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Approval is obtained by submitting a prospectus to the specified committees. The contents of the prospectus, set forth in 40 U.S.C. § 3307(b), include—

- a brief description of the building to be constructed, altered, purchased, or acquired;
- the location of the building and an estimate of the maximum cost to the government;
- a comprehensive plan addressing the space needs of all government employees in the locality;
- if construction is involved, a statement that other suitable space is not available either in government-owned buildings or at comparable cost;
- justification for not using buildings identified pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act (*see* 40 U.S.C. § 3303(c)); and
- a statement of how much the government is already spending to accommodate the employees who will occupy the building to be constructed, altered, purchased, or acquired.

The project cost may be increased by up to 10 percent of the prospectus estimate without having to submit a revised prospectus. 40 U.S.C. § 3307(c). Either committee may rescind its approval in the case of a project for construction, alteration, or acquisition if an appropriation has not been made within 1 year after the date of approval. 40 U.S.C. § 3307(d). GSA may adjust any dollar amount specified in section 3307 annually “to reflect a percentage increase or decrease in construction costs during the prior calendar year, as determined by the composite index of construction costs of the Department of Commerce,” promptly reporting any such adjustments to the committees. 40 U.S.C. § 3307(g).

Nothing in the statute precludes a situation in which GSA secures the required approval with the appropriation to be made to some other agency. [46 Comp. Gen. 427 \(1966\)](#). Since the approval requirement is a restriction on the appropriation of funds, it does not apply to the construction of a building where appropriated funds will not be involved, even where the building is clearly a “public building” and will be constructed by GSA. [B-143167-O.M., Sept. 27, 1960](#) (office building for Federal Deposit

Insurance Corporation). It also does not apply to projects involving the United States Capitol. [B-148004, Oct. 20, 1969](#).

Prospectus approval may precede or follow enactment of the relevant appropriation. [B-95136, Oct. 11, 1979](#). Limiting language in the approval is not legally binding unless incorporated in the appropriation providing funds for the project. [B-95136, Feb. 7, 1977](#). If GSA does not comply with the prospectus approval requirement and Congress chooses to appropriate the money anyway, the appropriation might be subject to a point of order, but it would be a perfectly valid appropriation if enacted. *Id.*; [B-95136, Sept. 27, 1978](#); [B-95136-O.M., Dec. 23, 1975](#). Funds will be available for the project, with or without compliance with 40 U.S.C. § 3307, if Congress specifically appropriates funds for the project, or if it can be clearly established that Congress knowingly included those funds in a lump-sum appropriation. Merely burying the project in budget justification material, however, is not enough. [B-95136, Oct. 11, 1979](#); [B-95136-O.M., Dec. 23, 1975](#).

In accord with these principles is *Maiatico v. United States*, 302 F.2d 880 (D.C. Cir. 1962), in which the court held that GSA had no authority to condemn an office building where GSA (1) had not obtained prospectus approval as required by 40 U.S.C. § 3307, and (2) purported to act under authority of a lump-sum appropriation which could not be demonstrated to include the building in question.

d. Scope of Construction Appropriations

Apart from obvious differences in factual context, determining the scope of a construction appropriation is not fundamentally different than for other types of appropriations. The process requires analyzing the language of the appropriation, the statutes and principles governing the use of appropriations in general, and the relationship of the construction appropriation to other appropriations available to the agency or for the project.

The first and most important determinant is the precise application of the language of the appropriation. For example, where language which would have appropriated funds for “beginning construction” was changed to “preparing for construction,” the appropriation was not available for any of the costs of actual construction. [B-122221, Jan. 14, 1955](#). If there is any inconsistency between the language of the enacted appropriation and legislative history or prior bills, the enacted language must prevail. *Id.* The statutory language alone will not always provide the answer, however. Words like “facilities” and “appurtenances,” for example, do not have

obvious meanings and, absent clear instructions in legislative history, it is necessary to resort to other principles and precedents for guidance. *See* [B-133148-O.M.](#), [B-132109-O.M.](#), [Jan. 20, 1959](#).

The next element in our approach is the application of the statutes and principles governing the availability of appropriations generally with respect to purpose, time, and amount. Purpose availability is governed by the “necessary expense” doctrine discussed in Chapter 4. One illustration is the treatment of expenses of preparation of plans and specifications, or what we have previously referred to as “design fees.” Congress may choose to provide separately for these expenses. *E.g.*, [36 Comp. Gen. 790 \(1957\)](#). If there is no separate appropriation, design fees are chargeable to the construction appropriation. As stated in [B-71067, Dec. 9, 1947](#), at 3:

“[W]hen Congress appropriates funds for the construction of a building and does not otherwise appropriate funds for plans or supervision of its construction, it is not to be presumed that its intention was that the building be erected without either plans or supervision, but that the expenses of planning and superintendence being reasonably necessary and incident to the construction they are for payment out of the funds made available for such construction.”

This being the case, design fees should not be charged to general operating appropriations. [18 Comp. Gen. 122 \(1938\)](#), *aff’g*, [18 Comp. Gen. 71 \(1938\)](#); [15 Comp. Gen. 389 \(1935\)](#). The same principle applies to work which is preliminary to the design work. Unless specifically provided for, it is chargeable to appropriations available for construction and not general operating appropriations. [11 Comp. Gen. 313 \(1932\)](#) (site tests). Of course, the existence of a specific appropriation will preclude use of construction funds. [B-9240, May 2, 1940](#) (specific appropriation for preliminary surveys). Where inspection or supervision of construction is performed by regular government employees, their salaries and related expenses are chargeable not to the construction appropriation but to the general Salaries & Expenses appropriation, or its equivalent, for the fiscal year in which the services are performed. [38 Comp. Gen. 316 \(1958\)](#); [16 Comp. Gen. 1055 \(1937\)](#), *modified*, [A-86612, Aug. 16, 1937](#).

The amount charged by a municipality for the “privilege” of connecting the sewer line of a government building to the municipal sewer system is a necessary cost of construction and therefore chargeable to construction appropriations. [19 Comp. Gen. 778 \(1940\)](#); [9 Comp. Gen. 41 \(1929\)](#);

[B-22714, Mar. 19, 1942](#). This is true whether the connection is part of the original construction or subsequent remodeling or improvement. [39 Comp. Gen. 363 \(1959\)](#).

We noted in Chapter 4 that reasonable expenses incident to dedication or cornerstone ceremonies for public buildings are regarded as a proper charge to appropriated funds. [53 Comp. Gen. 119 \(1973\)](#) (engraving a ceremonial shovel); [B-158831, June 8, 1966](#) (flowers for use as centerpieces); [B-11884, Aug. 26, 1940](#) (printing of programs and invitations); [A-88307, Aug. 21, 1937](#) (group photograph and recording of presidential speech). In each case, the proper appropriation to charge was the construction appropriation, not a general operating appropriation, the principle being stated in [A-88307](#), at 2, and quoted in [53 Comp. Gen.](#) at 120, as follows: “The laying of cornerstones has been connected with the construction of public buildings from time immemorial and any expenses necessarily incident thereto are generally chargeable to the appropriation for construction of the building.”

Availability as to time is discussed in section F.1.a of this chapter. With respect to amount, again, a construction appropriation is no different from any other appropriation. The appropriation of a specific amount for a construction project is a ceiling on the amount that can be obligated; it is the exclusive source of funds for the project and may not be augmented with funds from some other appropriation without congressional sanction. [20 Comp. Gen. 272 \(1940\)](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 892 \(1940\)](#), *modified by* [B-9460, June 11, 1940](#); [B-122221, Jan. 14, 1955](#). If you cannot build what you want with the money Congress has provided, you must either go back to Congress and ask for more or reduce the scope of your project.

The third basic determinant is the relationship of the construction appropriation to other appropriations. What Congress has or has not provided for elsewhere often helps determine what it has or has not provided as part of the construction appropriation. One line of cases involves construction appropriations and appropriations available for repairs and maintenance. For expenses connected with original construction, the test is stated as follows: “Costs necessary to the completion of a construction project are, essentially, construction costs, and not costs of maintenance, operation, repair, alteration, or improvements, which costs ordinarily arise only after completion of the project.” [19 Comp. Gen. 778, 781 \(1940\)](#). That case found sewer connection charges a proper cost of construction. In contrast, items such as acoustical ceilings, venetian blinds, partitioning, shrubbery, and other

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plants, not acquired until after GSA had designated the building as substantially complete and occupancy had begun, could not be said to be “necessary for completion of the project,” and were therefore properly chargeable to a repairs and improvements appropriation rather than construction. [B-165152-O.M., Oct. 15, 1968.](#)

For expenses arising after completion of the original construction, the question is whether they can be legitimately regarded as within the scope of an appropriation for repairs and maintenance or improvements, or whether they must be treated as construction items. The Comptroller General has offered the following broad definitions:

“It has been held that the term ‘repair’ includes anything that is reasonably necessary to keep up the premises. . . .

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“To ‘maintain’ means to preserve or keep in an existing state or condition, and embraces acts of repair and other acts to prevent a decline, lapse, or cessation from that state or condition, and has been taken to be synonymous with repair.”

[21 Comp. Gen. 90, 91–92 \(1941\).](#)

Thus, an extension or addition to a public building cannot be charged to an appropriation for repairs. [4 Comp. Gen. 1063 \(1925\)](#); [20 Comp. Dec. 73 \(1913\)](#); [7 Comp. Dec. 684 \(1901\)](#); [1 Comp. Dec. 33 \(1894\)](#); <sup>175</sup> [A-40231, Jan. 11, 1932](#); [A-1876, July 10, 1924](#). It is construction and, as the two unpublished decisions point out, must be handled as such, which means in compliance with 41 U.S.C. § 12. Similarly, appropriations for repairs and improvements are not available for extensive structural changes and replacement of worn-out equipment in a cafeteria ([27 Comp. Gen. 634 \(1948\)](#)), and certainly not for replacing a building entirely destroyed by fire ([39 Comp. Gen. 784 \(1960\)](#)). Treatment of walls and ceilings for soundproofing would qualify as an improvement, but it is not a “repair.” [2 Comp. Gen. 301 \(1922\)](#). If an item cannot be charged to a repair

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<sup>175</sup> Regarding [1 Comp. Dec. 33](#), did someone wager we could not find a case on “erecting an outhouse”? You lose.

appropriation because it is more properly regarded as construction, it follows that charging a general operating appropriation is equally improper. *E.g.*, 10 Comp. Dec. 633 (1904); [B-132109, July 18, 1958](#).

Another line of cases addresses the relationship between construction appropriations and appropriations for equipment and furnishings. The well-settled rule is that “an appropriation for the construction of a building is available only for the cost of construction proper and for equipment and/or fixtures permanently attached to the building and so essentially a part thereof that the removal of the same might cause substantial damage to the building.” 12 Comp. Gen. 488, 489 (1933).

An item of equipment qualifies as a “fixture” for purposes of this rule if (1) it is permanently attached to the realty, or (2) if not permanently attached, (a) it is necessary and indispensable to the completion and operation of the building, or (b) the structure was designed and built for the purpose of housing the equipment. [B-133148-O.M.](#), [B-132109-O.M.](#), [Aug. 18, 1959](#).

Use of construction funds rather than an appropriation for equipment and furnishings was proper in [9 Comp. Gen. 217 \(1929\)](#) (installation of cafeteria and associated equipment), and [B-118779, Nov. 14, 1969](#) (duct work, acoustical work, sprinklers, electrical fixtures, heating and cooling equipment). Cases holding construction appropriations to be the improper source of funds include [12 Comp. Gen. 488 \(portable fire extinguishers\)](#); [7 Comp. Gen. 474 \(1928\)](#) (window shades); and 26 Comp. Dec. 111 (1919) (linoleum which could be removed or replaced without material damage to the floor). All of these cases assume the existence of a separate appropriation for equipment and furnishings. Absent a separate appropriation, use of the construction appropriation would be proper if necessary to make the building usable for its intended purpose ([A-43075-O.M.](#), [Aug. 27, 1932](#)), but would not be proper for furniture or equipment not required for the construction ([B-123240, June 9, 1955](#)). Also, there is of course no problem if the construction appropriation is expressly made available for the purchase and installation of furniture. [7 Comp. Gen. 619 \(1928\)](#).

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## 2. Operation and Control

### a. Who's in Charge?

As with construction and leasing, the operation and control of public buildings is centralized in the General Services Administration (GSA), which derives its authority from several sources:

- Various provisions of title 40, United States Code, derived from the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 and the Public Buildings Act of 1958, noted later in this discussion, which assign specific responsibilities to GSA.
- Miscellaneous provisions of title 40 which were not part of the Federal Property or Public Buildings Acts. Examples are 40 U.S.C. §§ 8101<sup>176</sup> (GSA “shall have charge of the public buildings and grounds in the District of Columbia”); 3104<sup>177</sup> (furniture for new public buildings must be procured in accordance with plans and specifications approved by GSA); 3101<sup>178</sup> (GSA has exclusive control over public buildings outside of the District of Columbia purchased or constructed from appropriations under GSA’s control); and 3102<sup>179</sup> (GSA authorized to name or rename buildings under its control, even if previously named by statute).
- Section 303(b) of title 40,<sup>180</sup> which transferred to GSA all functions of its predecessor, the Federal Works Agency.
- Reorganization Plan No. 18 of 1950, sections 1 and 2, 40 U.S.C. § 301 note, which transferred to GSA, respectively, “all functions with respect to assigning and reassigning space” in buildings owned or leased by the government and “[a]ll functions with respect to the operation, maintenance, and custody of office buildings” owned or leased by the government.

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<sup>176</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 19.

<sup>177</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 283.

<sup>178</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 285.

<sup>179</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 298d.

<sup>180</sup> Section 103 of the 1949 Act, formerly 40 U.S.C. § 753 (*see* 40 U.S.C. § 303 note).



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While GSA's authority is thus broad and comprehensive, there are significant exceptions.<sup>181</sup> However, unless an agency falls within one of these exceptions, has its own specific statutory authority,<sup>182</sup> or has a delegation from GSA, GSA's authority is exclusive and the agency has no authority to procure building services directly. [B-309181, Aug. 17, 2007; 61 Comp. Gen. 658 \(1982\).](#)

b. Allocation of Space

One of the General Services Administration's (GSA) functions is to assign and reassign space of executive agencies in government-owned and leased buildings. 40 U.S.C. § 585(a).<sup>183</sup> Space assignments should be advantageous in terms of economy, efficiency, or national security. *Id.* § 581(c)(4).<sup>184</sup>

Space assignment is one of the functions GSA inherited from its predecessor, the Public Buildings Administration of the Federal Works Agency. Determinations under this authority, the Attorney General has noted, as with all discretionary authority, "should not be made abstractly, or in an arbitrary manner, or without ascertainment and due consideration of the true needs of an affected department or agency." 40 Op. Att'y Gen. 140, 143 (1941).

Incident to the assignment of space is the determination—within some bounds of reason—of how much space to assign. A bankruptcy judge sued to force GSA to provide more space for the performance of his duties. He lost. *Votolato v. Freeman*, 8 B.R. 766 (D.N.H. 1981).

An agency's space needs are subject to change over time as the agency grows or shrinks or acquires or sheds functions. A recurring question has been who must bear the expense when substantial growth by one agency

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<sup>181</sup> Some exceptions are found in the definition of "public building," noted under the Public Buildings Act heading earlier in this section. The 1950 reorganization plan includes others, several of which are noted in our discussion of leasing in section E of this chapter. Other exceptions are found in 40 U.S.C. §§ 102(9) (definition of "property") and 113. Still others may be contained in various agency-specific or program-specific statutes.

<sup>182</sup> GAO, for example, has "exclusive custody and control" over its main headquarters building in Washington, "including operation, maintenance, protection, alteration, repair, and assignment of space therein." 31 U.S.C. § 781(a).

<sup>183</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(h)(1).

<sup>184</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490.

requires the relocation of another agency which shares the building. GAO originally took the position that the moving agency must bear its own expenses. *E.g.*, 35 Comp. Gen. 701 (1956); 34 Comp. Gen. 454 (1955). Subsequently, however, after GSA adopted a regulation, 41 C.F.R. § 101-21.601(b) (1976), which made agencies that required the relocation of other agencies responsible for funding the latter's moving costs, GAO revisited the issue in 56 Comp. Gen. 928 (1977), agreed with GSA, and overruled the prior line of cases.

The 1977 decision was based on two primary considerations. First, in issuing the regulation, GSA was exercising its authority under the Federal Property Act, an exercise which merited deference unless it exceeded the bounds of GSA's statutory authority. Second, the prior decisions had employed a somewhat strained application of 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), which restricts appropriations to their intended purposes. While it is true that agency A does not receive appropriations to pay for agency B's move, it is equally true that agency B is not moving for its own benefit. Thus, GAO concluded:

“[W]e are now of the view that when one agency requires the relocation of another to meet its own space requirements, the relocation is done for the benefit of the requesting agency. . . . [T]he costs of the move must be considered necessary or incident to meeting the space needs of the requesting agency. Use of the requesting agency's appropriations would not, therefore, augment the appropriations of the displaced agency. In fact, to the extent the move and related renovations to accommodate the displaced agency are made due to the request of another agency, the costs thereof cannot be considered necessary to further the purposes of the displaced agency's appropriations.”

56 Comp. Gen. at 933. GSA's current regulations, 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.215, retain the rule that when one GSA customer agency “forces” the relocation of another, the “forcing” agency is financially responsible to the relocated agency for all of its reasonable relocation costs as well as the “undepreciated amount” of any payments by the relocated agency for alterations. The regulation also holds the forcing agency financially responsible to GSA for any unpaid tenant improvements provided to the relocated agency.

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c. Alterations and Repairs

As noted previously, 40 U.S.C. § 3305(b),<sup>185</sup> gives the General Services Administration (GSA) the authority to alter public buildings. If the total estimated expenditure exceeds \$1,500,000, the alteration is subject to the prospectus approval requirement of 40 U.S.C. § 3307. *See* 40 U.S.C. §§ 3307(a)(1), 3305(b)(2)(A). This threshold applies by its terms to the “total expenditure” (40 U.S.C. § 3307(a)(1)) for the “alteration and acquisition” (40 U.S.C. § 3305(b)(2)(A)). Thus, if the alteration requires the acquisition of land, the \$1,500,000 includes the combined cost of the alteration and acquisition. Of course, an agency which is exempt from GSA’s authority or which receives its own specific statutory authority may proceed accordingly. *E.g.*, B-131887, Aug. 27, 1957 (specific authority for Army to remodel military warehouse for an office building). The application of the prospectus requirement, or the existence of a comparable requirement, depends on the terms of the exempting legislation. For example, GAO’s headquarters building, although exempt from GSA’s custody and control, remains subject to 40 U.S.C. § 3307, although GAO rather than GSA would submit the prospectus. 31 U.S.C. § 781(a).

As a general proposition, the normal services that GSA provides include construction, alteration, and finishing space for customer agency occupancy. These services are covered by what GSA calls a “tenant improvement (TI) allowance.” *See* 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.35. The amount of the allowance will vary depending on the agency’s mission needs and other factors. *Id.* In addition, GSA is authorized to provide “special services, not included in the standard level user charge, on a reimbursable basis.” 40 U.S.C. § 592(b)(2).<sup>186</sup> *See also* 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.195. Both types of alterations, normal space needs and special services, are financed from the Federal Buildings Fund established by 40 U.S.C. § 592.<sup>187</sup> GAO has been critical of “augmenting” the Fund by seeking reimbursement for items which should have been treated as normal space needs. GAO, *The General Services Administration Should Improve the Management of Its Alterations and Major Repairs Program*, LCD-79-310 (Washington, D.C.: July 17, 1979), at 26–29. Examples cited include such things as resurfacing a driveway entrance, installing sprinklers, and conducting a survey to confirm complaints of inadequate ventilation.

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<sup>185</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 603.

<sup>186</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(f)(6).

<sup>187</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(f).

The distinction between normal space needs and special services is recognized in several decisions. *E.g.*, 38 Comp. Gen. 758 (1959); 38 Comp. Gen. 588 (1959); 38 Comp. Gen. 193 (1958); B-122723, Mar. 10, 1955. With respect to special services, as these cases point out, it is not enough that GSA is authorized to do the work on a reimbursable basis. The tenant agency's appropriations must be legally available to make the reimbursement. *See also* 39 Comp. Gen. 723 (1960). In addition, as these cases also address, if the work amounts to a "public improvement," it is also necessary to satisfy the specific authorization requirement of 41 U.S.C. § 12.

Since the 1970s, Congress has made the reimbursement question easier by enacting a general provision annually along these lines:

"Appropriations available to any department or agency during the current fiscal year for necessary expenses, including maintenance or operating expenses, shall also be available for payment to the General Services Administration for charges for space and services and those expenses of renovation and alteration of buildings and facilities which constitute public improvements performed in accordance with the Public Buildings Act of 1959 (73 Stat. 749), the Public Buildings Amendments of 1972 (87 Stat. 216), or other applicable law."

Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008, Pub. L. No. 110-161, § 706, 121 Stat. 1844, 2020 (Dec. 26, 2007).

d. Maintenance and Protective Services

Every government building requires custodial services and, in varying degrees, protective services. The Federal Buildings Fund is available "for real property management and related activities." 40 U.S.C. § 592(c)(1). The General Services Administration's (GSA) annual appropriations language under the Federal Buildings Fund heading is more descriptive, providing funds, quoting from GSA's 2008 appropriation, "for necessary expenses of real property management and related activities not otherwise provided for, including operation, maintenance, and protection of federally owned and leased buildings; . . . [and] contractual services incident to cleaning or servicing buildings." Consolidated Appropriations Act, Pub. L. No. 110-161, 121 Stat. 1844, 2000 (Dec. 26, 2007).

GSA provides a standard level of cleaning services as part of the package for which the tenant agency pays rent. 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.175.

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Section 102-85.165 of the regulations details the cleaning and maintenance services included in the standard level. The general objective of the GSA package of services is to provide services “comparable to those furnished in commercial practice.” 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.165(a).

Prior to establishment of the Federal Buildings Fund, agencies could not reimburse GSA for security services because the funds were appropriated to GSA. *34 Comp. Gen. 42 (1954); B-139678, Aug. 31, 1959.* Now, the standard level package also includes protective and security services. *See, e.g., 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-85.35, 102-85.55, 102-85.140. See also 41 C.F.R. pt. 102-81.* Other aspects of GSA’s authority to protect federal property are found in 40 U.S.C. § 1315.<sup>188</sup> *See generally B-105291-O.M., Nov. 30, 1976.*

Additional restrictions on the procurement of guard and custodial services have appeared in annual appropriations acts, and varied from year to year. For example, a provision in the 1995 Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government appropriations act prohibited the obligation or expenditure of funds from the Federal Buildings Fund “for the procurement by contract of any guard, elevator operator, messenger or custodial services” if the procurement would result in the displacement of any GSA veterans preference employee, except for contracts with sheltered workshops employing the severely handicapped. Pub. L. No. 103-329, § 505, 108 Stat. 2382, 2409 (Sept. 30, 1994). Similar restrictive language has been codified at 40 U.S.C. § 593.<sup>189</sup>

e. Utilities

Another indispensable element of building management is the provision of utility services such as electricity, natural gas, water, and telecommunications. The General Services Administration (GSA) is authorized to prescribe policies for the management of public utility services, subject to Office of Federal Procurement Policy regulations (40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(2)); procure and supply nonpersonal services for executive agencies (40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)); and represent its client agencies in negotiations with public utilities and in utility regulatory proceedings (40 U.S.C. § 501(c)).<sup>190</sup> Section 501(a)(2) permits exemptions for the Defense Department when determined by the Secretary of Defense to be

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<sup>188</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 318, 318b, and 318d.

<sup>189</sup> A similar provision was formerly carried as 40 U.S.C. § 490c.

<sup>190</sup> These provisions were formerly located in 40 U.S.C. § 481.

“in the best interests of national security.” *See also* 40 U.S.C. § 591 with respect to the purchase of electricity.

Another provision, 40 U.S.C. § 3174,<sup>191</sup> authorizes GSA to “provide and operate public utility communications services serving any governmental activity when the services are economical and in the interest of the Federal Government.” This has been interpreted to include telecommunication services. *See* 66 Comp. Gen. 58 (1986); B-190142, Feb. 22, 1978, *aff’d*, B-190142, Dec. 7, 1978. In addition, utility services would certainly seem to be included in “real property management and related activities” for purposes of 40 U.S.C. § 592(c)(1).

Absent specific statutory authority<sup>192</sup> or a delegation from GSA, an agency is not authorized to procure utility services directly, especially in an area covered by a GSA contract. B-152142-O.M., Sept. 17, 1963.

Multiyear utility contracts are authorized by 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)(B),<sup>193</sup> which provides that a “contract for public utility services may be made for a period of not more than 10 years.” This provision was designed to save the government money by enabling it to take advantage of discounts available under long-term contracts. 62 Comp. Gen. 569, 572 (1983); 35 Comp. Gen. 220, 222–23 (1955).

Although the statute uses the term “public utility services,” it is not limited to the “traditional” regulated public utility. 62 Comp. Gen. 569 (statute applies to installment purchase contract with a nontariffed supplier of telephone equipment); 45 Comp. Gen. 59 (1965) (a contract to furnish public utility gas service by a firm that is not within the strict legal definition of a public utility is not prohibited under the statute). The governing factor is the “nature of the product or service provided and not the nature of the provider of the product or services.” 62 Comp. Gen. at 575. “[T]he Congress in its judgment determined to categorize the service rather than the contractor;” the statute applies to “services having public utility aspects.” 45 Comp. Gen. at 64. In any event, the statute clearly applies to the commonly understood types of “utility services”—

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<sup>191</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 295.

<sup>192</sup> *E.g.*, 31 U.S.C. § 781(c)(2), authorizing GAO to contract for utility services for periods not to exceed 10 years “[t]o the extent that funds are otherwise available for obligation.”

<sup>193</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 481(a)(3).

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telecommunications (62 Comp. Gen. 569), natural gas (45 Comp. Gen. 59),<sup>194</sup> and electric power (44 Comp. Gen. 683 (1965)).

While the multiyear authority of 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)(B) has been liberally applied, it is not unlimited. The statute is intended to address “incidental utility services needed in connection with authorized Government business,” not any project that happens to involve utility services. 35 Comp. Gen. at 223. Thus, GAO has found it inapplicable to an Air Force early warning system (35 Comp. Gen. 220), and to a proposal to finance construction of power facilities on the Ryukyu Islands (B-159559, July 29, 1966).

GAO subsequently approved a proposal in the Ryukyu case for privately financed construction, with the government entering into a 10-year requirements contract with a renewal option and a guarantee provision. B-159559, June 19, 1967. The obvious purpose of the guarantee feature was to enable the utility to recover its capital cost. See also 37 Comp. Gen. 155, 159–60 (1957); 17 Comp. Gen. 126 (1937); 16 Comp. Gen. 136 (1936); 8 Comp. Gen. 654 (1929). While this type of arrangement is acceptable, a scheme which obligates the government to pay the contractor’s entire capital cost at the outset violates the advance payment prohibition in 31 U.S.C. § 3324(b). 57 Comp. Gen. 89 (1977); 58 Comp. Gen. 29 (1978).

Contracts under 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)(B) are incrementally funded. The contracting agency is not required to obligate the total estimated contract cost in the first year. It needs only sufficient budget authority at the time the contract is made to obligate the first year’s costs, with subsequent years obligated annually thereafter. 62 Comp. Gen. at 572. See also 44 Comp. Gen. at 688; 35 Comp. Gen. at 223. GSA pays utility invoices by using a combination of statistical sampling and fast pay procedures. See 67 Comp. Gen. 194 (1988) and 68 Comp. Gen. 618 (1989) for a detailed discussion. See also 31 U.S.C. § 3521(b); GAO, *Policy and Procedures Manual for the Guidance of Federal Agencies*, title 7, §§ 7.4.D–7.4.F (Washington, D.C.: May 18, 1993).

A contract for a term of 10 years with an option to renew for an additional 5 years is within the authority of 40 U.S.C. § 501(b)(1)(B) because the

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<sup>194</sup> A 1990 decision, 70 Comp. Gen. 44, held that a procurement of natural gas was not a contract for utility services for purposes of the Walsh-Healey Act, 41 U.S.C. §§ 35–45. That case distinguished 45 Comp. Gen. 59 on several grounds. 70 Comp. Gen. at 49.



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government is not obligated beyond the initial 10-year period. [B-227850, Oct. 21, 1987](#), *aff'd on reconsideration*, [B-227850.2, Mar. 22, 1988](#).

Except for telecommunication services, utilities are financed from the Federal Buildings Fund and are part of the “space and services” package for which federal agencies pay rent. 40 U.S.C. § 592. Telecommunication services are financed from a separate fund. Originally designated the Federal Telecommunications Fund, it was merged in 1987 with an automatic data processing fund and redesignated as the Information Technology Fund and codified in former 40 U.S.C. § 757.<sup>195</sup> See [69 Comp. Gen. 112, 113 \(1989\)](#). In 2006, the Information Technology Fund was merged with the General Supply Fund to form the Acquisition Services Fund, a revolving fund.<sup>196</sup> Pub. L. No. 109-313, § 3, 120 Stat. 1734, 1735 (Oct. 6, 2006), *codified at* 40 U.S.C. § 321. The Acquisition Services Fund is available for, among other things, personal property, nonpersonal property, and personal services related to the provision of information technology. 40 U.S.C. § 321(c).

Prior to enactment of the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996,<sup>197</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-106, div. E, 110 Stat. 186, 679 (Feb. 10, 1996), GSA had comprehensive authority to provide “Automatic Data Processing” (ADP) equipment and services (including telecommunications services) to federal agencies under the Brooks Automatic Data Processing Act (ADP Act). 40 U.S.C. § 759 (1994). Pursuant to this authority, GSA promulgated the Federal Information Resources Management Regulation (FIRMR), which governed “the umbrella of local and long distance telecommunications services . . . provided, operated, managed, or maintained by GSA for the common use of all Federal agencies and other authorized users.” 41 C.F.R. § 201-4.001 (1995). The Comptroller General had several occasions to interpret GSA’s authority under the Brooks ADP Act. See, e.g., [70 Comp. Gen. 238 \(1991\)](#) (termination charges); [69 Comp. Gen. 112 \(1989\)](#) (statistical sampling cost recovery); [65 Comp. Gen. 380 \(1986\)](#) (FIRMR applicability).

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<sup>195</sup> It is perhaps not intuitively obvious that the term “information technology resources” includes telephone services, but the origin and evolution of 40 U.S.C. § 757 remove any doubt. See generally [70 Comp. Gen. 233 \(1991\)](#); [69 Comp. Gen. 112 \(1989\)](#).

<sup>196</sup> For more on revolving funds, see Chapter 12, section C.

<sup>197</sup> So renamed by the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act of 1997, Pub. L. No. 104-208, title VIII, § 5808, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-393 (Sept. 30, 1996).



The Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 repealed the Brooks ADP Act. Pub. L. No. 104-106, § 5101. GSA abolished the FIRMR in August 1996. The regulatory scheme of the FIRMR was replaced with directives and guidance governing “Information Technology,” which includes telecommunications services. *See, e.g.*, OMB Cir. No. A-130, *Management of Federal Information Resources* (Nov. 28, 2000); Exec. Order No. 13011, *Federal Information Technology*, 61 Fed. Reg. 37,657 (July 16, 1996), as amended, 40 U.S.C. § 11101 note; Federal Acquisition Regulation, *Acquisition of Information Technology*, 48 C.F.R. pt. 39. GSA, however, continues to provide governmentwide telecommunications services through contracts which federal agencies, on a nonmandatory basis, may use to satisfy their telecommunications needs. Examples include GSA’s FTS-2001 contracts and the Metropolitan Area Acquisitions (MAA) program.

f. Use Restrictions

The Property Clause of the Constitution (art. IV, § 3) empowers Congress to “make all needful Rules and regulations” with respect to government-owned property, which includes the authority to control what use is made of government property. In addition to the general purpose restrictions which permeate appropriations law (see Chapter 4), a few restrictions on the use of government property appear in various parts of title 40 and are not reflected elsewhere. One example is 40 U.S.C. § 8108,<sup>198</sup> which prohibits the use of any public building in the District of Columbia, except the Capitol Building and the White House, for “public functions” unless expressly authorized by law. Another is 40 U.S.C. § 3105,<sup>199</sup> which provides that “no building owned, or used for public purposes, by the Federal Government shall be draped in mourning nor may public fund money be used for that purpose.” This prohibition applies to buildings abroad as well as to buildings in the United States, and applies regardless of who owns the building. 8 Comp. Dec. 317 (1901).

Many of the General Services Administration’s (GSA) regulations, issued under its authority in 40 U.S.C. § 121(c), address issues of access to, and personal conduct on government property. For example, they specify when government property will be open and closed to the public (41 C.F.R. § 102-74.375), and generally ban certain activities while on federal property, such as gambling (41 C.F.R. § 102-74.395) and consumption of alcoholic beverages (41 C.F.R. § 102-74.405), *etc.*

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<sup>198</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 31.

<sup>199</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 286.

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g. Payment of Rent by Federal Agencies

In 1972, Congress made fundamental changes in the way the government budgets for and finances its space needs. Prior to that time, the system was fairly simple: Congress, for the most part, appropriated the money to the General Services Administration (GSA) and GSA paid the bills. Under this system, there was little incentive for agencies to be conservative in their space needs. Also, as we have seen, coming up with appropriations to fund needed construction work proved to be extremely difficult.

The Public Buildings Amendments of 1972 made several important revisions to the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act. First, the 1972 law created a new revolving fund, later named the Federal Buildings Fund, to be available to the extent provided in annual appropriation acts, for GSA to use to finance its real property management functions. Next, it required agencies to pay rent to GSA, to be deposited in the revolving fund. Finally, it authorized any executive agency other than GSA which provides space and services to charge for the space and services.<sup>200</sup> While the concept of charging rent was not wholly unknown prior to 1972 (*see, e.g., 28 Comp. Gen. 221 (1948)*), this was the first governmentwide requirement.

Section 586(b) of title 40, providing for rent charges by GSA, states in part:

“(1) In general.—The Administrator of General Services shall impose a charge for furnishing space and services.

“(2) Rates.—The Administrator shall, from time to time, determine the rates to be charged for furnishing space and services and shall prescribe regulations providing for the rates. The rates shall approximate commercial charges for comparable space and services . . .

“(3) Exemptions.—The Administrator may exempt anyone from the charges required by this subsection when the Administrator determines that charges would be infeasible or impractical. . . .”

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<sup>200</sup> Pub. L. No. 92-313, §§ 3 and 4, 86 Stat. 216, 218–19 (June 16, 1972), 40 U.S.C. §§ 592 (Federal Buildings Fund); 586(b) (payment of rent to GSA); and 586(c) (authority of other agencies to charge for space and services).

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Section 586(c)(1) of title 40, providing for rent charges by other agencies, states: “An executive agency, other than the [General Services] Administration, may impose a charge for furnishing space and services at rates approved by the Administrator.”

Section 592(b)(1)(A) of title 40 directs that user charges under 40 U.S.C. § 586(b) be deposited in the Federal Buildings Fund. Section 586(c)(2) of title 40 authorizes the agency to credit the receipts to its own appropriations to the extent of recovering the cost of providing the services. Agency operating appropriations are available to pay the rent by virtue of the recurring general appropriations act provision discussed previously.

At first, the space-and-service charges were known as the “standard level user charge” or “SLUC.” They are now simply called “rent.” The rent requirement is intended to reduce cost and encourage more efficient space utilization by making agencies accountable for the space they use. H.R. Rep. No. 92-989 (1972). As noted above, rent charged by GSA is to approximate commercial charges for comparable space and services. This method was chosen over a cost-recovery basis in order to produce more income so that the revolving fund could finance construction and major repairs. See [B-95136, May 18, 1971](#) (GAO’s comments on the legislation). This hope has been largely unfulfilled.<sup>201</sup> Under the commercial charge formulation, it is not inconceivable that an agency occupying space in a leased building could pay more rent to GSA than GSA is paying to the lessor. This does not entitle the lessor to a rent increase. See [B-95136-O.M., Mar. 29, 1976](#).

GSA defines “rent” in simple terms as meaning “the amounts charged by GSA for space and related services to the customer agencies with tenancy in GSA-controlled space.” 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.35. Section 102-85.115 of the regulation describes how rent is determined. According to an early GSA statement in a December 1972 letter to GAO, rent is designed to cover—

“the value of the space itself plus cleaning, utilities,  
operation and maintenance of elevators and electric

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<sup>201</sup> See Chapter 1 of GAO, *The General Services Administration’s Rental Rates (Standard Level User Charge) for Federal Agencies*, GAO/LCD-78-329 (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 1978), and Chapter 3 of GAO, *Federal Office Space: Increased Ownership Would Result in Significant Savings*, GAO/GGD-90-11 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 22, 1989).

heating, air-conditioning, ventilating, refrigeration, plumbing and sewage systems, repairs and maintenance, including approaches, sidewalks and roads; the furnishing and maintenance of building equipment such as directory and bulletin boards, electrical outlets, door keys, and window shades or venetian blinds; and overhead (*i.e.*, the total cost of GSA's Public Buildings Service . . . except costs covered by reimbursements).”

[52 Comp. Gen. 957, 958–59](#) (1973).

The services GSA provides as part of the rent do not mean any and all services the tenant agency may need or want. GSA provides what it determines to be a “standard level” of service. 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.165. Over and above that standard level, services are provided on a reimbursable basis to the extent that GSA is authorized to do the work or provide the service and the tenant agency’s appropriations are available to pay.

GSA is not limited to charging only federal agencies for space and services it furnishes. Thus, for example, GSA was authorized to charge rent to the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, to which GSA was then required to furnish space under 49 U.S.C. § 305(f) (1970).

[B-95136, Nov. 17, 1978](#). As the result of some apparently skillful lobbying, the law was changed in 1980 to require the then Interstate Commerce Commission (*i.e.*, the taxpayers) to pick up the tab. Pub. L. No. 96-296, § 36, 94 Stat. 793, 826 (July 1, 1980).

A federal office building may house a variety of support concessions such as blind vending stands operated under the Randolph-Sheppard Act, Federal Credit Unions, cafeterias, dry cleaning and laundry facilities, *etc.* GSA could presumably charge rent directly to the concessioners. Instead, however, GSA assigns the space for these support concessions to the tenant agency for purposes of rent assessment, on the theory that the agency’s presence in the building generated the need for the space. GAO has agreed that this method is authorized. [52 Comp. Gen. 957](#) (1973); [B-114820-O.M., Dec. 14, 1977](#). GSA has “wide discretionary powers consistent with the purposes of the statute, in the manner of defining and charging for space occupied by Federal agencies and others.” [52 Comp. Gen. at 961](#). If the building houses more than one government agency, GSA allocates the joint-use space (and the rent for it) on a *pro rata* basis. 41 C.F.R. § 102-85.115(a).

GSA's rental charge also covers assigned parking spaces. Once again, since GSA is not limited to charging only federal agencies, it could assign spaces directly to individuals and charge rent to those individuals. In the exercise of its discretion, however, GSA simply includes the parking space in the total space charged to the tenant agency or agencies. *See* 52 Comp. Gen. at 960–61; [55 Comp. Gen. 897 \(1976\)](#). *See also American Federation of Government Employees v. Freeman*, 498 F. Supp. 651, 656–57 (D.D.C. 1980) (the statute authorizes, but does not require, GSA to charge parking fees). The authority of agencies to charge rent under 40 U.S.C. § 586(c) likewise is not restricted to charging other federal agencies.<sup>202</sup> Therefore, the tenant agency could charge its employees for parking space. 55 Comp. Gen. at 899–900. However, section 586(c) does not authorize an agency to collect (and retain) fees from nonagency participants in an agency-sponsored conference held in procured space. [B-190244, Nov. 28, 1977](#). (This does not necessarily mean that the agency cannot charge a fee, merely that it cannot rely on 40 U.S.C. § 586(c) as authority to credit the money to its own appropriation.)

The purpose of 40 U.S.C. § 586(b) is to raise revenue for GSA, not to create the full equivalent of a commercial landlord-tenant relationship. Accordingly, a tenant agency may not reduce its rental payments to recover the cost of property damaged by building failures. [59 Comp. Gen. 515 \(1980\)](#); [57 Comp. Gen. 130 \(1977\)](#).

Congress often uses appropriation act provisions to address either GSA's authority under 40 U.S.C. § 586(b) or the extent of an agency's liability to pay GSA's charges. Thus, to understand the operation of the statute for any given year, it is necessary to examine annual appropriations acts both for any provisions directed at GSA and for any provisions covering the tenant agency in question. For example, a provision in GSA's 1995 appropriation directed GSA to reflect in its rent rates the reductions contained in a particular budget amendment. Pub. L. No. 103-329, title IV, § 5, 108 Stat. 2382, 2404 (Sept. 30, 1994).

Restrictions directed at tenant agencies may take various forms. A provision imposing a specific dollar limit is discussed in [B-204270, Oct. 13, 1981](#). A provision imposing a percentage limitation is noted in [55 Comp.](#)

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<sup>202</sup> There is one significant difference between GSA and other rent-charging agencies under 40 U.S.C. § 586. Section 586(b) requires GSA to charge rent; section 586(c) merely authorizes other agencies to do so.

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[Gen. 897 \(1976\)](#). Two additional types appeared in the 1995 appropriations act for the Departments of Labor and of Health and Human Services (HHS), Pub. L. No. 103-333, 108 Stat. 2539 (Sept. 30, 1994). Section 207 of the HHS general provisions permanently canceled a specific dollar amount of “budgetary resources available . . . for space rental charges” in 1995, and directed HHS to allocate the reduction among its various accounts with certain exceptions. The operating appropriation for the Railroad Retirement Board, Pub. L. No. 103-333, 108 Stat. at 2571, specified that none of the funds shall be available to pay GSA rental charges. The precise language of the limitation will determine whether it applies only to rent or to other reimbursements as well. B-186818, Sept. 22, 1976. Regardless of the type of limitation, it must appear in the statute, and not merely in committee reports, in order to be legally binding. *Id.*; B-177610, Sept. 3, 1976.

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## G. Improvements to Property Not Owned by the Government

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### 1. The Rules

The topic of this section is the rule that, unless authorized by statute, appropriated funds may not be used to make permanent improvements to property not owned by the federal government. As numerous decisions have pointed out, the rule is based on the fundamental tenet, noted in various places throughout the chapters in these volumes, that no government official is authorized to give away government property—tangible property, money, legal rights—without specific statutory authority. *E.g.*, [B-286457, Jan. 29, 2001](#); [53 Comp. Gen. 351, 352 \(1973\)](#); [42 Comp. Gen. 480, 481 \(1963\)](#); [35 Comp. Gen. 715, 716 \(1956\)](#).

Although derived from the constitutional principle that disposal of government property is a function of Congress, the rule itself is decisional rather than statutory, or, to quote a phrase used regularly in the decisions, the rule “is one of policy and not of positive law.” [53 Comp. Gen. at 352](#); [42 Comp. Gen. at 483](#). Stated somewhat more accurately, the rule is “one of public policy, not statutory prohibition.” [B-286457, Jan. 29, 2001](#), at 3; [65 Comp. Gen. 722, 724 \(1986\)](#). The public policy which the rule reflects—that it is ordinarily not a particularly good idea for government officials to

give away the taxpayers' money—can be traced back at least to the early decisions of the Comptroller of the Treasury. *E.g.*, 6 Comp. Dec. 295 (1899).

Due at least in part to the lack of an explicit statutory foundation, the rule is not and never has been particularly rigid. A considerable body of exceptions has evolved, in recognition of the fact that there are situations in which making improvements to nongovernment property is appropriate to the circumstances and can be justified. Viewing the body of case law as a whole, it seems fair to say that there is a set of standards to determine when the expenditure may be authorized, with the prohibitory rule remaining for those cases in which the expenditure would amount to giving away government property.

Each of these standards is discussed below. However, there are several threshold matters to consider in determining whether the rule is even potentially applicable. To start with, the rule applies only to improvements. If something does not add to the value of the property in question, it is not an “improvement” for purposes of the rule. Thus, in [B-301367, Oct. 23, 2003](#), GAO held that affixing to a utility company water tower decals of the military units stationed at a nearby base did not enhance the tower’s value and thus did not raise an issue under the rule. Next, the rule applies only to *permanent* improvements. It does not prohibit temporary improvements as long as they remain the property of the government and the government reserves the right to remove them at the expiration of the lease or other government use. [43 Comp. Gen. 738 \(1964\)](#); [20 Comp. Gen. 927 \(1941\)](#); [15 Comp. Gen. 761 \(1936\)](#). For example, the 1964 decision concerned nonpermanent servicing facilities which the General Services Administration (GSA) needed to install in commercial space leased for motor pool activities. The propriety of temporary improvements is determined by applying the standard rules of purpose availability—you look first to see if the expenditure is expressly authorized by law; if it is neither expressly authorized nor expressly prohibited, you then apply the “necessary expense” doctrine discussed in Chapter 4. Of course, the rule does not apply if an agency has specific statutory authority to make the permanent improvements in question. Thus, in [B-286457, Jan. 29, 2001](#), GAO concluded that the rule had no application to the Federal Aviation Administration’s use of funds to demolish the air traffic control tower at La Guardia Airport since the agency had specific statutory authority to replace the existing tower with a new one.

If none of the foregoing threshold considerations makes the rule facially inapplicable, the expenditure may nevertheless be authorized if the following standards are met:

- The improvement must be incident to and essential for the effective accomplishment of an authorized purpose of the appropriation sought to be charged.
- The amount of the expenditure must be reasonable.
- The improvement must be for the principal benefit of the government.
- The interests of the government in the improvement must be protected.

These standards appear to have been first enunciated in [42 Comp. Gen. 480, 484 \(1963\)](#), and they have been reiterated in many cases since. *E.g.*, [B-286457, Jan. 29, 2001](#); [71 Comp. Gen. 4, 5 \(1991\)](#); [69 Comp. Gen. 673, 675 \(1990\)](#); [53 Comp. Gen. 351, 352 \(1973\)](#); [46 Comp. Gen. 25, 27 \(1966\)](#).

The first standard—incident and essential to an authorized purpose of the appropriation—is a relative concept, like the “necessary expense” doctrine from which it is derived. It is applied by evaluating the proposed expenditure against the authorized purposes of the appropriation. Thus, incidental improvements to private property, chargeable to project funds, are unobjectionable if necessary to the completion of an authorized federal project. [B-37747, Nov. 19, 1943](#); [A-65186, Oct. 19, 1935](#).

As with the necessary expense doctrine itself, an item may relate clearly to one appropriation but be totally foreign to another. A good illustration is the improvement involved in [42 Comp. Gen. 480—monkey cages in the San Diego Zoo](#). It is hard to see how the construction of monkey cages in a private zoo would further the purposes of a federal agency’s appropriation.<sup>203</sup> However, where the appropriation is for Public Health research and the expenditure stems from a cost-reimbursable contract for the experimental breeding of primates, the relationship of the monkey cages to the appropriation takes on a new perspective. This element shares

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<sup>203</sup> It should be apparent that we are talking about expenditures which are incident to some other government program or project, as distinguished from grant programs where making the improvement may be the very purpose of the federal assistance. Since the grant programs are statutorily authorized, this analysis would not apply, although the underlying rationale would bar the expenditure but for the statute.



the common-sense logic of the necessary expense doctrine. However wonderful an item may appear, if it does not bear a sufficient relationship to carrying out one of the agency's authorized programs or functions or to fulfilling the purposes for which Congress appropriated money to the agency, the agency has no business doing it.

The second standard—reasonableness of cost—is also relative. It is not enough to just look at the dollar amount in a vacuum. You must evaluate the cost against such factors as the type of improvement involved, the uses to which it is to be put, and the length of the government's contemplated use measured against the residual value, if any, to the owner. This element has been stated in various ways. The cost of the improvements must not be "extravagant or disproportionate to the needs to which the facilities are intended to be put." 35 *Comp. Gen.* at 716. If a lease or contract is involved, the cost of the improvements must be "in reasonable proportion to the overall cost of the lease or contract price." 53 *Comp. Gen.* at 352. The monkey cages in 42 *Comp. Gen.* 480, for example, cost approximately 10 percent of the total price of the research contract. Of course, this formulation is useless where land is being leased to the government for a nominal rent, in which case other factors must be used to assess reasonableness. Thus, spending approximately \$1,000 to improve an access road was "relatively small and not disproportionate to the needs of the Government," and therefore acceptable, in 38 *Comp. Gen.* 143, 146 (1958), whereas in 47 *Comp. Gen.* 61, 65 (1967), constructing a \$25 million building on land leased to the government was a different story, hardly qualifying as "some minor item incidental to a larger purpose."

For at least the last half century, the amount formula included a statutory element. As noted previously in section E.2.g of this chapter, section 322 of the Economy Act of 1932 prohibited the obligation or expenditure of appropriated funds for "alterations, improvements, and repairs" of rented premises in excess of 25 percent of the first year's rent. *See* 40 U.S.C. § 278a (1982). Section 322 of the Economy Act was repealed in 1988,<sup>204</sup> and the cases must therefore be regarded as modified to the extent they either impose a percentage limitation on the amount of otherwise authorized expenditures or treat section 322 as an independent source of authority.

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<sup>204</sup> Public Buildings Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-678, § 7, 102 Stat. 4049, 4052 (Nov. 17, 1988).

The third standard—principal benefit to the government—is largely self-explanatory and is necessary to prevent giveaways. Of course, words like “principal” or “primary” do not mean “exclusive,” and in many cases there will be some residual, if not contemporaneous, benefit to the owner. Thus, an otherwise authorized expenditure does not become objectionable merely because the facility will have an estimated life of 15 years and the government plans to use it for only 10 years. See [B-130515\(3\), May 8, 1969](#). Or, turning again to the monkey cages in [42 Comp. Gen. 480](#), nothing would prevent the zoo from cleaning them out and using them to house other monkeys upon completion of the government research contract. Nevertheless, the United States must be the primary beneficiary of the improvements. *E.g.*, [B-213379, Oct. 29, 1984](#) (no authority to pay railroad in Germany for track improvements where benefit to United States was merely “the unavoidable result of improvements made to the German rail system as a whole”).

The fourth and final standard—protection of the government’s interests—will again vary with the facts and circumstances of the particular case. For example, in a case where the then Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) wanted to erect or repair fences on private land to help deter the entry of illegal aliens, it would be necessary for the agency to gain “substantial control” over the land by some device such as an easement or lease covering the useful life of the fence. [55 Comp. Gen. 872, 874 \(1976\)](#). See also [A-65186, Oct. 19, 1935](#), specifying the same condition. Similarly, where the Department of Agriculture wanted to construct a dam, part of which would have to be located on Canadian soil, GAO advised that a right in perpetuity for the construction and maintenance of the dam should first be obtained from the property owner, as well as, of course, the consent of the Canadian government. [18 Comp. Gen. 463 \(1938\)](#). In some cases, the appropriate device for protecting the government’s interests may be the insertion of appropriate provisions in a contract. *E.g.*, [B-187482, Feb. 17, 1977](#). In other cases, it may be necessary to work out an *ad hoc* agreement with the owner tailored to the circumstances. See [71 Comp. Gen. at 6](#).

If these foregoing standards cannot be satisfied, then the expenditure is unauthorized unless the agency obtains statutory authority. For example, in [B-194031, May 1, 1979](#), GAO agreed with the then Veterans Administration (VA) that it could not use its funds for the repair and maintenance of the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C., a 30-acre cemetery of which the government owned only half an acre. The expenditure would primarily benefit the private owners and would be disproportionately large in relation to the government-owned portion.

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Significantly, on a few occasions in the past when Congress had authorized repairs, it did so explicitly. The VA could, of course, repair and maintain the government-owned plots.

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## 2. Some Specific Applications

### a. Leased Premises/Property

The rule prohibiting permanent improvements to nonfederal property without statutory authority applies to leased property, both unimproved property (*i.e.*, land)<sup>205</sup> and buildings.<sup>206</sup> However, the rule has evolved somewhat differently in the case of leases because of the contractual nature of the transaction. It has long been held that appropriated funds are available for improvements to property being leased by the government if provided for as part of the consideration under the lease. [65 Comp. Gen. 722, 723–24 \(1986\)](#); [18 Comp. Dec. 70 \(1911\)](#); [6 Comp. Dec. 943 \(1900\)](#); [A-33513, Oct. 10, 1930](#). Any other rule would make little sense because alterations are often necessary to make premises suitable for the government’s proposed use, and if the government could not pay directly, the landlord could make the alterations and factor the cost into the rent, and the government would end up paying anyway. Of course, there is a common-sense point beyond which this concept cannot be stretched. It would not, for example, permit the construction of a \$25 million building on land being leased for a dollar a year. *See* [47 Comp. Gen. 61 \(1967\)](#).

As noted in our general discussion, the prohibition does not apply with respect to alterations or improvements to the leased premises which are not permanent and which are removable. [43 Comp. Gen. 738 \(1964\)](#); [5 Comp. Gen. 696 \(1926\)](#); [B-127807, May 14, 1956](#); [A-55493, June 21, 1934](#); [A-54725, Apr. 13, 1934](#). In the case of a lease, however, before applying the purpose analysis, it is first necessary to ask whether the repair or improvement is one which the landlord is obligated to supply under the terms of the lease. [5 Comp. Gen. at 697](#). If it is, then the government is not

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<sup>205</sup> [47 Comp. Gen. 61 \(1967\)](#); [38 Comp. Gen. 143 \(1958\)](#); [35 Comp. Gen. 715 \(1956\)](#).

<sup>206</sup> [18 Comp. Gen. 144 \(1938\)](#); [14 Comp. Gen. 97 \(1934\)](#); [10 Comp. Gen. 149 \(1930\)](#); [5 Comp. Dec. 478 \(1899\)](#).

authorized to, in effect, pay twice to get what it is entitled to get under the lease. 2 Comp. Gen. 606, 607 (1923); A-50554, Aug. 28, 1933.<sup>207</sup>

The General Services Administration (GSA) has its own statutory authority, discussed generally in 65 Comp. Gen. 722. Under 40 U.S.C. § 581(c)(4),<sup>208</sup> GSA is authorized to “repair, alter, and improve rented premises” if it determines that the work “is advantageous to the Government in terms of economy, efficiency, or national security.” GSA’s determination must show that “the total cost (rental, repair, alteration, and improvement) for the expected life of the lease is less than the cost of alternative space not needing repair, alteration, or improvement.” *Id.* § 581(c)(4)(B). Work under 40 U.S.C. § 581(c)(4) is financed from the Federal Buildings Fund, 40 U.S.C. § 592.

If an agency other than GSA is doing the leasing under its own authority, what it can or cannot do will depend on the precise terms of its leasing authority, supplemented or restricted, as the case may be, by the decisions.

What happens to the improvements at the end of the lease, and related questions of liability, will depend on the terms of the lease. In one case, for example, the government had leased unimproved land for 10 years and constructed buildings on it. When the lease was over, the government removed the buildings and left the concrete foundations. Unfortunately for the landowner, the lease expressly relieved the government of any responsibility to restore the land to its prior condition, and the court refused to construe this in “all or nothing” terms. *M.H. Sherman Co. v. United States*, 258 F.2d 881 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1958). In a similar case where the lease did include the “restore to prior condition” clause, the government was liable. *Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Co. v. United States*, 129 Ct. Cl. 137 (1954).

The restoration clause is not a rigid requirement that the government remove improvements in any event and at all costs. Thus, in a case where removal would not have been cost-effective, the Attorney General approved a settlement whereby the government agreed to leave the improvements for the use of the lessor in full settlement of all claims

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<sup>207</sup> We are somewhat reluctant to admit it, but this case involved an expenditure of \$2.67 for the purchase of a toilet seat. Despite overwhelming temptations, we will eschew further comment.

<sup>208</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(a)(8).

against the government. 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 338 (1939). There can be no requirement “that improvements attached to leased premises must be removed when removal would involve the expenditure of public funds greatly in excess of any salvage value.” *Id.* at 340. *See also* 20 Comp. Gen. 105, 111 (1940).

The restoration clause serves more as a method of measuring damages where the government does not remove the improvements. Whatever the government does or does not do, liability requires provable damages. The point is illustrated in *Realty Associates v. United States*, 138 F. Supp. 875 (Ct. Cl. 1956), in which the government leased land and buildings which had been idle for several years and made substantial improvements to the property. When the lease was over and the property returned to the lessor, it had so increased in value as a result of the improvements that it was capable of producing, and did produce, substantial income. Nevertheless, the lessor sued for the cost of restoration on a breach of contract theory. Noting that if the government had restored the property to its former unusable condition, “no one would have been more unhappy than plaintiff” (*Realty Associates*, 138 F. Supp. at 877), and invoking Mark Twain’s aphorism that “the difference between a dog and a man is that if you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous he will not bite you” (*id.* at 878), the court held that the lessor could recover only if he could show that he actually suffered damage as a result of the government’s actions. If the property is worth more in its unrestored condition than it would be worth if restored, there is no damage. *See also Dodge Street Building Corp. v. United States*, 341 F.2d 641 (Ct. Cl. 1965). This principle has also been applied where the leasehold was acquired by condemnation. *Flood v. United States*, 274 F.2d 483 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 363 U.S. 805 (1960).

The fact that removal may not be feasible or cost-effective does not mean that the government has no alternative to simply giving away the improvements. GAO has recommended that the leasing agency consider, in appropriate cases—

“the advisability of incorporating in such leases a provision for reimbursement by the lessor of the residual value of such changes at the termination of the lease together with the basis for determining such value. . . . In determining the residual value there necessarily would be for consideration such factors as (1) the rental rate, (2) the lease term, and (3) the type of the alteration, improvement, or repair with particular consideration as to whether or not such building

changes at the termination of the lease will operate to enhance the value of the building or be advantageous to the lessor.”

[39 Comp. Gen. 304, 307 \(1959\)](#). The lease in that case was subject to termination by the lessor at the end of each annual renewal term, a situation in which a provision along the lines suggested is particularly desirable. *Id.*

b. Research

A number of government agencies have research responsibilities not infrequently involving atypical situations with atypical needs. Thus, it probably should not be too surprising that some years ago GAO noted that a common source of exceptions was “improvements (to a contractor’s property) incidental to but necessary to give full force and effect to research contracts made by the Government with private parties.” [53 Comp. Gen. 351, 352 \(1973\)](#).

One case is [42 Comp. Gen. 480 \(1963\)](#). The Public Health Service’s National Cancer Institute had entered into a research contract with the San Diego Zoo. Part of the contract involved the installation of cages and related work for the “experimental breeding of primates.” GAO evaluated the administrative justification in light of the rule and its exceptions, and found the expenditure authorized. This holding was applied a few years later in another case involving a Public Health Service cancer research contract, [46 Comp. Gen. 25 \(1966\)](#), allowing the costs incurred by the contractor in converting an unfinished basement into laboratory space for use in performing the contract. Part of the justification was a response to the logical question of why the agency had chosen this contractor rather than one who might have had more suitable facilities.

To avoid the difficult questions cases like these presented, GAO suggested that the Public Health Service might be better off with more explicit statutory authority, noting as a model 10 U.S.C. § 2353. [42 Comp. Gen. at 486](#). Under 10 U.S.C. § 2353(a), the military departments may fund the acquisition or construction of facilities and equipment deemed necessary for the performance of research contracts, but this may not include “new construction or improvements having general utility.” In addition, the statute prohibits the installation or construction of facilities “that would not be readily removable or separable without unreasonable expense or unreasonable loss of value” unless the contract includes specified safeguards. 10 U.S.C. § 2353(b). This statute clearly overcomes the “permanent improvement” prohibition. [B-138868-O.M., June 10, 1959](#). The

Public Health Service took the hint, and now has the explicit authority to enter into research contracts in accordance with 10 U.S.C. § 2353. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 241(a)(7).

Another case involving an exception made for a research project improvement is [B-96826-O.M., Feb. 8, 1967](#). It involved an irrigation system constructed on unimproved land by the Soil Conservation Service in connection with statutorily authorized soil erosion research. As with the Public Health Service cases, this too would now be authorized by statute. Under 7 U.S.C. § 2250a, Department of Agriculture appropriations may be used to erect buildings or other structures on land owned by someone other than the United States, as long as the government obtains the right to use the land for the estimated life of or need for the structure, including the right to remove the structure upon termination of government use.

Another agency with research responsibilities is the National Institute of Standards and Technology. GAO considered a number of proposals in the 1950s, concluding in several cases that the Institute could make improvements to leased property where those improvements were essential to carrying out the particular projects and could be removed without material damage to the premises. *E.g.*, [B-122439, Feb. 23, 1955](#) (unimproved land); [B-114240, May 8, 1953](#) (laboratory alteration). Nevertheless, statutory authority is preferable to case-by-case determinations, and legislation was enacted in 1958, now found at 15 U.S.C. § 278e(g), which authorizes the Secretary of Commerce to erect on leased property facilities needed by the Institute.

As this survey of cases suggests, a number of agencies with significant research responsibilities now have adequate statutory authority, with appropriate safeguards (except for 15 U.S.C. § 278e(g), which includes no apparent safeguards), to do what they need to do.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) presented a somewhat different situation in [B-187482, Feb. 17, 1977](#). In connection with authorized research under the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, EPA wanted to purchase a cooling tower from a private power company, knowing that it would abandon the facility in a few years upon completion of the research. EPA thought the situation was analogous to spending money for permanent improvements to private property. GAO agreed and applied the tests of [42 Comp. Gen. 480, finding](#), among other things, that the purchase price would amount to approximately 25 percent of the total cost of the research project, that constructing a new tower would have been



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considerably more expensive, and that the agreement included appropriate safeguards to protect the government’s interest in the tower. Accordingly, the purchase was authorized.

c. Public Improvements

By “public improvements” we mean such things as roads and sidewalks. By their nature, when not located on federal property, they tend to be located on land owned by state or local governments rather than private parties. This introduces different factors into the analysis.

Most of the cases involve proposals to construct, repair, or maintain roads leading or adjacent to some government facility. The earlier cases just said no, the fact that there would be some resulting benefit to the government being irrelevant. *E.g.*, [6 Comp. Gen. 353 \(1926\)](#); [2 Comp. Gen. 308 \(1922\)](#). Later cases found a basis to say no in a statute we discussed earlier in section F of this chapter, 41 U.S.C. § 12, which prohibits any contract “for the erection, repair, or furnishing of any . . . public improvement” in excess of the amount “appropriated for the specific purpose.” [39 Comp. Gen. 388 \(1959\)](#) (access road); [32 Comp. Gen. 296 \(1952\)](#) (deceleration lane on state highway); [B-143536, Aug. 15, 1960](#) (access road). The statement found almost *verbatim* in each case is, quoting from [B-143536](#) at 3, that “if specific action is required by the Congress with respect to public improvements on Federal property, *a fortiori*, specific authority would be required for the financing from Federal funds of public improvements on State or county property.”

Other cases applying this concept include [B-211044, June 15, 1984](#) (crosswalk across the median strip of a public highway), and [B-194135, Nov. 19, 1979](#) (locally owned wastewater treatment plant). In [38 Comp. Gen. 143 \(1958\)](#), however, improvements to an access road on state land were found authorized under the decisional rules where most of the contemplated improvements were not of a permanent nature and there would be no resulting benefit to the state since the road was no more than a car path leading to the government facility across grazing land. *See also* [B-126950, Mar. 12, 1956](#) (similar facts, same result).<sup>209</sup>

The prohibition has also been applied in a case where the government technically held fee title extending to the center of a public street, but had

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<sup>209</sup> A factual distinction that did not affect the result is that the rent being paid by the government in [38 Comp. Gen. 143](#) was nominal, whereas in [B-126950](#) it was more of a market rent.



no jurisdiction or control over the portion occupied by the street because it was subject to a permanent easement held by the city in trust for the public. [B-120012, Oct. 15, 1954](#).

In the case of sidewalks, there is statutory authority for any executive agency to “install, repair, and replace sidewalks around buildings, installations, property, or grounds” that are under the control of the agency, owned by the federal government, and located in a state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, or a United States territory or possession. 40 U.S.C. § 589(a). The agency may do the work directly or by reimbursement to the state or local government, in accordance with the General Services Administration regulations. *Id.* §§ 589(b), (c). Prior to the enactment of this general authority, some agencies had—and still have—their own comparable agency-specific authority. An example is 16 U.S.C. § 555b for the Forest Service. GAO has construed “owned” for purposes of the Forest Service provision as including a 99-year lease. [43 Comp. Gen. 705 \(1964\)](#). There is no reason why this holding should not apply as well to 40 U.S.C. § 589.

Section 589(e) of title 40 provides that the statute “does not increase or enlarge the tort liability of the Government for injuries to individuals or damages to property.” Thus, reimbursement by the federal government under section 589 does not operate to relieve the state or local government from any underlying obligation it might otherwise have to make the repairs, or from liability for failure to do so. *Connor v. United States*, 461 F.2d 1259 (D.C. Cir. 1972) (slip-and-fall on a sidewalk adjacent to a federal building in the District of Columbia). By the same token, contracting out maintenance of a sidewalk on federal property will not necessarily absolve the federal government of any liability as a property owner. *See Simpkins v. United States*, 253 F. Supp. 2d 4 (D.D.C. 2003) (another slip-and-fall on a sidewalk located on a parkland owned by the United States but maintained by a nonfederal entity).

d. Federal Aviation Administration

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) performs its functions at airports throughout the country and therefore has considerable presence on property which is not owned by the United States. Consequently, the FAA has had frequent occasion to consider the use of its appropriations for various alterations or improvements to nongovernment property.

The FAA has general authority to “acquire, establish, improve, operate, and maintain air navigation facilities.” 49 U.S.C. § 44502(a)(1)(A). Under this authority, it could, for example, make repairs and improvements to flight

service stations located on premises leased from airport owners or operators. [53 Comp. Gen. 317 \(1973\)](#).<sup>210</sup> *See also* [B-143536, Aug. 15, 1960](#) (similar language in an appropriation act provision applicable to leased as well as acquired lands).

Under another statute, the FAA may approve an airport development grant application only upon receipt of written assurances that—

“the airport owner or operator will provide, without charge to the Government, property interests of the sponsor in land or water areas or buildings that the Secretary decides are desirable for, and that will be used for, constructing at Government expense, facilities for carrying out activities related to air traffic control or navigation.”

49 U.S.C. § 47107(a)(12). This is also specific authority sufficient to overcome the prohibition on improving nongovernment property. [46 Comp. Gen. 60 \(1966\)](#). That case found FAA appropriations available for the reinforcement of building foundations and other structural improvements necessitated by the construction of air traffic control tower cabs on the roofs of those buildings. Another example involving FAA's statutory authority is [B-286457, Jan. 29, 2001](#), discussed in section G.1 of this chapter.

A 1990 case found an exception in a situation not covered by any of FAA's statutory authorities. The decision, [69 Comp. Gen. 673 \(1990\)](#), held that the inclusion in a lump-sum appropriation of funds for environmental cleanup at a facility being leased by the FAA on a long-term basis was sufficient to authorize the FAA to make permanent improvements to the facility deemed necessary for the cleanup. The expenditure had been specified in committee reports but not the appropriation act itself. The lesson of this case is that, since the permanent improvement prohibition is nonstatutory,

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<sup>210</sup> The issue in [53 Comp. Gen. 317](#) was whether the expenditure was subject to the 25 percent limitation of section 322 of the Economy Act of 1932. Following [B-152722, Aug. 16, 1965](#), GAO held that it was. As noted earlier in section G.1 of this chapter, this provision of the Economy Act was repealed in 1988. While the percentage limitation no longer exists, the FAA statute remains as an independent source of authority.

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it can be overcome by congressional action that would not be sufficient if it were a statutory requirement.<sup>211</sup>

e. Private Residences

As one might suspect, there should normally be very little occasion to consider the propriety of using appropriated funds to make permanent improvements to someone's private residence. However, as if to prove that one should never say never, the expenditure has been authorized in two cases.

In [53 Comp. Gen. 351 \(1973\)](#), the then Veterans Administration (VA) sought to install central air conditioning in the home of a disabled veteran. The VA received appropriations for necessary inpatient and outpatient care, and the applicable program legislation defined authorized medical care as including home health services. The legislative history indicated an intent to emphasize nonhospital treatment. The air conditioning was not just a matter of comfort. According to the VA, certain disabled veterans "suffer from a severe impairment of the heat regulatory mechanisms of their bodies to such an extent that their body temperatures can only be safely maintained in an artificially controlled physical environment." [53 Comp. Gen. at 351–52](#). The expenditure could not be justified as an exception under the tests of [42 Comp. Gen. 480 \(1963\)](#) and its progeny because the primary beneficiary would be the disabled veteran, not the government. Nevertheless, upon an administrative determination that the expense was necessary for the effective and economical treatment of the veteran, and that the only alternative would be admission to a hospital, the expenditure was authorized.

As noted in Chapter 4, decisions have held that an agency may use its operating appropriations to protect an agency official whose life has been threatened if the danger may impair the functioning of the agency. A 1991 case, [71 Comp. Gen. 4](#), took this one step further and held that the Drug Enforcement Administration could use its appropriations to enclose and secure a carport at the leased residence of its Administrator. Although the decision viewed the improvement as primarily benefiting the government, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that, under the circumstances presented—danger to the Administrator's life—the fact of shared benefit, or of some residual benefit to the landlord, should not be enough to invalidate an expenditure which otherwise meets the tests. Of course, the

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<sup>211</sup> See the discussion of *Tennessee Valley Authority v. Hill*, 437 U.S. 153 (1978), in section C.2.h of Chapter 2.

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agency would also have to take appropriate measures, possibly in the form of a provisional agreement with the landlord, to protect the government's interest in the improvement. 71 Comp. Gen. at 6.

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## H. Disposal

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### 1. The Property Clause

A fundamental point to understanding the body of law governing the operation of federal agencies is that no government official may dispose of government-owned property unless authorized by Congress. The source of this rule is article IV, section 3, clause 2 of the United States Constitution, the so-called Property Clause: “The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States . . . .” By virtue of the Property Clause, no agency or official of the government is authorized to sell, lease, give away, or otherwise dispose of government property without statutory authority, either explicit or by necessary implication. As the Supreme Court put it in one case:

“Power to release or otherwise dispose of the rights and property of the United States is lodged in the Congress by the Constitution. Art. IV, § 3, Cl. 2. Subordinate officers of the United States are without that power, save only as it has been conferred upon them by Act of Congress or is to be implied from other powers so granted.”

*Royal Indemnity Co. v. United States*, 313 U.S. 289, 294 (1941).

This principle has been consistently recognized and applied by the courts, the Attorney General, and the Comptroller General. *E.g.*, *Spirit Lake Tribe v. North Dakota*, 262 F.3d 732, 740–41 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001), *cert. denied*, 535 U.S. 988 (2002); 34 Op. Att’y Gen. 320 (1924); 65 Comp. Gen. 339 (1986); 50 Comp. Gen. 63 (1970); B-157578, Sept. 7, 1965. “Like any other owner [Congress] may provide when, how, and to whom its land can be sold.” *United States v. Midwest Oil Co.*, 236 U.S. 459, 474 (1915).

The Property Clause is not limited to real property but applies to personal property as well. As the Supreme Court explained in *Ashwander v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 297 U.S. 288, 331 (1936):

“The occasion for the grant [in the Property Clause] was the obvious necessity of making provision for the government of the vast territory acquired by the United States. The power to govern and to dispose of that territory was deemed to be indispensable to the purposes of the cessions made by the States. . . . The grant was made in broad terms, and the power of regulation and disposition was not confined to territory, but extended to ‘other property belonging to the United States,’ so that the power may be applied, as Story says, ‘to the due regulation of all other personal and real property rightfully belonging to the United States.’ And so, he adds, ‘it has been constantly understood and acted upon.’”

The Property Clause applies to all forms of property, intangible as well as tangible, and this includes legal rights. One manifestation of this is the rule that, unless authorized by statute, government officers have no right to modify existing contracts, or to waive or surrender contract rights which have vested in the government, without some compensating benefit to the government. *E.g.*, [47 Comp. Gen. 732, 736 \(1968\)](#); [40 Comp. Gen. 684, 688 \(1961\)](#); [B-174058, Oct. 18, 1972](#). Another is the rule that no government official may, absent statutory authority, waive a debt owing to the United States. *E.g.*, [B-171934, Apr. 2, 1971](#). Similarly, an agency may not, unless authorized by statute, waive the enforcement of a forfeiture accruing to the government’s benefit without consideration. [53 Comp. Gen. 574 \(1974\)](#); [40 Comp. Gen. 309 \(1960\)](#). This includes the retention of liquidated damages. [26 Comp. Gen. 775, 777 \(1947\)](#).

The interagency transfer of excess real or personal property is not a disposal for purposes of the Property Clause. [32 Op. Att’y Gen. 511 \(1921\)](#).

The right to dispose of government property which is no longer needed has been termed “an essential governmental function in the economic management of governmental affairs.” *City of Springfield v. United States*, [99 F.2d 860, 863 \(1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1938\)](#), *cert. denied*, [306 U.S. 650 \(1939\)](#). Congress has delegated this authority to executive agencies in several statutes, the most important of which is the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act.

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2. Disposal under Title 40  
of the United States  
Code

The provisions of title 40, United States Code, derived from the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act,<sup>212</sup> as amended, present a fairly complex scheme for the disposal of government property. The starting point is the definition of two key terms, “excess property” and “surplus property”:

“The term ‘excess property’ means any property under the control of a federal agency that the head of the agency determines is not required to meet the agency’s needs and responsibilities.”

“The term ‘surplus property’ means excess property that the Administrator [of the General Services Administration (GSA)] determines is not required to meet the needs or responsibilities of all federal agencies.”

40 U.S.C. §§ 102(3) and (10).<sup>213</sup>

Note that the using agency declares property to be excess, but GSA must declare it to be surplus. Property must be excess before it can be surplus.<sup>214</sup> Obviously, the arbitrary classification of property as excess or surplus in order to provide statutory authority for disposal which otherwise does not exist, is improper. [B-61717, Apr. 10, 1947.](#)

a. Excess Property

Agencies have a continuing responsibility to survey property under their control in order to identify property which has become excess. 40 U.S.C. § 524(a)(2).<sup>215</sup> The General Services Administration (GSA) tells agencies to do this at least annually. 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.60(a). If an agency identifies property which appears to be excess, it should first see if some other component of the agency can use it. 40 U.S.C. § 524(a)(3). If the property

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<sup>212</sup> Pub. L. No. 81-152, 63 Stat. 377 (June 30, 1949). See further discussion of this legislation in section E.2.a of this chapter.

<sup>213</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 472(e) and (g).

<sup>214</sup> These definitions do not distinguish between real property and personal property. See the overarching definition of “property” in 40 U.S.C. § 102(9). Thus, the same general scheme applies to both. Some of the operating provisions apply only to one type or the other, however.

<sup>215</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 483.

is not needed within the agency, it should be promptly reported to GSA as excess. *Id.*; 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.60(c). Conversely, if the agency needs property and cannot fill its need by transfer or improved utilization of property already under its control, it should report its need to GSA. 41 C.F.R. § 102.75.65.<sup>216</sup>

GSA then has the responsibility of determining if there is a need for the property by another federal agency, government corporation, or the District of Columbia, and directing transfer of the property accordingly. *See generally* 40 U.S.C. § 521.<sup>217</sup> According to the legislative history of section 521, detailed in [B-101646-O.M., Nov. 2, 1976](#), GSA is to do this by conducting a “survey” of the needs of other agencies. GAO regards the term survey in this context as flexible. It does not require GSA to follow specifically detailed procedures. “Rather, [the Administrator of GSA] may execute his survey on the basis of a broad analysis from an overall viewpoint making use of his general and specific knowledge of the situation in his role as the manager of the Government’s property.” [B-165868, June 30, 1971](#), at 3.

GSA calls its procedure “screening.” 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.1220. If GSA finds a “match” and determines that transfer is in the government’s best interest, the property is transferred. *See* 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.175.

The statute requires reimbursement by the receiving agency if either the transferor or the transferee is the District of Columbia or a government corporation subject to the Government Corporation Control Act, or if the property was acquired by using a revolving or reimbursable fund and the transferor agency requests reimbursement of the net proceeds. In all other cases, the extent of reimbursement, if any, is left to the determination of GSA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). 40 U.S.C. §§ 522(a), (b).<sup>218</sup> GSA’s Federal Management Regulation generally requires reimbursement of 100 percent of estimated fair market value, with qualifications specified in certain circumstances. *See* 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-75.190–102-75.200. The transfer is made without reimbursement if it is

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<sup>216</sup> Here and elsewhere in 41 C.F.R. part 102-75, the regulation refers to GSA as the “disposal agency.” *See* 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.5.

<sup>217</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 483(a)(1).

<sup>218</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 483(a)(1).



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specifically nonreimbursable by statute, or if GSA, with OMB's approval, grants an exception. *See* 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-75.205–102-75.225.

Since the receiving agency has already demonstrated a need for the property in order to qualify for the transfer, the amount of the reimbursement is a necessary expense of, and therefore chargeable to, operating appropriations for the program for which the property is to be used. [38 Comp. Gen. 782 \(1959\)](#). If the property being transferred is a leasehold, the fair market value should not include any restoration obligation incurred by the transferring agency. [28 Comp. Gen. 251 \(1948\)](#).

Congress occasionally waives the federal government's immunity from state and local taxation with respect to real property owned by a government corporation. *E.g.*, 12 U.S.C. § 1825(a) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation). If property subject to such a waiver is declared excess and transferred to an agency or entity that does not have such a waiver, the waiver dies with the transfer and the transferee agency is not authorized to continue paying the taxes. [36 Comp. Gen. 713 \(1957\)](#); [34 Comp. Gen. 319 \(1955\)](#); [32 Comp. Gen. 164 \(1952\)](#). *See also* *Rohr Aircraft Corp. v. County of San Diego*, 362 U.S. 628 (1960); *Board of County Commissioners of Sedgwick County v. United States*, 105 F. Supp. 995 (Ct. Cl. 1952) (both cases address the issue under the Surplus Property Act of 1944, a predecessor of the current provisions). The immunity attaches on the date the property is declared excess. [32 Comp. Gen. 574 \(1953\)](#).

As noted above, a government corporation can receive excess property but must pay for it. In the case of a mixed-ownership government corporation, the property loses its federal identity upon being transferred. Therefore, if the property should later become excess to the mixed-ownership corporation, the corporation may dispose of it without having to follow the Federal Property Act. *See* [B-101646](#), [B-175155-O.M.](#), [Sept. 6, 1979](#) (discussing transfer to Amtrak).

b. Surplus Property

If no other agency needs the property, the General Services Administration (GSA) then declares it to be surplus. If some other agency has requested transfer as excess property, it cannot be declared surplus until the request has been withdrawn. *Skokomish Indian Tribe v. GSA*, 587 F.2d 428 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1978). GSA is required to “supervise and direct the disposition of surplus



property.” 40 U.S.C. § 541.<sup>219</sup> GSA, or any executive agency so authorized by GSA, may dispose of surplus property “by sale, exchange, lease, permit, or transfer, for cash, credit, or other property,” and may “take other action it considers necessary or proper to dispose of the property.” 40 U.S.C. § 543.<sup>220</sup> GSA acts as the disposal agency except “in rare instances” where it delegates disposal authority to another agency. 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.5. Instances in which a landholding agency may act as the disposal agency are described in 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.296. Absent some applicable statutory exception, 40 U.S.C. § 541 and its related provisions are the exclusive means for the government to divest itself of a property interest. *United States v. 434.00 Acres of Land*, 792 F.2d 1006 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986) (common-law rule that easement terminates when purpose for which it was created ceases to exist not applicable to easement held by government).

The “necessary or proper” clause in 40 U.S.C. § 543 “suggests broad power.” *United States v. 1.33 Acres of Land*, 9 F.3d 70, 73 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1993). That case held that GSA was authorized to condemn an easement several years after the sale of adjacent property in order to complete the sale. (The easement was necessary for access to a highway and the parties could not come to voluntary terms.) GSA may also, under its broad statutory authority, authorize the interim nonfederal use of surplus property by lease or permit. See [B-101646-O.M., Oct. 11, 1977](#). The statute does not, however, authorize the use of options to purchase, either standing alone or included in a lease. 41 Op. Att’y Gen. 294 (1957).

Unless otherwise provided by statute or in the deed by which the government acquired the property, the person from whom the government acquired the property does not have an automatic or inherent right to repurchase it if it is declared surplus. This is true regardless of how the property was acquired. *Harrison v. Phillips*, 185 F. Supp. 204 (S.D. Tex. 1960), *aff’d*, 289 F.2d 927 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1961), *cert. denied*, 368 U.S. 835 (1961) (property acquired by voluntary purchase); [34 Comp. Gen. 374 \(1955\)](#) (donation); [B-165511, Mar. 21, 1978](#) (eminent domain).

With certain exceptions, the disposal agency should have the property appraised. 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.300. GSA treats the appraisal results as confidential so as not to influence the government’s ability to sell at a

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<sup>219</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 484(a).

<sup>220</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 484(c).

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favorable price. *See* 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.320. The courts and GAO agree with this nondisclosure policy. *Government Land Bank v. GSA*, 671 F.2d 663 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1982); *Martin Marietta Aluminum, Inc. v. GSA*, 444 F. Supp. 945 (C.D. Cal. 1977); [B-101646, Aug. 16, 1979](#). The court directed disclosure in *GSA v. Benson*, 415 F.2d 878 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1969), but the sale had already taken place and the purchaser needed the information for tax purposes.

Subject to several exceptions, the law provides that disposals of surplus property may be made “only after publicly advertising for bids” under regulations prescribed by GSA. 40 U.S.C. § 545(a)(1)(A).<sup>221</sup> While the solicitation is not required to specify a minimum acceptable bid, the government is also not required to give the property away and may reject all bids. 40 U.S.C. § 545(b)(6); [B-212285, Nov. 15, 1983](#). As noted above, the law authorizes sale for cash or credit. If the solicitation specifies that either is equally acceptable, the agency cannot give a preference to cash terms after bids have been opened. [B-189500, Mar. 21, 1978](#). The implied obligation to treat all bids fairly and honestly applies to sales of property as well as to procurement contracts. *Prineville Sawmill Co. v. United States*, 859 F.2d 905, 909 (Fed. Cir. 1988).

As a general proposition, a wide disparity between appraised values and bid prices is not enough to put the contracting officer on constructive notice of a mistake in bid because of the “myriad of uses” to which the land might be put. [B-177695, Jan. 22, 1973](#). However, in a case where the appraiser had indicated that the property would have little value to anyone other than the immediate adjacent landowner, and there was a large disparity between the appraisal and a bid by someone other than the adjacent landowner, the contracting officer should have been put on notice of the possibility of mistake and should have sought confirmation of the bid. [B-160113, Nov. 25, 1966](#).

If an appraisal is based on a mistake, the resulting contract of sale may be reformed to permit partial refund of the purchase price. [B-71334, Feb. 3, 1948](#) (appraisal included irrigation rights which in fact did not exist). Although not discussed in that decision, this is not viewed as a surrender of contract rights for purposes of the Property Clause. Also, depending on the circumstances, it may be possible to rescind the contract. *See Morris v. United States*, 33 Fed. Cl. 733, 744–48 (1995) (discussing the theories of

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<sup>221</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 484(e).

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misrepresentation, mutual mistake, and unilateral mistake in the context of government real property sales).<sup>222</sup>

The solicitation may require bid deposits or “earnest money,” apparently at the agency’s discretion, with the winning bidder’s deposit to be applied to the purchase price. Any time after acceptance of the offer but prior to the time specified for performance, that is, while the contract is still executory, the agency may agree to rescind the contract and refund the earnest money. [26 Comp. Gen. 775 \(1947\)](#). Once there has been a breach or default by the purchaser, however, the deposit belongs to the government and may not be refunded unless expressly provided by statute or in the contract. *Id.*; [8 Comp. Gen. 592 \(1929\)](#); [B-160256, Jan. 5, 1967](#), *aff’d on reconsideration*, [B-160256, Oct. 18, 1968](#).

While advertising for bids is the preferred method of disposal, the statute prescribes a number of situations in which surplus property can be disposed of by negotiated sale, as long as the government obtains “competition that is feasible under the circumstances.” 40 U.S.C. § 545(b). One is when “the character or condition of the property or unusual circumstances make it impractical” to advertise for bids and fair market value can be obtained by negotiation. *Id.* § 545(b)(7). For an example of a negotiated exchange under this authority, see [B-165868, Nov. 19, 1971](#); [B-165868, June 30, 1971](#); and [B-165868, Sept. 29, 1970](#) (all involve the same exchange). Another situation in which disposal may be negotiated is when “the disposal will be to a State, territory, or possession of the United States, or to a political subdivision of, or a tax-supported agency in, a State, territory, or possession, and the estimated fair market value of the property and other satisfactory terms of disposal are obtained by negotiation.” 40 U.S.C. § 545(b)(8).

The determination of what constitutes “feasible competition” is within GSA’s discretion. *Dover Sand & Gravel, Inc. v. Jones*, 227 F. Supp. 88 (D.N.H. 1963). When negotiating a disposal under 40 U.S.C. § 545(b)(8), GSA is not required to consider offers from nonpublic sources. [57 Comp. Gen. 823 \(1978\)](#). While section 545(b)(8) does not authorize disposal for less than fair market value, nothing prevents the government from getting more if it can. *Port of Seattle v. United States*, 450 F.2d 1363 (Ct. Cl. 1971);

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<sup>222</sup> See also *Dairyland Power Cooperative v. United States*, 16 F.3d 1197 (Fed. Cir. 1994); *Badgley v. United States*, 31 Fed. Cl. 508 (1994); *Meek v. United States*, 26 Cl. Ct. 1357 (1992), *aff’d*, 6 F.3d 788 (Fed. Cir. 1993); *Hartle v. United States*, 22 Cl. Ct. 843 (1991).

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[B-217356-O.M., Apr. 22, 1985](#). Since the use of section 545(b)(8) is itself discretionary, there is also nothing to prevent the government from rejecting an offer of fair market value. *Government Land Bank v. GSA*, 671 F.2d 663, 667 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1982).

If the government chooses to dispose of surplus property by negotiated sale, the responsible agency must prepare, with some exceptions specified in the statute, “an explanatory statement of the circumstances” and transmit the statement “to the appropriate committees of the Congress in advance of the disposal.” 40 U.S.C. §§ 545(e)(1)(A), 545(e)(2). This is nothing more than a “report and wait” provision and is not subject to attack on constitutional grounds. *City of Alexandria v. United States*, 737 F.2d 1022 (Fed. Cir. 1984). If an agency other than GSA prepares the statement, the agency should submit it to GSA, which will in turn submit it to the committees. 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.920. Nothing in the statute purports to make the validity of a disposal in any way contingent upon compliance with the reporting requirement. See [B-116344, July 21, 1955](#).

In general, it is improper to classify property as excess or surplus if the holding agency still needs it. This follows from the very definitions quoted earlier. GAO has looked at several cases where an agency wanted to sell property and then lease it back, or sell some facility and then contract with the new owner to provide the same service the facility was providing when it was in government hands. These cases are always questionable, and the agency has the burden of showing that there is some rational basis for its determination. However, an axiom of life is “never say never,” and the legitimacy of the transaction cannot be categorically foreclosed. For example:

“There may be instances where certain property, such as communication facilities, could be sold and the purpose for which it was being used accomplished through private contracts at a cost less than the Government’s costs of operation and maintenance of the property. In such cases, it could be argued that the Government’s need was for the availability of communication services rather than for a property right in the facilities.”

[B-132099, July 22, 1957](#), at 4.

While the discussion in [B-132099](#) was hypothetical, an actual situation occurred in [B-146494, Dec. 4, 1961](#), concerning the sale of an ammonium

perchlorate facility. GAO was satisfied that “the only need of the Government is that sufficient productive capacity be in existence, without reference to whether such productive capacity is Government-owned or privately-owned.” B-146494, at 2.

Situations like those described in B-132099 and B-146494 are the clear exception, and in most cases the proper basis for disposal as surplus property will not exist. B-132099, June 25, 1958. Thus, whatever justifications might work in the case of industrial facilities do not work when the need is for office space at a particular location. B-152223, Nov. 6, 1963. Similarly, there is no authority for a “sale with lease-back” simply because the agency does not have enough money for needed renovations. 65 Comp. Gen. 339 (1986). See 45 Comp. Gen. 265 (1965), however, for a case approving the sale of excess property to the successful bidder on a contract to construct a building on that property to be leased to a different agency.<sup>223</sup>

Section 550 of title 40<sup>224</sup> provides for a number of discretionary types of disposal. GSA can assign surplus property to the Departments of Education or Health and Human Services for conveyance to state and local bodies to be used for education or public health purposes. 40 U.S.C. §§ 550(c) and (d), respectively; see also 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-75.350–102-75.360. These are called “public benefit conveyances” or “public benefit discount conveyances.” See *Northrop University v. Harper*, 580 F. Supp. 959, 961 (C.D. Cal. 1983). In cases where GSA had already contracted to sell the property to the state or local educational body but title had not yet passed and the purchase price had not yet been paid, GAO has approved rescission of the contract to permit transfer under the section 550 procedures. 40 Comp. Gen. 455 (1961); B-157885, Nov. 8, 1965. However, this is not available where the sale has been consummated and the purchase price paid. B-162194, Aug. 18, 1967.

In B-109403, June 3, 1952, the government wanted to reserve mineral rights because a survey suggested the presence of oil. However, a provision purporting to obligate the United States to pay any damages resulting from exercise of the mineral rights amounted to an open-ended indemnification

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<sup>223</sup> The legal dilemma in that case was that there is no authority to sell excess property to a private party, and no authority to declare the property surplus if another agency needs it.

<sup>224</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 484(k).

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agreement and was therefore unauthorized. (For more on indemnification agreements, see Chapter 6, section C.2.c.)

Section 550(e) of title 40 authorizes GSA to assign surplus property to the Interior Department for reconveyance for public park or recreation purposes. GSA's administration of this authority is highly discretionary. *New England Power Co. v. Goulding*, 486 F. Supp. 18 (D.D.C. 1979) (entirely proper for GSA to give priority to disposal under this subsection). See also *Northrop University*, 580 F. Supp. 959.

Still another subsection of section 550 authorizes GSA to convey to states or municipalities, without monetary consideration, surplus real property which is suitable and desirable for use as a historic monument. 40 U.S.C. § 550(h); 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-75.440–102-75.485. GSA may authorize use of the property for revenue-producing activities. 40 U.S.C. § 550(h)(2)(A); [60 Comp. Gen. 158 \(1981\)](#). As with the other subsections, section 550(h) is limited to surplus property and does not authorize conveyance of nonsurplus property. [B-126823, July 21, 1965](#).

c. Disposition of Proceeds

The disposition of the proceeds from the disposal of excess and surplus property is governed by 40 U.S.C. §§ 571–574,<sup>225</sup> as effectively modified by 16 U.S.C. § 460l-5(a). Section 571(a) of title 40 provides that all proceeds from any transfer of excess property or sale or other disposition of surplus property, except as otherwise provided in sections 571 through 574, must be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. One of the exceptions, already noted, is property acquired by use of a revolving or reimbursable fund. 40 U.S.C. § 574(a). Another, 40 U.S.C. § 574(b), permits agencies to deposit part of the proceeds in a special account in the Treasury so that they will be available for refunds if necessary. Section 574(c) recognizes contract provisions which permit the proceeds of any sale of government property in the contractor's custody to be credited to the cost or price of work under the contract.

In 1964, Congress enacted the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 88-578, 78 Stat. 897 (Sept. 3, 1964). Section 2(b) of Public Law 88-578, as codified at 16 U.S.C. § 460l-5(a), requires deposit in the Land and Water Conservation Fund of:

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<sup>225</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. §§ 485, 485a.

“All proceeds . . . hereafter received from any disposal of surplus real property and related personal property under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended . . . notwithstanding any provision of law that such proceeds shall be credited to miscellaneous receipts of the Treasury. Nothing in this part shall affect existing laws or regulations concerning disposal of real or personal surplus property to schools, hospitals, and States and their political subdivisions.”

The portion of the above provision not quoted gives two categories of exceptions. First, the requirement does not apply to the various subsections of 40 U.S.C. § 574 which themselves provide exceptions to the miscellaneous receipts requirement of 40 U.S.C. § 571(a). Second, it does not apply to the following provision which appeared in the Independent Offices Appropriation Act of 1963, Pub. L. No. 87-741, 76 Stat. 716, 725 (Oct. 3, 1962), under the heading “Operating Expenses, Utilization and Disposal Service [GSA]” or later appropriations act language of this nature: “For necessary expenses, not otherwise provided for, incident to the utilization and disposal of excess and surplus property, as authorized by law, \$8,500,000, to be derived from proceeds from the transfer of excess property and the disposal of surplus property.” The Land and Water Conservation Fund is a fund in the Treasury used to finance acquisitions mostly by the Departments of Interior and Agriculture (national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges). 16 U.S.C. § 460l-9. Money in the fund is available for expenditure “only when appropriated therefor.” 16 U.S.C. § 460l-6.

Thus, the 1964 legislation preserved the exceptions of the former Federal Property Act, and recognized what would be true in any event—that Congress can legislate exceptions in the future. Subject to these exceptions, proceeds from the sale of *surplus* real property go to the Land and Water Conservation Fund and not the general fund. Nothing in the 1964 legislation purported to affect the treatment of proceeds from the transfer of *excess* property.

Since the disposition of sale proceeds is governed by statute, a 1946 decision found no authority for a proposal to transfer title to a warehouse (built by the government on leased land) to the landowner with its value to be amortized against rental payments. The proposal would have the effect of using the sale proceeds as rent. B-61717, Dec. 10, 1946.



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A 1966 decision, [46 Comp. Gen. 356](#), considered the operation of 16 U.S.C. § 460l-5(a) in the context of a government corporation which was in the process of going out of business. The Virgin Islands Corporation had terminated its operations and wanted to close its books, but there were some assets remaining to be sold. If the books remained open, it was clear that the proceeds would be credited to the corporation's revolving fund, in accordance with 40 U.S.C. § 574(a), and used to offset the government's equity. It was suggested, however, that since the revolving fund was no longer needed, the corporation's accounts could be closed and the proceeds deposited in the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The decision concluded that closing the accounts as a matter of administrative convenience should not have the effect of diverting the proceeds from being used to repay the government's investment. Since any balances on hand at the time of closing would be deposited as miscellaneous receipts, that was also the proper disposition of the sale proceeds.

d. Deduction of Expenses

Section 571(b) of title 40, United States Code,<sup>226</sup> provides:

“Subject to [General Services Administration] regulations . . ., the expenses of the sale of . . . public property may be paid from the proceeds of the sale so that only the net proceeds are deposited in the Treasury. This subsection applies whether proceeds are deposited as miscellaneous receipts or to the credit of an appropriation as authorized by law.”

This statute originated in 1896.<sup>227</sup> Decisions of the Comptroller General and Comptroller of the Treasury over the decades established the rule that this provision allowed the deduction only of expenses directly connected with the sale and did not authorize deduction of expenses incurred in connection with preparation of the property for sale. *E.g.*, [42 Comp. Gen. 212, 213](#) (1962). Thus, such things as appraisers' fees, brokerage commissions, auctioneers' fees, and advertising costs could be deducted from the proceeds prior to deposit in the Treasury. [37 Comp. Gen. 59](#) (1957); [33 Comp. Gen. 31](#) (1953); [16 Comp. Gen. 876](#) (1937).

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<sup>226</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 485a.

<sup>227</sup> Act of June 8, 1896, ch. 373, 29 Stat. 267, 268.



e. Disposal under Other Authorities

While the title 40 provisions described above constitute the primary regime for disposing of federal property, they are not the only disposal authority. Exceptions to the title 40 authority tend to be of three types: (1) those set forth in title 40 itself; (2) those stated explicitly or arising by necessary implication from general property-disposition authorities applicable to an agency or program, which contain their own standards and procedures; and (3) statutes that provide for the disposition of a specific piece of property in a specific way.

As to the first type, 40 U.S.C. § 113(a) provides as follows: “Except as otherwise provided in this section, the authority conferred by this subtitle is in addition to any other authority conferred by law and is not subject to any inconsistent provision of law.” Section 113(a) refers to the general range of the General Services Administration’s (GSA) authorities under title 40, including but not limited to property disposal. The remainder of section 113 recites various limitations and exceptions, some of which deal with the disposal of property. For example, sections 113(e)(9) and (10) provide that “[n]othing in this subtitle impairs or affects” the property-disposal authority, respectively, of an official or entity under the Farm Credit Act (12 U.S.C. ch. 23), or the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development or the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation with respect to certain properties.

As to the second type, a 1992 GAO study identified 17 agencies with authority to dispose of real property. GAO, *Real Property Dispositions: Flexibility Afforded Agencies to Meet Disposition Objectives Varies*, GAO/GGD-92-144FS (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 18, 1992). As the title implies, GAO found considerable variation in the programs and their objectives.

In some cases, the statutes deal with property that is explicitly exempted from the title 40 provisions, such as public domain lands. See 40 U.S.C. § 102(9)(A)(i) (excluding public domain lands from the definition of “property”). An example is 43 U.S.C. § 1713, authorizing the Interior Department to sell tracts of public land meeting specified disposal criteria. In a case involving the predecessor of this statute, the Bureau of Land Management vacated a sale when, after several years of appeals, re-appeals, and cross appeals by the bidders, it learned that the appraised value of the property had increased much beyond the amount of the bids. Noting that the courts had upheld the discretion of the Secretary of the Interior to refuse to sell for whatever reason he found adequate, GAO concluded that the Bureau did nothing wrong. [B-168879, May 7, 1970](#).

For property which would otherwise be within the scope of the title 40 provisions, language such as “notwithstanding any other provision of law” may be sufficient in itself to provide the necessary exemption. *See* [B-178205.80, Mar. 16, 1976](#). Other statutes use more specific exempting language. One example is 7 U.S.C. § 1985(c), authorizing sales of property in connection with certain Department of Agriculture activities. Section 1985(c)(4) provides: “The Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 shall not apply to any exercise of authority under this chapter.” Another example, from the housing laws, is 12 U.S.C. § 1750c(f), which authorizes the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to sell certain properties “[n]otwithstanding any other provision of law relating to the acquisition, handling, or disposal of real property by the United States.”

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is authorized to sell property seized under a tax levy. 26 U.S.C. § 6335. While these sales are not specifically exempted from title 40, they are governed by their own specific standards and procedures as spelled out in the Tax Code. If there are no bids from the public at or higher than the minimum price set by the IRS, the United States may purchase the property at that minimum price. 26 U.S.C. § 6335(e)(1)(C). The former owner has the right to redeem the property within 180 days after the sale by paying the purchase price plus interest. 26 U.S.C. § 6337(b). A sale under 26 U.S.C. § 6335 is a sale only of the taxpayer’s interest in the property—any equity over and above outstanding mortgages and liens. *Belgard v. United States*, 232 F. Supp. 265, 269 (W.D. La. 1964) (seizure and sale under section 6335 had no effect on taxpayer’s indebtedness to Small Business Administration).

The third type of exception consists of statutes authorizing or directing the disposal of a particular piece of property in accordance with specified standards or procedures set forth in those statutes. GSA calls these “special statutes,” and recognizes that they are not governed by title 40. 41 C.F.R. § 102-75.110. GAO considered one example in [B-194482, June 15, 1979](#). The U.S. Fire Administration, Department of Commerce, had been authorized to purchase, and did purchase, a site for a National Academy for Fire Prevention and Control. When problems developed over the use of that site, Congress enacted legislation authorizing the Fire Administration to sell it, deposit the proceeds in a special account, and apply those funds to the acquisition of a new site. Pub. L. No. 95-422, § 4, 92 Stat. 932, 933 (Oct. 5, 1978). Applying two principles of statutory construction—(1) the specific governs over the general, and (2) if there is any inconsistency, the later enactment controls—and noting GSA’s treatment of “special statutes,”

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GAO concluded that the Fire Administration could dispose of the site without regard to the requirements of title 40.

Potentially eligible recipients of federal property can differ depending on which disposal authority applies. This occasionally leads to litigation focusing on the interplay between the basic title 40 provisions and other statutory authorities. Two recent decisions provide examples.

In *National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty v. Veterans Administration*, 98 F. Supp. 2d 25 (D.D.C. 2000), the plaintiffs sought to acquire a former federal courthouse under a section of the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11411, that, in essence, gives a priority to homeless assistance for excess and surplus property going through the title 40 disposition process. GSA maintained, however, that the property at issue was not “excess” or “surplus” for purposes of title 40. According to GSA, the property was subject to disposal under an entirely distinct statutory provision, 40 U.S.C. § 1304(a),<sup>228</sup> which authorizes GSA to sell to state or local governments “obsolete” buildings that are being replaced with new structures. Thus, the title 40 excess and surplus property disposition authorities, along with the McKinney Act priority attached to them, were inapplicable. The court agreed with the plaintiffs on the basis of what it described as the Property Act’s “preemption provision.” Now 40 U.S.C. § 113(a), this provision was at the time of the *National Law Center* decision 40 U.S.C. § 474(c) (2000) and it stated in relevant part: “The authority conferred by this Act shall be in addition to and paramount to any authority conferred by any other law and shall not be subject to the provisions of any law inconsistent herewith.” The court held that there was a clear conflict between section 1304(a) and the title 40 excess and surplus property disposition provisions read in conjunction with the McKinney Act. Therefore, by virtue of then 40 U.S.C. § 474(c), the latter provisions took precedence.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 345b.

<sup>229</sup> Interestingly, the current (codified) version of 40 U.S.C. § 474(c) is 40 U.S.C. § 113(a), quoted previously, which refers to “the authority conferred by this subtitle” rather than the authority conferred by the Property Act. By virtue of the codification, the excess and surplus property disposition provisions as well as the “obsolete” property disposition provision at issue in *National Law Center* (then 40 U.S.C. § 345b, now 40 U.S.C. § 1304(a)) all are in subtitle I of title 40.

*Shawnee Tribe v. United States*, 423 F.3d 1204 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005), concerned a potential conflict between 40 U.S.C. § 523 and a “special statute” of the type described previously. Section 523 requires that excess property located within the reservation of a federally recognized Indian tribe be transferred without compensation to the Secretary of the Interior to be held in trust for that tribe. The Shawnee Tribe sought to enforce this provision in the case of an excess military installation known as the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant. GSA determined, however, that section 523 did not apply because the installation was not within the current boundaries of the reservation. The tribe appealed to the courts. While the appeal was pending Congress enacted section 2841 of the Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, Pub. L. No. 108-375, 118 Stat. 1811, 2135 (Oct. 28, 2004), which provided in part:

“The Secretary of the Army, in consultation with the Administrator of General Services, may convey to an entity selected by the Board of Commissioners of Johnson County, Kansas . . . a parcel of real property . . . containing the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant. The purpose of the conveyance is to facilitate the re-use of the property for economic development and revitalization.”

GSA argued that the enactment of section 1841 and the Army’s determination to proceed with the authorized conveyance superseded 40 U.S.C. § 523 and nullified any claim to the property that the tribe may have had under section 523. The tribe countered that section 523 took precedence over the authorization act provision, relying on the same provision as the plaintiffs in *National Law Center*, 40 U.S.C. § 113(a), formerly 40 U.S.C. § 474(c).

Unlike the outcome in *National Law Center*, however, the court sided with GSA in this case:

“[T]he Shawnee Tribe reads . . . § 113(a) to mean that the Property Act trumps *any* other inconsistent grant of authority, including § 2841, and therefore that § 523 still governs this case.

“However, the language of § 113 does not compel this reading. Instead, the phrase ‘in addition to any other authority’ suggests the opposite—that § 523 does *not* preempt other laws.”

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*Shawnee Tribe*, 423 F.3d at 1214 (emphasis in original). The court held that section 113—

“stand[s] for the relatively unremarkable proposition that the Property Act trumps any pre-existing laws not specifically excluded by § 113 when it was re-enacted in 2002, but that the Congress is, of course, free to change the Property Act’s coverage in the future by any act enacted after March 31, 2002. Thus, § 2841 of the 2005 National Defense Authorization Act, which was passed in October of 2004, suspends the Property Act’s applicability in this case as it gives discretion to dispose of this particular property to the Secretary of the Army.”

*Id.* at 1216.

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### 3. Use by Nongovernment Parties

#### a. Leasing and Concessions (1) Outleasing in general

The government acquires property in order to perform its own functions, not for use by nongovernment parties. Nevertheless, there are situations in which it is clearly desirable to permit use by nongovernment parties, either in support of the primary government purpose or as an alternative to letting the property sit idle.

Leasing is a form of disposal for purposes of the Property Clause, and is therefore a function of Congress. *Ashwander v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 297 U.S. 288, 331 (“This power of disposal was early construed to embrace leases”). See also *United States v. Gratiot*, 39 U.S. (14 Pet.) 526 (1840); [50 Comp. Gen. 63 \(1970\)](#); [14 Comp. Gen. 169 \(1934\)](#); [B-191943, Oct. 16, 1978](#); 34 Op. Att’y Gen. 320, 322 (1924). Accordingly, a federal agency needs statutory authority in order to “outlease” (lease government-owned property to nongovernment parties) property under its control. Naturally, when and if Congress grants such authority, it may also impose conditions on it. *E.g.*, *Light v. United States*, 220 U.S. 523, 536 (1911) (United States “can prohibit absolutely or fix the terms on which its property may be used”).

One question is how specific the authority needs to be. A 1978 GAO study found instances where agencies treated the authority to lease as incident to more general statutory authority giving them custody and control over certain space. See GAO, *Government Space Leased to Commercial Activities by Agencies Other Than the General Services Administration*, LCD-78-337 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 13, 1978). GAO drew no legal conclusions in the cited report because the issue had been raised in a pending lawsuit. That lawsuit produced *Globe, Inc. v. Federal Home Loan Bank Board*, 471 F. Supp. 1103 (D.D.C. 1979), in which the court held that the General Services Administration (GSA) possessed long-term commercial outleasing authority, but not the former Federal Home Loan Bank Board. While *Globe* certainly supports the proposition that specific authority is required, it was based in part on provisions of the Board's enabling legislation and the extent to which it applies to all agencies has not been addressed.

In any event, those agencies most likely to have the need to engage in outleasing have the necessary statutory authority. GSA's authority is found in several provisions of title 40, United States Code. Under 40 U.S.C. § 581(d)(1),<sup>230</sup> GSA may lease federal building sites, including improvements, at a "fair rental value," until they are needed for construction purposes. While this at first blush may seem like fairly short-term authority, a site may not be needed for construction for decades. *E.g.*, [B-168096, Aug. 5, 1974](#) (site had been leased to commercial parking operators since 1930s). GSA is also authorized to lease space to "a person, firm, or organization engaged in commercial, cultural, educational, or recreational activities," as defined in 40 U.S.C. § 3306(a), at rates equivalent to the prevailing commercial rate for comparable space. 40 U.S.C. § 581(h). Also, 40 U.S.C. § 1303(b)<sup>231</sup> authorizes GSA to lease certain excess property outside the District of Columbia for periods of up to 5 years.

The military departments are authorized to outlease nonexcess property under their control that is not needed for public use at the time, for terms of up to 5 years. 10 U.S.C. § 2667. The purpose of this provision is "to enable property not immediately needed to be leased in such a manner that it will be utilized with as few changes as possible in order that the property could immediately be put back into operation in the event of an

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<sup>230</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(a)(13).

<sup>231</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 304a.

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emergency.” *City of San Francisco v. United States*, 443 F. Supp. 1116, 1122 (N.D. Cal. 1977), *aff’d*, 615 F.2d 498 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1980), *citing* S. Rep. No. 80-626 (1947). The military departments have had some form of outleasing authority since 1892. *See* 8 Comp. Gen. 632 (1929). Under this authority, military departments have leased real property for grazing purposes (56 Comp. Gen. 655 (1977)) and agricultural purposes (B-174833, Mar. 10, 1972). They have leased water treatment and transmission facilities to local water districts which could, after supplying the needs of the military reservation, sell the remaining capacity. B-162141, Oct. 18, 1967. They have used the authority of 10 U.S.C. § 2667 to permit former owners of property acquired by the government to remain as lessees until the property is needed for project requirements. 52 Comp. Gen. 300 (1972).<sup>232</sup> And they have used it to grant rent-free use, except for maintenance and service charges, to other government agencies. B-119724-O.M., Apr. 25, 1955.

Leasing authority under 10 U.S.C. § 2667 continues to exist until there has been a final determination that the property is excess. B-188246, May 17, 1978 (preliminary or conditional determination does not terminate the authority). However, it does not apply to property which usage inescapably shows to be excess notwithstanding the absence of a formal determination. B-118030, July 23, 1954.

The Small Business Administration is authorized to rent (or sell) any real property acquired in connection with its loan programs. 15 U.S.C. § 634(b)(3); *United States v. Schwartz*, 278 F. Supp. 328, 330 (S.D.N.Y. 1968). Other agencies with specific outleasing authority include the Coast Guard (14 U.S.C. § 93(a)(13)), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (42 U.S.C. § 2473(c)(3)) the National Science Foundation (42 U.S.C. § 1870(e)), the Bureau of Land Management (43 U.S.C. § 1732(b)), the Postal Service (39 U.S.C. § 401(5)), the Internal Revenue Service (26 U.S.C. § 7506(c)), and GAO (31 U.S.C. § 782).

We saw earlier in this chapter that the rights and obligations of the parties are determined mostly under federal law when the government is the lessee. The court in *United States v. Morgan*, 196 F. Supp. 345 (D. Md. 1961), *aff’d*, 298 F.2d 255 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1962), applied the same principle where the government was the lessor. In another case, however, the United States

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<sup>232</sup> When the government does this, the rent it may charge “shall not exceed the fair rental value of the property to a short-term occupier.” 42 U.S.C. § 4651(6).

successfully brought an unlawful detainer action under a state law which provided for the recovery of double rent. *United States v. Hall*, 463 F. Supp. 787 (W.D. Mo. 1978), *aff'd*, 588 F.2d 1214 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1978).

The disposition of income received from outleasing varies considerably. The only safe generalization is the one that applies to all government receipts under 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b): the money must be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts unless the agency has statutory authority for some other disposition. In the area of property leases, this rule is reinforced by 40 U.S.C. § 1302,<sup>233</sup> (money derived from the rental of buildings shall be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts). There are, however, a number of statutory exceptions. Rent received by GSA under the subsections of 40 U.S.C. § 581 cited above is deposited in the Federal Buildings Fund. 40 U.S.C. §§ 581(d)(3) and (h)(3). Rent received by military departments under 10 U.S.C. § 2667 is deposited in a special account in the Treasury to be available, as specified in appropriation acts, for purposes specified in the statute. 10 U.S.C. § 2667(d). A special account is also authorized for income received by GAO from renting space in the GAO headquarters building, the receipts to be available as specified in appropriation acts, for maintenance, operation, and repair of the building. 31 U.S.C. § 782.

Many other situations are governed by specific statutory provisions. For example, rent received by the Corps of Engineers “for rental of plant owned by the Government in connection with the prosecution of river and harbor works” shall be credited to “the appropriation to which the plant belongs.” 33 U.S.C. § 559. This includes the revolving fund established by 33 U.S.C. § 576. [B-129718-O.M., Jan. 3, 1957](#). Several types of lease income are subject to distribution formulas which allocate the receipts, with varying degrees of complexity, among a combination of state and federal purposes. Examples are:

- The Mineral Leasing Act of 1920 and the Mineral Leasing Act for Acquired Lands, 30 U.S.C. §§ 191 and 355.
- Income received by the Forest Service from activities in the national forests. 16 U.S.C. §§ 499 and 500.

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<sup>233</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 303b.



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- Grazing statutes such as the Taylor Grazing Act, 43 U.S.C. § 315i, and 43 U.S.C. § 1181d relating to certain lands in California and Oregon. *See* [B-203771, Jan. 13, 1982](#).

(2) 40 U.S.C. § 1302

A question that once generated considerable controversy is whether the “rent” for a lease of government property could include things other than money, such as making repairs or alterations to the property. Opinions split among predictable lines. GAO took the position that rent should be in the form of money only, on the grounds that anything else would amount to a circumvention of the miscellaneous receipts requirement. 8 Comp. Gen. 632 (1929); [A-38658, July 15, 1932](#). The executive branch countered that the authority to lease necessarily implied the authority to agree to forms of consideration other than money. 36 Op. Att’y Gen. 282 (1930). Congress entered the fray by enacting section 321 of the Economy Act of 1932, Pub. L. No. 72-212, 47 Stat. 382, 412 (June 30, 1932), now codified at 40 U.S.C. § 1302, as follows:

“Except as otherwise specifically provided by law, the leasing of buildings and property of the Federal Government shall be for a money consideration only. The lease may not include any provision for the alteration, repair, or improvement of the buildings or property as a part of the consideration for the rent to be paid for the use and occupation of the buildings or property. Money derived from the rent shall be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts.”

The Senate Appropriations Committee explained the provision as follows:

“The enactment of this section will put a stop to the more or less general practice which has been adopted of including as a part of the rental consideration provisions in the lease that the tenant shall make certain repairs, alterations, or improvements to public property. By this method improvements are made on public property which may or may not be authorized by law, and indirectly there is an expenditure of funds which should be covered into the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts.”

S. Rep. No. 72-556, at 14–15 (1932), *quoted in* [41 Comp. Gen. 493, 495 \(1962\)](#). This did not mean that Congress would be unwilling to consider exceptions, merely that it wanted to reserve to itself the power to decide what those exceptions should be.

GAO has held that the statute should apply to any arrangement that creates essentially the same legal relationship as a lease regardless of what it is called. [42 Comp. Gen. 650 \(1963\)](#); [41 Comp. Gen. 493 \(1962\)](#). In [49 Comp. Gen. 476 \(1970\)](#), an agency had employees working in two nearby buildings, one government-owned and one leased. A private parking operator was charging commercial rates to park in the leased building. The agency wanted to equalize parking costs for its employees, and proposed to have the private concern operate parking facilities in both buildings “as a single facility” at a uniform rate. The decision concluded that “the contemplated agreement . . . while couched in terms of management services, [amounted to] conferring an interest in Federal property, a leasehold interest from which revenues are derived, in contravention of 40 U.S.C. [§ 1302].” *Id.* at 478.

In [B-162986, May 1, 1968](#), GAO considered a Forest Service proposal for a graduated rate fee system, based on a percentage of sales, to be used for national forest special use permits for commercial enterprises (*e.g.*, ski area operators). Recognizing the relationship of returns to investment, the decision nevertheless concluded that “it would be an unwarranted extension of section 321 to view it as inhibiting any consideration of the permittee’s investment for the purpose of determining the fair amount of fees to be charged.” [B-162986](#), at 4. GAO applied the same approach more than 20 years later in [70 Comp. Gen. 597 \(1991\)](#), finding that user fees charged by the Interstate Commerce Commission to carriers for computer equipment installed by the carriers at ICC headquarters were unobjectionable under 40 U.S.C. § 1302.

As noted, Congress has been willing to grant exceptions from 40 U.S.C. § 1302 when considered desirable. For example, under 10 U.S.C. § 2667(b)(5), outleases by military departments—

“may provide, notwithstanding section 1302 of title 40, or any other provision of law, for the alteration, repair, or improvement, by the lessee, of the property leased as the payment of part or all of the consideration for the lease.”

Within this framework, the exception permits “extraordinary as well as ordinary items of maintenance.” [B-145738-O.M., Jan. 18, 1962](#), at 4. It is a good idea for the government to reserve the right to approve repairs and restoration since the leased property still belongs to the government. [B-163784, May 2, 1968](#).

The statute talks about alteration or repair “of the property leased.” Therefore, it does not authorize a lease of one parcel with the lessee agreeing to construct a facility for the government’s use on a separate and unleased parcel. [B-205685, Dec. 22, 1981](#). Since the proposal was not within the exception of 10 U.S.C. § 2667(b)(5), it was prohibited by 40 U.S.C. § 1302. Also prohibited by section 1302 was a proposal to lease a civilian housing area on Guam to a private concern for an annual rental of one dollar plus operation and maintenance of the housing. 27 Comp. Gen. 543 (1948).

As the language of 40 U.S.C. § 1302 requires, exceptions must be specific. The authority to enter into leases “on such terms and conditions as the [agency head] deems appropriate” is not enough. [B-117919, Feb. 5, 1954](#); [B-140397-O.M., Aug. 20, 1959](#). The structure of 10 U.S.C. § 2667, for example, bears this out. Section 2667(a) authorizes the Secretary of a military department to lease property “upon such terms as he considers will promote the national defense or be in the public interest”; section 2667(b)(5) then provides the specific exemption from 40 U.S.C. § 1302. General authority was enough in [B-159719, Mar. 30, 1972](#), because it was clear that Congress was aware of, and had sanctioned, the activity. That case involved concession agreements with the Federal Aviation Administration for various support facilities at Washington National Airport.

Some other specific exceptions are 16 U.S.C. § 3b (National Park Service), 38 U.S.C. §§ 8122(a)(1) and 8201(e) (Department of Veterans Affairs), 42 U.S.C. § 1544 (Department of Housing and Urban Development with respect to housing acquired or constructed under the National Housing Act), and 42 U.S.C. § 2473(c)(11) (National Aeronautics and Space Administration).

### (3) Concessions

The government uses concession agreements in a wide variety of situations to support, directly and indirectly, its use of government facilities. Some, such as cafeterias or dry cleaning facilities, are found in public buildings.

The major portion in terms of numbers occur on recreational lands managed by the Park Service, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management. GAO studies in the early 1990s found that there were approximately 9,000 concession agreements. See GAO, *Federal Lands: Improvements Needed in Managing Short-Term Concessioners*, GAO/RCED-93-177 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 14, 1993); *Federal Lands: Improvements Needed in Managing Concessioners*, GAO/RCED-91-163 (Washington, D.C.: June 11, 1991). The same studies noted that there is no single statute authorizing or regulating concessions, and therefore no uniformity as to their use.

GAO has long espoused the view that “the operation of a concession utilizing Government-owned facilities constitutes a valuable privilege for which the Government should be compensated and that contractual and other arrangements relating to the establishment and operation of such activities should be subject to existing statutory provisions governing public contracts.” [41 Comp. Gen. 493, 495 \(1962\)](#). See also [B-129352, Jan. 23, 1957](#). The most common manifestation of this principle has been the finding that income an agency receives from a concession should be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts unless the agency has statutory authority to do something else. *E.g.*, [7 Comp. Gen. 806 \(1928\)](#); [A-51624, Mar. 25, 1944](#); [A-95642, Nov. 18, 1943](#); [A-95642, Mar. 19, 1943](#).

A related issue is the extent to which 40 U.S.C. § 1302 applies to concession agreements. The following passage from [41 Comp. Gen. 493, 495 \(1962\)](#) illustrates GAO’s general approach:

“For all practical purposes if a concession gives a concessioner the exclusive right to the use of real property his rights are identical with [those] of a lessee and the relation of landlord and tenant is created. If the right is not exclusive the occupant is a mere licensee. The relationship of persons under such circumstances is primarily a question of fact . . . . If exclusive possession or control of the premises or a portion thereof is granted, even though the use is restricted by reservations, the instrument or agreement will be considered to be a lease and not a license.”

That case involved National Park Service concessions. The Park Service uses concessioners to “provide innumerable goods and services including food, lodging, gasoline and souvenirs. Concession activity in the national

parcs is a thriving business which is becoming increasingly dominated by large corporate concessioners.” *National Parks & Conservation Association v. Kleppe*, 547 F.2d 673, 675–76 (D.C. Cir. 1976) (footnotes omitted). Originally, the Justice Department had concluded that the Park Service was not authorized to permit concessioners to withhold part of their annual fees for deposit to a special fund to finance construction work. 41 Op. Att’y Gen. 127 (1953). The 1962 decision quoted above, [41 Comp. Gen. 493](#), also found 40 U.S.C. § 1302 applicable to certain Park Service concession contracts. A few years later, in 1965, Congress enacted the National Park System Concessions Policy Act, Pub. L. No. 89-249, 79 Stat. 969 (Oct. 9, 1965). Section 7 of that Act provides a specific exemption from 40 U.S.C. § 1302 for the National Park Service. That exemption is now codified at 16 U.S.C. § 5962.

Section 6 of Public Law 89-249 gave a concessioner who acquired or constructed improvements a “possessory interest” in those improvements, consisting of “all incidents of ownership except legal title” which, of course, remained in the United States. This provision recognized the government’s reliance on concessioners within the national parks, and was designed to give them a property interest which they could encumber in order to obtain construction financing. It also permitted encumbrance to enable a new concessioner to finance the purchase of an existing concession. [57 Comp. Gen. 607 \(1978\)](#). The current law, 16 U.S.C. § 5954, provides a “leasehold surrender interest” for concessioners who construct capital improvements and retains special rules for concessioners who acquired possessory interests under the earlier provision.

In [64 Comp. Gen. 217 \(1985\)](#), GAO reviewed the concession contract between GSA and Guest Services, Inc. (GSI), which operated cafeterias in government buildings in Washington. While GSA charged rent to the tenant agency for the space the cafeteria occupied, it did not charge rent to GSI. The contract required GSI to establish a reserve in its accounting system for the purchase and replacement of equipment. Thirty years earlier, in [35 Comp. Gen. 113 \(1955\)](#), GAO had found a somewhat similar arrangement to be in violation of 40 U.S.C. § 1302. That contract, however, had required the concessioner to actually transfer funds into a bank account, whereas the new reserve was “a mere bookkeeping entry in the internal accounts of GSI.” 64 Comp. Gen. at 219. Also, the agreement was more of a license than a lease. *Id.* at 220–21. Accordingly, and in view of the “historically unique nature” of the GSA-GSI agreement, GAO concluded that there was no violation of 40 U.S.C. § 1302. *Id.* at 221.

b. Granting of Revocable License

A question that arose with great frequency during the early decades of the twentieth century was the extent to which the government could grant a license, as opposed to a lease, to use government-owned property. Through a large number of cases before both the Attorney General and the Comptroller General, the following rule developed:

“[T]he head of a Government department or agency has authority to grant to a private individual or business a revocable license to use Government property, subject to termination at any time at the will of the Government, provided that such use does not injure the property in question and serves some purpose useful or beneficial to the Government itself.”

[B-164769, July 16, 1968](#), at 1–2. The rationale is that a revocable license is not a property interest, and the granting of such a license is not a “disposal” for purposes of the Property Clause. Therefore, specific statutory authority is not required. The most comprehensive discussion occurs in what is probably the leading case on the subject, 34 Op. Att’y Gen. 320 (1924). Said the Attorney General:

“It is plain that the intent of the Constitutional provision was to prevent alienation of the title, ownership, or control of Government property, whether real or personal, without Congressional sanction. That is the evil which was intended to be avoided, and no construction beyond that intent should be imposed on the prohibition unless clearly implied, especially when it would lead to unreasonable and unforeseen results.”

34 Op. Att’y Gen. at 323.

A GAO decision discussing many of the early Attorney General opinions is [22 Comp. Gen. 563 \(1942\)](#). If a revocable license or permit is not a property interest for purposes of the Property Clause, it is equally not a property interest for purposes of the Fifth Amendment. Therefore, termination does not trigger a constitutional right to compensation. *E.g., Acton v. United States*, 401 F.2d 896 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1968), *cert. denied*, 393 U.S. 1121 (1969); *Osborne v. United States*, 145 F.2d 892 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1944).

Based on application of the rule, the following activities were found authorized:

- Cultivation of crops on land on which Federal Communications Commission radio monitoring stations were located. 22 Comp. Gen. 563 (1942). Permitting the cultivation would not only produce money for the Treasury but would also help reduce fire hazards by controlling the growth of grass and weeds.
- Use of government research space and facilities by university faculty and graduate students. 36 Comp. Gen. 561 (1957).
- Seminar at the United States Merchant Marine Academy. B-168627, May 26, 1970.
- Rock concert on the grounds of the National Institutes of Health. B-168527, Nov. 19, 1970.<sup>234</sup>
- Use of government-owned land by railroads. 30 Op. Att’y Gen. 470 (1915); 22 Op. Att’y Gen. 240 (1898). The Attorney General cautioned the agency in the 1915 opinion to make sure what it was granting was really revocable “practically speaking, whatever it might be in form.” 30 Op. Att’y Gen. at 483.

A more recent case is B-191943, Oct. 16, 1978. The question was the extent to which the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) could make BLM space available to a commercial firm to microfilm public documents. The firm planned to use the documents to provide a filing service for mining claim holders, and also intended to sell copies of the microfilmed documents to the public. If the first purpose were the only use to be made of the property, the proposal would have been permissible under the revocable license rule. The second purpose was more problematic, however, because BLM had a duty under the law to provide copies of the documents to the public for a reasonable fee and should either perform the task itself or contract out for it under the procurement laws. Because it was not realistic to distinguish between the governmental and the private or commercial purposes, GAO concluded BLM should not grant the license.

The rule applies to personal property as well as real property. 47 Comp. Gen. 387 (1968); 44 Comp. Gen. 824 (1965). GAO found a proposal unacceptable in 25 Comp. Gen. 909 (1946) because the arrangement would

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<sup>234</sup> The decision does not specify what was the “purpose useful or beneficial to the government,” but we are sure there was one.



have the effect of permanently vesting beneficial ownership of the government property in a private contractor and would have resulted in a diminution of government control beyond that contemplated in the typical revocable license. The proposal was subsequently amended and, as amended, approved in [B-57383, Feb. 25, 1947](#). While 25 Comp. Gen. 909 involved personal property, the principle would, of course, be fully applicable to real property. In a similar vein is [38 Comp. Gen. 36 \(1958\)](#), disapproving a proposal to permit a private utility company to install connections in a government-owned natural gas line because, under the proposed arrangement, the company would relinquish its rights only if it failed to acquire a right to purchase natural gas from the government.

A statute in this area is 40 U.S.C. § 581(h)(2),<sup>235</sup> added by the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act of 1976, Pub. L. No. 94-541, § 104(a), 90 Stat. 2505, 2506 (Oct. 18, 1976). It authorizes the General Services Administration to—

“make available, on occasion, or to lease at a rate and on terms and conditions that the Administrator considers to be in the public interest, an auditorium, meeting room, courtyard, rooftop, or lobby of a public building to a person, firm, or organization engaged in cultural, educational, or recreational activity . . . that will not disrupt the operation of the building.”

The terms “cultural,” “educational,” and “recreational” are defined in 40 U.S.C. § 3306. GSA’s implementing regulations are found at 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-74.460–102-74.560. Permits may not be issued for more than 30 calendar days, but they are renewable upon submission of a new application. *Id.* § 102-74.485. Permits are generally free of charge, and this includes the normal level of services that would be provided to the building during the times of permit use. Services over and above this level must be reimbursed, but GSA may waive reimbursement if the cost is “insignificant.” *Id.* §§ 102-74.535–102.74-540.

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#### 4. Adverse Possession

The term “adverse possession” refers to a process whereby one can obtain title to someone else’s property by “exclusive, hostile, open, and notorious”

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<sup>235</sup> Formerly 40 U.S.C. § 490(a)(17).



possession for a period of time. *See Black's Law Dictionary* 59 (8<sup>th</sup> ed. 2004). With respect to property owned by the United States, the situation is different. The quiet title statute, 28 U.S.C. § 2409a, provides that “[n]othing in this section shall be construed to permit suits against the United States based upon adverse possession.” 28 U.S.C. § 2409a(n). In addition, 28 U.S.C. § 2415(c) provides that “[n]othing herein shall be deemed to limit the time for bringing an action to establish the title to, or right of possession of, real or personal property.” The “herein” refers to the various statutes of limitations on suits brought by the government. Thus, the government cannot be sued on an adverse possession theory, and there is no time limit on a suit by the government to eject a trespasser or “adverse possessor.” Therefore, as many courts have noted, no one can acquire title to government property by adverse possession. *E.g., Sea Hunt, Inc. v. Unidentified Shipwrecked Vessel or Vessels*, 221 F.3d 634, 642 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2000), *cert. denied*, 531 U.S. 1144 (2001); *United States v. Pappas*, 814 F.2d 1342, 1343 n.3 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987); *Sweeten v. Department of Agriculture*, 684 F.2d 679, 682 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982); *United States v. Santos*, 878 F. Supp. 1359, 1362 (D. Guam 1993). As the Supreme Court stated in *United States v. California*, 332 U.S. 19, 40 (1947) (footnote omitted):

“The Government, which holds its interests here as elsewhere in trust for all the people, is not to be deprived of those interests by the ordinary court rules designed particularly for private disputes over individually owned pieces of property; and officers who have no authority at all to dispose of Government property cannot by their conduct cause the Government to lose its valuable rights by their acquiescence, laches, or failure to act.”

There is a limited statutory exception, the Color of Title Act, 43 U.S.C. §§1068–1068b.<sup>236</sup> The law was enacted in 1928 to enable persons, mostly in the western states, to acquire title to property upon which they resided and which turned out, upon being surveyed, to be government land.<sup>237</sup> There are two classes of claimants. The first is a person who has possessed the land in good faith and under claim or color of title for more than 20 years,

<sup>236</sup> Act of December 22, 1928, ch. 47, § 1, 45 Stat. 1069. A very few similar statutes are also on the books, but they have extremely limited application, for example, 43 U.S.C. §§ 177 and 178, applicable only to certain lands in New Mexico

<sup>237</sup> *See* M.H. Schwarz, *Comment, A Practitioner's Guide to the Federal Color of Title Act*, 20 Nat. Resources J. 681 (1980).

and who has either made valuable improvements to the land or placed part of it under cultivation. 43 U.S.C. § 1068(a). The second is a person who possesses the land in good faith and who can trace a “chain of possession” back to at least January 1, 1901, and who has paid state or local property taxes on that land. *Id.* § 1068(b). A claimant, by applying in accordance with Interior Department regulations (43 C.F.R. part 2540), can purchase up to 160 acres, with mineral rights reserved to the United States. 43 C.F.R. § 2540.0-3(a).

The statute sets a price of “not less than \$1.25 per acre.” Under the regulations, the price is fair market value at the time of appraisal, reduced to reflect value resulting from improvements or development by claimants or their predecessors, and giving consideration to “the equities of the applicant.” 43 C.F.R. § 2541.4(a).

A statutory condition for both classes of claimants is that the land be held in good faith. Under the regulations, knowledge that the land is owned by the United States precludes a finding of good faith. This has been upheld as a reasonable interpretation. *Day v. Hickel*, 481 F.2d 473, 476 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1973). Until Interior determines that an application meets the statutory requirements, the applicant does not have a vested property interest, merely a priority to purchase. *Cavin v. United States*, 956 F.2d 1131 (Fed. Cir. 1992) (applicant cannot maintain inverse condemnation suit).

It has been stated that land which has been withdrawn from the public domain “is not subject to the Color of Title Act because it is already appropriated for other purposes.” *Beaver v. United States*, 350 F.2d 4, 10 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1965), *cert. denied*, 383 U.S. 937 (1966). Since all public domain lands have been “withdrawn” at least to some extent, perhaps it is more accurate today to say that the statute does not apply to land which has been withdrawn from the public domain and reserved to some use or uses. *E.g.*, *United States v. Vasarajs*, 908 F.2d 443, 446 n.4 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990) (Color of Title Act not applicable to land on military reservation).

# Claims against and by the Government

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# Claims against and by the Government

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## A. Introduction

Volume III of the second edition of *Principles of Appropriations Law* discussed the basic legal authorities and concepts dealing with claims asserted by and against the United States. Among other things, those chapters addressed: (1) the administrative settlement of monetary claims against the federal government; (2) the settlement and payment of claims against the government that found their way into the courts; and (3), where the shoe is on the other foot, the collection by the federal government of claims (also known as “debts”<sup>1</sup>) owed to it.

Since the second edition was published, Congress has amended many of the laws addressed in Volume III. GAO no longer has governmentwide jurisdiction over the administrative settlement of claims against the United States, and Congress transferred to the Treasury Department GAO’s Judgment Fund and debt collection responsibilities. However, the exercise of these responsibilities has appropriations law consequences. This chapter discusses these responsibilities in that context.<sup>2</sup>

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## B. History of Claims Settlement

The United States, as sovereign, cannot be sued without its consent.<sup>3</sup> Neither may the funds, property, or rights of the federal government be given away without its consent.<sup>4</sup> The United States gives its consent (or, to be more precise, waives its sovereign immunity) only by clear and explicit legislative acts.<sup>5</sup> Thus, claims against the United States may not be

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., 31 U.S.C. § 3701(b)(1); 31 C.F.R. § 900.2(a).

<sup>2</sup> Because Volume III of the second edition provides a useful history of case law in these areas, it will remain available on GAO’s Web site, [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov). For the reasons provided herein, GAO will not update that volume, however, and it should not be viewed as a statement of current law. Also, it should not be confused with Volume III of the third edition, which updates Volume IV of the second edition; it neither updates, supersedes, nor replaces Volume III of the second edition.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., *United States v. Sherwood*, 312 U.S. 584 (1941).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., *Bausch & Lomb Optical Company v. United States*, 78 Ct. Cl. 584, 607, cert. denied, 292 U.S. 645 (1934); B-307767, Nov. 13, 2006; B-276550, Dec. 15, 1997; B-159292, July 7, 1988.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., B-276550, Dec. 15, 1997; 67 Comp. Gen. 271, 273 (1988). In *Franconia Associates v. United States*, 536 U.S. 129, 141 (2002), quoting *United States v. King*, 395 U.S. 1, 4 (1969), the Supreme Court observed, “A waiver of sovereign immunity of the United States ‘cannot be implied but must be unequivocally expressed.’” See also *United States v. Mitchell*, 445 U.S. 535, 538 (1980); *United States v. Mescalero Apache Tribe*, 518 F.2d 1309 (Ct. Cl. 1975); cert. denied, 425 U.S. 911 (1976).

approved, whether judicially or administratively, and appropriated funds (or other resources) may not be used to satisfy claims against the United States, unless there is constitutional and/or statutory authority that both allows the claim to be pursued and makes funds (or other resources) available for that purpose.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, absent statutory authority, the officers and agents of the government have no authority to waive (or fail to pursue) rights that have accrued to the United States or to modify existing contracts to the detriment of the United States without adequate legal consideration or a compensating benefit. [B-276550, Dec. 15, 1997](#); [67 Comp. Gen. 271, 273 \(1988\)](#).

In the earliest days of the republic, Congress reserved to itself a very large role in the audit and settlement of claims.<sup>7</sup> In 1775, the Continental Congress established the first of a number of congressional committees to examine and report claims and accounts of and against the government for congressional approval or disapproval.<sup>8</sup> During the war for independence, the task of settling the government's claims and accounts grew as the war effort dragged on.<sup>9</sup> To help cope with the volume, Congress established committees and authorized them to organize administrative offices and staffs for support.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Congress sought to “put some of the

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<sup>6</sup> *E.g.*, [17 Comp. Gen. 931 \(1938\)](#). See also 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 127 (1998). Over the years, Congress has waived much of its sovereign immunity by enacting a broad range of legal remedies, both judicial and administrative, governing claims against the federal government. These include, to name only a few, the Tucker Act (28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(a)(2), 1491(a)(2)), the Federal Tort Claims Act (28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(b), 2671–2680), the Military Claims Act (10 U.S.C. § 2733), the Federal Employees Compensation Act (5 U.S.C. ch. 81), Military Personnel and Civilian Employees Claims Act (31 U.S.C. § 3721), and the Contract Disputes Act (41 U.S.C. §§ 601–613). Thus, while sovereign immunity is still a rule of law in the United States, it applies to a smaller universe than it did in the early years of the republic or even a century ago.

<sup>7</sup> *Cf.*, *e.g.*, *Office of Personnel Management v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414, 430 (1990) (“Congress’ early practice was to adjudicate each individual money claim against the United States, on the ground that the Appropriations Clause forbade even a delegation of individual adjudicatory functions where payment of funds from the Treasury was involved.”).

<sup>8</sup> Roger Trask, *Defender of the Public Interest: The General Accounting Office, 1921–1966*, 2–5 (1996) (hereafter Trask).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 2–3; Frederick C. Mosher, *The GAO: The Quest for Accountability in American Government*, 20 (1979) (hereafter Mosher); Harvey C. Mansfield, *The Comptroller General: A Study in the Law and Practice of Financial Administration*, 24–26 (1939) (hereafter Mansfield).

increasing burden of details on officials responsible to it [Congress] but not a part of it.”<sup>11</sup> The end of the war did not bring about an end to the need for these committees or the administrative offices they relied upon. As a result, the Congress of the Confederation continued to rely upon them and various reincarnations of them until the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1798.<sup>12</sup> Beginning in 1781, for a time, Congress abolished its congressional committees and substituted in their place the Office of the Superintendent of Finance.<sup>13</sup> Later in the same year, Congress replaced the other preexisting administrative offices with a comptroller, a treasurer, a register, auditors, and clerks.<sup>14</sup> Three years later, in 1784, the Office of the Superintendent of Finance was itself abolished and the congressional committees were reauthorized and reconstituted in its place.<sup>15</sup>

With the ratification of the Constitution and its establishment of the federal executive branch came the need to revisit how the government’s interests were being managed. In 1789, early in its first session, the new United States Congress considered and enacted, piece by piece, James Madison’s proposal<sup>16</sup> to establish three departments, Foreign Affairs,<sup>17</sup> War,<sup>18</sup> and Treasury.<sup>19</sup> (During this same period, Congress also considered and enacted the beginnings of what would eventually become a fourth department (Justice) when it authorized the appointment of the first Attorney General.<sup>20</sup>) Although Congress left the balance of the organizational structure and other specifics of the Foreign Affairs and War Departments for the executive branch to work out, Congress enacted a

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<sup>11</sup> Trask, at 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 5; Mosher, at 21.

<sup>13</sup> Mosher, at 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Mosher, at 23; Mansfield, at 27.

<sup>17</sup> Act of July 27, 1789, ch. 17, 1 Stat. 28 (later renamed the Department of State).

<sup>18</sup> Act of August 7, 1789, ch. 7, 1 Stat. 49 (later renamed the Department of Defense).

<sup>19</sup> Act of September 2, 1789, ch. 12, 1 Stat. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Act of September 24, 1789, ch. 20, § 35, 1 Stat. 73, 92–93. The Justice Department itself was not established until 1870. Act of June 22, 1870, ch. 150, § 1, 16 Stat. 162.

much longer and more detailed statute for the Treasury Department. It has been observed that “[a]t no point was suspicion of government more definitely written into law and practice than in the management of federal finance.”<sup>21</sup> This suspicion, grounded in the colonies’ experience with British financial practices, gave birth to a deep and abiding congressional desire to maintain close control over the nation’s money.<sup>22</sup> In the Treasury Department act, Congress specifically addressed the structure of the department, creating a system of checks and balances within the agency by authorizing and prescribing the precise duties and relationships of each of six high-ranking officers within the Treasury Department.<sup>23</sup> These officers were the “Secretary of the Treasury, to be deemed head of the department, a Comptroller, an Auditor, a Treasurer, a Register, and an Assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury.”<sup>24</sup>

Pursuant to the act establishing the Treasury Department in 1789, claims and accounts were settled in the department.<sup>25</sup> The Auditor examined them and the Comptroller approved or disapproved the Auditor’s findings.<sup>26</sup> Under the act creating the department, the Comptroller’s duties included adjusting and preserving public accounts, as well as examining all accounts settled by the Auditor.<sup>27</sup> In 1817, Congress gave settlement authority to the Treasury Department, providing that “all claims and demands whatever, by the United States or against them, and all accounts whatever, in which the United States are concerned, either as debtors or as creditors, shall be settled and adjusted in the Treasury Department.”<sup>28</sup> The Treasury Department’s claim settlement philosophy was simple and straightforward:

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<sup>21</sup> Leonard D. White, *The Federalists: A Study in Administrative History*, 323 (1948).

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> 1 Stat. at 65–67.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Stat. 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> Mansfield, at 36.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Stat. 66–67.

<sup>28</sup> Act of March 3, 1817, ch. 45, § 2, 3 Stat. 366. This provision, as amended, is now codified in 31 U.S.C. §§ 3526, 3702.

“The accounting officers *have jurisdiction to settle*, except where otherwise provided by statute, any and all claims against the Government, of whatever kind or description that may be presented to them for settlement, and they have the power to *allow* any legal claim that is supported by evidence fully showing the liability of the Government for the amount claimed or allowed.”

21 Comp. Dec. 134, 138 (1914) (emphasis in original). Where the facts were disputed and required the taking of testimony and the weighing of conflicting evidence, the department’s auditors and comptrollers accepted the government’s version of the facts and disallowed the claim, or only allowed it to the extent of the government’s agreement on the matter. *Id.* See also, *e.g.*, 18 Comp. Dec. 649 (1912); 5 Comp. Dec. 273 (1898). Initially, the auditors and comptrollers were comfortable paying allowed claims from the general, lump-sum appropriations.<sup>29</sup> Before long, however, Congress began specifying with particularity the uses for each appropriation, and claims that were allowed for which no funds were legally available had to wait for further appropriations. 22 Comp. Dec. 37 (1915) (insufficiency of appropriation to pay all of the claims allowed dictated that additional appropriations be sought rather than simply prorating payment using the funds actually available). At that time, where claims were disallowed by the auditors and comptrollers, the only means by which to appeal the disallowance was to petition Congress.<sup>30</sup>

By 1855, the workload generated by petitions to Congress for appropriations to pay claims against the government had become burdensome and unwieldy. See, *e.g.*, *Belt’s Executrix v. United States*, 15 Ct. Cl. 92, 106 (1879) (“Claimants . . . had no remedy except through Congress.”). For this reason, Congress established the Court of Claims to hear all monetary claims based upon a law, a regulation, or a federal government contract.<sup>31</sup> Initially, however, the Court of Claims was a “court

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<sup>29</sup> Darrell Heavenor Smith, *The General Accounting Office—Its History, Activities, and Organization*, 83 (1927).

<sup>30</sup> Note, *The Distinction Between Legislative and Constitutional Courts*, 43 Yale L. J. 316, 317 (1933).

<sup>31</sup> Act of February 24, 1855, ch. 122, § 1, 10 Stat. 612. See also *Glidden Co. v. Zdanok*, 370 U.S. 530, 552–53 (1962) (the Court of Claims “was created . . . primarily to relieve the pressure on Congress caused by the volume of private bills”); 43 Yale L. J. at 317.



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only in name.”<sup>32</sup> The court lacked the authority to issue binding decisions,<sup>33</sup> and its role was “purely advisory” in nature.<sup>34</sup> The court’s establishment paralleled the earlier congressional practice of establishing administrative offices to process claims and report them for congressional consideration.<sup>35</sup>

However, as the Supreme Court noted, by the end of 1861 “it was apparent that the limited powers conferred on the [Court of Claims] were insufficient to relieve Congress from the laborious necessity of examining the merits of private bills.” *Glidden Co. v. Zdanok*, 370 U.S. 530, 553 (1962). In his State of the Union message of 1861, President Lincoln recommended that the Court of Claims be empowered to issue final decisions as a true court of the United States.<sup>36</sup> In 1863, Congress accepted Lincoln’s proposal and authorized the court to issue binding decisions. Act of March 3, 1863, ch. 92, § 5, 12 Stat. 765, 766. Even then, however, the finality of awards issued by the Court of Claims was immediately drawn into question based on a statutory provision that, according to the Supreme Court, authorized the Treasury Department to review and decline to enforce Court of Claims decisions. *Glidden*, 370 U.S. at 569. Based on its interpretation of that provision, the Supreme Court declined to hear appeals from the Court of Claims. *Gordon v. United States*, 117 U.S. 697 (1864). Congress then repealed the offending provision, and the Supreme Court agreed to hear appeals from the Claims Court. *Glidden*, 370 U.S. at 554, *citing* Act of March 17, 1866, ch. 19, § 1, 14 Stat. 9. During this same time, the agency heads and some of the Attorneys General began asserting the right to overrule the findings of the comptrollers. *Smith*, at 38. In 1868,

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<sup>32</sup> Note, *The Court of Claims: Judicial Power and Congressional Review*, 46 Harv. L. Rev. 677, 679 n.15 (1933). See *Williams v. United States*, 289 U.S. 553, 565 (1933) (“originally nothing more than an administrative or advisory body, [that was later] converted into a court, in fact as well as in name”). See also *Nourse v. United States*, 2 Ct. Cl. 214 (1866), *citing* *Ferriera v. United States*, 54 U.S. [13 How.] 40 (1851).

<sup>33</sup> 10 Stat. at 614 (court’s opinions become “conclusive” only if “confirmed by Congress”).

<sup>34</sup> 46 Harv. L. Rev. at 679. See also *Glidden*, 370 U.S. at 552 (“As an innovation the court was at first regarded as an experiment, and some of its creators were reluctant to give it all the attributes of a court by making its judgments final; instead, it was authorized to hear claims and report its findings of fact and opinions to Congress, together with drafts of bills designed to carry its recommendations into effect.”).

<sup>35</sup> See text accompanying notes 7 and 8, *supra*.

<sup>36</sup> Cong. Globe, 37<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess. (1862), app. at 2.

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Congress declared that the certified determinations of the Treasury Department's auditor and comptroller "shall be taken as final and conclusive upon the executive branch of the government." Act of March 30, 1868, ch. 36, 15 Stat. 54.

In 1921, Congress, to establish an independent administrative claims settlement process, enacted the Budget and Accounting Act, creating GAO and transferring to it from the Treasury Department, among other things, the authority to administratively and conclusively settle and adjust all claims of and against the United States, and to superintend the recovery of all debts owed to the United States. Pub. L. No. 67-13, §§ 304, 305, 312, 42 Stat. 20, 24–26 (June 10, 1921). Also, GAO was to report to Congress and the Justice Department on requests for appropriations to pay judgments. *Id.* § 304. *See, e.g.,* 34 *Comp. Gen.* 221, 223 (1954). The transfer of these and other related authorities to GAO was intended to "strengthen the control of Congress over the expenditure of funds [by means of] a legislative agency independent of the administration and responsible directly to Congress."<sup>37</sup>

Over the years, GAO picked up additional authorities and responsibilities that were related in one fashion or another to settling claims. For example, in 1928, Congress enacted legislation, known as the Meritorious Claims Act, which charged GAO to report to Congress claims against the government that, in the opinion of the Comptroller General, could not be paid under existing law but that Congress, for legal or equitable reasons, should consider paying. Pub. L. No. 70-217, 45 Stat. 413 (Apr. 10, 1928), *codified at* 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). Also, Congress later assigned to GAO the duty to certify payments from the so-called "Judgment Fund," a permanent, indefinite appropriation for the satisfaction of judgments, awards, and compromise settlements against the United States, 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a)(2) (1994), and the responsibility to prescribe, jointly with the Justice Department, the debt collection regulations known as the Federal Claims Collection Standards, 4 C.F.R. parts 101–104 (1994).

In the 1990s, however, Congress transferred a number of these duties to other agencies. The Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, 1996, transferred some of these functions to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), including the general authority to settle claims of and against the United States. Pub. L. No. 104-53, § 211, 109 Stat. 514, 535

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<sup>37</sup> Smith, at 62. *See also* Pub. L. No. 67-13, § 301; Mosher, at 48–51.

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(Nov. 19, 1995), 31 U.S.C. § 501 note. Congress authorized OMB to delegate the transferred functions to other agencies.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, OMB made the following delegations:

- OMB delegated the settlement of federal employee claims for compensation and leave, and settlement of deceased employees' accounts, to the Office of Personnel Management, Office of General Counsel, Claims Adjudication Unit;
- OMB delegated the settlement of federal employee claims for travel, transportation, and relocation expenses and allowances to the General Services Administration (GSA) Board of Contract Appeals;
- OMB delegated the settlement of claims for military personnel pay, allowances, travel, transportation, retired pay, and survivor benefits, and final settlement of the accounts of such personnel, to the Department of Defense Office of Hearings and Appeals;
- OMB delegated Judgment Fund payments and setoffs against such payments to the Judgment Fund Group of the Treasury Department's Financial Management Service;
- OMB delegated the settlement of transportation carrier requests for review of GSA audit actions on their bills to the GSA Board of Contract Appeals; and
- OMB delegated the settlement of transportation carrier disputes over collections against them for loss and damage incurred in government shipments to the Department of Defense Office of Hearings and Appeals.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-53, § 211. A 1997 GAO memorandum to departments and agencies describes in detail the statutory functions transferred to OMB by Public Law 104-53, as well as the delegations that OMB had made as of that date. [B-275605, Mar. 17, 1997](#). While claims settlement was transferred from GAO, GAO's account settlement authority was not altered. Compare Pub. L. No. 104-53, § 211, and 31 U.S.C. §§ 3526, 3529. See also [B-275605](#); Chapter 1, section C.2.

<sup>39</sup> See OMB, *Determination with Respect to Transfer of Functions Pursuant to Public Law 104-53* (June 28, 1996), available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/foia/gc](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/foia/gc) June 28.pdf (last visited June 10, 2008); [B-275605, Mar. 17, 1997](#).

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In the following year, Congress enacted the General Accounting Office Act of 1996, which made conforming amendments to the United States Code reflecting the transfers of functions and OMB's delegations. Pub. L. No. 104-316, 110 Stat. 3826 (Oct. 19, 1996). This act also transferred from GAO to the Treasury Department the authority to assume the collection of debts on behalf of other agencies and the responsibility to prescribe (jointly with the Justice Department) the Federal Claims Collection Standards, now found in 31 C.F.R. parts 900–904. *Id.* § 115(g).

GAO no longer has governmentwide jurisdiction over the administrative settlement of claims against the United States (31 U.S.C. § 3702), no longer shares in supervising the collection of debts owed to the government (31 U.S.C. § 3711), and no longer certifies payments from the Judgment Fund (31 U.S.C. § 1304). GAO is still charged by law to administratively settle the accounts of the United States. *See* 31 U.S.C. §§ 3526–3530. The exercise of the claims settlement functions has appropriations law consequences<sup>40</sup> and consequences for accounts settlement; that is what this chapter addresses.

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## C. Claims against the Government

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### 1. Overview and Sources of Claims Settlement Authority

The question of what is a claim was long ago answered by the Supreme Court in *Hobbs v. McLean*, 117 U.S. 567 (1886). The Court said:

“What is a claim against the United States is well understood. It is a right to demand money from the United States . . . which can be presented by the claimant to some department or officer of the United States for payment, or may be prosecuted in the court[s].”

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<sup>40</sup> *See* Smith, at 82, *quoting* GAO Letter of January 28, 1927 (“the question is not so much a settlement of claims as determination of availability of appropriations”). *See also* *Harts Case*, 16 Ct. Cl. 459, 484 (1880), *aff'd*, *Hart v. United States*, 118 U.S. 62 (1886) (“Auditing and accounting are but parts of a scheme for payment.”).

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*Hobbs*, 117 U.S. at 575. *See also Page v. United States*, 49 Fed. Cl. 521, 530 (2001). Any federal program that involves the disbursement of funds can generate claims.

As a result, claims routinely arise in areas covered by other chapters of *Principles*. Claims against the United States originate under a variety of sources and circumstances. For example, Chapter 4 discusses legal limitations that constrict the purposes to which appropriated funds may be applied. A claim relevant to Chapter 4 might involve, for example, the application of statutory restrictions that preclude active duty and retired military members from receiving retired pay during any period that they are employed by a foreign government or its instrumentalities. *See, e.g.*, [53 Comp. Gen. 753 \(1974\)](#) (a retired U.S. Air Force colonel was barred from receiving retirement pay from the U.S. government because he was effectively employed by an Israeli company). Assistance programs, discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, often generate claims arising from the application of program restrictions: restrictions that define the eligibility of applicants for assistance, or perhaps the total amount of funds available to the agency for distribution under the program. *E.g.*, [1 Comp. Gen. 429 \(1922\)](#) (claims for tuition grants to Native American children enrolled in Montana public schools). Another example would be situations, discussed in Chapter 9, under which accountable officers become obligated to reimburse the government for unlawful expenditures of appropriated funds that they disbursed or certified. *See, e.g.*, [70 Comp. Gen. 463 \(1991\)](#) (accountable officer held liable for certifying overpayments in a travel voucher).

Some claims are authorized directly by the Constitution. For example, where construction work on government land (or land controlled by the government) causes the land of another person to be flooded permanently, the other person's land is considered "taken" and the government must pay "just compensation" under the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. *E.g.*, [B-173971, Oct. 27, 1971](#). Contractual relationships often generate claims against the government. A contract is a legal instrument from which legal rights, duties, and obligations flow. *See, e.g., Black's Law Dictionary* 341 (8<sup>th</sup> ed. 2004). A federal agency has the inherent power to enter into contracts in the execution of its duties. *E.g., United States v. Tingey*, 30 U.S. (5 Pet.) 115, 127–28 (1831). While many (if not most) government contract claims are now governed by the Contract Disputes Act, 41 U.S.C. §§ 601–613, there is authority for the proposition that agencies have inherent authority, as an incident to the power to enter into contracts, to settle at least certain types of contract claims. *See United States v. Corliss*

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*Steam-Engine Co.*, 91 U.S. 321 (1875); *Brock & Blevins Co. v. United States*, 343 F.2d 951 (Ct. Cl. 1965); *Cannon Construction Co. v. United States*, 319 F.2d 173 (Ct. Cl. 1963).

There is a fairly large universe of claims statutes that serve a wide range of functions. Some establish the authority to settle certain types of claims in situations where that authority would not otherwise exist. A prime example of this is the Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. ch. 171. Others, the Contract Disputes Act for example, do not necessarily establish the right to file claims but nevertheless provide a statutory basis for claims and set out procedures for addressing claims. Some, as the two statutes cited, are governmentwide. Many others are agency specific. One example is 31 U.S.C. § 3724, which authorizes the Attorney General to settle civilian claims that cannot be settled under the Federal Tort Claims Act.<sup>41</sup>

The Constitution gives Congress ultimate authority over the disposition of the property and resources of the United States. U.S. Const., art. IV, § 3, cl. 2 (“The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States.”). *See, e.g., Royal Indemnity Co. v. United States*, 313 U.S. 289, 294 (1941); B-276550, Dec. 15, 1997. Congress has delegated some of its authority to the courts, some to the executive branch, and it has retained the balance for itself. This discussion examines claims settlement authorities as delegated to each of the branches and retained by Congress. Appropriated funds are available to pay claims against the government only if the government agrees to pay the claim in exercise of appropriate claims settlement authority.

a. Legislative Claims Settlement

(1) Congressionally sponsored bills

Claims settlement in the federal government derives from the combination of congressional waivers of the sovereign immunity of the United States and the plenary constitutional authority of Congress over the funds and property of the United States.<sup>42</sup> In the executive and judicial branches, claims settlement is generally limited to dispositions based on legal

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<sup>41</sup> Under 31 U.S.C. § 3724(a), the Attorney General is authorized to settle claims for “personal injury, death, or damage to, or loss of, privately owned property, caused by an investigative or law enforcement officer . . . employed by the Department of Justice acting within the scope of employment that may not be settled under [the Federal Tort Claims Act].”

<sup>42</sup> See notes 2–4, *supra*, and the accompanying text.

liability, and no court or agency may order or pay taxpayers' money based on a perceived moral obligation, unless so authorized by law.<sup>43</sup> Congress, however, may choose to legislatively recognize claims based on moral obligations or any other bases, as it chooses. *Glidden Co. v. Zdanok*, 370 U.S. 530, 567 (1962), *citing United States v. Realty Co.*, 163 U.S. 427 (1896) (“Congress may *for reasons adequate to itself* confer bounties upon persons and, by consenting to suit, convert their moral claim into a legal one enforceable by litigation in an undoubted constitutional court”) (emphasis added). *See also* B-307681, [May 2, 2006](#), at 7 (“it is for Congress to decide whether to provide equitable relief”).

The time-honored method of pursuing such claims against the United States has been to persuade a member of your state's congressional delegation to sponsor a private relief bill. The power of Congress to appropriate funds in this manner is beyond question. The Supreme Court said over a century ago:

“Payments to individuals, not of right, or of a merely legal claim, but payments in the nature of a gratuity, yet having some feature of moral obligation to support them, have been made by the government by virtue of acts of Congress appropriating the public money, ever since its foundation. Some of the acts were based on considerations of pure charity.”

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<sup>43</sup> *E.g.*, *Office of Personnel Management v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414, 429–31 (1990), *quoting* Subcommittee on Administrative Law and Governmental Relations of the House Committee on the Judiciary, *Supplemental Rules of Procedure for Private Claims Bills*, 101st Cong. 2 (Comm. Print 1989):

“As the business of the Federal Legislature has grown, Congress has placed the individual adjudication of claims based on the Constitution, statutes, or contracts, or on specific authorizations of suit against the Government, with the Judiciary. . . . But Congress has always reserved to itself the power to address claims . . . founded not on any statutory authority, but upon the claim that ‘the equities and circumstances of a case create a moral obligation on the part of the Government to extend relief to an individual.’”

*See also, e.g.*, 62 *Comp. Gen.* 419, 421 (1983), *citing* 8 *Comp. Dec.* 582 (1902) (“The claims settlement jurisdiction of the ‘accounting officers’ extends only to claims based on legal liability and not to claims based on equity or moral obligations.”); B-175670, [May 25, 1972](#), at 2 (“[W]e may not consider your claim on equitable grounds since our office is authorized only to settle claims based on applicable legal principles, and we may not settle a claim on the basis of moral or equitable obligations of the Government.”).

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*Realty Co.*, 163 U.S. at 441. See also *Pope v. United States*, 323 U.S. 1, 9 (1944); *Merchants National Bank of Mobile v. United States*, 5 Cl. Ct. 180, 209 n.32 (1984); B-156080, Sept. 10, 1965.

In its earliest days, Congress resisted the idea of delegating (to the courts or administrative officers) its authority to settle claims against the United States. *E.g.*, Judicial Conference of the United States, *The United States Court of Claims: A History*, pt. II, § 1 (1978), at 5, 10–11, reprinted in 216 Ct. Cl. following XXVIII (1978). Periodically, over time, however, concerns over the continually growing number, amount, and complexity of claims and private relief legislation that Congress had to consider helped convince Congress increasingly to waive sovereign immunity and delegate congressional authority to resolve various types of claims against the United States. *Id.*

For example, in proposing what is now known as the Tucker Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1491, Representative Randolph Tucker of Virginia explained that he intended his bill to relieve his colleagues and himself of “a large mass of private claims which were encumbering our business and preventing our discharging our duties to the great public interests of this country.” *Id.* at 39. Courts have described the “overwhelming purpose” of the Federal Tort Claims Act as to “reliev[e] Congress of the pressure of private claims” and “enable it to devote more time to major public issues.” *United States v. Yellow Cab Co.*, 340 U.S. 543, 550–51 (1951). See also *Kosak v. United States*, 465 U.S. 848, 867 (1984); *Costo v. United States*, 248 F.3d 863, 872 n.2 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001), *cert. denied*, 534 U.S. 1078 (2002); *In re “Agent Orange” Product Liability Litigation*, 506 F. Supp. 762, 769 (E.D. N.Y. 1980).

Nowadays, Congress has waived federal sovereign immunity for a wide range of suits, including those that seek traditional money damages, such as the waivers provided by the Federal Tort Claims Act (28 U.S.C. ch. 171) and the Tucker Act (28 U.S.C. § 1491). See *Department of Army v. Blue Fox, Inc.*, 525 U.S. 255, 260 (1999); *Culver v. United States*, No. 3: 06cv1865 (M.D. Pa. Oct. 17, 2007). One result of this is that the volume of private relief legislation has diminished dramatically. For example, volumes 55 and 56 of Statutes at Large list 635 private laws enacted by the 77<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1941 and 1942. Volumes 81 and 82 of Statutes at Large list 362 private laws enacted by the 90<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1967 and 1968. By contrast, volumes 113 through 118 of Statutes at Large (together covering the period from 1999 through 2004) list only 24 private laws for the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress and 6 private laws each for the 107<sup>th</sup> and 108<sup>th</sup> Congresses.



While private relief legislation is often enacted in the form of a stand-alone private law, it occasionally takes other forms and appears in other kinds of laws. Sometimes it has taken the form of a simple direction in a public law to pay a sum of money to a named individual, group of individuals (named or unnamed), or some other entity. For example, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997 directed the Secretary of Defense to “make a payment under this section to a[ny] person [or the survivors of a person] who . . . was captured and incarcerated . . . as a result of [participating] in operations conducted under OPLAN 34A [its predecessor, or OPLAN 35].”<sup>44</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-201, div. A, title VI, §§ 657(a), 110 Stat. 2422, 2584–85 (Sept. 23, 1996). See *Mattes v. Chairman, Vietnamese Commandos Compensation Commission*, 173 F.3d 817 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1999) (upholding power of Congress to provide this private relief without judicial review). Another form of private relief is a bill relieving someone of indebtedness to the government. In the Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act of 1996, for example, under the heading of “Debt Forgiveness,” Congress directed that the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development “shall cancel the indebtedness” of three named hospitals relating to public facilities loans issued under title II of the Housing Amendments of 1955. Pub. L. No. 104-134, § 213, 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-288–89 (Apr. 26, 1996). Private relief can also take the form of removing a jurisdictional bar or waiving some other legal defense. The latter type is discussed in *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, 448 U.S. 371 (1980).

## (2) Congressional reference cases

Sometimes, Congress uses a hybrid claims settlement process, known as “congressional reference,” to assist its consideration of private relief legislation. See 28 U.S.C. §§ 1492, 2509. Under this process, either house of Congress can refer a private relief bill (“except a bill for a pension”) to the Court of Federal Claims. 28 U.S.C. § 2509(a). The court follows the procedures set forth in 28 U.S.C. § 2509 and makes “findings of fact [and] conclusions sufficient to inform Congress whether the demand is a legal or

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<sup>44</sup> During the Vietnam War, the United States hired commandos to conduct covert operations deep inside North Vietnam. Prior to this act, the United States had not acknowledged this fact. *Mattes v. Chairman, Vietnamese Commandos Compensation Commission*, 173 F.3d 817, 818 n.2 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1999). The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1997 authorized the appropriation of \$20 million for his purpose, with individual payments ranging from \$40,000 to \$50,000. Pub. L. No. 104-201, §§ 657(c) & (g). The Secretary’s determinations under this provision were “final and conclusive,” and judicial review was “specifically precluded.” *Id.* § 657(j).

equitable claim or a gratuity, and the amount, if any, legally or equitably due from the United States to the claimant.” 28 U.S.C. § 2509(c). See *Office of Personnel Management v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414, 431 (1990); B-187806, Jan. 11, 1979 (discussing Congressional Reference Case No. 1-72, *Arizona Insurance and Investment Co. v. United States* (Oct. 29, 1976)). The basic purpose of the congressional reference process is “to provide judicially determined facts to the Congress for its use in deciding whether or not certain private claims warrant legislative relief.” *Zadeh v. United States*, 111 F. Supp. 248, 251 (Ct. Cl. 1953).

Essentially, a congressional reference case is conducted as a trial with one judge of the Court of Federal Claims serving as a “hearing officer” and three other judges serving as a reviewing body. 28 U.S.C. § 2509(a). There is a plaintiff (usually the party seeking relief) and a defendant (often the United States). One example of a congressional reference case is *Land Grantors in Henderson, Union, and Webster Counties, Kentucky v. United States*, 77 Fed. Cl. 686 (2007). See also *INSLAW, Inc. v. United States*, 40 Fed. Cl. 843 (1998). Congressional reference cases are not subject to judicial review. 28 U.S.C. § 2509(b). Rather, the report goes back to the house of Congress that requested it. *Id.* § 2509(e). According to the Court of Federal Claims, nowadays, these cases are “relatively rare.” *Wolfchild v. United States*, 77 Fed. Cl. 22, 28 (2007).

### (3) Meritorious Claims Act

In 1927, GAO recommended that Congress enact legislation authorizing GAO to report claims against the government that could not be paid under existing law but that Congress should consider paying for legal or equitable reasons. GAO, *Annual Report of the Comptroller General of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1927* (Washington, D.C.: 1927), at 9–11. This legislation, known as the Meritorious Claims Act,<sup>45</sup> is codified at 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). Until 1996, the responsibility for submitting these meritorious claims to Congress rested exclusively with GAO. However, as a result of the transfer and delegation of claims settlement authority discussed in section B of this chapter, this responsibility is now widely dispersed among the agencies of the federal government. Today, section 3702(d) provides:

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<sup>45</sup> Pub. L. No. 70-217, 45 Stat. 413 (Apr. 10, 1928).

“The official responsible . . . for settling the claim shall report to Congress on a claim against the Government that is timely presented under this section that may not be adjusted by using an existing appropriation, and that the official believes Congress should consider for legal or equitable reasons. The report shall include recommendations of the official.”

The Meritorious Claims Act does not authorize agencies to pay claims. *See* 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 11 (1998). It merely authorizes the submission of favorable recommendations to Congress. Congress, using private relief bills or otherwise, will have to enact an appropriation to pay the claim if it agrees with the agency’s recommendation. Unlike other private relief that is championed by a claimant and the claimant’s representatives, private relief enacted pursuant to a Meritorious Claims Act recommendation is supported by the agency that investigated and adjudicated the claim. Presumably, this lends credibility to the claim and makes the congressional task easier. *See* S. Rep. No. 70-684, at 3–4 (1928); H.R. Rep. No. 70-491, at 1–4 (1928). For a recent example of this authority in action, see Private Law No. 106-6, §§ 1, 2, 114 Stat. 3097 (Oct. 10, 2000). This law directed the Treasury Secretary to pay \$10,208.74 from funds in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated to Akal Security, Inc., for security guard services it rendered to the Army in 1991. *Id.* It also directed that Akal’s liability to the government for \$57,771.29 previously paid to it for those same security services was “hereby extinguished.” *Id.*

The act filters claims through four conditions that Congress imposed on the authority to submit recommendations. First, claims must be “timely presented.” 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). In other words, notwithstanding equitable or other considerations, claims that are time-barred by the Barring Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3702(b), or another more specific statutory or regulatory limitation, may not be submitted. [14 Comp. Gen. 324 \(1934\)](#); [B-208290, Sept. 7, 1982](#).

Second, the act stipulates that claims must be presented to “the official responsible under subsection (a) for settling the claim.” 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). This means that the act applies only to claims that an agency may settle pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 3702, which, as discussed below, generally empowers agencies to settle claims in situations where there is no law that otherwise authorizes them to settle such claims. In [62 Comp. Gen. 280 \(1983\)](#), for example, GAO held that claims cognizable, but denied, under the Federal Tort Claims Act (28 U.S.C. ch. 171) or the Military Claims

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Act (10 U.S.C. § 2733) could not be reported to Congress under the Meritorious Claims Act.

Third, this authority does not extend to claims that, if otherwise allowable, could be paid from existing appropriations. 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). For example, in [B-155149, Oct. 21, 1964](#), GAO found that the Meritorious Claims Act was not the appropriate vehicle to address the claim of an accountable officer who had used personal funds to reimburse the government to cover a loss of public funds for which the officer was later found not to have been responsible. The act did not apply because the officer could have applied for relief (and been reimbursed from agency operating appropriations) under the applicable accountable officer relief statute.

The fourth condition is that the claim must have legal or equitable merit sufficient to warrant special consideration by Congress. 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). When evaluating whether a claim merits recommendation to Congress under this authority, it is important to keep in mind that the act is “limited to extraordinary circumstances.” [B-259657, Aug. 15, 1995](#), at 3; [53 Comp. Gen. 157, 158 \(1973\)](#). Reportable cases should be of an unusual nature that are unlikely to constitute a recurring problem, “since to report to the Congress a particular case when similar equities exist or are likely to arise with respect to other claimants would constitute preferential treatment over others in similar circumstances.” [53 Comp. Gen. at 158](#). *See also* [B-230871.4, June 19, 1996](#); [63 Comp. Gen. 93, 95 \(1983\)](#); [B-210831, Aug. 2, 1983](#); [B-209292, Feb. 1, 1983](#). Frequently recurring problems are better left to general remedial legislation. *E.g.*, [17 Comp. Gen. 720, 724 \(1938\)](#).

GAO invoked this act sparingly. Perhaps because of this, Congress enacted most of GAO’s recommendations. Of the 53 claims GAO reported in 1928 through 1930, 51 were enacted; out of 31 submitted between 1948 and 1976, 28 were enacted. These statistics are drawn from two studies by GAO attorneys, [B-230950-O.M., Aug. 29, 1988](#), and [B-150882-O.M., Mar. 17, 1977](#).

**b. Judicial Claims Settlement**

The authority of a federal court to settle a claim derives from a federal statute authorizing the court to resolve the dispute or granting it the power to review the administrative determination at issue in the case. *See, e.g.*, [Glidden Co. v. Zdanok](#), 370 U.S. 530 (1962); [Williams v. United States](#), 289 U.S. 553, 580–81 (1933). For example, the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution mandates the payment of just compensation for

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governmental takings of private property,<sup>46</sup> so Congress enacted statutes designating which courts may hear Fifth Amendment takings claims. *E.g.*, 28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(a)(2), 1491(a)(1). There are other federal statutes that authorize the courts to settle certain claims of and against the United States. Examples of these are provisions of the Federal Tort Claims Act (28 U.S.C. ch. 171) and 26 U.S.C. § 7433(a) (which allows taxpayers to bring lawsuits in response to unauthorized tax collection actions).

Judicial claims settlement also can occur under circumstances and pursuant to statutes that are not normally understood to contemplate claims settlement, and might even appear to explicitly preclude the consideration of monetary claims. In *Bowen v. Massachusetts*, 487 U.S. 879 (1988), for example, the state of Massachusetts sued the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under the Administrative Procedures Act (APA), 5 U.S.C. § 702. Massachusetts believed that HHS had distributed Medicaid reimbursements to the state governments improperly. In court, it claimed that HHS had misinterpreted the Medicaid statutes and regulations and owed Massachusetts more Medicaid reimbursements. *Bowen*, 487 U.S. at 888 n.10. One of the issues the Court had to deal with in this case was the language of the APA which specifically allows claims against the United States for “relief other than money damages.” 5 U.S.C. § 702. As a result of this language, claimants are not normally allowed to pursue monetary claims under the APA. *Bowen*, 487 U.S. at 890–91. *See also* [B-259065, Dec. 21, 1995](#). In this case the Supreme Court concluded, however, that the law does not completely foreclose monetary awards as an APA remedy. *Bowen*, 487 U.S. at 893. As the Court noted, neither the APA nor equity authorize courts to consider claims against the government for “money damages.” Here, however, the Supreme Court distinguished between “money damages” and “money judgments.” The latter, it held, may be allowed under the APA and under equity when the amount to be awarded represents “injunctive” or “specific” relief. *Id.* at 893–901. *See also* [B-259065, Dec. 21, 1995](#). Massachusetts convinced the Court that the federal government had not properly implemented the Medicaid statutes and the Court agreed that an order should issue requiring HHS to reverse its denial of the state’s claim—as

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<sup>46</sup> “Nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation.” U.S. Const. amend. V. *See* Chapter 13, section B.5.b.

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specific relief.<sup>47</sup> *Bowen*, 487 U.S. at 909–11. Thus, as a practical matter, while neither the APA nor the Medicaid statutes expressly authorized the court to settle monetary Medicaid claims, the process of APA judicial review effectively accomplished just that.

c. Administrative Claims Settlement

Over 100 years ago, claims settlement was viewed as largely an adversarial process. The tenor of the times was captured in the following statement made by the Treasury Department’s First Comptroller in 1883: “The Auditors and Comptrollers, and the accountants under them, constitute the safeguard of the National Treasury, and have to withstand the whole army of claimants and their increased clamor.” 4 Lawrence, First Comp. Dec. xix (Introduction) (1883) (emphasis omitted).

Claims settlement was much simpler back then. The key claims-authorizing statutes had not yet been enacted. The absence of applicable waivers of sovereign immunity meant that there was no authority for the agencies to allow claims against the government.<sup>48</sup> Most potential claimants lacked access to the courts for the same reason.<sup>49</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>47</sup> GAO, taking cognizance of *Bowen*, held that monetary awards made under the APA and other equitable authorities should be treated no differently than other monetary awards when being considered for payment from the permanent, indefinite appropriation known as the Judgment Fund, 31 U.S.C. § 1304. That, however, did not necessarily make the award payable from the Judgment Fund. Rather, GAO said, “to the extent that monetary awards made under equitable authorities otherwise satisfy the statutory criteria governing use of the Judgment Fund, those awards should be paid in the same manner as other monetary awards against the United States.” B-259065, Dec. 21, 1995, at 4–5. See also B-279886, Apr. 28, 1998, at 10–11 (the Judgment Fund would not be available to pay a court order directing the government to pay the costs of supervising a labor union’s election rerun, “even if the court were to award a specific sum equivalent to the actual or anticipated costs of supervising the rerun” because such an order “would appear more in the nature of injunctive relief, than a monetary award of damages”).

<sup>48</sup> Absent an authorizing statute, an agency has no authority to create liability by regulation. *Illinois Central Railroad Co. v. United States*, 52 Ct. Cl. 53, 59 (1917). See also *Mitzelfelt v. Department of Air Force*, 903 F.2d 1293 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990); B-201054, Apr. 27, 1981. This principle follows logically and directly from the more fundamental principle that “[a]gents and officers of the Government have no authority to give away the money or property of the United States.” *Central Engineering & Construction Co. v. United*, 59 F. Supp. 553, 568 (Ct. Cl. 1945). See also B-159292-O.M., July 7, 1988 (and cases cited), and notes 2–4, *supra*, and accompanying text.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

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the possibility of obtaining redress for claims against the government was limited.<sup>50</sup>

The law has undergone a sea change since then. Now, there are many statutes that, in varying degrees of detail, waive sovereign immunity and bestow authority to administratively entertain claims, as well as case law recognizing and fleshing out bases in the law to settle claims in a wide variety of contexts and forums. Here is a brief sampler of the many authorities available today to administratively settle claims against the federal government.

Tort and tort-related claims

- Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. ch. 171.
- Small Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3723.
- Tort claims arising in foreign countries, 28 U.S.C. § 2680(k).
- Unauthorized tax collection actions, 26 U.S.C. § 7433(a).
- The Military Claims Act, 10 U.S.C. § 2733.
- The Foreign Claims Act, 10 U.S.C. § 2734.
- The International Claims Act, 10 U.S.C. §§ 2734a, 2734b.
- Military vehicular claims on government installations, 10 U.S.C. § 2737.
- Federal Employees Compensation Act, 5 U.S.C. §§ 8101–8193.
- Military Personnel and Civilian Employees Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3721.

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<sup>50</sup> Of course, claimants could petition Congress for private relief legislation (see section B of this chapter) and the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution allowed claims to be asserted against the government under certain circumstances (see section C.1.b of this chapter).

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Contract and contract-related claims

- The Contract Disputes Act, 41 U.S.C. §§ 601–613.
- Ratification, 48 C.F.R. § 1.602-3.<sup>51</sup>
- Bid protests under the Competition in Contracting Act of 1984, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3551(1), 3552; 4 C.F.R. § 21.2(a).
- Contracts implied-in-law under *quantum meruit/quantum valebant*, see, e.g., [B-271163, May 22, 1996](#); 40 Comp. Gen. 447, 451 (1961).

Miscellaneous claims

- Unclaimed money/property, 31 U.S.C. §§ 1321 and 1322.
- Voluntary creditors rule, see, e.g., *Heirs of Emerson v. Hall*, 38 U.S. (13 Pet.) 409, 412–13 (1839); 4 Comp. Dec. 409, 410 (1898); [B-278805, July 21, 1999](#).
- Estoppel, see, e.g., *Office of Personnel Management v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414 (1990); *Perez v. United States*, 156 F.3d 1366, 1373 (Fed. Cir. 1998); [B-307681, May 2, 2006](#); 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 127 (1998).

Some of these authorities allow agencies to settle claims in situations where that authority would not otherwise exist. A prime example is the Federal Tort Claims Act. Others, such as the Contract Disputes Act, do not necessarily create the right to file claims but provide a statutory basis and establish procedures for their resolution. Some statutes for the resolution

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<sup>51</sup> When a government agent purports to commit the government to a transaction that he or she has no actual authority to enter, the government is not legally obligated to honor the transaction. [B-209132, Oct. 3, 1983](#). An agency, however, can ratify such an agreement after the fact. See Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), 48 C.F.R. § 1.602-3. The authority to ratify unauthorized transactions and settle the resulting claims has long been recognized by the courts and accounting officers of the United States. See, e.g., *United States v. Beebe*, 180 U.S. 343 (1901); 22 Comp. Gen. 1083 (1943). To exercise this authority, the ratifying official, among other things, must have the authority to enter into the agreement (48 C.F.R. § 1.602-3(c)(2)) and the underlying agreement must be “otherwise proper” (48 C.F.R. § 1.602-3(c)(3)). For a discussion of this authority, see [B-306353, Oct. 26, 2005](#), in which GAO determined that the Architect of the Capitol could use appropriated funds to pay a contractor for services rendered pursuant to an unauthorized commitment which the Architect of the Capitol had subsequently ratified.



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of claims, such as the two just mentioned, provide authority to most, if not all, agencies. Others provide authority to only one agency. For example:

- 31 U.S.C. § 3724—In situations where the Federal Tort Claims Act does not apply, the Attorney General may settle claims up to \$50,000 for personal injury or property damage caused by law enforcement officers employed by the Department of Justice.
- 39 U.S.C. § 2008(d)—The United States Postal Service has specific authority under the Postal Reorganization Act to settle its own claims. *See B-179464, Mar. 27, 1974.*
- 12 U.S.C. § 1702—The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) has specific statutory authority to settle claims against it based on its authority to sue and be sued and to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures. *53 Comp. Gen. 337 (1973); 27 Comp. Gen. 429 (1948).*

#### Authority to settle and adjust claims under 31 U.S.C. § 3702

To the extent that they are not otherwise authorized by law to do so, 31 U.S.C. § 3702 gives agencies general authority to “settle and adjust” claims arising from their operations. Section 3702 is derived from legislation dating to 1817. As originally enacted, this authority was not only comprehensive but exclusive, providing that “all claims and demands whatever, by the United States or against them, and all accounts whatever, in which the United States are concerned, either as debtors or as creditors, shall be settled and adjusted in the Treasury Department.” Act of March 3, 1817, ch. 45, § 2, 3 Stat. 366. It was this statute that the Supreme Court was construing when it held that the term “settlement,” when used in connection with public transactions and accounts, describes the “administrative determination of the amount due.” *Illinois Surety Co. v. United States*, 240 U.S. 214, 219 (1916). The claims settlement function remained in the Treasury Department until 1921, when it was transferred to GAO. As discussed in section B of this chapter, in 1996 the claims settlement function was transferred from GAO to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

The origins and history of this statute are discussed in *Lambert Lumber Co. v. Jones Engineering & Construction Co.*, 47 F.2d 74 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 283 U.S. 842 (1931). Before the 1996 transfer of the claims settlement function from GAO, the statute provided in relevant part:

“Except as provided in this chapter or another law, the Comptroller General shall settle all claims of or against the United States Government.” 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a) (1994). In practice, GAO’s exercise of claims settlement authority was not nearly as sweeping as the language suggests. GAO’s policy was to leave initial settlement of a claim to the agency from whose activities the claims arose. 4 C.F.R. § 31.4 (1996). If the claimant was not satisfied with the agency’s disposition, he or she could appeal to GAO. *Id.* Also, an agency could submit a claim to GAO for settlement if the agency was unable to resolve it. *Id.* In addition, an agency official could request an advance decision from GAO pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 3529 on issues concerning a claim.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the vast majority of claims arising under 31 U.S.C. § 3702 were actually settled by the agencies concerned. GAO claims settlement case law was developed primarily in response to appeals from disappointed claimants and requests for decisions from agency officials.

The General Accounting Office Act of 1996 amended 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a) to reflect the transfer of claims settlement authority from GAO to OMB and OMB’s initial delegations of that authority. Pub. L. No. 104-316, § 202(n), 110 Stat. 3826, 3843 (Oct. 19, 1996). The current version of section 3702(a) retains in substance the language that, except as otherwise provided by law, “all claims of or against the United States Government shall be settled” under it. Section 3702(a) goes on to assign settlement responsibilities as follows:

- The Defense Department settles claims involving uniformed service members’ pay, allowances, and benefits as well as claims by transportation carriers involving amounts collected from them for property loss or damage incident to shipments at government expense. 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a)(1).
- The Office of Personnel Management settles claims involving federal civilian employees’ compensation and leave. *Id.* § 3702(a)(2).

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<sup>52</sup> The authority to issue decisions with respect to claims is now vested in the head of the agency responsible for settling the claim. *See* 31 U.S.C. § 3529(b)(2)(B) (added by Pub. L. No. 104-316, § 204, 110 Stat. 3826, 3845 (Oct. 19, 1996), discussed in section B of this chapter). *See also* B-275605, Mar. 17, 1997. Public Law 104-316 did not transfer, amend, or repeal GAO’s authority under 31 U.S.C. § 3529 to issue decisions on matters involving the use of appropriations that do not specifically involve settling a claim, or GAO’s authorities under 31 U.S.C. §§ 3527 and 3528 to grant relief to disbursing and certifying officers. *Id.*

- The General Services Administration settles claims involving federal civilian employees' official travel, transportation, and relocation expenses. *Id.* § 3702(a)(3).

Section 3702(a)(4) left to OMB the responsibility for settling claims not otherwise assigned by section 3702(a). As discussed in section B of this chapter, OMB has issued a general delegation of this responsibility to each individual agency out of whose activity a particular claim arises. *See* [B-275605, Mar. 17, 1997](#), at 3 (referring to OMB's December 17, 1996, general delegation of claims settlement authority to executive branch agencies). On May 15, 1997, OMB delegated to legislative and judicial branch agencies settlement authority arising out of their activities.<sup>53</sup>

The reach of 31 U.S.C. § 3702 is subject to a number of conditions and restrictions.<sup>54</sup> First, section 3702 applies “[e]xcept as provided in this chapter or another law.” 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a). Thus, a more specifically applicable claims settlement authority will take precedence over section 3702. For example, section 3702 does not apply to claims—

- within the scope of the Federal Tort Claims Act (28 U.S.C. ch. 171), which makes settlement under that statute “final and conclusive”<sup>55</sup> (*e.g.*, [B-215494, Sept. 4, 1984](#));
- involving the United States Postal Service, which has specific authority to settle its own claims under the Postal Reorganization Act ([B-179464, Mar. 27, 1974](#));

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<sup>53</sup> Copies of the OMB delegation orders are available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/foia/transfer\\_gao\\_auth.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/foia/transfer_gao_auth.html) (last visited June 10, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> While section 3702 provides an independent administrative claims handling procedure, it does not provide an independent basis for paying claims. “Rather, in order for payment of the claim to be lawful, there must be independent appropriations authority to pay the claim.” 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 11, 20 (1998). Identification of the proper appropriation to use in order to pay a claim is, in large part, a function of appropriations law. (Note the specific appropriations usage directed in 31 U.S.C. §§ 3702(d) and (e)(2).) Payment issues are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

<sup>55</sup> A statutory scheme may be regarded as exclusive even without explicit “final and conclusive” language. *E.g.*, *Aamodt v. United States*, 976 F.2d 691 (Fed. Cir. 1992); *Carter v. Gibbs*, 909 F.2d 1452 (Fed. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 498 U.S. 811 (1990); [71 Comp. Gen. 374 \(1992\)](#).

- involving the District of Columbia government, based in part on its status as a separate legal entity (*e.g.*, [1 Comp. Gen. 451 \(1922\)](#); [B-168704, Jan. 16, 1970](#));
- relating to government checks (*see generally* 31 U.S.C. §§ 3327–3334; 31 C.F.R. pt. 240); or
- arising from the operations of government corporations that have the authorities to sue and be sued and to determine the character and necessity of their expenditures (*e.g.*, [53 Comp. Gen. 337 \(1973\)](#); [27 Comp. Gen. 429 \(1948\)](#)).

Second, for purposes of section 3702, a claim is limited to a *monetary* claim, that is, a claim for the payment of money. Thus, the statute does not permit consideration of nonmonetary claims such as specific performance ([B-179702, Oct. 10, 1973](#)) or issues involving title to land ([19 Comp. Gen. 196 \(B-1250, Aug. 14, 1939\)](#); [B-207613, Apr. 6, 1983](#)).

Third, while section 3702 provides for settling claims, it provides only the procedural authority to settle claims administratively. Unlike most of the statutes noted above, section 3702 does not spell out any substantive criteria upon which claims against the government may be allowed by agencies. *Cf., e.g.*, Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. ch. 171. Consequently, agencies must be able to identify a sufficient, independent, substantive basis in the law in order to allow a claim brought under this provision. As GAO noted, the agency “performing this function . . . is necessarily called upon to construe the laws and regulations which may be pertinent to an individual’s claim against the government.”<sup>56</sup> [60 Comp. Gen. 132, 134 \(1980\)](#).

For example, in [B-193987, Feb. 29, 1980](#), GAO allowed an employee’s claim for additional living quarters allowance while the employee was serving with the U.S. Customs Service in Hamburg, Germany. GAO noted that the Secretary of State had prescribed regulations governing the payment of quarters allowances in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 5923 to qualifying individuals defined under 5 U.S.C. § 5922. GAO asserted that

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<sup>56</sup> Of course, if the law does not provide an adequate basis for allowing a claim against the government, the agency may consider whether the claim should be reported to Congress pursuant to the Meritorious Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3702(d). See sections B and C.1.a(3) of this chapter.

section 3702(a) “leaves to the discretion of this Office what evidence is required to support such claims.” B-193987, at 2–3. On the other hand, the rule of law allowing the claim was derived not from section 3702(a), but rather from the State Department’s regulations—“it is these regulations which provide the controlling authority in establishing [this employee’s] entitlement to a living quarters allowance in the circumstances presented.” *Id.*, at 3.

Similarly, in [65 Comp. Gen. 177 \(1986\)](#), GAO was asked to review under section 3702(a) a claim against a Forest Service employee. GAO explained that in such cases it engaged in a narrow review of agency actions: GAO determined whether the agency asserting a claim against its employee had statutory or regulatory authority to do so and then asked whether the agency followed that authority in the individual case. In keeping with this narrow review, GAO examined the Forest Service regulations and compared the agency’s internal reports of the incident giving rise to the claim. GAO found that the regulations Forest Service cited in assessing this claim specifically contemplated an *intentional* violation of Forest Service regulations. The agency report stated, however, that while carrying out his official duties the employee had *inadvertently* violated the agency’s rules. Therefore, GAO concluded, Forest Service had not adequately established under its own regulations a legal basis for assessing financial liability against the employee. GAO directed that Forest Service cease collection.

Finally, claims settlement under section 3702 is subject to a statute of limitations imposed in section 3702 itself.<sup>57</sup> With certain exceptions, each claim must be “received by the official responsible under subsection [3702](a) for settling the claim or by the agency that conducts the activity from which the claim arises within 6 years after the claim accrues.” 31 U.S.C. § 3702(b). This provision is often referred to as the “Barring Act.” *E.g., Hernandez v. Department of the Air Force*, 498 F.3d 1328, 1331 (Fed. Cir. 2007); [B-274195, Oct. 8, 1996](#). Unless otherwise provided by law,

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<sup>57</sup> We are tempted to say that if statutes of limitations did not exist, we would still be litigating Revolutionary War claims. We suspect, however, that without a citation, we might be accused of exaggerating. So, check out *Lunaas v. United States*, 936 F.2d 1277 (Fed. Cir. 1991), *cert. denied*, 502 U.S. 1072 (1992). *Lunaas* involved just such a claim, arising from loans allegedly made to the Continental Congress during the winter of 1777–78, never repaid, and estimated to be worth as much as \$140 billion with interest by the time of this decision. To make a long story short, the court held that, while there was room for debate as to precisely when the claim “accrued” for statute of limitations purposes, it had been time-barred under any theory for over a century. *Lunaas*, 936 F.2d at 1279–80.

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appropriated funds are not legally available to pay claims on which the applicable limitation has run.<sup>58</sup> See [52 Comp. Gen. 420 \(1973\)](#).

The Barring Act provides the following special rules:

- When a claim by a member of the armed forces accrues during war or within 5 years before war begins, the applicable limitation period is 5 years after peace is established or the standard 6 years, whichever is later.<sup>59</sup> 31 U.S.C. § 3702(b)(2).
- A claim on a Treasury check is limited to 1 year after issuance of the check, but the 1-year limit does not apply to the underlying obligation for which the check was issued. 31 U.S.C. § 3702(c).
- The Defense Department may waive the Barring Act for claims (not exceeding \$25,000) that it is authorized to settle under section 3702(a)(1). 31 U.S.C. § 3702(e).

Generally speaking, absent statutory authority, agencies may not waive or extend the time allowed by a statute of limitations. *E.g.*, *United States v. Garbutt Oil Co.*, 302 U.S. 528, 534–35 (1938); *Finn v. United States*, 123 U.S. 227, 233 (1887); *Computervision Corp. v. United States*, 445 F.3d 1355, 1367 (Fed. Cir. 2006), *cert. denied*, \_\_\_ U.S. \_\_\_, 127 S. Ct. 2033 (2007). See also, *e.g.*, [B-197635, June 6, 1980](#); 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 127 (1998).

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<sup>58</sup> It is important, however, to be sure to correctly identify the applicable statute of limitations. See [29 Comp. Gen. 54 \(1949\)](#), in which GAO observed that the expiration of the statute of limitations *for bringing a lawsuit* on a claim would not preclude the agency from *administratively paying* that claim so long as the time for administratively settling the claim had not expired and funds to pay it were still available at that time.

<sup>59</sup> By its terms, this provision applies only to members of the armed forces. And members on active duty at that. [59 Comp. Gen. 463 \(1980\)](#). See also, *e.g.*, Department of Defense Instruction No. 1340.21, § E5.6 (May 12, 2004). Therefore, it could not help a civilian employee of the Navy Department interned with the crew of the *U.S.S. Pueblo* in North Korea in 1968 who filed a claim for overtime compensation for his internment which was not received until after the statute of limitations had expired. [B-194474, Oct. 24, 1979](#). Another statutory provision relevant to claims of military personnel is 50 U.S.C. App. § 526 (formerly 50 U.S.C. App. § 525), which provides that periods of military service shall not be included in applying a statute of limitations, whether the claim or cause of action accrued prior to or during the service. Decisions applying this provision in various contexts include *Conroy v. Aniskoff*, 507 U.S. 511 (1993), [63 Comp. Gen. 70 \(1983\)](#), and [41 Comp. Gen. 812 \(1962\)](#).

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The same is true of the Barring Act.<sup>60</sup> *E.g.*, 70 Comp. Gen. 292 (1991); 62 Comp. Gen. 80, 83 (1982); B-249968, Feb. 16, 1993.

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## 2. Source of Payment of Claims against the Government

Just because a claim is approved through the claims settlement process does not necessarily mean that it can or will be paid. For the claim to be paid, appropriated funds must be available for that purpose. Even where a court has found a claim to be valid under the law, the claim may not be paid unless Congress has enacted an appropriation available for that purpose.<sup>61</sup> In other words, if the claim is settled in favor of the claimant, it still must be determined whether (and which) funds have been appropriated and are legally available (considering purpose, time, and amount—see Chapters 4, 5, and 6) to pay it. If so, the payment process may begin. If not, the claim may not be paid.

### a. Legislatively Settled Claims

A private relief act may or may not include an appropriation. The test, as described in Chapter 2 for all appropriations, is whether it includes both a direction to pay, as opposed to a mere authorization to pay, and a designation of the source of funds. A direction to pay without designating the source of funds does not constitute an appropriation. 21 Comp. Dec. 867 (1915); B-26414, Jan. 7, 1944. Relief acts which do include appropriations may specify payment from the funds of a designated agency. An example is Private Law No. 97-21, 96 Stat. 2620 (June 1, 1982), directing payment “from the applicable appropriations” of named agencies. More commonly, however, an act will direct payment by the Secretary of the Treasury “out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated.” *E.g.*, Priv. L. No. 108-5, § 1(a), 118 Stat. 4030 (Dec. 3, 2004); Priv. L. No. 107-3, § 1, 116 Stat. 3121 (Oct. 4, 2002); Priv. L. No. 107-2, § 1(a),

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<sup>60</sup> In *Irwin v. Department of Veterans Affairs*, 498 U.S. 89 (1990), the Court held that there is a “rebuttable presumption” that a statute of limitations is subject to “equitable tolling” in a suit against the United States in the same manner as in a suit between private parties. *Id.* at 95–96. The doctrine of “equitable tolling” permits a court to waive a statute of limitations based on considerations of equity, such as where the claimant filed a defective pleading within the deadline or where the defendant induced the claimant to miss the filing deadline. *Id.* at 96. The Justice Department has opined quite emphatically that congressionally imposed limitation periods must be strictly followed in claims settlement and that *Irwin* does not affect this conclusion. 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 127 (1998).

<sup>61</sup> Some rights have no remedies. *Cf.*, *e.g.*, *Harts Case*, 16 Ct. Cl. 459, 483 (1880), *aff’d*, *Hart v. United States*, 118 U.S. 62 (1886). While rare in modern appropriations law practice, this is still true, occasionally. *See, e.g.*, 63 Comp. Gen. 470 (1984) (no appropriation was legally available to pay a judgment against the United States).



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116 Stat. 3119 (Oct. 1, 2002); *see also* 23 Comp. Dec. 167, 170 (1916). If a relief act directs payment by the Secretary of the Treasury “out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated” and does not indicate any more specific source of funds for payment, payment is charged to the permanent, indefinite account 20X1706 (Relief of Individuals and Others by Private and Public Laws) and is made directly by the Treasury Department. *See* B-142380, Mar. 24, 1960 (circular letter); I TFM Announcement No. A-2008-03 (Apr. 8, 2008), at A-69.

The amount specified in a private relief act effectively constitutes a “final adjudication” and confers no authority to do anything other than pay it in accordance with its terms. *United States v. Price*, 116 U.S. 43 (1885); *United States v. Jordan*, 113 U.S. 418 (1885); 22 Op. Att’y Gen. 295 (1899); 5 Op. Att’y Gen. 94 (1849). Except for the possibility of bringing the matter to the attention of Congress, it must be paid even if it is believed to be erroneous. *United States v. Louisville*, 169 U.S. 249 (1898); 2 Comp. Dec. 629 (1896). As the Court of Claims said: “The disposition of public money is in the discretion of Congress, and its reasons for passing an act and the consideration thereof can not be inquired into nor its will thwarted by any executive officers or by the courts.” *Mumford v. United States*, 31 Ct. Cl. 210, 215 (1896).

In Chapter 2 we discuss the principle that, except for errors in the amount appropriated, obvious clerical or typographical errors in a statute which could change the meaning or render execution impossible may be disregarded if the intent is clear. This principle applies equally to private relief acts. Thus, a relief act appropriating money to pay a claim of Martin and P.W. Murphy which erroneously designated the payees as “Martin and P.B. Murphy” could be paid to the rightful claimants because the context clearly established the *B* as a clerical error. 18 Op. Att’y Gen. 501 (1886).

b. Judicially Settled Claims:  
the Judgment Fund

A judgment by a federal court, like other claims settlements, may result in an award against the government. Without more, however, it cannot be paid. The Appropriations Clause of the United States Constitution (art. I, § 9, cl. 7) applies with equal force to payments directed by a court. *E.g.*, *OPM v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414, 424–26 (1990).

This section explores how judicial judgments (as well as some other awards and settlements against the United States) are paid. Because the Appropriations Clause must be satisfied, payment must be prescribed by statute. This may take the form of (1) a specific appropriation for a particular judgment or judgments, (2) a general appropriation for



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judgments, or (3) a legislative enactment which makes a preexisting appropriation available to make the payment. Until 1956, judgments were paid only pursuant to an appropriation specific to a particular judgment. Since 1956, most judgments have been paid from the Judgment Fund, 31 U.S.C. § 1304, a permanent, indefinite appropriation enacted as a source of payment for judgments.

(1) Origins and overview

It has long been held that, as a general rule, unless otherwise provided by law, agency operating appropriations are not available to pay judgments against the United States. *E.g.*, 8 Comp. Dec. 261, 262 (1901); 8 Comp. Dec. 145, 149 (1901). Originally, this rule preserved for Congress the opportunity to consider the court's decision and refuse to appropriate funds to pay any judgments with which Congress disagreed. On those occasions when Congress declined to appropriate funds, the judgment creditor was left with a judicially approved claim against the United States but received no payment for it. This was (and still is) part and parcel of the power of the purse. The courts adjudicate, but only Congress can appropriate. This result, however, has rarely happened. In *Glidden Co. v. Zdanok*, 370 U.S. 530, 570 (1962), for example, the Supreme Court noted a 1933 study which found only 15 instances in a 70-year period in which Congress had refused to pay a judgment.

Over time, the process of reviewing and effectively overruling the courts in this manner evolved from a luxury to a burden. As sovereign immunity was increasingly waived to allow more and more lawsuits against the government, the process (in both the executive and the legislative branches) of preparing, presenting to Congress, and processing specific appropriations to pay final judgments took an increasing and inordinate amount of time and resources. In the early 1950s, GAO recommended that Congress create a permanent, indefinite appropriation for the payment of judgments. That recommendation was designed to expedite judgment payments by eliminating the need for specific congressional appropriations. It was also intended to save the government money both by eliminating the largely ministerial appropriations processes for paying judgments and reducing post-judgment interest costs arising from the previous payment delays. The proposal was eventually enacted as section 1302 of the Supplemental Appropriation Act of 1957, Pub. L. No. 84-814, 70 Stat. 678, 694-95 (July 27, 1956). Now codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1304, this provision (and the permanent, indefinite appropriation it created) is commonly referred to as the "Judgment Fund."

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In its current form, as set forth in 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a), the Judgment Fund constitutes an appropriation of amounts sufficient to pay “final judgments, awards, compromise settlements, and interest and costs specified in the judgments or otherwise authorized by law” when (1) payment is “not otherwise provided for”; (2) payment is certified by the Secretary of the Treasury; and (3) the judgment, award, or settlement is payable under the following authorities:

- 28 U.S.C. §§ 2414, 2517;
- Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. §§ 2672 (when the amount exceeds \$2,500; less than that is paid from the concerned agency’s appropriation), 2677;
- Small Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3723;
- decisions of boards of contract appeals (subject to reimbursement by the contracting agency from current appropriations<sup>62</sup>), 41 U.S.C. §§ 612(a)–(c);
- portions of meritorious claims that exceed the amounts payable by law from agency appropriations, 10 U.S.C. §§ 2733 and 2734, 32 U.S.C. § 715, and 42 U.S.C. § 2473(c)(13); or
- awards arising from express or implied contracts by certain, specified nonappropriated fund instrumentalities subject to reimbursement from the activity.

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<sup>62</sup> While generally the responsible agencies are not required to reimburse the Judgment Fund, this is an example of a statutory exception, which provides that payments made by the Judgment Fund “shall be reimbursed to the [Judgment Fund] . . . by the agency whose appropriations were used for the contract out of available funds or by obtaining additional appropriations for such purposes.” 41 U.S.C. § 612(c). Under a similar example of a statutory exception, litigative awards under the Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002 (or “NoFEAR,” for short), are paid initially from the permanent, indefinite Judgment Fund appropriation, and then, within a reasonable time thereafter, the federal agency involved must reimburse the Judgment Fund from its operating appropriations. Pub. L. No. 107-174, § 201(b), 116 Stat. 566, 568–69 (May 15, 2002). As a result of this law, all awards against federal agencies for discrimination or whistleblowing retaliation against federal employees, former federal employees, or applicants for federal employment (including associated attorney fee awards)—whether litigative or administrative—are paid from agency operating appropriations, which was one of the main goals Congress intended the law to accomplish. S. Rep. No. 107-143, at 1–3, 7–8 (2002).

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31 U.S.C. §§ 1304(a)(3), 1304(c)(1). While the foregoing captures all of the items listed in section 1304 itself, Congress sometimes includes a provision in other legislation making particular items payable from the Judgment Fund. *See, e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 100-202, § 623, 101 Stat. 1329, 1329-428-29 (Dec. 22, 1987) (amending the Back Pay Act to authorize interest payments, in certain cases, from the Judgment Fund).

When enacted in 1956, the Judgment Fund statute required the Comptroller General to certify all payments made from the fund. Pub. L. No. 84-14, § 1302. In 1996, Congress transferred this function to the Secretary of the Treasury.<sup>63</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-316, § 202(m), 110 Stat. 3826, 3843 (Oct. 19, 1996); 31 U.S.C. § 1304. *See also* 28 U.S.C. § 2414 (federal district court awards); 28 U.S.C. § 2517(a) (Court of Federal Claims awards). GAO has explained that certifying Judgment Fund payments under section 1304 is essentially a “ministerial” function. B-259065, Dec. 21, 1995, at 6. What GAO meant by this is that certification under section 1304 does not involve reviewing the merits of the awards submitted for payment. As GAO learned from its own experience, the certification process does routinely entail making some very complicated legal determinations. The need for these determinations arises from the restrictions and limitations in the law. In other words, the legal availability of the Judgment Fund to pay each award depends upon whether the award satisfies these conditions. Some of those limitations are specified in section 1304(a) itself, while others derive from other specifically applicable statutes or from appropriations law, in general.

While GAO no longer certifies payments from this Judgment Fund, GAO remains available to assist in determining which appropriations (the Judgment Fund or agency appropriations, if any) should be used to make any particular payment. As already noted, the Judgment Fund is a permanent, indefinite appropriation. GAO’s authorities under 31 U.S.C. §§ 3526 (to settle accounts) and 3529 (to issue decisions on matters involving the use of appropriations that do not specifically involve settling a claim) apply equally to the Judgment Fund as to any other appropriation.

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<sup>63</sup> Current Treasury guidance on Judgment Fund procedures, such as that contained in 31 C.F.R. part 256 and I TFM 6-3100, is available at [www.fms.treas.gov/judgmentfund/regulations.html](http://www.fms.treas.gov/judgmentfund/regulations.html) (last visited June 10, 2008).

(2) Availability and limitations

Here are some of the more common conditions imposed on the availability of the Judgment Fund:

Sovereign immunity

The Judgment Fund is not itself a waiver of sovereign immunity. Thus, the legal basis for a judgment or award must be found elsewhere in the law. *OPM v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414, 432 (1990) (section 1304 “does not create an all-purpose fund for judicial disbursement. . . . Rather, funds may be paid out only on the basis of a judgment based on a substantive right to compensation based on the express terms of a specific statute.”).

Litigative awards primarily

The Judgment Fund was created and remains available primarily for paying court judgments and compromise settlements negotiated under authority of the Justice Department. Compromise settlements were included in Judgment Fund coverage in 1961. Pub. L. No. 87-187, 75 Stat. 415, 416 (Aug. 30, 1961). A compromise settlement is an agreement reached by the parties involving mutual concessions. 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 94, 95–96 (1933). The Attorney General, as the government’s chief litigator, has broad authority to compromise cases referred to the Justice Department for prosecution or defense. *United States v. Hercules, Inc.*, 961 F.2d 796, 798 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992); Exec. Order No. 6166, *Reorganization of Executive Agencies Generally*, § 5 (June 10, 1933); 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 124 (1934); 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 98 (1934). The power attaches “immediately upon the receipt of a case in the Department of Justice.” 38 Op. Att’y Gen. at 102. However, a compromise settlement which exceeds the authority of the official purporting to make it does not bind the government. *White v. United States Department of Interior*, 639 F. Supp. 82 (M.D. Pa. 1986), *aff’d mem.*, 815 F.2d 697 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1987); *United States v. Irwin*, 575 F. Supp. 405 (N.D. Tex. 1983).

The amendment to 28 U.S.C. § 2414 provided a standard for determining when compromise settlements are payable from the judgment appropriation. It states that—

“compromise settlements of claims referred to the Attorney General for defense of imminent litigation or suits against the United States, . . . made by the Attorney General . . . shall

be settled and paid in a manner similar to judgments in like causes and appropriations or funds available for the payment of such judgments are hereby made available for the payment of such compromise settlements.”

28 U.S.C. § 2414. Thus, the rule is that a compromise settlement is payable from the same source that would apply to a judgment in the same suit. If a given action could result in a money judgment payable from the judgment appropriation, a compromise settlement of that action will be payable from the judgment appropriation. *E.g.*, [B-212134, June 29, 1983](#). If the action would not result in a money judgment payable from the judgment appropriation, then the judgment appropriation will not be available for a compromise settlement. *E.g.*, [B-248313-O.M., Apr. 10, 1992](#); [B-246660-O.M., Mar. 20, 1992](#). *See also* [B-182219, Oct. 23, 1974](#) (judgment against official in individual capacity). The resolution of a case by compromise settlement does not alter the source of funds. *See* 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 118 (1989). A contrary view, as Justice points out, might encourage settlements driven by source-of-funds considerations rather than the best interests of the United States. *Id.* at 125.

As quoted above, section 2414 mentions referrals for the “defense of imminent litigation.” Except for a general discussion in a 1979 decision, [58 Comp. Gen. 667](#), this language has not been addressed. The “imminent litigation” authority is not a device to enable an agency to avoid paying from its own funds. The agency must be confronted with a genuine disagreement or impasse before referring the claim to Justice. Litigation is not imminent for purposes of this provision merely because a claimant will sue if the agency does not pay. There must be a legitimate dispute over either liability or amount. Absent such a dispute or impasse, there is nothing to refer to the Attorney General. *See* [B-198352, June 22, 1981](#). *See also* 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 98, 99 (1934) (nothing to compromise where liability is certain; must be a “*bona fide* dispute as to either a question of fact or of law”); 38 Op. Att’y Gen. 94, 96 (1933), *quoting* 23 Op. Att’y Gen. 18, 20 (1900) (claim “must in some way be doubtful” to be validly compromised). The fund, generally, is not available to pay agencies’ administrative settlements. *See, e.g.*, [B-257334, June 30, 1995](#).

### Finality required

The first sentence of 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a) limits the Judgment Fund to paying “final” awards.<sup>64</sup> Finality can mean different things in different contexts. *See McDonald v. Schweiker*, 726 F.2d 311, 313 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983). For example, finality for purposes of taking an appeal and finality for payment purposes are two different things. The true import of this distinction may not be immediately apparent. Obviously, it is not in the government’s interest to pay judgments while the claimant’s entitlement and the government’s obligation are still subject to change. [B-208999, Sept. 13, 1982](#). In fact, the finality requirement was designed to protect the government “against loss by premature payment of a judgment which might later through appeal be amended or reversed.” [B-129227, Dec. 22, 1960](#), at 2. As stated in [B-129227](#), the term “final judgment” for payment purposes means “such judgments as have become conclusive by reason of loss of the right of appeal—by expiration of time or otherwise—or by determination of the appeal by the court of last resort.” *Id.*, at 3. *See also Marathon Oil Co. v. United States*, 374 F.3d 1123, 1128 (2004), *cert. denied*, 544 U.S. 1031 (2005); *McDonald*, 726 F.2d at 313. Thus, a judgment against the United States is final for payment purposes when the appellate process is completed. Generally speaking and subject to the occasional exception, this can happen in one of three ways: determination by the court of last resort, determination by the parties not to seek further review, or expiration of the time available for filing an appeal.<sup>65</sup> *E.g.*, [73 Comp. Gen. 46 \(1993\)](#). Given the finality requirement, GAO has concluded that the Judgment Fund should not be used to make “intermediate,” partial, or “good faith” payments—even upon the stipulation of the parties. *E.g.*, [B-164766, June 1, 1979](#).

Sometimes different aspects of a case become “final” at different times. The decision in [B-164766](#), for example, concerned a case pending before the Court of Claims concerning whether a contractor had realized “excess profits” under a government contract. Pursuant to its view of the statute

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<sup>64</sup> Finality is also required for Judgment Fund payments made under 28 U.S.C. §§ 2414 and 2517.

<sup>65</sup> “Whenever the Attorney General determines that no appeal shall be taken from a judgment or that no further review will be sought from a decision affirming the same, he shall so certify and the judgment shall be deemed final.” 28 U.S.C. § 2414. This provision permits a judgment to be paid before it has become final by operation of law, that is, before the time limit for taking an appeal has expired.

governing excess profits, the court ordered the United States to accept a bond from the contractor. This bond was to take the place of money that the contractor previously paid to the government in that case—money that the court ordered to be refunded to the contractor. The Justice Department was still litigating other aspects of the case, and had not yet decided whether to appeal this interlocutory order of the court. The department asked GAO whether the Judgment Fund could be used to pay the refund order. GAO concluded that the court’s refund order was readily severable from the merits of the underlying litigation. GAO noted, however, that the court’s refund order was not final because the department had not yet decided whether to appeal it. GAO advised that after the refund order became final (in one of the ways noted above), the refund order could be certified for payment without regard to the status of the balance of the litigation.

The important point is that any amount to be paid under section 1304 must be a final award—not subject to change upon further appeal. *See, e.g., Barnes v. United States*, 678 F.2d 10 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir.), *aff’d*, 685 F.2d 66 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1982) (partial summary affirmance of undisputed portion of lower court’s judgment may be treated as a separate final judgment payable under section 1304 notwithstanding the continuing appeal of the disputed item); *Parker v. Lewis*, 670 F.2d 249 (D.C. Cir. 1981) (summary affirmance of uncontested portion of attorney fees claim enables payment under section 1304 notwithstanding the pending appeal of the disputed balance of the award); [60 Comp. Gen. 573 \(1981\)](#) (“partial awards” made by contract appeals boards under the Contract Disputes Act may be paid from the Judgment Fund as they become final, despite the pendency of other portions of the same claim).

Finality issues also arise with “interim” fee awards. Interim fees represent awards made during the course of the litigation for legal services rendered to date. In [B-190940, Sept. 21, 1978](#), following the Supreme Court’s rationale in *Bradley v. Richmond School Board*, 416 U.S. 696, 721–23 (1974), GAO agreed that interim fee awards that can no longer be appealed are final for purposes of section 1304. *See also McKenzie v. Kennickell*, 669 F. Supp. 529 (D.D.C. 1987) (court directed immediate payment of interim fee award representing what the parties agreed was the “irreducible minimum” owed to the plaintiffs). Of course, where the government does not intend to appeal an interim fee award, as was true in these cases, the Attorney General can certify this fact under 28 U.S.C. § 2414. The Attorney General’s certification creates finality sufficient for payment under section 1304.

A different finality problem arises when a judgment becomes final but does not specify the dollar amount to be paid. Such a judgment, even though it may be final with respect to the plaintiff's right to recover, is not in and of itself final for Judgment Fund certification. The reason? The government's computation of the amount owed would not be binding on the plaintiff and would, itself, be subject to judicial review. *See* [58 Comp. Gen. 311 \(1979\)](#). Before such a judgment is final, the parties must reach an agreed-upon amount (including any required deductions), together with written statement that the plaintiff will accept that amount in satisfaction of the judgment. *Id.*

#### Monetary awards only

Essentially, section 1304 contemplates a money judgment, that is, a judgment directing the government "to pay final judgments, awards, compromise settlements, and interest and costs," as opposed to a judgment directing the government to perform some specific action. 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a). Any judgment can be translated into a monetary amount in the sense that the cost of compliance can be calculated, but this does not mean that the ultimate cost is to be borne by the judgment appropriation. [70 Comp. Gen. 225 \(1991\)](#); 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 118 (1989). Thus, court orders and compromise settlements to do the following things were not money judgments for purposes of section 1304:

- reconsider benefit program eligibility, [70 Comp. Gen. 225](#);
- implement a nondiscriminatory employment system, [69 Comp. Gen. 160 \(1990\)](#);
- hire an equal opportunity expert, [B-234793.2, June 5, 1989](#); and
- correct structural defects in a building, [B-193323, Jan. 31, 1980](#).

A court order directing the United States to pay the costs of supervising an election rerun was "more in the nature of injunctive relief, than a monetary award of damages" and, therefore, not payable from the Judgment Fund. [B-279886, Apr. 28, 1998](#), at 10. This would be true even if the court were to award a specific sum equivalent to the actual or anticipated costs of supervising the rerun. *Id.*

Money judgments have "traditionally taken the form of a lump sum, paid at the conclusion of the litigation." *Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp. v. Pfeifer*,



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462 U.S. 523, 533 (1983). The decades of the 1970s and 1980s saw the mushrooming of “structured settlements” in personal injury cases requiring long-term care wherein all or part of the award is placed in a reversionary trust or used to purchase an annuity. In [B-162924, Dec. 22, 1967](#), involving a medical malpractice suit brought under the Federal Tort Claims Act on behalf of a plaintiff expected to remain comatose for life, the proposed settlement included two parts: (1) a lump-sum payment covering all damages other than future care and treatment, and (2) another lump sum payable in trust to a court-appointed trustee. Upon the death of the plaintiff, any remaining *corpus* and income would revert to the United States. GAO found the proposal legally unobjectionable, cautioning only that the amount paid to the trustee should represent the government’s maximum obligation and should not exceed the cost of a reasonable fixed settlement. Of course, money that reverts to the United States under a structured settlement is credited to the appropriation from which the settlement was originally disbursed (usually the Judgment Fund). [B-209849, Dec. 2, 1982](#) (nondecision letter).

“Not otherwise provided for”

Section 1304(a)(1) of title 31, United States Code, limits the Judgment Fund to paying awards “not otherwise provided for.” Payment is otherwise provided for when another appropriation or fund is legally available to satisfy the judgment. *E.g.*, [66 Comp. Gen. 157, 160 \(1986\)](#); [62 Comp. Gen. 12, 14 \(1982\)](#). *See also* 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 141 (1998).

Whether payment is otherwise provided for is a question of legal availability rather than actual funding status. In other words, if payment of a particular judgment is otherwise provided for as a matter of law, the fact that the defendant agency has insufficient funds at that particular time does not operate to make the Judgment Fund available. [66 Comp. Gen. at 160](#); [22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 141](#). The agency’s only recourse in this situation is to seek additional appropriations from Congress, as it would have to do in any other deficiency situation.<sup>66</sup> For judgments legally payable from agency appropriations, the amount and time limitations imposed on that appropriation apply just as with any other expenditure from that appropriation.

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<sup>66</sup> It is possible, although remote, that there is *no* appropriation legally available to pay a particular judgment. One example, which apparently resulted from a legislative oversight and was later cured legislatively, is in [63 Comp. Gen. 470 \(1984\)](#).

There is only one proper source of funds in any given case. There is no election to be made. If agency funds are available, then the Judgment Fund is not. Conversely, if the Judgment Fund is the proper source, then payment of the judgment from agency funds would violate the purpose statute, 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), and possibly the Antideficiency Act. *See, e.g., B-178551, Jan. 2, 1976.* Some specific examples follow:

*Tax refunds.* Tax refund judgments are payable from the permanent, indefinite appropriation, *Refunding Internal Revenue Collections*.<sup>67</sup> 31 U.S.C. § 1324. This appropriation is also used “for any overpayment in respect of any internal-revenue tax.” 28 U.S.C. § 2411. Thus, judgments representing overpayments to or amounts improperly collected by IRS are paid from this appropriation. Judgments in this category may result from suits for refund under 26 U.S.C. § 7422 or suits for wrongful levy under 26 U.S.C. § 7426.

*Land condemnation.* Land condemnation judgments are generally payable from the funds of the acquiring agency.<sup>68</sup> 66 Comp. Gen. 157 (1986); 54 Comp. Gen. 799 (1975); 17 Comp. Gen. 664 (1938). This rule predates the creation of the Judgment Fund. 17 Comp. Gen. 664; 5 Comp. Gen. 737 (1926); A-25484, Jan. 11, 1929; A-12979, Feb. 10, 1926. Any agency with the authority to acquire land has the authority to acquire it by mutual agreement or by condemnation. 40 U.S.C. § 257. When an agency is unable to reach a satisfactory purchase agreement with a landowner, the agency may condemn the land. (This is known as the power of eminent domain. For further discussion of real property acquisition through condemnation, see Chapter 13, section B.) The condemnation initiates litigation to determine the price (“just compensation”) the agency will pay to acquire the land. Condemnation can be accomplished only through judicial

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<sup>67</sup> Tax refund judgments must be distinguished from judgments arising from other Internal Revenue Service (IRS) activities. *E.g., B-211389, July 23, 1984* (damages awarded under the Tucker Act were payable from the Judgment Fund after IRS seized a building to recover taxes owed by the building occupant, but not owed by the building owner who sued IRS for erroneous seizure). In addition, 26 U.S.C. § 7432 (IRS negligent failure to release a tax lien) and 26 U.S.C. § 7433 (IRS intentional disregard of tax code or regulations), each contain a payment provision expressly directing payment under 31 U.S.C. § 1304.

<sup>68</sup> These may be distinguished from “inverse condemnation” judgments, which the case law holds payable from the Judgment Fund. *See* 66 Comp. Gen. at 163. In addition, Congress has enacted a number of exceptions in connection with some legislative takings. *See, e.g.,* 16 U.S.C. § 79g(b) (expansion of the Redwood National Park); Pub. L. No. 100-647, title X, § 10002, 102 Stat. 3342, 3819 (Nov. 10, 1988) (expansion of the Manassas National Battlefield Park).

process. In this way, condemnation judgments are different from other judgments: condemnation deploys litigation as a routine tool for the exercise of a normal program activity. [66 Comp. Gen. at 160–61](#). Congress appropriates funds for agency land acquisitions, and these funds are legally available to make the purchase without regard to which process was used. Thus, land condemnation judgments are otherwise provided for.

*Refunds.* Judgments for refunds of money previously paid to or seized by the federal government are payable from the account to which the original payment was credited. The rule, as stated in [17 Comp. Gen. 859, 860 \(1938\)](#) and repeated in [29 Comp. Gen. 78, 79 \(1949\)](#), is: “When the amount subject to refund can be traced as having been erroneously credited to an appropriation account the refund claim is chargeable to said appropriation whether it be lapsed or current, or reimbursable or nonreimbursable.”<sup>69</sup> The order to pay a refund hinges upon the determination that the government improperly received or retained the original funds. *Cf.* [70 Comp. Gen. 225, 228 \(1991\)](#) (refunds are more akin to orders of injunctive relief than money judgments). This disposition prevents augmentation of the appropriation that received the original payment. *See* [61 Comp. Gen. 224 \(1982\)](#) (refund of right-of-way permit fees, some of which were credited to a special fund appropriated for Interior and some credited as miscellaneous receipts); [55 Comp. Gen. 625 \(1976\)](#) (fines assessed by the IRS and credited as internal revenue collections). *See also* [B-259065, Dec. 21, 1995](#).

*Postal Service.* The Postal Reorganization Act specifically provides that judgments against the United States arising out of activities of the Postal Service shall be paid by the Postal Service out of any funds available to it. 39 U.S.C. § 409(h).

*Government corporations.* Judgments against a government corporation generally are paid from the corporation’s funds, not the Judgment Fund. Generally, government corporations are set up to operate in a business-like manner independent of the Treasury. *See Keifer & Keifer v. Reconstruction Finance Corp.*, 306 U.S. 381 (1939); *Reconstruction Finance Corp. v. Foust Distilling Co.*, 204 F.2d 343 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1953). These

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<sup>69</sup> The decisions cited in the text both predated the current statutory account closing structure (*see* Chapter 5, section D). GAO has not addressed the source of payment for a refund where the appropriation account has closed or expired under the current account closing provisions.

corporations are free from many of the restrictions on appropriated funds that apply to agencies. They are usually given considerable latitude in determining their expenditures, and their statutory charters typically contain a “sue and be sued” clause. *See* Chapter 15, section B.8.c(2). It is logical that losses incurred by such corporations, whether by judgment or otherwise, should be treated as liabilities of the corporation and charged to corporate funds, not to the U.S. Treasury. *See, e.g., Far West Federal Bank v. Director, Office of Thrift Supervision*, 930 F.2d 883, 890 (Fed. Cir. 1991); [37 Comp. Gen. 691, 695 \(1958\)](#); [25 Comp. Gen. 685 \(1946\)](#); [B-164879, Dec. 5, 1973](#); 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 559 (1938); 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 141 (1998); 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 436 (1989).

Congress has authorized a number of agencies to conduct commercial-type programs. Where such a program has “sue and be sued” authority and is financed from a revolving or other special fund, judgments arising from program activities are treated as a necessary expense of the program and are generally payable from agency’s funds. *See, e.g., C.H. Sanders Co. v. BHAP Housing Development Fund Co.*, 903 F.2d 114, 120 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1990); *S.S. Silberblatt, Inc. v. East Harlem Pilot Block*, 608 F.2d 28, 35–36 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1979), *citing Federal Housing Administration v. Burr*, 309 U.S. 242 (1940); [62 Comp. Gen. 12 \(1982\)](#).

*Nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs)*. These are entities or activities that do not receive appropriations.<sup>70</sup> NAFIs raise their own operating funds through product sales, member fees, *etc.* Absent statutory provisions to the contrary, the United States “assumes none of the financial obligations” of a NAFI. *United States v. Hopkins*, 427 U.S. 123, 124 (1976). Thus, the general rule is that judgments against them are payable from the instrumentality’s own funds. *E.g., Cosme Nieves v. Deshler*, 786 F.2d 445 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 479 U.S. 824 (1986). *See also, e.g., B-204703, Sept. 29, 1981* (tort judgments). *Cf. B-145762, May 19, 1961* (since the negligence at issue was imputable to the base engineer, not to an officer or employee of the NAFI, the tort award was payable from the Judgment Fund). There is one exception of sorts: Congress designated the Judgment Fund as the initial source of payment for judgments and compromise settlements arising from contracts made by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, the Navy Exchanges, the Marine Corps Exchanges, the Coast Guard Exchanges, and the Exchange Councils of the National

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<sup>70</sup> For more information on NAFIs, see Chapter 15, section C.

Aeronautics and Space Administration; however, the NAFIs must reimburse the Judgment Fund. 31 U.S.C. § 1304(c).

*Agencies receiving funds that are not to be construed as appropriations.* Some agencies have received legislation directing that the funds they derive and use under statutory authority “shall not be construed to be Federal Government funds or appropriated moneys.” 12 U.S.C. § 2250(b)(2) (Farm Credit Administration); 12 U.S.C. § 244 (Federal Reserve Board); 12 U.S.C. § 481 (Office of the Comptroller of the Currency). This being the case, the funds of those agencies are not encumbered by the traditional prohibition on the use of operating appropriations for judgments. As a result, their funds are legally available to pay litigative awards, and payment, for the purposes of section 1304, is otherwise provided for. [B-251061.3, Sept. 29, 1993](#); [B-251061.2, Feb. 10, 1993](#).

*Garnishment.* Several statutes make the wages of federal civilian and military personnel subject to garnishment for certain purposes. *See, e.g.*, 42 U.S.C. § 659(a) (alimony and child support); 5 U.S.C. § 5520a (legal debts of employees generally). As a general proposition, garnishment orders are directed to and paid by the employing agency from agency funds, but, the Judgment Fund may be used in cases that involve liability on the part of the government for failure to comply with an appropriate garnishment order or legal process. [56 Comp. Gen. 592 \(1977\)](#).

*Bankruptcy.* Federal bankruptcy law is complex and allows for a wide variety of awards against the government. The law expressly waives federal sovereign immunity for orders and awards under 60 specific sections of the United States Code. 11 U.S.C. § 106(a)(1). It does not identify, however, the source of payment. What it does say is that—

“enforcement of any such order, process, or judgment against any governmental unit shall be consistent with appropriate nonbankruptcy law applicable to such governmental unit and, in the case of a money judgment against the United States, shall be paid as if it is a judgment rendered by a district court of the United States.”

11 U.S.C. § 106(a)(4).

For this reason, in order to determine whether payment is otherwise provided for, it is necessary to compare each bankruptcy award with

analogous judgments discussed in other contexts in this chapter. *See* [B-239556-O.M., Oct. 12, 1990](#). For example, reference to this chapter's discussion of refunds and tax judgment should help to resolve most situations. While the federal government is not subject to punitive damages in a bankruptcy proceeding, 11 U.S.C. § 106(a)(3), it may still be held in "civil contempt" and assessed compensatory damages including attorney fees and court costs if it attempts to collect debts discharged in bankruptcy. When made, such compensatory awards are payable from the Judgment Fund, notwithstanding their civil contempt status. *Id.*

c. **Administratively Settled  
Claims**

Claims settled at the administrative level are paid in one of three ways: (1) from operating appropriations available to the agency whose activities gave rise to the claims; (2) from some existing appropriation or fund other than the agency's operating appropriations; or (3) by submitting the claim to Congress for a specific appropriation. As is true of most funding source determinations, there is no option. For any given claim, one of these methods will apply to the exclusion of the other two. *See, e.g.,* [65 Comp. Gen. 790, 793 \(1986\)](#).

Some statutes governing specific types of claims contain detailed provisions governing the payment of those claims. For example, under the Federal Tort Claims Act, administrative settlements of \$2,500 or less are paid "by the head of the Federal agency concerned out of appropriations available to that agency." 28 U.S.C. § 2672. Another example is 16 U.S.C. § 574, which authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to reimburse property owners up to \$2,500 for loss or damage caused by the government in connection with the administration or protection of the national forests, "payment to be made from any funds appropriated for the protection, administration, and improvement of the national forests." This authority has been used, for example, to compensate landowners for damage caused by aerial spraying for pest control. [B-117720, Dec. 23, 1953](#).

A 1978 amendment to 31 U.S.C. § 1304 allows payment from the Judgment Fund of claims settled under section 203 of the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958, 42 U.S.C. § 2473(c)(13). This statute authorizes the Administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to settle claims for death, personal injury, or property damage resulting from the conduct of NASA's functions, if the claim is presented in writing within 2 years after the incident giving rise to the claim. Claims of \$25,000 or less are paid directly by NASA from its own funds. Claims in excess of \$25,000 are paid from the judgment appropriation. The NASA statute differs from the Military, Foreign, and National Guard Claims Acts



in one important respect. Under the military statutes, if a claim exceeds the amount payable from agency funds, only the excess over that amount is paid from the judgment appropriation. Under the NASA statute, if the amount of a settled claim exceeds \$25,000, the entire amount of the claims is paid from the judgment appropriation.

When considering what appropriation to use to pay an administratively settled claim, the first place to look is the statute authorizing the settlement. If the statute authorizes an agency to settle claims but is silent with respect to payment, the necessary implication is that the agency will pay from its operating appropriations. For example, claims settled under authority of the Military Personnel and Civilian Employees Claims Act of 1964, 31 U.S.C. § 3721, are paid from operating appropriations. [B-143673](#), Nov. 11, 1976, *overruled on other grounds by* [56 Comp. Gen. 615 \(1977\)](#); [B-174762](#), Jan. 24, 1972; [B-206856](#), Apr. 7, 1982 (nondecision letter). *Cf.* [65 Comp. Gen. 790, 792 \(1986\)](#) (while claims presented under 31 U.S.C. § 3721 are usually paid from the agency’s operating appropriations, in this case Congress designated another payment source for the claim). Similarly, administrative settlements under the Contract Disputes Act (at the contracting officer level) are paid from the Judgment Fund, which the contracting agency must reimburse from its procurement appropriations. [63 Comp. Gen. 308 \(1984\)](#). Another example is 31 U.S.C. § 3724, which authorizes the Attorney General to settle claims for death, personal injury, or property damage caused by investigative or law enforcement officers of the Department of Justice acting within the scope of their employment, which cannot be settled under the Federal Tort Claims Act. Settlement authority is limited to “not more than \$50,000 in any one case.” 31 U.S.C. § 3724(a). The statute makes no mention of how the claims are to be paid, but the legislative history of a 1989 revision recognized that they are paid from the operating funds of the Justice Department. H.R. Rep. No. 101-46, at 3 (1989).

For the Department of Defense and the military departments, claims payable from agency funds are paid from Operation and Maintenance (O&M) appropriations in accordance with 10 U.S.C. § 2732. While terms of the statute are general (“claims authorized by law to be paid”), its scope is clarified by its origin. Until fiscal year 1989, the Defense Department received a separate lump-sum appropriation entitled “Claims, Defense.” It was available for all noncontractual claims payable from agency funds, including “personnel claims, tort claims, admiralty claims, and miscellaneous claims.” Starting with fiscal year 1989, Congress discontinued the Claims, Defense appropriation and instructed Defense to

charge the claims to O&M appropriations. Pub. L. No. 100-463, § 8098, 102 Stat. 2270, 2270-35 (Oct. 1, 1988). The authority was made permanent in 1990. Pub. L. No. 101-510, § 1481(j), 104 Stat. 1485, 1708 (Nov. 5, 1990), *codified at* 10 U.S.C. § 2732.

When payment is to be made from agency operating appropriations, it is necessary to determine when the obligation occurs and hence what fiscal year to charge. The governing principle, stated in a number of earlier decisions, is that a claim against an annual appropriation is chargeable to the appropriation for the fiscal year in which the liability was incurred. *E.g.*, 18 Comp. Gen. 363, 365 (1938). When this happens depends on the type of claim.

Where the United States is not obligated to pay a claim until a final determination of liability has been made, the appropriation current at the time that determination is made is properly chargeable with the obligation. *E.g.*, 65 Comp. Gen. 533, 541 (1986); 63 Comp. Gen. 308 (1984); 38 Comp. Gen. 338, 340 (1958); B-174762, Jan. 24, 1972. This rule is “grounded on the theory that the court or administrative award ‘creates a new right’ in the successful claimant, giving rise to new Government liability.” 63 Comp. Gen. at 310. *See also* B-272984, Sept. 26, 1996; B-255772, Aug. 22, 1995. As a general proposition, claims involving property damage or personal injury will fall into this category. *E.g.*, 38 Comp. Gen. 338; 35 Comp. Gen. 511, 512 (1956). Thus, administrative awards of \$2,500 or less under the Federal Tort Claims Act are payable from funds currently available at the time the claim is determined to be proper for payment. 38 Comp. Gen. 338; 35 Comp. Gen. at 512; 27 Comp. Gen. 445 (1948); 27 Comp. Gen. 237 (1947). Similarly, payments under the Military Personnel and Civilian Employees’ Claims Act of 1964 are chargeable to funds current when a final determination of liability is made. B-174762, Jan. 24, 1972.

Contract claims arising from changes to an existing contract are chargeable to appropriations current at the time the basic contract was executed if the changes were authorized by and enforceable under the provisions of the original contract. 65 Comp. Gen. 741 (1986); 59 Comp. Gen. 518 (1980). This type of change, commonly referred to as a within-scope change, is considered an “antecedent liability.” 59 Comp. Gen. at 522. A contract claim is based on antecedent liability if the modification or adjustment is within the general scope of the original contract and is made pursuant to a provision, such as a “Changes” clause, in the original contract. For example, a contractor provided supplemental research services under a contract with the Interior Department without the issuance of written



contract amendments. Since the government received the benefit of the services and ratified the transaction, the contractor was entitled to be paid. The work was within the general scope of the original contract and the government's liability was viewed as deriving from the "Changes" clause. Therefore, the contractor's claim was chargeable to funds available at the time the original contract was executed. [B-197344, Aug. 21, 1980](#). A contract change which exceeds the general scope of the original contract, commonly referred to as an outside-of-scope change, like any new obligation, is chargeable to funds current at the time the change is made. [37 Comp. Gen. 861 \(1958\)](#); [B-207433, Sept. 16, 1983](#). *See also* [61 Comp. Gen. 184 \(1981\)](#), *aff'd upon reconsideration*, [B-202222, Aug. 2, 1983](#); [B-224702, Aug. 5, 1987](#). With a contract implied-in-law (*quantum meruit*), there is no contract to which the allowance of the claim can relate. The payment is chargeable to the fiscal year in which the goods were received or the services rendered. [B-210808, May 24, 1984](#); [B-207557, July 11, 1983](#).

Claims by federal employees for compensation and related allowances are chargeable to appropriations for the fiscal year in which the work was performed. If the claim covers more than one fiscal year, the payment must be prorated accordingly. If the applicable appropriation account is insufficient to pay the claim, the agency must seek a deficiency appropriation. [69 Comp. Gen. 40 \(1989\)](#) (administrative awards of back pay); [54 Comp. Gen. 393 \(1974\)](#) (claim for statutory salary which claimant had previously improperly waived); [47 Comp. Gen. 308 \(1967\)](#) (payment resulting from recrediting of sick leave); [B-171786, Mar. 2, 1971](#) (overtime). Interest under the Back Pay Act is chargeable to the same fiscal year or years as the back pay to which it relates. [69 Comp. Gen. at 43](#).

The rule is the same in situations where the claimant did not perform any work, for example, restoration after an improper termination where the period of wrongful termination is deemed valid service under the Back Pay Act. [69 Comp. Gen. at 42](#); [58 Comp. Gen. 115 \(1978\)](#). The latter case held that court-ordered agency contributions to an employee's retirement account must be prorated among the fiscal years covered. While the case involved a court order, not an administrative settlement, it implies that

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back pay under the Back Pay Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, and the Veterans Preference Act should be treated similarly.<sup>71</sup>

Several types of administrative claims are payable from the permanent judgment appropriation established by 31 U.S.C. § 1304. The primary example is administrative awards in excess of \$2,500 under the Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2672. Monetary awards by agency boards of contract appeals are payable in the first instance from the judgment appropriation, subject to reimbursement by the contracting agency from current appropriations. 41 U.S.C. §§ 612(b), (c). *See* [63 Comp. Gen. 308 \(1984\)](#). A 1978 amendment to the judgment appropriation added several types of claims that previously had required specific appropriations. Pub. L. No. 95-240, § 201, 92 Stat. 107, 116 (1978). Those covered elsewhere in this chapter are the Small Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3723, and amounts in excess of amounts payable from agency appropriations under the Military Claims Act, 10 U.S.C. § 2733, Foreign Claims Act, 10 U.S.C. § 2734, and National Guard Claims Act, 32 U.S.C. § 715. Unless required by statute, such as the Contract Disputes Act and the Notification and Federal Employee Antidiscrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002 (“NoFEAR”),<sup>72</sup> agencies do not have to reimburse claims paid from the judgment appropriation.

There are several instances in which there is *no* source of funds available for immediate payment. If the legislation governing a particular type of claim requires specific appropriations, then payment must await congressional action. Statutes of this type frequently require that the agency’s determination be reported to Congress for its consideration or certified to Congress as a “legal claim.” Examples are:

- 10 U.S.C. §§ 4802, 7622, 9802, and 14 U.S.C. § 646: Admiralty claims settled by the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard, respectively. Under these statutes, the applicable agency head may settle and pay admiralty claims up to a specified limit (\$500,000 for the Army and Air Force, \$15,000,000 for the Navy, and \$100,000 for the Coast Guard). If

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<sup>71</sup> One older case reached a contrary result, concluding that back pay resulting from restoration could be charged to current year funds since the administrative action directing the restoration could be viewed as creating the government’s obligation. [B-113279-O.M., Jan. 30, 1953](#). However, it does not appear to have been followed.

<sup>72</sup> *See* 41 U.S.C. § 612(c); Pub. L. No. 107-174, § 201(b), 116 Stat. 566, 568–69 (May 15, 2002).

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the settlement exceeds the specified limit, the claim must be certified to Congress.

- 20 U.S.C. § 975(b): Claims for losses under indemnity agreements authorized by the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act. Certification to Congress is made by the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.
- 31 U.S.C. § 3725: Claims for death or personal injury of a foreign national caused by a government employee in a foreign country in which the United States has privileges of extraterritoriality. Settlement authority is conferred upon the State Department and is limited to \$1,500. *See* [B-120773, Mar. 22, 1955](#).
- 42 U.S.C. § 2207: Claims resulting from certain nuclear or other explosive detonations in the conduct of programs undertaken by the Department of Energy.
- 42 U.S.C. § 2211: Claims resulting from a nuclear incident involving the nuclear reactor of a United States warship, excluding combat activities.

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### 3. Whom and What to Pay

This section addresses the issues of whom to pay (including the consequences of paying the wrong person) and what amounts—beyond the principal amount owed—may be paid as a matter of appropriations law. The government must be assured that it is paying the right person the right amount, and it must obtain documentation sufficient to demonstrate that it legally discharged the government’s obligation. *See* [24 Comp. Gen. 679, 680–81 \(1945\)](#). The ultimate objective is to avoid placing the government in a situation where it might later find itself embroiled in a controversy between competing claimants—facing the possibility of being required to pay a second time to someone else and take action to recover the previous payment. *See, e.g.,* [B-199455, Sept. 29, 1980](#); [B-136946, Apr. 8, 1960](#).

Obviously, payment should include the principal amount properly found owed to the payee. Often at issue, in addition to the principal amount, are the payee’s claims for interest, costs, and attorney fees. *See, e.g.,* [63 Comp. Gen. 465 \(1984\)](#); [B-248420, July 30, 1992](#); [B-246294, Feb. 26, 1992](#).

#### a. To Whom Agencies Should Make Payment

The guiding principle regarding whom to pay is the common-sense proposition that payment should be made to the person or entity entitled to receive it. Common sense in this instance is reinforced by 31 U.S.C.

§ 3322(a)(2)(B), which instructs disbursing officers to draw public money from the Treasury “payable to persons to whom payment is to be made.” This statutory direction is simple and straightforward, but complications arise in a number of circumstances, such as when the payee is a minor,<sup>73</sup> mentally incompetent,<sup>74</sup> no longer alive,<sup>75</sup> or a corporate entity.<sup>76</sup> Sometimes, the proper payee cannot be determined short of an adversary proceeding. In that event, GAO held, the proper course of action is to deny payment administratively and leave the competing claimants to their remedy in the courts. *E.g.*, [68 Comp. Gen. 284 \(1989\)](#).

As a general proposition, agencies should deliver government checks directly to the payees. [16 Comp. Gen. 840 \(1937\)](#). However, when there is some valid reason for doing so, an agency may deliver the check to appropriate agency employees for subsequent forwarding to the payees. *E.g.*, [65 Comp. Gen. 81 \(1985\)](#).

Payment to the wrong person obviously does not discharge the government’s obligation. If, through administrative mistake of fact or law or clerical error, a payment is made to a person not entitled to it, the government is still obligated to make payment to the proper claimant. *E.g.*, [37 Comp. Gen. 131, 133 \(1957\)](#) (payment of death gratuity to erroneously designated payee). The agency should take action to recover from the first payee. 31 U.S.C. §§ 3727(c), 3528(b)(2), 3711(a)(1). However, payment to the proper claimant should not be held up pending recovery of the erroneous payment, even though this may result in a duplicate payment. Illustrative cases include [66 Comp. Gen. 617 \(1987\)](#), *aff’d on reconsideration*, [B-226540.2, Aug. 24, 1988](#); [19 Comp. Gen. 104 \(1939\)](#); and [B-249869, Jan. 25, 1993](#).

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<sup>73</sup> *E.g.*, [B-176252-O.M., Sept. 5, 1972](#) (pursuant to state law, appointment of a legal guardian may be required before payment may be made).

<sup>74</sup> *E.g.*, [65 Comp. Gen. 621, 624 \(1986\)](#) (given the substantial amounts to be paid under the military survivor annuity programs, and the fact that payments might continue for years, the accounting officers of the uniformed services should insist on a court-approved guardianship before making payment on behalf of an incompetent annuitant).

<sup>75</sup> *E.g.*, *Miniafee v. United States*, 17 Cl. Ct. 571, 577 (1989) (payment to the legal representative of the payee’s estate); [B-234425, May 30, 1989](#) (where payee’s estate has been closed, state laws applicable to that situation should be followed).

<sup>76</sup> *E.g.*, [B-203676, Sept. 21, 1981](#) (agency should close its file and deobligate the amount of the payment where the corporation entitled to payment was dissolved and potential claimants, including creditors and stockholders, were unknown).

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If the government cannot recover the erroneous payment from the erroneous payee, the certifying officer responsible for that payment may have to reimburse the government for the unrecovered amount. (For more information on the liability and relief of accountable officers under these circumstances, see Chapter 9).

b. Amounts Payable in  
Addition to the Principal  
Amount

(1) Interest

Claims for interest probably have generated more controversy than any other aspect of the payment of claims and judgment. The law in this area is complex and often highly technical. As a general rule, interest may not be recovered against the United States unless expressly provided by statute or contract.<sup>77</sup> Statutory interest provisions and some exceptions recognized by the courts, however, have blunted some of the potentially harsh consequences of the general rule.

General no-interest rule

The courts have recognized and applied the general rule on numerous occasions. For example, in *Environmental Tectonics Corp. v. United States*, 72 Fed. Cl. 290 (2006), the court noted that the Supreme Court has held that the right to recover interest from the United States requires a waiver of sovereign immunity “separate from a general waiver of immunity to suit.” *Environmental Tectonics*, 72 Fed. Cl. at 296, quoting *Library of Congress v. Shaw*, 478 U.S. 310, 314 (1986). This does not necessarily mean that the interest waiver must be in a separate statute. Rather, the waiver of sovereign immunity with respect to interest must itself be explicit, and will not be inferred from a general waiver of immunity to suit. See, e.g., *United States v. N.Y. Rayon Importing Co.*, 329 U.S. 654, 659 (1947) (“consent can take only two forms: (1) a specific provision for the payment of interest in a statute; [or] (2) an express stipulation for the payment of interest in a contract duly entered into by agents of the United States”); *Zumerling v. Marsh*, 783 F.2d 1032, 1034 (Fed. Cir. 1986), quoting *Fidelity Construction Co. v. United States*, 700 F.2d 1379, 1383 (Fed. Cir.), cert. denied, 464 U.S. 826 (1983) (“express consent to the payment of interest must be found in either a special statute or an express contractual provision. The intent by Congress to permit the recovery of interest cannot be implied, and must be

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<sup>77</sup> See 51 Comp. Gen. 251 (1971), citing *United States v. Thayer-West Point Hotel Co.*, 329 U.S. 585, 590 (1947). See also 70 Comp. Gen. 153, 158 n.5 (1990); 65 Comp. Gen. 842, 843 (1986); B-186494, July 22, 1976.

strictly construed.”); [B-206101, May 20, 1982](#), at 1 (in the absence of statutory authority, the government must have “affirmatively and unambiguously contracted to pay interest”). *See also* *Marathon Oil Co. v. United States*, 56 Fed. Cl. 768, 770–71 (2003), *aff’d*, 374 F.3d 1123 (Fed. Cir. 2004), *cert. denied*, 544 U.S. 1031 (2005); *Alaska Airlines, Inc. v. Johnson*, 8 F.3d 791, 798 (Fed. Cir. 1993).

There are two types of interest: pre-judgment (interest as part of the claim upon which the judgment was founded) and post-judgment (interest on the judgment itself). As the cases cited throughout this discussion make clear, the general rule applies equally to both types. Depending on the statute authorizing pre-judgment interest, it may run to the date of payment or the date of judgment. In the latter case, the pre-judgment interest becomes part of the judgment amount to which any authorized post-judgment interest is applied. *See, e.g.*, [B-111945, Nov. 13, 1952](#).

Generally speaking, absent an applicable waiver of sovereign immunity, courts are not authorized to award interest against the United States on the basis of equity or because payment has been delayed even if the delay can be termed unreasonable. *E.g.*, *Brazos Electric Power Cooperative, Inc. v. United States*, 52 Fed. Cl. 121, 134 (2002), *quoting* *N.Y. Rayon Importing*, 329 U.S. at 660; *Lichtman v. OPM*, 835 F.2d 1427 (Fed. Cir. 1988); [B-214289, Oct. 23, 1985](#); [B-206101, May 20, 1982](#). Interest is often found disguised as something else, but the courts will penetrate the disguise and see it for what it is. A leading case in this area is *United States v. Mescalero Apache Tribe*, 518 F.2d 1309 (Ct. Cl. 1975), *cert. denied*, 425 U.S. 911 (1976). As the Court of Claims explained:

“[The] no-interest rule applies to *any* incremental *damages* sought to be assessed against the United States, whether it be designated interest, as such, or is designated by some other terminology which has the same effect. . . .

“[T]he character or nature of interest cannot be changed by calling it damages, loss, earned increment, just compensation, discount, offset, or penalty, or any other term because it is still interest and the no-interest rule applies to it.”

*Mescalero*, 518 F.2d at 1321, 1322 (emphasis in original). *See also* *England v. Contel Advanced Systems, Inc.*, 384 F.3d 1372, 1378–79 (Fed. Cir. 2004).

In *Shaw*, an employee who brought a job-related racial discrimination action requested an award of attorney fees. The district court obliged and added interest, as well. The district court, however, did not use the term “interest.” Rather, it increased the attorney fees by 30 percent “to compensate counsel for the delay in receiving payment for the legal services rendered.” *Shaw*, 478 U.S. at 313. In invalidating the interest award, the Supreme Court brushed aside the lower court’s designation and looked at the substance. Citing *Mescalero* with approval, the Court added that “the force of the no-interest rule cannot be avoided simply by devising a new name for an old institution.” *Id.* at 321. As the court observed in *District of Columbia v. United States*, 67 Fed. Cl. 292, 341 (2005), “no matter what term plaintiff uses, compensation for the belated receipt of money violates the no-interest rule absent an express . . . waiver of sovereign immunity from liability for interest.” Unauthorized interest, disguised as “liquidated damages” under the Fair Labor Standards Act, was disallowed in *Doyle v. United States*, 931 F.2d 1546, 1550–51 (Fed. Cir. 1991), *cert. denied*, 502 U.S. 1029 (1992). In *Sterling Savings Ass’n v. United States*, 80 Fed. Cl. 497, 518–19 (2008), the court faced inflated “wounded bank damages,” and in *District of Columbia v. United States*, 67 Fed. Cl. 292, 340 (2005), the court rejected “escalation costs for inflation.”

In the context of administrative claims, the general rule manifests itself in virtually every area in which monetary claims can be brought against the United States. Examples in which claims for interest have been disallowed are: [65 Comp. Gen. 598 \(1986\)](#) (delayed contract payment to the assignee of a government contract); [B-241592.3, Dec. 13, 1991](#) (duties collected by the Customs Service for the Virgin Islands); [B-236330.2, Feb. 14, 1990](#) (compensation for the passage of time between the date a claim accrued and the date it was paid); [B-206101, May 20, 1982](#) (late payment of Treasury bill); [B-195265, Aug. 17, 1979](#) (delayed reimbursement by Labor Department of benefit payments to employee trust); [B-154102, June 16, 1974](#) (award under Military Claims Act). The interest prohibition also applies to claims arising in foreign countries as well as to claims arising in the United States. [45 Comp. Gen. 169 \(1965\)](#).

The general rule also applies to payments under private relief legislation. *United States v. Bayard*, 127 U.S. 251, 260 (1888). However, consistent with the rule, such legislation may provide for interest in situations where it would not otherwise be payable. *See, e.g.*, [B-182574-O.M., July 19, 1979](#). In [B-187866, Apr. 12, 1977](#), GAO concluded that interest could be paid on a claim for which Congress had made a specific appropriation where the



appropriation language did not specify interest but it was clear from the legislative history that the amount appropriated included interest. (The specific claim involved in B-187866 would now be covered by the Contract Disputes Act.)

A statute originating in 1841 provides that amounts held in trust by the United States shall be invested in government obligations and shall bear interest at a minimum annual rate of 5 percent. 31 U.S.C. § 9702. This statute applies only where trust funds are otherwise required by statute, treaty, or contract to be invested, and is not an independent authorization for the payment of interest. *Mescalero*, 518 F.2d at 1323–31; *White Mountain Apache Tribe of Arizona v. United States*, 20 Cl. Ct. 371, 380–81 (1990); [B-241592.3, Dec. 13, 1991](#).

If the necessary authority for the payment of interest does not exist in a particular context, it follows that appropriations are not legally available for that purpose. Thus, in the absence of legislation expressly making federal agencies liable for interest and penalties the same as private parties, appropriations are not available for the payment of interest or penalties to the Internal Revenue Service on account of late forwarding or underpayment of employment taxes. [B-161457, May 9, 1978](#). Similarly, the Internal Revenue Service is not liable for interest on overpayments of employer taxes by federal agencies. [B-161457, Dec. 5, 1983](#).

#### Judicially recognized exceptions

There are two nonstatutory exceptions to the general rule, both of which were noted in *Library of Congress v. Shaw*, 478 U.S. 310, 317 n.5 (1986). The first is a taking of property or a property interest which entitles a claimant to just compensation under the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution. The second is “where the Government has cast off the cloak of sovereignty and assumed the status of a private commercial enterprise.” *Shaw*, 478 U.S. at 317 n.5.



*Fifth Amendment takings.* The courts have determined that interest is inherent in the concept of “just compensation” required by the Fifth Amendment in order to make the property owner whole.<sup>78</sup> See *Phelps v. United States*, 274 U.S. 341, 344 (1927). Of course, the predicate to this constitutional right to interest is a cognizable claim to just compensation under the Fifth Amendment. The takings exception is a discrete concept and cannot be used to open the back door to otherwise unauthorized interest awards where the Fifth Amendment is not involved. See, e.g., *United States v. Alcea Band of Tillamooks*, 341 U.S. 48 (1951); *Alaska Airlines, Inc. v. Johnson*, 8 F.3d 791, 798 (Fed. Cir. 1993). See also [B-180565, May 31, 1974](#) (there must be some underlying legal obligation to which interest liability can attach); [B-173904, Feb. 18, 1972](#) (rejecting claim that payment delay, alone, in circumstances where payment required congressional enactment of an appropriation, constituted a compensable Fifth Amendment taking).

*Commercial ventures.* The “commercial venture” exception originated in the Supreme Court’s decision in *Standard Oil Co. v. United States*, 267 U.S. 76 (1925). Under World War I legislation, the United States had insured a private steamship against certain war risks. The steamship sank and the main issue in litigation was whether the insurance policy applied to the facts of the case. The Supreme Court found the policy applicable, and also awarded interest. Speaking for the Court, Justice Holmes said:

“Some question was made as to the allowance of interest. When the United States went into the insurance business, issued policies in familiar form and provided that in case of disagreement it might be sued, it must be assumed to have accepted the ordinary incidents of suits in such business.”

*Standard Oil*, 267 U.S. at 79. See also *Bituminous Casualty Corp. v. Lynn*, 503 F.2d 636 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1974), awarding interest on a recovery under a reinsurance contract issued by the Department of Housing and Urban

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<sup>78</sup> Apart from legislative takings and physical invasions (which can give rise to “inverse condemnation” lawsuits), the government may use the “complaint only” procedure, 40 U.S.C. § 3113, under which the government does not acquire title until it tenders payment, and by invoking the Declaration of Taking Act, 40 U.S.C. § 3114–3115, in which event title vests in the United States the moment the declaration is filed. (For more on these methods of property acquisition, see Chapter 13, section B.5.b.) Even though the courts have ruled that constitutional “just compensation” inherently authorizes interest against the government, the Declaration of Taking Act specifically provides for interest.

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Development (HUD). Citing *Standard Oil*, the court noted the “well defined” exception to the general rule when a federal agency “embarks on a business venture” with the power to sue and be sued. *Bituminous Casualty*, 503 F.2d at 643. The court stated three grounds for the interest award: HUD’s sue-and-be-sued clause, the “self-supporting nature” of the HUD program, and the fact that the transactions resembled those of private parties. *Id.* at 645.

Another example is the United States Postal Service. In *Loeffler v. Frank*, 486 U.S. 549, 556 (1988) (citations and quotation marks omitted), the Court observed:

“By launching the Postal Service into the commercial world, and including a sue-and-be-sued clause in its charter, Congress has cast off the Service’s cloak of sovereignty and given it the status of a private commercial enterprise. . . . It follows that Congress is presumed to have waived any otherwise existing immunity of the Postal Service from interest awards.”

The Court further noted that the interest award would not be inconsistent with the Postal Service’s enabling legislation (Postal Reorganization Act), would not threaten “grave interference” with the Service’s operations, and was not contrary to anything in the legislative history of the Service’s sue-and-be-sued authority. *Loeffler*, 486 U.S. at 556–57.

Based on the Supreme Court’s *Loeffler* formulation, it seems clear that the “commercial venture” exception to the general rule requires several things. First, there must be a sue-and-be-sued clause. *Pender Peanut Corp. v. United States*, 21 Cl. Ct. 95, 97 (1990). Second, a sue-and-be-sued clause alone is not enough; the agency or program involved must be one that Congress has launched into the commercial world. *Id.* Finally, liability for interest must not be inconsistent with the relevant enabling or program legislation. *Id.* Applying the *Loeffler* criteria, courts have refused to invoke the “commercial venture” exception when a federal agency does not have a sue-and-be-sued clause and is engaged in primarily governmental, as opposed to commercial, functions. *McGehee v. Panama Canal Commission*, 872 F.2d 1213 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1989) (unlike the Panama Canal Company that it replaced, the Commission was not given sue-and-be-sued authority); *Wilson v. United States*, 756 F. Supp. 213 (D.N.J. 1991) (former Veterans Administration).

### Specific interest statutes

In the United States Court of Federal Claims, pre-judgment interest, when not otherwise provided for by law, is governed by 28 U.S.C. § 2516(a), which essentially codifies the general rule: “Interest on a claim against the United States shall be allowed in a judgment of the United States Court of Federal Claims only under a contract or Act of Congress expressly providing for payment thereof.” As the Supreme Court explained in *United States v. N.Y. Rayon Importing Co.*, 329 U.S. 654, 659 (1947), the statute means exactly what it says. The authority to award interest may not be implied, nor may it be derived from some expression of intent not reflected in explicit statutory or contractual language. *Id.*

With respect to contractual waivers of the government’s immunity, it should be remembered that the government will not be bound by the unauthorized acts of its officers and employees. *E.g.*, *OPM v. Richmond*, 496 U.S. 414, 419–20 (1990). *See also* [B-306353, Oct. 26, 2005](#); [B-290901, Dec. 16, 2002](#). Accordingly, the courts and GAO have disallowed monetary claims against the government based on contractual waivers of sovereign immunity where the persons who contracted on behalf of the government lacked authority to bind the government to pay monetary damages. *See, e.g.*, *Robbins v. United States Bureau of Land Management*, 438 F.3d 1074, 1084 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2006); [B-258257, Nov. 28, 1994](#).

In numerous statutes, Congress has authorized the recovery of pre-judgment interest against the United States. Under some of these statutes, interest is an entitlement; under others, it is merely authorized and must be affirmatively awarded. The following listing is by no means comprehensive but is intended to identify some important examples:

- *Back Pay Act*. Under 5 U.S.C. § 5596(b)(2), back pay “shall be payable with interest” calculated from the effective date of the withdrawal or reduction of pay to a date not more than 30 days prior to the date of payment. The applicable interest rate is the rate for tax overpayments determined under 26 U.S.C. § 6621(a)(1). Interest is payable from the same source as the back pay. *E.g.*, [69 Comp. Gen. 40, 43 \(1989\)](#). Section 5596(b)(2) applies to both administrative awards under the Back Pay Act, which are payable from agency funds ([69 Comp. Gen. at 42](#)), as well as judicial awards, which are generally payable from the Judgment Fund ([58 Comp. Gen. 311 \(1979\)](#)). Sometimes a court will order “front pay” which is an increment above the employee’s current pay. In [60 Comp. Gen. 375 \(1981\)](#), GAO concluded that a front pay

award is more in the nature of damages, and it should be paid from the Judgment Fund.

- *Wrongful tax levy.* Where a court determines that a tax levy was improper, interest on the judgment is provided for in 26 U.S.C. § 7426(g). If the levy was executed on money, interest runs from the date the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) received the money to the date of payment of the judgment. If the levy was executed on other property which has been sold, interest runs from the date of the sale to the date of payment of the judgment. The applicable rate of interest is, again, the tax overpayment rate under 26 U.S.C. § 6621(a)(1).
- *Tax refund judgments.* When a taxpayer receives a judgment “for any overpayment in respect of any internal revenue tax,” “interest shall be allowed” under 28 U.S.C. § 2411 from the date of the payment or collection of the overpayment to a date, to be determined by the IRS, preceding the date of the refund check by not more than 30 days. Once more, the applicable interest rate is the tax overpayment rate.
- *Equal Access to Justice Act.* Under the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA), 28 U.S.C. § 2412(f), if the United States appeals an EAJA award of costs or fees and other expenses and the award is affirmed, in whole or in part, interest shall be paid on the amount of the award as affirmed. This interest is computed at the 52-week Treasury bill rate determined under 28 U.S.C. § 1961(a), from the date of the award “through the day before the date of the mandate of affirmance.” *See, e.g., Haitian Refugee Center v. Meese*, 791 F.2d 1489, 1501 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986).
- *Court of International Trade.* When a plaintiff obtains monetary relief by judgment or stipulation in an action under section 515 of the Tariff Act of 1930, 19 U.S.C. § 1515, interest “shall be allowed,” running from the filing of the summons to the date of the payment, at the rate established under 26 U.S.C. § 6621.
- *Judgment offsets.* Under 31 U.S.C. § 3728, the government is required to set off debts owed to the United States against awards payable to the debtor from the Judgment Fund, 31 U.S.C. § 1304. If the debtor agrees to the setoff, the matter ends there. If the debtor disputes the setoff, the government must bring a lawsuit against the debtor and prove the debt in court. If the government ultimately recovers less in that lawsuit than the amount it set off, the statute requires the government to repay

the balance owed with 6 percent interest for the time it was withheld. 31 U.S.C. § 3728.

- *Contract Disputes Act.* The Contract Disputes Act of 1978, 41 U.S.C. § 611, requires the government to pay interest on contract claims from the date the contracting officer receives the claim to the date of payment. It applies whether the claim is allowed by the contracting officer, a board of contract appeals, or a court.
- *Medicare Provider Reimbursements.* Courts are authorized by 42 U.S.C. § 1395oo(f)(2) to award interest to Medicare providers during judicial review of determinations by the Provider Reimbursement Review Board. *See, e.g., Tucson Medical Center v. Sullivan*, 947 F.2d 971 (D.C. Cir. 1991).
- *Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.* As amended in 1991, Title VII, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-16(d), makes the government liable for interest to compensate for payment delays in the same manner as private parties.
- *Superfund.* The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, as amended by the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986, makes federal agencies liable for the same awards, including interest, that nongovernmental entities are liable for. 42 U.S.C. §§ 9607, 9620. Interest under these laws is paid at the rate specified for investments of the Hazardous Substance Superfund under 26 U.S.C. § 9507(d). Similar governmental liability is provided for Superfund reimbursement claims. *See Santa Fe Pacific Realty Corp. v. United States*, 780 F. Supp. 687, 696–97 (E.D. Cal. 1991); [B-245482-O.M., Apr. 8, 1992](#).
- *Suits in Admiralty Act and Public Vessels Act.* A money judgment against the United States in a *libel in personam* under the Suits in Admiralty Act may include 4 percent interest to the date of payment, unless a higher rate is stipulated in the contract. 46 U.S.C. § 30911(b). Interest may not accrue prior to the filing of the suit except pursuant to an express contract stipulation. 46 U.S.C. § 30911(a). The Public Vessels Act incorporates the interest provisions of the Suits in Admiralty Act, except that interest may not accrue prior to the date of the judgment except pursuant to an express contract stipulation. 46 U.S.C. § 31107.

Most of the previous discussion has centered on pre-judgment interest—interest allowed as part of a judgment against the United States. The same general observations that apply to pre-judgment interest are equally applicable to post-judgment interest—interest that is payable on the judgment itself. First, payment of post-judgment interest requires a clear and explicit waiver of sovereign immunity, with interpretive ambiguities resolved against a waiver.<sup>79</sup> Second, Congress, in fact, has statutorily waived sovereign immunity to permit the award of post-judgment interest against the United States in many situations and circumstances—enacting or amending legislation in specific contexts as deemed necessary or desirable. *See, e.g., Arvin v. United States*, 742 F.2d 1301, 1304 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1984).

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<sup>79</sup> Citing a number of precedents, the Federal Circuit summarized in *Marathon Oil Co. v. United States*, 374 F.3d 1123, 1127 (Fed. Cir. 2004), *cert. denied*, 544 U.S. 1031 (2005), the governing principles of post-judgment interest:

“The no-interest rule applies to claims for post-judgment interest. . . . Well established rules of statutory construction frame the court’s analysis of whether Congress has waived sovereign immunity in a statute or statutory scheme, and they tilt the interpretive playing field in favor of the government’s immunity. . . . A waiver of sovereign immunity must be unequivocally expressed or a court must infer that Congress did not intend to create a waiver. . . . If a statute is susceptible to a plausible reading under which sovereign immunity is not waived, the statute fails to establish an unambiguous waiver and sovereign immunity therefore remains intact.”

Other waivers apply to awards made by particular courts. The authority for these post-judgment interest assessments arises under 28 U.S.C. § 2516(b),<sup>80</sup> 28 U.S.C. § 1961,<sup>81</sup> and 31 U.S.C. § 1304(b)(1)(B).<sup>82</sup> Essentially, when read together these statutes allow post-judgment interest when the United States appeals and loses in certain situations and subject to certain procedural requirements.<sup>83</sup> *See, e.g., Marathon Oil*, 374 F.3d at 1128 (“a chain of cross-references that links four distinct statutory provisions”).<sup>84</sup> *See also Globe Savings Bank, F.S.B. v. United States*, 74 Fed. Cl. 736, 741–42 (2006); *United States v. Wilson*, 926 F.2d 725 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1991); *Thompson v. Kennickell*, 797 F.2d 1015 (D.C. Cir. 1986), *cert. denied*, 480 U.S. 905 (1987).

Most court judgments against the United States are paid from the Judgment Fund, a permanent, indefinite appropriation established by 31 U.S.C. § 1304. *See, e.g., B-279886, Apr. 28, 1998*. This fact offers a convenient handle to begin to grasp the authority for post-judgment interest assessments. Section 1304 appropriates funds and specifies procedures for

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<sup>80</sup> Under 28 U.S.C. § 2516(b):

“Interest on a judgment against the United States affirmed by the Supreme Court after review on petition of the United States is paid at a rate equal to the weekly average 1-year constant maturity Treasury yield, as published by the Board of Governor of the Federal Reserve System, for the calendar week preceding the date of the judgment.”

<sup>81</sup> The terms of 28 U.S.C. § 1961(c) provide in part that:

“(1) This section shall not apply in any judgment of any court with respect to any internal revenue tax case. Interest shall be allowed in such cases at [the rate specified under 26 U.S.C. § 6621].

“(2) Except as otherwise provided in paragraph (1) of this subsection, interest shall be allowed on all final judgments against the United States in the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal [C]ircuit, at the rate provided in subsection (a) and as provided in subsection (b).

“(3) Interest shall be allowed, computed, and paid on judgments of the United States Court of Federal Claims only as provided in paragraph (1) of this subsection or in any other provision of law.”

<sup>82</sup> Section 1304 is quoted in the text below.

<sup>83</sup> This authority applies only to the extent that the law governing the underlying matter does not provide otherwise. *See, e.g., 28 U.S.C. § 1961(c)(3)* (interest shall only be allowed as provided in this section “or in any other provision of law”).

<sup>84</sup> The court’s math differs from ours because it counts two subsections of 28 U.S.C. § 1961 as separate laws.

the payment of many, if not most, judgments rendered against the United States. *Id.* With respect to interest, section 1304(a) states that “[n]ecessary amounts are appropriated to pay final judgments, awards, compromise settlements, and *interest* and costs specified in the judgments or otherwise authorized by law” (emphasis added) when certain procedural requirements have been met. Section 1304(b) adds:

“(1) Interest may be paid from the [Judgment Fund]—

“(A) on a judgment of a district court, only when the judgment becomes final after review on appeal or petition by the United States Government, and then only from the date of filing of the transcript of the judgment with the Secretary of the Treasury through the day before the date of the mandate of affirmance, or

“(B) on a judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit or the United States Court of Federal Claims under section 2516(b) of title 28, only from the date of filing of the transcript of the judgment with the Secretary of the Treasury through the day before the date of the mandate of affirmance.

“(2) Interest payable under this subsection in a proceeding reviewed by the Supreme Court is not allowed after the end of the term in which the judgment is affirmed.”

As summarized in [73 Comp. Gen. 46, 48 \(1993\)](#), before payment may be made from the Judgment Fund, the Secretary of the Treasury<sup>85</sup> must certify that an award satisfies four basic criteria. 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a)(2). First, the award must be final. 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a). Second, the award must provide monetary, rather than injunctive, relief. *E.g.*, [70 Comp. Gen. 225, 228 \(1991\)](#). Third, the award must have been made under one of the authorities specified in 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a)(3), which include, but are not limited to, 28 U.S.C. § 2414 (United States District Court judgments and compromise

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<sup>85</sup> Effective June 30, 1996, the duty to certify payments from the Judgment Fund was transferred from GAO to the Treasury Department. Pub. L. No. 104-53, § 211, 109 Stat. 514, 535 (Nov. 19, 1995); Pub. L. No. 104-316, §§ 202(k)–202(m), 110 Stat. 3826, 3843 (Oct. 19, 1996). See [B-275605, Mar. 17, 1997](#) (circular letter announcing the transfer of functions, including Judgment Fund certification).



settlements negotiated by the Justice Department to dispose of actual or imminent litigation) and 28 U.S.C. § 2517 (Court of Federal Claims judgments). Fourth, payment of the award must not be “otherwise provided for.” 31 U.S.C. § 1304(a)(1). These criteria and conditions must be strictly complied with. *See, e.g., Marathon Oil*, 374 F.3d at 1136–37; *Dickerson v. United States*, 280 F.3d 470, 478–79 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2002); [44 Comp. Gen. 421 \(1965\)](#).

To understand how the Judgment Fund statute applies to the payment of interest awards also requires an understanding of how section 1304 fits into the larger web of federal statutes, such as 28 U.S.C. § 2516 and 18 U.S.C. § 1961, that address the authority to allow and pay interest awards against the United States under specific programs and by specific courts. The decision in *Globe*, 74 Fed. Cl. at 741–42, concerned a lawsuit brought to recover a great deal of money that Globe lost beginning in 1990 due to government actions. Globe had recently won a favorable remand in the matter, but it feared that the government would appeal again from any final judgment that court might issue on remand. For this reason, Globe urged the court to enter a partial final judgment in the amount of \$20,902,446. The court explained to Globe that, under the circumstances of the case and pursuant to sections 1304, 1961, and 2516, payment could not yet be made and interest could not be awarded because the matter was not yet final. *Globe*, 74 Fed. Cl. at 741–42. The court added, “This result might not be just or equitable, but it is required by law.” *Id.* at 742. *See also Marathon Oil*, 374 F.3d 1123; *Wilson*, 926 F.2d 725; *Thompson*, 797 F.2d 1015.

## (2) Costs and attorney fees

We preface this discussion by invoking once again two now familiar principles: Just as with the case of the award and payment of the underlying judgment, both a statutory waiver of sovereign immunity and an appropriation of funds are necessary to permit the award and payment of costs and attorney fees against the federal government. *See Knight v. United States*, 982 F.2d 1573 (Fed. Cir. 1993); *Cassata v. Federal Savings & Loan Insurance Corp.*, 445 F.2d 122, 125 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1971); [23 Comp. Gen. 805 \(1944\)](#). Congress, however, has enacted a host of statutes that do both. These statutory authorities have generated a great deal of litigation.<sup>86</sup> This prompted one court to observe: “To the old adage that death and taxes

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<sup>86</sup> In a 1983 decision, the Supreme Court lamented that a “request for attorney’s fees should not result in a second major litigation.” *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 437 (1983).

share a certain inevitable character, federal judges may be excused for adding attorneys' fees cases."<sup>87</sup> *Kennedy v. Whitehurst*, 690 F.2d 951, 952 (D.C. Cir. 1982). While there is considerable GAO and other case law in this area, our modest purpose here is to briefly highlight some of the major statutes and their basic features, particularly from an appropriations law perspective.

### Costs

In 1966, Congress waived a portion of the government's sovereign immunity by statutorily allowing courts to assess costs against the government in all civil actions unless specifically prohibited. *See* Pub. L. No. 89-507, § 1, 80 Stat. 308 (July 18, 1966), *codified at* 28 U.S.C. § 2412(a). These costs are "limited to reimbursing in whole or in part the prevailing party for the costs incurred by such party in the litigation." 28 U.S.C. § 2412(a)(1). Congress intended the 1966 amendments to "put private litigants and the United States on an equal footing regarding cost awards." [54 Comp. Gen. 22, 23 \(1974\)](#).

Section 2412(a)(1) states that, except as otherwise specifically provided by statute, costs, "as enumerated in" 28 U.S.C. § 1920, "may be awarded to the prevailing party in any civil action brought by or against the United States." The cross-reference in section 2412(a)(1) to 28 U.S.C. § 1920 serves to identify six categories of permissible costs. These six categories include:

- fees of the clerk and marshal;
- fees of the court reporter for all or any part of the stenographic transcript necessarily obtained for use in the case;
- fees and disbursements for printing and witnesses;
- fees for exemplification and copies of papers necessarily obtained for use in the case;
- docket fees under 28 U.S.C. § 1923; and

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<sup>87</sup> Check out the quote suggesting an analogy between attorney's fees and paying tribute to Genghis Khan. *In re Four Star Terminals, Inc.*, 42 B.R. 419, 428 n.2 (Bankr. D. Alaska 1984).

- compensation of court-appointed experts and interpreters, and salaries, fees, expenses, and costs for special interpretation services under 28 U.S.C. § 1828.

28 U.S.C. § 1920. This list “now embodies Congress’ considered choice as to the kinds of expenses that a federal court may tax as costs against the losing party.” *Crawford Fitting Co. v. J.T. Gibbons, Inc.*, 482 U.S. 437, 440 (1987). *See also United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. W&O, Inc.*, 213 F.3d 600, 620 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2000). The courts are free to construe the meaning and scope of the items enumerated in section 1920, and may exercise discretion in allowing or disallowing them, but may not assess costs beyond those enumerated.<sup>88</sup> *See, e.g., Frederick v. City of Portland*, 162 F.R.D. 139, 142 (D. Or. 1995).

Section 2412(c)(1) provides that costs awarded under section 2412(a) shall be in addition to any relief provided in the judgment, and “shall be paid as provided in sections 2414 and 2517 of this title.” Sections 2414 and 2517 address, among other things, the payment of awards against the United States rendered in the district courts, the Court of International Trade, and the United States Court of Federal Claims. 28 U.S.C. §§ 2414, 2517. Thus, section 2412(c)(1) means that these cost awards are payable from the Judgment Fund like other judgments against the United States. However, the authority to award costs under 28 U.S.C. § 2412(a) is not limited to cases involving money judgments. [B-165149-O.M., Sept. 23, 1968](#). The statute also applies to costs awarded on appeal, to the extent authorized by law. *Super Food Services, Inc. v. United States*, 416 F.2d 1236, 1241 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1969).

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<sup>88</sup> Notwithstanding this rule, if an item not included in this list is assessed against the United States and allowed to become final, it must be certified for payment from the Judgment Fund under 31 U.S.C. § 1304, unless payment is otherwise provided for. *See 41 Comp. Gen. 583 (1962)*. *Cf., B-259065, Dec. 21, 1995*, at 6 (notwithstanding any errors that may have occurred, “[o]nce all rights of appeal have been exhausted in any particular case, or it has been decided to forego appeal, the court’s decision becomes final, which is also to say conclusive and binding upon the government and the Judgment Fund process”).

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Attorney fees<sup>89</sup>

In England, it is customary for the loser to pay the winner's attorneys fees. *E.g.*, *Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. v. Wilderness Society*, 421 U.S. 240, 247 n.18 (1975). This is called the "English Rule." *Anderson v. Griffin*, 397 F.3d 515, 522 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005). The United States, by contrast, follows the so-called "American Rule," under which each side to a lawsuit bears its own legal expenses. *Id.* Here in the United States, absent a specific statutory (or contractual) authorization, the prevailing litigant or claimant ordinarily may not recover attorney's fees from the loser. *E.g.*, *Buckhannon Board and Care Home, Inc. v. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources*, 532 U.S. 598, 602 (2001); *Summit Valley Industries, Inc. v. Local 112, United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners of America*, 456 U.S. 717, 721 (1982). In principle, of course, even without the American Rule, sovereign immunity shields the United States from attorney fee awards except where the government has waived its immunity. *Ardestani v. Immigration & Naturalization Service*, 502 U.S. 129, 137 (1991). Today's reality is that Congress has enacted a vast host of fee-shifting statutes—so many that some might be tempted to conclude that the American Rule and this application of the principle of sovereign immunity had been converted to exceptions. There are well over 100 federal fee-shifting statutes on the books. *Morillo-Cedron v. District Director for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services*, 452 F.3d 1254, 1257–58 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2006) (citing a listing of fee-shifting

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<sup>89</sup> Everyone loves a good lawyer joke. The following quotation is taken from Judge Wilkey's dissenting opinion in *Copeland v. Marshall*, 641 F.2d 880, 929–30 n.53 (D.C. Cir. 1980):

"An immediately deceased lawyer arrived at the Pearly Gates to seek admittance from St. Peter. The Keeper of the Keys was surprisingly warm in his welcome: 'We are so glad to see you, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. We are particularly happy to have you here, not only because we get so few lawyers up here, but because you lived to the wonderful age of 165.' Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was a bit doubtful and hesitant. 'Now, St. Peter, if there's one place I don't want to get in under false pretenses, it's Heaven. I really died at age 78.' St. Peter looked perplexed, frowned, and consulted the scroll in his hand. 'Ah, I see where we made our mistake as to your age. We just added up your time sheets!'"

statutes in an appendix to the dissenting opinion of Justice Brennan in *Marek v. Chesny*, 473 U.S. 1, 43–51 (1985)).<sup>90</sup>

Once again, our objective here is limited to presenting an overview of attorney fee awards, as seen from the perspective of appropriations law. An award of attorney’s fees may be included in a judgment on the merits or may be made in a separate judgment or order. In a few instances, attorney fees are paid from the amount recovered on the underlying claim, and are allowable up to a specified maximum percentage of the recovery.<sup>91</sup> Other statutes authorize courts (or administrative agencies) to award reasonable attorneys fees to the prevailing party separate from and in addition to any monetary recovery in the underlying judgment.<sup>92</sup> In either case, like other money judgments against the United States, judicial awards of attorney fees are payable—unless otherwise provided by law—from the permanent, indefinite appropriation established by 31 U.S.C. § 1304 and commonly known as the Judgment Fund. *E.g.*, 61 Comp. Gen. 260, 261 (1982); B-239556, Oct. 12, 1990; B-231771, Dec. 7, 1988. Similarly, unless otherwise provided by law, administrative awards of attorney fees are payable from the agency’s appropriations. B-199291, June 19, 1981. The parties may not alter the correct source of payment by stipulating a specific payment source in a settlement agreement. 69 Comp. Gen. 114 (1990).

Prior to 1980 Congress had dealt with fee shifting on a piecemeal basis. That changed in 1980 with the enactment of major fee-shifting legislation for general application to both administrative and judicial proceedings. That legislation is the Equal Access to Justice Act, referred to as “EAJA.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> While this is a listing of attorney fee-shifting statutes in general, a number of the statutes do apply to the federal government as a defendant. Examples are the Equal Access to Justice Act, 5 U.S.C. § 504, 28 U.S.C. §§ 2412(b), (d); Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. §§ 552(a)(4)(E), (a)(4)(F); the Privacy Act, 5 U.S.C. §§ 552a(g)(2)(B), (g)(4)(B); the Government in the Sunshine Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552b(i); the Federal Tort Claims Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2678; and the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 406(b).

<sup>91</sup> Examples are the Federal Tort Claims Act and the Social Security Act, cited in the previous footnote.

<sup>92</sup> A prominent example of this would be awards under the Equal Access to Justice Act, cited in note 90, *supra*.

<sup>93</sup> EAJA was first enacted in Public Law No. 96-481, title II, 94 Stat. 2321, 2325 (Oct. 21, 1980). Portions of that law were subject to a 3-year “sunset” date. Those portions were amended and made permanent by Pub. L. No. 99-80, 99 Stat. 183 (Aug. 5, 1985).

EAJA provides for both administrative and judicial awards of attorney fees. Administrative EAJA awards are covered in 5 U.S.C. § 504. This section authorizes attorney fee awards and other expenses to a party who prevails over a federal agency in “an adversary adjudication,” defined as “an adjudication under section 554 of [the Administrative Procedure Act].” 5 U.S.C. §§ 504(a)(1), 504(b)(1)(C)(i). It adds, however, that attorney fee awards must be denied if the official conducting the adjudication finds that the losing agency’s position was “substantially justified” or that “special circumstances make an award unjust.” *Id.* § 504(a)(1). These awards are paid by the losing agency “from any funds made available to the agency by appropriation or otherwise.” *Id.* § 504(d). Even if the agency ultimately prevails, section 504(a)(4) requires the hearing officer to award attorney fees against the agency:

“If, in an adversary adjudication arising from an agency action to enforce a party’s compliance with a statutory or regulatory requirement, the demand by the agency is substantially in excess of the decision of the adjudicative officer and is unreasonable when compared with such decision, under the facts and circumstances of the case, . . . unless the party has committed a willful violation of law or otherwise acted in bad faith, or special circumstances make an award unjust. Fees and expenses awarded under this paragraph shall be paid only as a consequence of appropriations provided in advance.”

For judicial awards, EAJA enacted two different fee-shifting provisions, now codified at 28 U.S.C. § 2412(b) and (d). Section 2412(b) authorizes fee awards to prevailing parties against the United State in civil actions “[u]nless expressly prohibited by statute, . . . to the same extent that any other party would be liable under the common law or under the terms of any statute which specifically provides for such an award.” As the quoted language indicates, section 2412(b) covers two general situations. First, it makes the United States liable under fee-shifting statutes that do not by their terms apply to the United States. An example of a statute now applicable to the United States by virtue of section 2412(b) is the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, 29 U.S.C. § 621. *See Newmark v. Principi*, 283 F.3d 172, 178 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 2002). The Civil Rights Attorney’s Fees Award Act of 1976, 42 U.S.C. § 1988(b), is another. *See Premachandra v. Mitts*, 753 F.2d 635 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985). Section 2412(b) also makes the United States liable for fee awards under some court rules, such as Rule 37 of the

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*Federal Rules of Civil Procedure*<sup>94</sup> (certain discovery violations). *M.A. Mortenson Co. V. United States*, 996 F.2d 1177 (Fed. Cir. 1993); 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 525 (1982). However, the waiver of sovereign immunity does not extend to court rules that, unlike the *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure*, are not reviewed and approved by Congress and thus lack the force and effect of a federal statute. *Yancheng Baolong Biochemical Products Company, Ltd. v. United States*, 406 F.3d 1377, 1382–83 (Fed. Cl. 2005) (rules of the Court of International Trade).

Second, it makes the United States liable under various common-law exceptions to the American Rule that were previously inapplicable to the federal government. For example, the federal circuit courts recently have been vigorously discussing the extent to which section 2412(b) applies to the common law authority to award attorney fees based on a party’s “bad faith.” *See, e.g., Centex Corp. v. United States*, 486 F.3d 1369, 1372–74 (Fed. Cir. 2007). Awards made under section 2412(b) are paid from the Judgment Fund unless otherwise provided for by law. One example of when these awards are otherwise provided for can be seen in 28 U.S.C. § 2412(c)(2), specifying that an award based on a finding of bad faith under this statutory provision must be paid from agency funds. *See, e.g., 63 Comp. Gen. 260* (1984).

The second EAJA provision, applicable to judicial awards is section 2412(d). It is a “catch-all” provision that generally applies to any civil action brought by or against the United States except tort cases or cases subject to another fee-shifting statute. It parallels the provisions of 5 U.S.C. § 504(a), discussed above. A prevailing party (other than the United States) who meets specified financial eligibility criteria may apply to the court for a fee award under this subsection. Fees will be awarded unless the court finds that “the position of the United States was substantially justified or that special circumstances make an award unjust.” 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(A). The “substantially justified” determination includes the underlying administrative action, as well as the government’s position in the lawsuit. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(B). Once the party applies for the fee application, the burden shifts to the United States to establish

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<sup>94</sup> The *Federal Rules of Civil Procedure* are available at [www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf](http://www.judiciary.house.gov/media/pdfs/printers/109th/civil2005.pdf) (last visited June 10, 2008).

that its position was substantially justified.<sup>95</sup> *E.g., International Air Response, Inc. v. United States*, 80 Fed. Cl. 460, 463 (2008). Fees are limited to \$125 per hour, but courts may award higher amount based on cost-of-living increases or other special factors. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(A). An award may be reduced or denied if the prevailing party has “unduly and unreasonably protracted” the case. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(C).

As amended in 1985,<sup>96</sup> EAJA provides that section 2412(d) awards “shall be paid by any agency over which the party prevails from any funds made available to the agency by appropriation or otherwise.” 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(4). Line-item appropriations are not required for this purpose. *E.g., Electrical District No. 1 v. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission*, 813 F.2d 1246 (D.C. Cir. 1987); 63 Comp. Gen. 260, 263 (1984); 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 204, 209–12 (1982).

### (3) Deductions

If someone entitled to payment from the Judgment Fund also owes a debt to the United States, the Secretary of the Treasury is required by 31 U.S.C. § 3728 to set off (withhold) that amount from the Judgment Fund payment. This set-off requirement has been on the books since 1875. Act of March 3, 1875, ch. 149, 18 Stat. 481. As the Court of Claims said in *Labadie v. United States*, 33 Ct. Cl. 476, 480 (1898): “When the time of payment comes the statutes give the accounting officers . . . abundant authority to set off an indebtedness due from a claimant to the United States against a judgment in his favor.”

It is important, in this context, however, to distinguish between setoff taken against awards payable from the Judgment Fund pursuant to section 3728 and setoff taken in other contexts or pursuant to other statutes or common law authority. The procedures of section 3728 apply only to setoff against awards payable from the Judgment Fund. Thus, they do not apply to the government’s right of setoff prior to the entry of judgment on the claim against which offset is sought. *E.g., Fitzgerald v.*

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<sup>95</sup> Suffice it to say that the meaning of “substantially justified” has been much litigated. We will not go into that case law here. *See, e.g., Pierce v. Underwood*, 487 U.S. 552 (1988).

<sup>96</sup> Pub. L. No. 99-80, 99 Stat. 183 (Aug. 5, 1985). The 1985 EAJA amendments also added to the act’s coverage what is now the Court of Federal Claims, 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(F), and the boards of contract appeals, 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(E). Later legislation added the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(2)(F).



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*Staats*, 578 F.2d 435, 439 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 439 U.S. 1004 (1978). The right of setoff against an administrative claim is wholly independent of section 3728, and there is no requirement to seek the debtor’s consent pursuant to section 3728 when pursuing setoff in that context.<sup>97</sup> *E.g.*, *Project Map, Inc. v. United States*, 486 F.2d 1375 (Ct. Cl. 1973); [14 Comp. Gen. 849 \(1935\)](#). Likewise, section 3728 has no application to setoff taken by an executive agency against a judgment payable from *agency funds* rather than the *Judgment Fund* and provides no basis for awarding interest in conjunction with such an offset. *Bianchi v. United States*, 46 Fed. Cl. 363 (2000).

Section 3728 both establishes the requirement for setoff and prescribes the procedures to be followed. If the plaintiff consents, the amount of the debt is deducted from the amount paid pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 1304 and the debt is discharged. 31 U.S.C. § 3728(b)(1). If the plaintiff refuses to consent or denies the indebtedness, the amount must still be withheld, together with the estimated cost of prosecuting the debt to final judgment, 31 U.S.C. § 3728(b)(2)(A). Thereafter, the statute requires, the Secretary shall “have a civil action brought if one has not already been brought.” 31 U.S.C. § 3728(b)(2)(B). If the government loses in this action or if the amount recovered on the debt and costs is less than the amount withheld, the balance must be paid over to the plaintiff with 6 percent interest for the time it was withheld. 31 U.S.C. § 3728(c).

The requirements of 31 U.S.C. § 3728 with respect to judgment creditors have generally been viewed as mandatory. *E.g.*, [B-259532, Mar. 6, 1995](#); 37 Op. Att’y Gen. 215, 217–18 (1933). Thus, an agreement purporting to consent to the entry of final judgment without regard to setoff is invalid. *Eastern Transportation Co. v. United States*, 159 F.2d 349, 352 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1947).

On the other hand, the award subject to setoff does not have to arise from a judgment in order to trigger the procedures of 31 U.S.C. § 3728. Where the applicable statute provides for payment from the Judgment Fund “in a manner similar to judgments and compromises in like causes,” or “in accordance with the procedures provided by” section 1304, or pursuant to

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<sup>97</sup> Of course, other procedural requirements may apply to setoffs taken in other contexts. *See, e.g.*, 5 U.S.C. § 5514 (procedures for salary offset); 31 U.S.C. § 3728 (procedures for administrative offset). *See also* [64 Comp. Gen. 142 \(1984\)](#) (discussing due process requirements under various authorities).

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some other similar language, the procedures of section 3728 will apply. *E.g.*, [B-135984, May 21, 1976](#) (those administrative settlements under the Federal Tort Claims Act which are payable from the Judgment Fund because they exceed \$2,500, as provided by 28 U.S.C. § 2672); [B-210316-O.M., Sept. 16, 1983](#) (awards made by boards of contract appeals under the Contract Disputes Act).

As discussed above, administrative back pay awards are normally paid from agency funds. [69 Comp. Gen. 40, 42 \(1989\)](#). When an agency pays an employee's salary, it normally makes several deductions from the gross amount for such things as income tax and retirement fund contributions. Typical deductions include federal income tax, state income tax, retirement fund or social security contribution, Medicare tax, and Federal Employees Group Life Insurance.<sup>98</sup> The treatment of these types of deductions may become an issue when an employee receives back pay from the Judgment Fund as the result of a lawsuit under the Back Pay Act, 5 U.S.C. § 5596, and other statutes. *See, e.g.*, [58 Comp. Gen. 311 \(1979\)](#).

Where payment is made on a judgment, deductions may not be made from the amount owed under the judgment unless the deductions are specified in the judgment or in a written agreement signed by the judgment creditor. In [B-129346, Sept. 23, 1981](#), for example, GAO held that it had no authority to unilaterally withhold taxes from back pay judgments against the United States unless the judgments specifically directed the withholdings or the parties involved agreed to the deduction of specified amounts. The authority to certify judgments under 31 U.S.C. § 1304, GAO noted, is largely ministerial, and does not allow certification of judgments for payment "other than in accordance with their terms." [B-124720, B-129346, Aug. 1, 1961](#), at 1. *See also* [44 Comp. Gen. 729 \(1965\)](#); [8 Comp. Gen. 603, 605 \(1929\)](#). As a practical matter, however, if the parties agree to the deduction of a specified amount of withholding tax, their agreement may be implemented in making the settlement, even where the judgment itself is silent because the payee consented to the deduction. [B-124720, B-129346, Sept. 23, 1981](#).

Some deductions, such as federal retirement and Social Security, require contributions by the government, as well as by the employee. As GAO concluded in [58 Comp. Gen. 115 \(1978\)](#), if a judgment directs the payment

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<sup>98</sup> Other adjustments which do not involve payments may also be appropriate. *E.g.*, [B-213604, May 15, 1984](#) (restoration of annual and sick leave in wrongful separation case).

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of the government's share, as well as the employee's share, they become part of the judgment and payable from the permanent appropriation. If a judgment directs a particular deduction but is silent with respect to the government's share, the employee's share is payable from the permanent appropriation because it is part of the judgment, but the government's share is not and must be paid from the employing agency's funds. 58 Comp. Gen. at 118–19.

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## D. Claims by the Government: Debt Collection

“It is ‘as much the duty of the citizen to pay the Government as it is the duty of the Government to pay the citizen.’”

*Cherry Cotton Mills, Inc. v. United States*, 327 U.S. 536, 540 (1946), quoting *Cong. Globe*, 37<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess. 1674 (1862).

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### 1. Introduction

As discussed above, 31 U.S.C. § 3702 charges agencies to settle “all claims of or against the United States,” while 31 U.S.C. § 3526(a) charges GAO to settle “all accounts of the United States.” Naturally, the settlement of claims under section 3702 regularly identifies amounts owed to the United States. This section discusses the accounts settlement issues encountered by agencies when they go about collecting these claims of the United States. These claims are commonly referred to as “debts”<sup>99</sup> and this process is commonly known as “debt collection.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See Federal Claims Collection Act of 1966 (FCCA), as amended, 31 U.S.C. § 3701(b)(1) (“the term ‘claim’ or ‘debt’ means any amount of funds or property that has been determined by an appropriate official of the Federal Government to be owed to the United States”). See also Federal Claims Collection Standards (FCCS), 31 C.F.R. § 900.2(a) (for purposes of federal debt collection, “the terms ‘claim’ and ‘debt’ are synonymous and interchangeable”).

<sup>100</sup> FCCA, 31 U.S.C. § 3711(a)(1) (agencies “shall try to collect . . . claim[s] of the United States Government for money or property”).

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The amount of delinquent debt<sup>101</sup> owed to the federal government is enormous. The Treasury Department has estimated that, as of September 30, 2006, nontax delinquent debt stood at about \$91 billion.<sup>102</sup> The outstanding tax debt is even more staggering: As of the same date, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) estimated delinquent tax debt at about \$245 billion.<sup>103</sup>

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## 2. The Government's Duty and Authority to Collect Debts Owed to It

Federal debt collection is a legal duty. Article IV, section 3, clause 2 of the Constitution, the so-called Property Clause, gives Congress the power to dispose of property belonging to the United States.<sup>104</sup> Thus, the Supreme Court has stated:

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<sup>101</sup> A "delinquent" debt refers to an amount owed that was not paid by its due date, whether by the date specified in the agency's written demand for payment or in a post-delinquency payment agreement. FCCS, 31 C.F.R. § 900.2(b). Thus, the concept and processes of debt collection come into play only if and when the debtor falls behind in payments and thereby becomes delinquent. Department of Treasury, Financial Management Service, *Instructional Workbook for Preparing the "Treasury Report on Receivables and Debt Collection Activities"* (May 2006), at 50–51, available at [www.fms.treas.gov/debt/dmrpts.html](http://www.fms.treas.gov/debt/dmrpts.html) (last visited June 10, 2008); 64 *Comp. Gen.* 366, 369 (1985).

<sup>102</sup> See Treasury Department, *Fiscal Year 2006 Report to the Congress: U.S. Government Receivables and Debt Collection Activities of Federal Agencies* (July 2007), at 28, available at [www.fms.treas.gov/news/reports/debt06.pdf](http://www.fms.treas.gov/news/reports/debt06.pdf) (last visited June 10, 2008). According to this report, in fiscal year 2006, total receivables increased by \$8.5 billion and total delinquencies increased by \$2.9 billion. *Id.* at 4.

<sup>103</sup> See Internal Revenue Service, *Financial Statements, Supplemental Information—Unaudited: For the Fiscal Years Ended September 30, 2006 and 2005*, at 27, reprinted in GAO, *Fiscal Audit: IRS's Fiscal Years 2006 and 2005 Financial Statements*, GAO-06-137 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 9, 2006), at 116. The \$245 billion is made up of about \$91 billion in assessments agreed to by the taxpayers, \$57 billion in assessments not agreed to, and about \$97 billion that IRS expects to write off. Of course, the debt owed to the federal government pales in comparison to the amount the government owes; consider, if you will, the current debt ceiling of \$9,815 billion. 31 U.S.C. § 3101(b), as amended by Pub. L. No. 110-91, 121 Stat. 988 (Sept. 29, 2007). See also GAO, *Financial Audit: Bureau of the Public Debt's Fiscal Years 2007 and 2006 Schedules of Federal Debt*, GAO-08-168 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 7, 2007).

<sup>104</sup> The Property Clause states, "The Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States; and nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any Claims of the United States, or of any particular State." For discussion of the Property Clause in the context of real property, see Chapter 13, sections D.3, F.2.f, and H.1.

“Power to release or otherwise dispose of the rights and property of the United States is lodged in the Congress by the Constitution. Art. IV, § 3, Cl. 2. Subordinate officers of the United States are without that power, save only as it has been conferred upon them by Act of Congress or is to be implied from other powers so granted.”

*Royal Indemnity Co. v. United States*, 313 U.S. 289, 294 (1941). For example, as the Court of Claims put it in *Fansteel Metallurgical Corp. v. United States*, 172 F. Supp. 268, 270 (Ct. Cl. 1959), “when a payment is erroneously or illegally made it is in direct violation of article IV, section 3, clause 2, of the Constitution. . . . Under these circumstances it is not only lawful but the duty of the Government to sue for a refund thereof.” See also *Amtec Corp. v. United States*, 69 Fed. Cl. 79, 88 (2005), *aff’d*, 239 Fed. Appx. 585 (Fed. Cir. 2007).

It follows that, without a clear statutory basis, an agency has no authority to forgive indebtedness or to waive recovery. *E.g.*, [B-276550, Dec. 15, 1997](#); [67 Comp. Gen. 471 \(1988\)](#). The courts have added that even the mistakes of federal employees will not estop the government from fulfilling its duty to collect claims of the United States. *E.g.*, *Aetna Casualty & Surety Co. v. United States*, 526 F.2d 1127, 1130 (Ct. Cl. 1975), *cert. denied*, 425 U.S. 973 (1976); *Lawrence v. United States*, 69 Fed. Cl. 550, 557, *aff’d*, 206 Fed. Appx. 993 (2006); *Amtec*, 69 Fed. Cl. at 88. See also [51 Comp. Gen. 162, 165 \(1971\)](#). The duty to recover misspent federal grant funds even extends to grantees that innocently incur improper expenditures. [B-303927, June 7, 2005](#).

The courts have long recognized that the government, as sovereign, also has the inherent right to collect debts owed to it. *E.g.*, *United States v. Wurts*, 303 U.S. 414, 415 (1938); *United States v. Lahey Clinic Hospital, Inc.*, 399 F.3d 1, 15 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 546 U.S. 815 (2005). “The only time a government agency is barred from exercising its right to recover overpayments is when Congress has clearly manifested its intention to raise a statutory barrier.” *Old Republic Insurance Co. v. Federal Crop Insurance Corp.*, 746 F. Supp. 767, 770 (N.D. Ill. 1990), *aff’d*, 947 F.2d 269 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1991). See also *O’Gilvie v. United States*, 66 F.3d 1550, 1554 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1995), *aff’d*, 519 U.S. 79 (1996).

Over the years, Congress, through a series of governmentwide statutes, has acted to affirm, regulate, and augment the government's inherent and common law duty and powers with respect to debt collection.<sup>105</sup> The first of these governmentwide statutes was the Federal Claims Collection Act (FCCA). Pub. L. No. 89-508, 80 Stat. 308 (July 19, 1966). *See also* Debt Collection Act of 1982, Pub. L. No. 97-365, 96 Stat. 1749 (Oct. 25, 1982); the Federal Debt Recovery Act, Pub. L. No. 99-578, 100 Stat. 3305 (Oct. 28, 1986); Federal Debt Collection Procedures Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-647, title XXXVI, 104 Stat. 4789, 4933 (Nov. 29, 1990); Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-134, title III, ch. 10, § 31001, 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-358 (Apr. 26, 1996). Governmentwide regulations, known as the Federal Claims Collection Standards (FCCS), are found at 31 C.F.R. ch. IX. Each individual agency has authority and responsibility in the first instance for collecting debts arising from its own programs and activities. 31 C.F.R. § 901.1(a) (“Federal agencies shall aggressively collect all debts arising out of activities of, or referred or transferred for collection services to, that agency. Collection activities shall be undertaken promptly with follow-up action taken as necessary.”). The Departments of Treasury and Justice are responsible for supervising federal debt collection practices. 31 U.S.C. § 3711(d). Prior to 1996, when Congress transferred GAO's responsibility for supervising federal debt collection activities to the Treasury Department,<sup>106</sup> GAO jointly promulgated the FCCS with the Justice Department, and issued many decisions and opinions addressing federal debt collection practices.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Congress has also enacted laws in the nature of program legislation and agency organic authority that address the debt collection activities of specific agencies and specific programs. *See, e.g.*, 19 U.S.C. § 1505(c) (customs duties); 15 U.S.C. § 634(b)(2) (Small Business Administration); 38 U.S.C. § 3720(a)(4) (Department of Veterans Affairs); 42 U.S.C. §§ 2651–2652 (various agencies with respect to third-party claims for hospital or medical care); 26 U.S.C. §§ 6321–6326 (tax liens) and 6331 (tax levy). Where such provisions exist, they and their implementing regulations take precedence over the more general debt collection statutes. *See* Federal Claims Collection Act (FCCA), Pub. L. No. 89-508, § 4, 80 Stat. 308, 309 (July 19, 1966) (“Nothing in this Act shall increase or diminish the existing authority of the head of an agency to litigate claims, or diminish his existing authority to settle, compromise, or close claims.”); Federal Claims Collection Standards (FCCS), 31 C.F.R. § 900.4. *See, e.g.*, 62 Comp. Gen. 599 (1983); 62 Comp. Gen. 489 (1983).

<sup>106</sup> General Accounting Office Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-316, § 115(g), 110 Stat. 3826, 3834–35 (Oct. 19, 1996).

<sup>107</sup> GAO's debt collection case law, while current only as of 1996, may still be of use to agencies.

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### 3. Debt Collection in a Nutshell

This part of the chapter focuses on how government debt collection efforts affect and are affected by appropriations law. A very basic description of how the government collects debts will provide a useful backdrop.<sup>108</sup>

The Federal Claims Collection Standards (FCCS) break down the governmentwide debt collection regime into the following components: administrative collection (31 C.F.R. part 901), compromise of claims (part 902), suspension or termination of collection (part 903), and referrals for litigation (part 904).

The administrative collection actions described in FCCS, part 901, include:

- issuing demand letters (31 C.F.R. § 901.2);
- taking administrative offset (31 C.F.R. § 901.3);
- reporting debts to consumer reporting agencies (31 C.F.R. § 901.4);
- contracting with private collection agencies (31 C.F.R. § 901.5);<sup>109</sup>
- suspending federal licenses, permits, and privileges (31 C.F.R. § 901.6);
- liquidating security or collateral (31 C.F.R. § 901.7);
- accepting collection in installments (31 C.F.R. § 901.8); and
- assessing interest, penalties, and administrative costs (31 C.F.R. § 901.9).

If these tactics do not result in prompt collection of the debt, agencies are required to refer their debts to the Treasury Department for further administrative collection efforts. 31 C.F.R. §§ 901.1(d) & (e).

In the event that collection of the complete amount cannot be accomplished, the FCCS addresses the authority of the agencies and

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<sup>108</sup> For more detail, see the Federal Claims Collection Standards (FCCS), 31 C.F.R. ch. IX.

<sup>109</sup> The Federal Claims Collection Act also gives the Justice Department broad authority to contract for legal services to assist in debt collection, including using private counsel to negotiate, compromise, settle, and litigate federal debt claims. 31 U.S.C. § 3718(b).

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Treasury to suspend or terminate collection under certain criteria (31 C.F.R. §§ 903.2 and 903.3). The FCCS also address agency authority to compromise claims (31 C.F.R. part 902) or refer administratively uncollectible debts to Justice for litigation (31 C.F.R. part 904). As a final effort to obtain at least some return on uncollectible debts, the FCCS requires agencies to attempt to sell nontax debts without recourse against the government (31 C.F.R. § 903.5(b)). Once all of these collection avenues have been explored, the FCCS directs agencies to discharge (also referred to as a close out of the debt) the debts that remain and report that fact to the Internal Revenue Service. 31 U.S.C. § 3711(a)(3); 31 C.F.R. §§ 903.3(a), 903.5.

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#### 4. Common Appropriations Law Issues Associated with Debt Collection Activities

##### a. Diminishing Returns and Cost/Benefit Considerations

Many years ago, GAO approved the establishment of thresholds for small claims below which initiating or continuing collection action would not be cost-effective. *See, e.g., 65 Comp. Gen. 893, 896 (1986)* (agencies should establish “‘minimum debt amounts’ and realistic ‘points of diminishing returns’”). *See also 55 Comp. Gen. 1438, 1439 (1976); 45 Comp. Gen. 553 (1966)*. In this context, notwithstanding the duty to collect claims owed to the United States, GAO concluded that, where the costs of collection would greatly exceed the amounts to be recovered, agencies should adopt plans to forgo or cease collection in such case. *See, e.g., 65 Comp. Gen. 893; 18 Comp. Gen. 838 (1939); B-115800, Aug. 17, 1976.*

The Federal Claims Collection Standards (FCCS) endorse this approach and encourage the use of cost-benefit analysis:

“Agency collection procedures should provide for periodic comparison of costs incurred and amounts collected. Data on costs and corresponding recovery rates for debts of different types and in various dollar ranges should be used to compare the cost effectiveness of alternative collection techniques, establish guidelines with respect to points at which costs of further collection efforts are likely to exceed recoveries, assist in evaluating offers of compromise, and



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establish minimum debt amounts below which collection action need not be taken.”

31 C.F.R. § 901.10. In this regard, in [58 Comp. Gen. 372, 375 \(1979\)](#), GAO held that the Interior Department could forgo collection action on reclamation fees paid by coal mine operators of underpayments of \$1 or less, noting that “it may safely be presumed, without cost studies, that in cases of \$1 or less collection action will always exceed the amount recoverable.” GAO also waived collection of erroneous overpayments of compensation over a 1-year period to nearly 5,000 National Guard technicians and small overpayments to approximately 10,000 persons, because of the administrative burden of identifying the debtors and computing the amounts of the individual claims. [B-206699.1](#), [B-206699.2](#), [Sept. 15, 1988](#).

b. Disposition of Proceeds

Once an agency collects a debt owed to the United States, what can/must it do with that money?

(1) The general rule

Generally, if an agency collects a debt owed to the United States, it must deposit the collection in the general fund of the United States Treasury as “miscellaneous receipts.” *See, e.g.*, [B-302366](#), [July 12, 2004](#); [64 Comp. Gen. 395, 402 \(1985\)](#). This rule is nothing more than an application of the so-called miscellaneous receipts statute, 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), discussed more fully in Chapter 6, section E.2. Section 3302(b) provides that “an official or agent of the Government receiving money for the Government from any source shall deposit the money in the Treasury as soon as practicable without deduction for any charge or claim.” Violation of this statute constitutes an illegal augmentation of the agency’s appropriation. *E.g.*, [B-265734](#), [Feb. 13, 1996](#).

As explained in [B-308476](#), [Dec. 20, 2006](#), appropriations establish maximum authorized program funding levels. Absent statutory authorization, agencies may not operate beyond the level that can be paid for using the funds Congress appropriates to them. Supplementing appropriations with funds obtained from sources not provided by law would improperly augment—meaning usurp Congress’s fiscal control over—agency programs. [B-308476](#), *citing* [B-300248](#), [Jan. 15, 2004](#).

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This rule, however, is subject to two classes of exceptions, statutory exceptions and the refund exception. *See, e.g., B-302366, July 12, 2004; 69 Comp. Gen. 260, 262 (1990).*

(2) Statutory exceptions

Statutory exceptions to the miscellaneous receipts statute are laws that expressly authorize an agency to credit some or all of its receipts to a particular fund or appropriation (instead of to the general fund of the Treasury), or allow it to expend those receipts without depositing them. *See, e.g., B-241269, Feb. 28, 1991* (discussing provisions of the Economy Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 1535, 1536, and the Government Employees Training Act, 5 U.S.C. § 4104).

One such provision central to federal debt collection is 31 U.S.C. § 3718(d). This law, part of the Federal Claims Collection Act as amended, states that—

“[n]otwithstanding section 3302(b) of this title, a contract under subsection (a) [private debt collectors] or (b) [private attorneys] of this section may provide that a fee a person charges to recover indebtedness owed, or to locate or recover assets of, the United States Government is payable from the amount recovered.”

In other words, this law allows agencies to use some of their collection proceeds to pay the fees of private debt collection contractors and lawyers retained to collect delinquent debts owed to the United States.

In *64 Comp. Gen. 366 (1985)*, GAO considered the statutory exception in section 3718(d). The General Services Administration (GSA) wanted to conserve its appropriations by using collection proceeds on a contingency-fee basis to pay contractors to examine bills GSA had already paid, identify any overcharges or other erroneous payments made by the government, request repayment for those amounts, and take other necessary and appropriate actions to effect their collection. *64 Comp. Gen. at 366–67.* GAO found that some of the amounts recovered qualified as proceeds from the collection of *delinquent* debts and could be used to pay the contractors under 31 U.S.C. § 3718(d). *Id. at 370.* The majority of the amounts being recovered by GSA’s contractors, however, were *not delinquent* and arose from “account servicing” rather than “debt collection.” *Id. at 369.* Section 3718(d) does not apply to these amounts, and they had to be

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deposited in full (*i.e.*, without deductions to pay the contractors) in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. *Id.* at 370.

(3) Refund exception

The refund exception to 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b) concerns repayments of amounts that were erroneously paid from appropriated funds.<sup>110</sup> *E.g.*, [B-308476, Dec. 20, 2006](#); [62 Comp. Gen. 70, 73 \(1982\)](#). This exception encompasses “refunds of advances, collections for overpayments made, adjustments for previous amounts disbursed, or recoveries of erroneous disbursements from appropriation or fund accounts that are directly related to, and reductions of, previously recorded payments from the accounts.” [69 Comp. Gen. 260, 262 \(1990\)](#). Refunds represent repayments for excess payments made by the agency to outside sources that are to be credited to the appropriation from which the excess payments were made. [B-305402, Jan. 3, 2006](#).

For example, in [B-302366, July 12, 2004](#), the Department of Energy asked whether it could retain amounts repaid to the department by one of its contractors. The repayment represented amounts that the department’s contractor had overpaid for state business and occupation taxes plus interest on that overpayment. [B-302366](#). GAO agreed that the principal portion would be considered a refund and could be credited to the department’s appropriation as an overpayment of an expense under the contract. However, GAO also concluded that the department could not credit amounts that represented interest. Unlike the principal amount, the interest did not reflect the restoration of a previous improper payment or overpayment. *Id.* Instead, the purpose of the interest payment was to compensate for the passage of time and the lost earnings resulting from the state’s retention of money to which it was not entitled. *Id.* Interest paid on the principal amount is an amount in excess of the amount originally paid. Thus, the interest did not qualify as a refund under the refund exception to section 3302(b). Without express statutory authority, crediting the interest to the appropriation would augment the department’s appropriations and violate section 3302. *Id.* *Cf.* [B-310725, May 20, 2008](#) (the National Science Foundation Inspector General (IG) may not credit to the IG appropriation amounts the agency recovered under the False Claims Act that represent

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<sup>110</sup> Repayment of an appropriation also includes reimbursements. Reimbursements are amounts collected by the agency for goods or services furnished by the agency; an agency may retain reimbursements only if it has statutory authority. [B-305402, Jan. 3, 2006](#).

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costs incurred by the IG to investigate a False Claims Act claim; those amounts do not restore to the appropriation amounts that should not have been paid from the appropriation).

c. **Accountable Officer Issues**

Accountable officers and agencies both have a duty to collect from people who receive money from the government to which they were not entitled.<sup>111</sup> So strong is the duty to collect that many of the statutes that address relief for accountable officers specifically condition relief upon diligent action to collect the debt. *See, e.g.*, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3527(b)(1)(B) (certain erroneous payments), 3527(c) (disbursing officers), 3528(b)(2) (certifying officers). *See also* B-271017, Aug. 12, 1996. Some statutes even emphasize that granting relief to the accountable officer does not diminish this duty. *E.g.*, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3333(b), 3343(g), 3526(c)(4), 3527(d)(2).

At the same time, however, the recipient and the responsible accountable officer share an element of joint liability. *See, e.g.*, B-228946, Jan. 15, 1988. The agency's first obligation is to seek recovery from the recipient. B-212602, Apr. 5, 1984. If the agency cannot collect the full amount from the recipient, the accountable officer is liable for any remaining balance unless and to the extent that he or she is granted relief. *Id.*; 30 Comp. Gen. 298, 300 (1951). *See also* 62 Comp. Gen. 476, 478–79 (1983); 54 Comp. Gen. 112, 114 (1974). For more on accountable officers, see Chapter 9.

GAO is reluctant to deny relief solely on the basis of inadequate collection action because the failure may be attributable to the agency and beyond the accountable officer's control. *See, e.g.*, B-239154, Nov. 30, 1990. Nevertheless, GAO may deny relief for lack of adequate debt collection efforts when such a denial is appropriate to the facts and circumstances. *See, e.g.*, B-234815, Oct. 3, 1989 (disbursing officer did not initiate collection action despite advice from agency counsel).

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<sup>111</sup> People who receive money from the government to which they were not entitled, no matter how innocently they received it, have no right to keep it. They must pay it back. *See, e.g.*, B-249371, Apr. 30, 1993; B-198770, Nov. 13, 1980; B-127649, July 9, 1956.

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# Miscellaneous Topics

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## A. Boards, Committees, and Commissions

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### 1. Introduction

In addition to the “regular” departments and agencies that tend to attract the most attention, the federal government at any given time includes—although not in a formal, structural sense—a large number of miscellaneous bodies designated as boards, committees, commissions, and various similar names. So pervasive are these miscellaneous bodies that they have been informally called the “Fifth Branch of Government.”<sup>1</sup> This section will address funding aspects of these entities.

It is always helpful at the outset to define your universe. In this instance, however, we have been unable to discover or devise a satisfactory definition for these miscellaneous bodies. As we will see later, the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) defines “advisory committee” for purposes of that statute, but advisory committees are only one type of these miscellaneous bodies, albeit the largest. The impossibility of crafting a useful definition becomes apparent upon considering the key elements of function, creation, membership, and duration:

- *Function:* Most of the bodies we are talking about are purely advisory. Some, however, are operational, and others have elements of both. Functions include, for example, such things as the investigation of specific incidents, claims adjudication, and the commemoration of historic persons or events.
- *Creation:* Advisory bodies can be created by Congress, the President, or a department head. Bodies that are not purely advisory may or may not require specific legislation, depending on their exact nature and functions.

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<sup>1</sup> *E.g.*, House Committee on Government Operations, *The Role and Effectiveness of Federal Advisory Committees*, H.R. Rep. No. 91-1731, at 4–5 (1970). The independent regulatory agencies—which also tend to be called “commissions”—comprise the so-called Fourth Branch. *Id.*

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- *Membership:* The entity may consist entirely of government officers or employees, entirely of nongovernment parties, or some of each.
  - *Duration:* Some are temporary; some are indefinite; some are permanent. Some start out as temporary and, in effect, achieve immortality.<sup>2</sup>

One of the earliest instances of the use of presidential commissions—if not purely advisory ones—occurred in 1794, when George Washington named a commission to investigate the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Although the explosive growth of these miscellaneous bodies did not occur until the twentieth century, they were sufficiently common in 1842 to prompt Henry Clay to observe that the practice had “grown into use long since in the Executive Department.”<sup>4</sup>

No one knows exactly how many miscellaneous boards, committees, and commissions exist at any given time. The only statistics available are for advisory committees subject to FACA,<sup>5</sup> certainly the largest single category, and for these there is a clear downward trend as they are a favorite target of cost-cutters. When Congress was considering FACA, the House Government Operations Committee reported that “there are at least 2,600 interagency and advisory committees and possibly as many as 3,200 presently existing,” the uncertainty being that “many agencies are unable to supply a list of all their advisory bodies.” H.R. Rep. No. 92-1017, at 2 (1972). By the end of fiscal year 1992, there were 1,236 federal advisory committees. General Services Administration, *Twenty-Second Annual Report of the President on Federal Advisory Committees* (1994), at 1. On February 10, 1993, President Clinton issued Executive Order No. 12838, directing executive branch departments and agencies to terminate at least one-third of the “advisory committees subject to FACA (and not required by

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<sup>2</sup> We are not talking about the so-called independent regulatory agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, Federal Communications Commission, Surface Transportation Board, *etc.*, which, notwithstanding their designation as commissions or boards, are permanent federal agencies, and are funded as such.

<sup>3</sup> *E.g.*, David Flitner Jr., *The Politics of Presidential Commissions*, 7 (1986).

<sup>4</sup> Cong. Globe, 27<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess. 231 (1842), *quoted in* Jay S. Bybee, *Advising the President: Separation of Powers and the Federal Advisory Committee Act*, 104 Yale L.J. 51, 61 (1994).

<sup>5</sup> The General Services Administration maintains data for advisory committees in a “Governmentwide shared Internet-based system . . .” 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.100(b)(4).

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statute) that are sponsored by the department or agency.” By the end of fiscal year 1993, the number of advisory committees had dropped to 1,088.<sup>6</sup> *GSA Report*, at 1.

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## 2. Title 31 Funding Provisions

Regardless of whether one likes or dislikes the use of boards and committees, there are a lot of them around, they are here to stay, and someone has to pay their bills. If, as we have noted elsewhere, the central theme of federal fiscal law is the quest for balance between executive flexibility and legislative control, the funding of miscellaneous boards and committees is unquestionably a microcosm of this reality.

Historically, Congress has asserted its presence in the area by enacting funding restrictions, now found mostly in title 31 of the United States Code. The key provisions are 31 U.S.C. §§ 1346 and 1347. These provisions are an amalgam of over a century’s worth of legislation. We set out section 1346 in full here and will refer to specific portions in our discussion of this area of the law.

“§ 1346. *Commissions, councils, boards, and interagency and similar groups*

“(a) Except as provided in this section—

(1) public money and appropriations are not available to pay—

(A) the pay or expenses of a commission, council, board, or similar group, or a member of that group;

(B) expenses related to the work or the results of work or action of that group; or

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<sup>6</sup> Although the number was to drop still further, GAO found that the costs and number of members per committee had increased. GAO, *Federal Advisory Committee Act: Overview of Advisory Committees Since 1993*, GAO/T-GGD-98-24 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 5, 1997). The number of such committees fell to approximately 950 in fiscal year 2003. GAO, *Federal Advisory Committees: Additional Guidance Could Help Agencies Better Ensure Independence and Balance*, GAO-04-328 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2004), at 10.

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(C) for the detail or cost of personal services of an officer or employee from an executive agency in connection with that group; and

(2) an accounting or disbursing official, absent a special appropriation to pay the account or charge, may not allow or pay an account or charge related to that group.

“(b) Appropriations of an executive agency are available for the expenses of an interagency group conducting activities of interest common to executive agencies when the group includes a representative of the agency. The representatives receive no additional pay because of membership in the group. An officer or employee of an executive agency not a representative of the group may not receive additional pay for providing services for the group.

“(c) Subject to section 1347 of this title, this section does not apply to—

(1) commissions, councils, boards, or similar groups authorized by law;

(2) courts-martial or courts of inquiry of the armed forces; or

(3) the contingent fund related to foreign relations at the disposal of the President.”

Section 1347, also known as the “Russell Amendment,” is set out later in this discussion.

a. 1842: The First Attempt

The earliest congressional attempt to rein in the use of boards and committees grew out of controversy surrounding a commission appointed by President Tyler to investigate certain irregularities at the New York customs house. The result was section 25 of the Act of August 26, 1842, ch. 202, 5 Stat. 523, 533, which, with certain exceptions, prohibited the payment of “any account or charge whatever” in connection with “any commission or inquiry . . . until special appropriations shall have been made by law to pay such accounts and charges.” The prohibition is now found at 31 U.S.C. § 1346(a)(2); sections 1346(c)(2) and (c)(3) are the exceptions.

Initially, this attempt was successful. The Attorney General had occasion to consider the statute less than 2 months after it was enacted. A private relief bill directed the Secretary of the Treasury to investigate, and estimate the damages resulting from, an incident involving “emigrating Creek Indians.” Treasury asked whether appointment of an individual to perform the investigation would be subject to the statute. Yes, replied the Attorney General. “The words of the law are too comprehensive to admit of any exception, and too express to warrant any relaxation.” 4 Op. Att’y Gen. 106 (1842). The following year, the Attorney General discussed the statute in this much-quoted passage:

“The power of appointment results from the obligation of the executive department of the government ‘to take care that the laws be faithfully executed;’ an obligation imposed by the constitution, and from the authority of which no mere act of legislation can operate a dispensation. Congress may, however, indirectly limit the exercise of this power by refusing appropriations to sustain it, and thus paralyze a function which it is not competent to destroy. This would seem to be the purpose of the act of 26th August, 1842. . . .”

4 Op. Att’y Gen. 248 (1843). The Attorney General went on to point out that payment would require a specific appropriation. Charging a general appropriation would not suffice because general appropriations must be read as limited by existing prohibitory statutes. *Id.* at 249.

The “undoing” of the 1842 restriction was furthered by a 1915 decision of the Comptroller of the Treasury. The Comptroller quoted the Attorney General’s 1843 opinion and agreed that “the purpose of this provision was to prohibit, indirectly, the creation of commissions by the executive [branch] . . . through its inherent power to make appointments.” 21 Comp. Dec. 442, 443 (1915). However, the Comptroller continued: “I do not think it was the intent or purpose of this law to prohibit the use of an appropriation otherwise available, though general in terms, for the payment of expenses of a commission specifically authorized by Congress.” *Id.* In this way, a general appropriation available for the expenses of a body specifically created by Congress became a “special appropriation” for purposes of the 1842 law. *Id.* at 443–44.

Congress’s 1842 attempt to restrict funding for boards and committees was further weakened by a distinction alluded to in an early GAO decision. This

distinction, between a group of persons acting individually and a group acting collectively, would be invoked in all subsequent legislation on this subject. In the 1922 case before GAO, the Secretary of War had sent four men to the Canal Zone to investigate existing conditions at the Panama Canal. Each had his own area of expertise, and the governing legislation authorized the President to appoint or employ persons to carry out these responsibilities. In finding the 1842 statute inapplicable, the Comptroller General stated:

“The right of the President to appoint any one of these experts to advise him in an individual capacity would undoubtedly be authorized. . . . If he sees fit to appoint or employ four experts to make a concurrent investigation and report on the various matters of which each is an expert in his particular field, it would not appear that such designation of the individuals thus selected would make them a ‘commission [or] inquiry’ in the legal sense of the term.”

Review Nos. 2249 *et al.*, Aug. 22, 1922, at 4–5.<sup>7</sup> The 1842 enactment never purported to address the extent of the executive’s power to create boards and committees, and even though it is still on the books, these administrative interpretations mean that it is no longer a significant funding impediment either.

b. 1909: The Tawney Amendment

The next congressional attempt to control boards and committees grew out of President Theodore Roosevelt’s creation in 1909 of a Commission on Fine Arts to advise on artistic aspects of certain public structures and monuments.<sup>8</sup> The following year, Congress gave the Commission a permanent statutory basis in what is now 40 U.S.C. § 9101. Before doing that, however, Congress, disturbed over the President’s willingness to create such bodies without first obtaining congressional approval, enacted the Act of March 4, 1909, ch. 299, § 9, 35 Stat. 945, 1027, which prohibited the use of appropriated funds to pay any expenses in connection with any

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<sup>7</sup> The 1922 decision failed to address 4 Op. Att’y Gen. 106, which found the statute applicable to the appointment of a single individual, but the point would appear moot in view of the authority to hire experts and consultants now found in 5 U.S.C. § 3109.

<sup>8</sup> Jay S. Bybee, *Advising the President: Separation of Powers and the Federal Advisory Committee Act*, 104 Yale L.J. 51, 63–65 (1994).

commission, council, board, or similar body, or any members of such a group, “unless the creation of the [group] shall be or shall have been authorized by law.” This statute, sometimes referred to as the Tawney Amendment, is now found at 31 U.S.C. §§ 1346(a)(1) (prohibition) and 1346(c)(1) (“authorized by law” exception).

This second congressional attempt met with weakening administrative interpretations even more swiftly than did the first attempt. Less than 2 months after it was enacted, the Attorney General concluded that the 1909 law did not apply to groups consisting entirely of government officers or employees dealing with matters relating to their scope of employment. 27 Op. Att’y Gen. 308 (1909) (special committee appointed by President Roosevelt to conduct an investigation of agency contracts, composed of a representative official of each executive agency, was not subject to the prohibition). *See also* 8 Comp. Gen. 294 (1928); B-79195, Sept. 30, 1948. As the Attorney General stated in another opinion, it would make no sense to construe the statute as prohibiting an agency head “from submitting to the concurrent investigation and report of several employees of his department any question which he might submit for investigation to any one of them.” 27 Op. Att’y Gen. 300, 307 (1909). The same interpretation applies to experts and consultants as long as their employment has been properly authorized. 37 Op. Att’y Gen. 484 (1934).

The key question under the 1909 statute is the meaning of “authorized by law.” In another 1909 opinion, the Attorney General adopted an interpretation that effectively weakened the law’s requirements. Noting that every action an agency takes does not have to be spelled out in legislation, he concluded: “Congress did not intend to require that the creation of the commissions, *etc.*, mentioned should be specifically authorized by a law of the United States, but that it would be sufficient if their appointment were authorized in a general way by law.” 27 Op. Att’y Gen. 432, 437 (1909).

The Comptroller of the Treasury followed suit. 16 Comp. Dec. 422 (1910); 16 Comp. Dec. 278 (1909) (quoting extensively from the Attorney General’s opinion). Somewhat inexplicably, several early GAO decisions took the position that specific authority was required. The difficulty with this divergence was that the Attorney General’s conclusion was supported by some pretty strong legislative history. *See* 27 Op. Att’y Gen. at 437. In 22 Comp. Gen. 140 (1942), the Comptroller General reviewed this legislative history, repudiated his earlier “specific authority” decisions, and adopted the Attorney General’s “authorized in a general way” formulation.



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To avoid rendering the statute totally meaningless, GAO developed the following approach:

“[T]here must be sufficient authority in general or specific terms for the creation of a commission, board, *etc.*, such as an authorization for work which could be accomplished only by a commission, board, *etc.*, or authorization for duties of such a nature generally recognized as best performed by a commission, board, *etc.*”

[11 Comp. Gen. 495, 497 \(1932\)](#). Virtually identical statements are found in [31 Comp. Gen. 454, 455 \(1952\)](#) and [B-116975, Apr. 27, 1954](#), at 4.<sup>9</sup>

There needs to be something more than just the authority to perform the function because the “authorized by law” portion of the statute applies to creation of the body, not performance of the function. *See, e.g.,* [B-51203, Aug. 14, 1945](#); 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 541, 550 (1982). The fact situation in the 1909 Attorney General opinion, 27 Op. Att’y Gen. 432, is a good example. The War Department then, as does the Army Corps of Engineers now, performed a variety of civil works functions. Incident to one of them, Congress directed that the work not injure “the scenic grandeur of Niagara Falls.” The Department pointed out that it did not have on its payroll experts in “scenic grandeur,” and when it had received similar mandates in the past, it went out and contracted for the necessary expertise, often in the form of a committee. This was sufficiently “authorized by law” for purposes of the 1909 prohibition. Similarly sufficient was the situation in [40 Comp. Gen. 478 \(1961\)](#). The Interior Department had specific authority to consult with various private parties on certain forest matters. For decades, it had done this by the use of advisory bodies. In view of this longstanding practice, the Comptroller General found that the consultation statute could be viewed as furnishing the necessary authority.

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<sup>9</sup> Another decision stated the principle with a minor change in language:

“[The 1909 law] does not necessarily require that commissions, councils, boards, and other such bodies be specifically established by statute. . . . General or specific authority to perform functions or duties is sufficient to allow payment of the expenses of boards, commissions, *etc.*, if such duties or functions can be performed only by such a group or if it is generally accepted that such duties can be performed best by such a group.”

[40 Comp. Gen. 478, 479 \(1961\)](#) (citations omitted).

In contrast, where an agency was authorized to conduct certain investigations and to employ experts and others for carrying out agency functions, and where the agency had in fact conducted the investigations for many years without an advisory body, there was no basis to find the body authorized by law, even in a “general way.” [31 Comp. Gen. 454 \(1952\)](#).

The “authorized in a general way” standard is also met if a department includes a board or commission in its budget justification materials and Congress enacts a lump-sum appropriation without prohibiting the item. [B-38047, Nov. 8, 1943](#). *See also* [B-116975, Apr. 27, 1954](#).

However, 31 U.S.C. § 1346(a)(1) does not override 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), the purpose statute, discussed in Chapter 4. [B-182398\(1\), Mar. 29, 1976](#). Nor is it affected in any way by 5 U.S.C. § 5703, the “invitational travel” statute. [27 Comp. Gen. 630 \(1948\)](#). Of course, if the “authorized in a general way” standard is legitimately met, there should be no problem under either statute.

Applying section 1346(a)(1) to a given entity requires analysis of the entity’s nature and functions. What it happens to be named is not the controlling factor. [27 Op. Att’y Gen. 406, 409 \(1909\)](#); [A-16348, Dec. 8, 1926](#). The Justice Department has also cautioned that adding diverse functions could cause a board or commission to lose its “authorized in a general way” status. [6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 541, 550 \(1982\)](#).

Finally, cases under the 1909 statute continue to recognize the individual *versus* unit distinction first noted in connection with the 1842 law. The circumstances in [B-116975, Apr. 27, 1954](#), involved three people inspecting coffee for the Army. It was significant that, although the three conducted their inspections independently, a majority vote determined acceptance or rejection. Thus, the inspectors acted as a unit and the statute applied. The same reasoning applied to tea inspectors for the Navy in [6 Comp. Gen. 140 \(1926\)](#).<sup>10</sup>

Setting aside subsequent developments for the moment, the combined effect of the 1842 and 1909 enactments—31 U.S.C. §§ 1346(a) and (c)—was that boards and committees created by executive action could be funded

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<sup>10</sup> [6 Comp. Gen. 140](#) is one of the “specific authority” cases and to that extent has been modified by [22 Comp. Gen. 140](#). This, however, has no bearing on the point noted in the text.

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either if their creation was authorized (“in a general way”), or if Congress appropriated funds for that purpose.

c. 1944: The Russell Amendment

Peace prevailed between the branches over the use of boards and committees for a few decades, but ended in 1944 when congressional concern over some of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s creations prompted another piece of legislation, forming a “veritable Maginot Line of barriers to funding commissions.”<sup>11</sup> This third attempt at congressional control was the so-called Russell Amendment, Pub. L. No. 78-358, § 213, 58 Stat. 361, 387 (June 27, 1944). Now codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1347, it provides:

“(a) An agency in existence for more than one year may not use amounts otherwise available for obligation to pay its expenses without a specific appropriation or specific authorization by law. If the principal duties and powers of the agency are substantially the same as or similar to the duties and powers of an agency established by executive order, the agency established later is deemed to have been in existence from the date the agency established by the order came into existence.

“(b) Except as specifically authorized by law, another agency may not use amounts available for obligation to pay expenses to carry out duties and powers substantially the same as or similar to the principal duties and powers of an agency that is prohibited from using amounts under this section.”

The amendment’s sponsor, Senator Russell, stated its purpose as follows:

“[T]he purpose of the committee amendment, which is apparent from a reading thereof, is to retain in the Congress the power of legislating and creating bureaus and departments of the Government, and of giving to Congress the right to know what the bureaus and departments of the Government which have been created by Executive order, are doing.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas R. Wolanin, *Presidential Advisory Commissions—Truman to Nixon*, 66 (1975).

“Regardless of what agencies might be affected, the purpose of this amendment is to require them all to come to Congress for their appropriations after they have been in existence for more than a year.”

90 Cong. Rec. 3119 (1944), *quoted in* [24 Comp. Gen. 241, 243 \(1944\)](#).

The original language makes this intent a little clearer. “Agency” in section 1347(a) originally read “any agency or instrumentality including those established by Executive order,” and “specific authorization by law” originally read specific authorization for “the expenditure of funds” by the body. Pub. L. No. 78-358, § 213.

As had happened with its predecessors, administrative interpretations have narrowed the Russell Amendment’s scope and impact. In 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 263 (1979), the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel concluded that the Russell Amendment does not apply to boards or committees that are purely advisory, stating the test as follows:

“Mere advisors are not ‘agencies’ or ‘instrumentalities’ of Government for purposes of the Russell amendment. They do not become ‘agencies’ or ‘instrumentalities’ merely because they meet and advise collectively. They become ‘agencies’ or ‘instrumentalities’ for Russell amendment purposes only if the officer to whom they report seeks to invest them with actual authority to take substantive action on his or the Government’s behalf.”

*Id.* at 265. *See also* [B-152583, Nov. 7, 1963](#) (finding the Russell Amendment not applicable to President’s Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Forces, which was purely advisory). Justice took this a step further a few years later, concluding that a council under the United States Information Agency (USIA) whose functions were both advisory and operational (in this case, solicitation of contributions) was subject to the Russell Amendment because “it would discharge responsibilities vested by law in the USIA and would not be purely advisory.” 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 541, 551 (1982). The operational aspect does not have to amount to “substantive action”; the law applies if the body “acts on behalf of the government or exerts any governmental power.” *Id.*

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### 3. Interagency Funding

#### a. Joint Funding of Common-Interest Project

It is necessary at the outset to distinguish between joint funding of a project and joint funding of a board, committee, or similar group. While statutes address the latter, the former is governed by the normal rules regarding the obligation and expenditure of appropriated funds. If a project will benefit more than one agency, and as long as it is not something one of the agencies is required to do as part of its mission without reimbursement, then there is nothing that prohibits the agencies from funding the project in proportion to their benefit.

This point was made in an early case, [A-7571, May 14, 1925](#). Several agencies, along with state and local bodies, were interested in development of the Colorado River and sponsored the construction and maintenance of three “gauging stations” along the river, under the supervision of the Interior Department’s Geological Survey. Once it was determined that this was not something the Geological Survey was required to do anyway as part of its job—that is, that there was no augmentation problem—it was fairly easy to conclude that “there appears no legal objection to the allocation of Federal Power Commission funds to pay for its proper share of the expenses incident to the maintenance of the stations from which it derives a corresponding benefit.” *Id.* at 3. *See also* [B-111199, Aug. 20, 1952](#); [B-51145, Sept. 11, 1945](#).

A more recent decision dealt with joint funding of mutually beneficial research and demonstration projects by use of interagency agreements. Several environmental statutes authorize or direct the Environmental Protection Agency to cooperate with other federal and nonfederal entities. These statutes were viewed as sufficient authority for interagency agreements, to be funded by transfers to the contracting agency from the other participating agencies. [52 Comp. Gen. 128 \(1972\)](#). The decision pointed out the distinction between this type of interagency agreement—in which the participating agencies all had an interest—and an Economy Act agreement, in which the performing agency has “no specific interest apart from the provision of a routine service.” *Id.* at 133. In view of the statutory provisions involved, there was no need to consider what EPA could or could not have done without those statutes.

In any joint funding case—project, board or commission, interagency agreement, *etc.*—the threshold question is purpose availability. Joint funding cannot be used if the source appropriation is not otherwise

available for the object in question. [B-182398, Mar. 29, 1976](#). In other words, joint or interagency funding may not be used to expand the availability of any of the participating appropriations. Once this threshold is crossed, use of a working fund as a financing device is permissible, but the money “must be obligated and expended in accordance with the statutes appropriating such funds and within the period of availability of the original appropriations.” [B-111199, Aug. 20, 1952](#).

b. 1945: The First Interagency Funding Statute

Earlier in this section, we described the Russell Amendment, 31 U.S.C. § 1347. In 1945, less than a year after the Russell Amendment, Congress enacted section 214 of Pub. L. No. 79-49, 59 Stat. 106, 134 (May 3, 1945). Now codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b), section 214 authorizes interagency funding of groups engaging in activities of common interest.

Section 214’s legislative history indicates that it was intended as an amendment to the Russell Amendment. Therefore, to the extent of its terms, it overrides the Russell Amendment’s requirement to seek congressional appropriations after one year. [B-75669, June 16, 1948](#). Also, because it specifically makes appropriations available, it overrides, again to the extent of its terms, the prohibition of 31 U.S.C. § 1346(a)(1) (the 1909 statute). [49 Comp. Gen. 305, 307 \(1969\)](#); <sup>12</sup> [26 Comp. Gen. 354 \(1946\)](#).

The current version of 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b), stemming from the 1982 recodification of title 31, makes appropriations available for interagency groups “conducting activities of interest common to executive agencies when the group includes a representative of the agency.” The original language, which governs in a case like this,<sup>13</sup> was “authorized activities of common interest to such departments and establishments and composed in whole or in part of representatives thereof.” Pub. L. No. 79-49, § 214. It is clear from the original language (“in whole or in part”) that the interagency group can include private parties in addition to the government representatives. [26 Comp. Gen. at 358](#).

It also would seem that the current language requires the group to include at least one representative from every agency participating in the funding.

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<sup>12</sup> The decision in [49 Comp. Gen. 305](#) was erroneously overruled in part by [54 Comp. Gen. 1055 \(1975\)](#), and was reinstated by [56 Comp. Gen. 572 \(1977\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., *Fourco Glass Co. v. Transmirra Products Corp.*, 353 U.S. 222, 227 (1957).

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The original (governing) language did not necessarily say this, and in fact a 1962 decision stated:

“We do not read the language of [section 214] as making agency membership on an interagency board or committee a requisite to the availability of appropriations for meeting the expenses of such interagency groups. Nor have we found anything in the legislative history of the statute which would dictate that such membership is required. Thus in a proper case we would not be required to object to contribution by a nonmember agency toward the expenses of an interagency group, on the sole ground of nonmembership.”

[B-150511, Dec. 28, 1962](#), at 2. Accordingly, the controlling factor is not membership, but “whether the interagency groups are ‘engaged in authorized activities of common interest’ to the contributing agencies.” [B-150511, Jan. 9, 1963](#), at 1.

A device commonly used in interagency funding situations is a working fund. While there is nothing wrong with establishing a working fund as an accounting device, the Comptroller General has emphasized that this does not alter the availability of the amounts contributed. The funds advanced to a common fund by a participating agency remain available only for their original purposes, and only during the source appropriation’s period of obligational availability. [28 Comp. Gen. 365 \(1948\)](#); [B-150963, July 9, 1963](#); [B-51203, Nov. 14, 1945](#). A working fund established to implement 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b) is not an Economy Act working fund. *See* [35 Comp. Gen. 201, 202 \(1955\)](#).

Following are some examples of the application of 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b):

- The Federal Communications Commission, upon making the standard “necessary expense” determination, could use its appropriated funds to finance its share of something called the Radio Technical Commission for Aeronautics (RTCA), an advisory group on aeronautical radio, even though the RTCA had never been authorized by statute or executive order. Payment would have been barred under 31 U.S.C. § 1346(a), but was permissible under 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b). [26 Comp. Gen. 354 \(1946\)](#).
- The Defense Department could participate in funding an interagency group called the National Inventors Council because one of the

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Council's functions was to encourage and screen inventions which might be useful in national defense as well as industry. [35 Comp. Gen. 201 \(1955\)](#).

- The National Service Corps Study Group was established in 1962 to study the feasibility of a national service program patterned after the Peace Corps. It consisted of the Attorney General, Secretaries of Agriculture, Interior, Commerce, Labor, and Health, Education and Welfare, plus some smaller agencies. Because the study extended into such fields as health, education, labor, housing, *etc.*, it could fairly be regarded as being of interest to the agencies asked to participate in the funding. [B-150963, July 9, 1963](#).
- The Defense Department could contribute to the funding of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. [B-148247, Mar. 5, 1962](#).
- Agencies could pay "dues" to the Federal Automatic Data Processing Council, as long as the Council was using the money only for the kinds of expenses for which the source appropriations would be available. [B-161214-O.M., Apr. 24, 1967](#).
- The Federal Trade Commission could continue to pay the salary of an employee sent to Japan as part of an interagency trade mission. [B-54464, Dec. 14, 1945](#).

c. Appropriation Act Provisions

Each of the title 31, United States Code, provisions discussed thus far in this section entered the scene in the form of a permanent general provision contained in an appropriation act. Appropriation acts also may contain other relevant provisions, which may vary from agency to agency or year to year.

One such governmentwide provision is of particular importance. In the 1960s, Congress became increasingly concerned over the proliferation of miscellaneous interagency bodies, created under the apparent *carte blanche* authority of 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b). At the time, the executive could use section 1346(b) to create an interagency body and, assuming compliance with the membership and common interest requirements, fund it indefinitely by "passing the hat." Congress once again began feeling left out.



The result was legislation that effectively modified 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b) by prohibiting the use of appropriated funds for interagency financing without prior and specific congressional approval for that type of financing. The provision first appeared in several appropriation acts for 1969. In 1972, the prohibition was inserted in the Treasury-General Government Appropriation Act and made governmentwide (“this or any other act”). This history is outlined in [B-147637-O.M., Dec. 12, 1974](#).

The original version applied only to interagency groups under 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b). Eventually, Congress realized that this was narrower than it had intended, and dropped the specific reference to section 1346(b), as well as changed “congressional approval” to “statutory approval.” The provision for fiscal year 2006 states:

“No part of any appropriation contained in this or any other Act shall be available for interagency financing of boards (except Federal Executive Boards), commissions, councils, committees, or similar groups (whether or not they are interagency entities) which do not have a prior and specific statutory approval to receive financial support from more than one agency or instrumentality.”

Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, the District of Columbia, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-115, div. A, title VIII, § 810, 119 Stat. 2396, 2497 (Nov. 30, 2005). Note that the group itself may or may not be an interagency group; the statute is directed solely at the method of funding. The exemption for Federal Executive Boards first appeared in 1996.<sup>14</sup>

This provision, which for ease of discussion we shall refer to as section 810, its designation in the statute for fiscal year 2006, does not apply to a government corporation statutorily authorized to determine the nature and character of its expenditures. [B-174571, Jan. 5, 1972](#) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation). Nor does it apply to the Comptroller of the Currency, whose funds, by statute, are not to be construed as appropriated funds. *Id.* Thus, as the cited decision concluded, section 810 would not inhibit contributions by either body to the President’s Commission on Financial Structure and Regulation.

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<sup>14</sup> Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, 1997, Pub. L. No. 104-208, § 613, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-356 (Sept. 30, 1996).

GAO's first encounter with the language in section 810 was [49 Comp. Gen. 305 \(1969\)](#). The Veterans Administration wanted to contract with an individual to serve as director of the Interagency Institutes for Federal Hospital Administrators, the contract cost to be shared by the participating agencies. To start with, because 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b) partially superseded 31 U.S.C. § 1346(a) with respect to certain interagency groups, there was no need to determine whether this particular group was authorized by law. This was the good news. The bad news was that 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b) was itself partially overridden by section 810. Interagency funding would require prior and specific legislative approval. [49 Comp. Gen. at 307](#). Similarly, as we have already noted, 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b), to the extent of certain interagency bodies, also partially supersedes the 1-year requirement of the Russell Amendment. Thus, the President could lawfully create an interagency Radiation Policy Council for a duration in excess of 1 year, but interagency funding would require compliance with section 810. [B-196841-O.M., Dec. 18, 1980](#). Section 810 also has been applied to a proposal to purchase solicitation services for the Combined Federal Campaign from an interagency entity. [67 Comp. Gen. 254 \(1988\)](#).

The “prior and specific” approval can take different forms. One approach is section 829 of Public Law 109-115: “Notwithstanding section 1346 of title 31, United States Code, or section 810 of this Act, funds made available for the current fiscal year by this or any other Act shall be available for the interagency funding of specific projects, workshops, studies, and similar efforts to carry out the purposes of the National Science and Technology Council (authorized by Executive Order No. 12881), which benefit multiple Federal departments, agencies, or entities . . .” Because the statute authorizes the concept but not the precise method, there would presumably be some discretion in this regard—for example, periodic reimbursement, advances to a working fund, *etc.*

Another approach is illustrated by the Federal Accounting Standards Advisory Board (FASAB). FASAB was created administratively in 1990 as an advisory committee to the Comptroller General of the United States, the Secretary of the Treasury, and the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). FASAB recommends accounting standards and principles for the federal government that are issued by GAO and OMB. Further information is available at [www.fasab.com](http://www.fasab.com) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007). GAO covers FASAB's expenses (*e.g.*, executive director and staff salaries) with GAO's appropriation and then bills the other sponsors and the Congressional Budget Office, which also participates on the Board, equal shares of the costs. This funding method is expressly authorized by a

proviso in the general governmentwide provisions of the annual Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, the District of Columbia, and Independent Agencies Appropriations acts. *See, e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 109-115, § 826.

Perhaps the best illustration of the import and impact of the section 810 language is the saga of the Federal Executive Boards. In 1961, President Kennedy created interagency groups called Federal Executive Boards (FEBs) to better coordinate federal activities outside of Washington. Their number has increased over the years.<sup>15</sup> From the outset, the FEBs were funded from the appropriations of the member agencies rather than by direct appropriations. The enactment of the section 810 language in the 1969 appropriation acts gave the agencies something of a jolt because they had been supporting the FEBs up to that point under 31 U.S.C. § 1346(b),<sup>16</sup> entirely legitimately, and now all of a sudden learned that they no longer had the authority to do so.

GAO's first written encounter with the problem came in 1973, when GAO's own field managers asked why they were being asked to pay FEB assessments from personal funds and whether there was any way GAO could pick up the tab. GAO reviewed the history of the section 810 language and concluded that there was no way around the statute:

“We see no possible alternative in the instant case to concluding the language of section [810] . . . prohibits the GAO and all other Federal agencies from using their appropriated funds to provide administrative support, salaries, and reimbursement or payment of a member's assessments for Federal Executive Board activities.”

[B-147637-O.M., Dec. 12, 1974](#), at 6. The solution, of course, was to seek specific authorization from Congress. *Id.*

In 1986, the Veterans Administration and the Small Business Administration came to the conclusion that the section 810 language barred interagency financing of the FEB, and sought GAO's concurrence. They got

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<sup>15</sup> GAO, *Standardized Federal Regions—Little Effect on Agency Management of Personnel*, FPCD-77-39 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 17, 1977), at 2.

<sup>16</sup> This fact may help suggest why Congress wanted to reinsert itself in the process.

it. [65 Comp. Gen. 689 \(1986\)](#). There was one possible—although probably not very feasible—way out. The decision added, “we see nothing to prevent a single entity with a primary interest in the success of the interagency venture, from picking up the entire costs.” *Id.* at 692. Thus, if one agency could be said to have a “primary interest” in a particular Board activity, and if that agency were willing to pay the entire cost without hope of reimbursement, it could do so. The next question, expectedly, was what does primary interest mean? It means that “an agency must have a substantial stake in the outcome of the interagency endeavor and the success of the interagency venture must further the agency’s own mission, programs or functions.” [67 Comp. Gen. 27, 29 \(1987\)](#). This latter decision also reiterated that section 810 barred in-kind as well as cash support. Mere attendance at meetings or functions, however, does not constitute support. *Id.*

One of the things FEBs do is give awards. Absent the requisite statutory approval, an agency may not pay a pro-rata share of the expenses of an FEB awards banquet. [B-219795, Sept. 29, 1986](#). It can, however, pay or reimburse the fee charged to its own nominees, award recipients, and supervisors, under authority of the Incentive Awards Act. [70 Comp. Gen. 16 \(1990\)](#). Under the Incentive Awards Act, it also can make awards to its own employees for services rendered to an FEB. [B-240316, Mar. 15, 1991](#). Similarly, an agency may pay a reasonable registration fee for attendance of its employees at an FEB training seminar. [71 Comp. Gen. 120 \(1991\)](#).

Why this situation persisted for so many years is not clear. GAO had recommended as early as 1977 that the executive branch present the problem of FEB funding to Congress.<sup>17</sup> In any event, as noted above, the section 810 language was amended in 1996 to exempt the FEBs.

Another general provision which has been around for about 20 years is section 815 of the 2006 appropriations act, Pub. L. No. 109-115:

“Notwithstanding section 1346 of title 31, United States Code, or section 810 of this Act, funds made available for fiscal year 1998 by this or any other Act shall be available for the interagency funding of national security and emergency preparedness telecommunications initiatives which benefit

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<sup>17</sup> FPCD-77-39, at 24.

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multiple Federal departments, agencies, or entities, as provided by Executive Order No. 12472 (April 3, 1984).”

This provision first appeared as section 629 of the Treasury, Postal Service and General Government Appropriations Act, 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-202, 101 Stat. 1329, 1329-431 (Dec. 22, 1987).

If an instance of unauthorized interagency funding does occur, the appropriate remedy is an adjustment of accounts, that is, the recipient gives the donor back its money. [B-182398-O.M., Sept. 3, 1976](#). If the period of obligational availability has expired, the adjustment might not serve any useful purpose, even if the recipient entity has or can restore sufficient unobligated balances, because the donor agency could not use the money for new obligations. *Id.* It also would be inappropriate to pursue action against the certifying officers involved because, while there may have been a loss to a particular agency, there is no loss to the government, assuming the money was used for some authorized purpose of the recipient. *Id.*

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#### 4. The Federal Advisory Committee Act

##### a. Overview and Applicability

As we have noted, in the world of miscellaneous boards and committees, advisory committees are by far the largest single group. There are several types: general advisory committees, scientific and technical advisory committees, special clientele (industry) advisory committees, specific task (or action) advisory committees, research committees, and public conferences.<sup>18</sup> They are popular because they represent a relatively inexpensive way for the government to get expert advice, or at least advice from different perspectives; they are criticized because many tend to outlast their usefulness.

If reining in the proliferation of advisory committees is the measure, the century-plus series of fiscal statutes must be said to have met with very limited success. In the report of a 1970 study conducted by the Special Studies Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government

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<sup>18</sup> David S. Brown, *The Management of Advisory Committees: An Assignment for the '70's*, 32 Pub. Ad. Rev. 334, 335 (1972); Richard O. Levine, *Comment, The Federal Advisory Committee Act*, 10 Harv. J. on Legis. 217, 217-18 (1973).

Operations, Subcommittee Chairman John Monagan described the committees in the following terms: “Sort of like satellites, I think of them in that way . . . They go out into outer space but they keep circling around, you know, and no one really knows how many there are or what direction they are going in, or what duplication there is.”<sup>19</sup>

In 1972, Congress made its first attempt to comprehensively regulate advisory committees—the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), Pub. L. No. 92-463, 86 Stat. 770 (Oct. 6, 1972), codified in the appendix to title 5 of the United States Code, sections 1–16, as amended. FACA’s purposes are “to eliminate unnecessary committees; to govern the administration of those that remain; and to inform the public about [their] membership and . . . activities.”<sup>20</sup> It does this by regulating the creation, operation, and termination of executive branch advisory committees. The theory, in plain English, is to start when you are needed and quit when you are done. The General Services Administration (GSA) is given the job of prescribing “administrative guidelines and management controls applicable to advisory committees.” 5 U.S.C. app. § 7(c). GSA’s regulations are found in 41 C.F.R. part 102-3.<sup>21</sup>

The key issue under FACA, and certainly the most hotly litigated, is how to determine whether or not the statute applies to a particular body. As discussed later, this determination has fiscal consequences. In addition,

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<sup>19</sup> House Committee on Government Operations, *The Role and Effectiveness of Federal Advisory Committees*, H.R. Rep. No. 91-1731, at 2 (1970) (quoting a statement made in committee hearings).

<sup>20</sup> Michael H. Cardozo, *The Federal Advisory Committee Act in Operation*, 33 Admin. L. Rev. 1, 10 (1981). The quoted passage is distilled from 5 U.S.C. app. § 2 (*Findings and purpose*). With respect to the objective of eliminating useless committees, see *Carpenter v. Morton*, 424 F. Supp. 603 (D. Nev. 1976); GAO, *Better Evaluations Needed to Weed Out Useless Federal Advisory Committees*, GGD-76-104 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 7, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> The Supreme Court has said that the GSA regulations merit “diminished deference” because they were not issued contemporaneous with the statute and because 5 U.S.C. app. § 7(c), the statutory authority pursuant to which the GSA regulations were promulgated, does not impose liability for violation of the GSA regulations nor has Congress otherwise declared that such regulations shall have the force of law. *Public Citizen v. Department of Justice*, 491 U.S. 440, 463–65 n.12 (1989). The D.C. Circuit accords them no deference because FACA is “applicable to all agencies.” *Association of American Physicians & Surgeons, Inc. v. Clinton*, 997 F.2d 898, 913 (D.C. Cir. 1993). See also *Collins v. National Transportation Safety Board*, 351 F.3d 1246 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (noting that for generic statutes like FACA, their broad applicability undermines any basis for deference and courts, therefore, must review interpretive questions *de novo*).

wholly apart from fiscal matters, a determination that FACA applies means that, among other things: the committee must prepare a detailed charter and file it with appropriate officials before it can meet or take any action (5 U.S.C. app. § 9(c)); its meetings must be open to the public (5 U.S.C. app. § 10(a)(1)); notice of each meeting must be published in the Federal Register (5 U.S.C. app. § 10(a)(2)); it must keep detailed minutes of each meeting (5 U.S.C. app. § 10(c)); a designated officer or employee of the federal government must call or approve each meeting, and an officer or employee of the federal government must chair or attend each meeting (5 U.S.C. app. §§ 10(e), (f)); and it must make transcripts of meetings available to the public at actual duplication cost (5 U.S.C. app. § 11(a)). Advisory committees also must “be fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented and the functions to be performed.” 5 U.S.C. app. §§ 5(b)(2) and (c); 41 C.F.R. §§ 102-3.30(c) and 102-3.60(b)(3). *See also National Anti-Hunger Coalition v. Executive Committee of the President’s Private Sector Survey on Cost Control*, 711 F.2d 1071, 1073 n.1 (D.C. Cir. 1983).

Courts have held that no private cause of action exists under FACA. This is because neither FACA’s text nor its structure “evinces a congressional intent to confer on private litigants a right to enforce the statute’s requirements.” *International Brominated Solvents Ass’n v. American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists, Inc.*, 393 F. Supp. 2d 1362, 1377–78 (M.D. Ga. 2005). *See also Cheney v. United States District Court*, 542 U.S. 367, 374–75 (2004) (acknowledging district court’s holding that FACA does not create a private cause of action); *Natural Resources Defense Council v. Abraham*, 223 F. Supp. 2d 162, 176 (D.D.C. 2002), *vacated in part on other grounds*, 353 F.2d 40 (D.C. Cir. 2004) (courts may not imply the existence of a private cause of action under a statute such as FACA where the plain intent of that statute does not create a cause of action). Further, FACA does not prescribe remedies or penalties for violations. *See* B-278940, Jan. 13, 1998. Thus, assuming a plaintiff can establish standing and then establish some violation, it is up to the court, within the limits of judicial power, to devise an appropriate remedy that is tailored to further FACA’s goals of public accountability and reduction of economic waste. *See California Forestry Ass’n v. United States Forest Service*, 102 F.3d 609 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (citing *Public Citizen*, 491 U.S. at 459); *Akzo-Nobel, Inc. v. United States*, No. 00-30834 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001). One court, after finding FACA violations, permanently enjoined the agency from using the advisory body’s report, “the product of a tainted procedure.” *Alabama-Tombigbee Rivers Coalition v. Department of Interior*, 26 F.3d 1103, 1107 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994). Another potential form of relief is the

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declaratory judgment. *E.g.*, *National Nutritional Foods Association v. Califano*, 603 F.2d 327, 336 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1979). The Second Circuit further noted in *Califano* that, at least as of 1979, no court had used a FACA violation to “invalidate a regulation adopted under otherwise appropriate procedures.” *Id.* Other forms of relief might include orders to open future meetings to the public, produce documents, or comply with any of FACA’s other procedural requirements, depending on the precise violation. As far as we are aware, no court has yet to suggest that it could award a judgment for money damages.

(1) Definition and specific exemptions

The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), as amended by the Federal Advisory Committee Act Amendments of 1997,<sup>22</sup> defines “advisory committee” as follows:

“The term ‘advisory committee’ means any committee, board, commission, council, conference, panel, task force, or other similar group, or any subcommittee or other subgroup thereof . . . which is—

(A) established by statute or reorganization plan, or

(B) established or utilized by the President, or

(C) established or utilized by one or more agencies,

in the interest of obtaining advice or recommendations for the President or one or more agencies or officers of the Federal Government, except that such term excludes (i) any committee that is composed wholly of full-time, or permanent part-time, officers or employees of the Federal Government, and (ii) any committee that is created by the National Academy of Sciences or the National Academy of Public Administration.”

5 U.S.C. app. § 3(2).

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<sup>22</sup> Pub. L. No. 105-153, § 2(a), 111 Stat. 2689 (Dec. 17, 1997).



In assessing the scope of section 3(2), the first (and easiest) step is to exclude those entities FACA itself expressly exempts. Of the exemptions in section 3(2), the exemption for committees composed wholly of government officials is the most important. For the most part, this is relatively straightforward and easy to apply, but not always. One issue in *Association of American Physicians & Surgeons (AAPS) v. Clinton*, 997 F.2d 898 (D.C. Cir. 1993), was the status of the President's spouse. President Clinton had asked the First Lady to chair his Task Force on National Health Care Reform. If she could be regarded as a government official, FACA would not apply because everyone else on the task force was unquestionably a government official. While the court believed the question far from easy, *id.* at 906, it found persuasive the suggestion that "Congress itself has recognized that the President's spouse acts as the functional equivalent of an assistant to the President." *Id.* at 904 (emphasis omitted). The First Lady could therefore be deemed a *de facto* officer of the government for FACA purposes. *Id.* at 905.

Also at issue in *AAPS* was whether the interdepartmental working group established by the President (separate from the task force) for the purpose of gathering information and developing options on health care reform for the task force was an advisory committee subject to FACA. The working group allegedly consisted of both federal employees and private consultants who attended at least some working group meetings. *Id.* at 914–15. The court stated that if a consultant's involvement and role in an advisory committee is indistinguishable from other members, for example, the consultant regularly attends and fully participates in committee meetings as if he were a member, he is a *de facto* member of the committee and "his status as a private citizen would disqualify the working group from the section 3(2) exemption for meetings of full-time government employees." *Id.* at 915.

The analysis can also be complicated when there are separation of powers concerns. For example, in 2001, President Bush created the National Energy Policy Development Group (NEPDG) to advise and make recommendations to him regarding energy policy. Although the only officially named members of the NEPDG were the Vice President, several cabinet officers, and other high level federal officials, private sector representatives were alleged to have had extensive participation in NEPDG meetings and activities as well. Public interest groups filed suit under FACA against the NEPDG and its individual members, seeking access to NEPDG records. They argued, among other things, that the private

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individuals had played such a substantial role in the group’s activities that under *AAPS*, they became *de facto* members.

In response, the government filed a petition seeking to modify or dissolve plaintiff’s discovery order, among other things, which made its way to the Supreme Court. The Court was sympathetic to the Vice President’s argument that applying FACA would violate separation-of-powers principles and interfere with the executive’s constitutional prerogatives. According to the Court, the separation-of-powers considerations include giving “recognition to the paramount necessity of protecting the Executive Branch from vexatious litigation that might distract it from the energetic performance of its constitutional duties.” *Cheney v. United States District Court*, 542 U.S. 367, 382 (2004). The Supreme Court remanded the case to the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals for “reexamin[ation of] . . . whether [FACA] embodies the *de facto* membership doctrine.” *Id.* at 371.

On remand, the D.C. Circuit ruled that the private individuals were not *de facto* members and thus that the NEPDG was not subject to FACA. *In re Cheney*, 406 F.3d 723 (D.C. Cir. 2005). The court reasoned that “[i]n light of the severe separation-of-powers problems in applying FACA on the basis that private parties participated in, or influenced, or were otherwise involved with a committee in the Executive Office of the President,” strict construction of the statute is required. *Id.* at 728. Accordingly, the court held that, “if the President has given no one other than a federal official a vote in or, if the committee acts by consensus, a veto over the committee’s decisions,” an advisory committee is deemed composed wholly of federal officials, and thereby qualifies for the section 3(2) FACA exemption. *Id.* Thus, under *In re Cheney*, an individual would have to have an official vote or veto to qualify as a *de facto* member.

The exemption for committees created by the National Academy of Sciences or the National Academy of Public Administration was added in the 1997 amendment.<sup>23</sup> While exempt from the section 3(2) definition, they

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<sup>23</sup> The original version of section 3(2), until the 1997 amendment, exempted the Commission on Government Procurement and the Advisory Committee on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR). The Procurement Commission finished its job in 1973. The ACIR was terminated in 1995, but extended the following year for the sole and limited purpose of performing a contract with the National Gambling Impact Study Commission. Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government Appropriations Act, 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-52, title IV, 109 Stat. 468, 480 (Nov. 19, 1995) (termination); Pub. L. No. 104-328, 110 Stat. 4004 (Oct. 19, 1996) (extension).

are nevertheless subject to a set of procedures included in the 1997 legislation. 5 U.S.C. app. § 15. Section 4 of FACA further exempts committees whose enabling legislation specifically provides otherwise (this would be the case in any event); committees established or utilized by the Central Intelligence Agency or the Federal Reserve System; and certain state and local bodies.

Exemptions, of course, may appear in other statutes. For example, section 204(b) of the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act of 1995, Pub. L. No. 104-4, 109 Stat. 48, 65–66 (Mar. 22, 1995), codified at 2 U.S.C. § 1534(b), renders FACA inapplicable to meetings between federal and state, local, or tribal officials, if they deal solely with federal programs “that explicitly or inherently share intergovernmental responsibilities or administration.” *See also* 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.40(g) (intergovernmental committees not covered). Similarly, section 3112 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2004 permits an officer or employee of a management and operating contractor of the Department of Energy to be treated as an officer or employee of the Department for purposes of determining whether the group is an advisory committee within the meaning of section 3 of FACA.<sup>24</sup> Pub. L. No. 108-136, div. C, title XXXI, 117 Stat. 1392, 1743 (Nov. 24, 2003), 42 U.S.C. § 7234 note.

Other exemptions have been recognized administratively or derive from case law. For example, the Justice Department has concluded that FACA does not apply to a body created jointly by the United States and another nation. 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 321 (1979). The Justice Department also concluded in 1988 that the Smithsonian Institution is not a FACA “agency.” It reasoned that because FACA incorporates the definition of agency under the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), 5 U.S.C. § 551(1), and the Smithsonian does not meet the terms of the APA’s definition, the Smithsonian and any of its advisory bodies are not covered by FACA. 12 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 122 (1988). The D.C. Circuit has since buttressed this conclusion by confirming that the Smithsonian is not an APA agency.

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<sup>24</sup> This provision was enacted following the district court’s decision in *Natural Resources Defense Council v. Abraham*, 223 F. Supp. 2d 162 (D.D.C. 2002). The court held that FACA applied to a committee that consisted of federal employees and employees of contractors who managed and operated Department of Energy-owned laboratories, where the contractors were providing advice on a project that lay outside of their specific contract. *Id.* at 192. As a result of the enactment of the statute, the district court order pertaining to the FACA violation was set aside in *Natural Resources Defense Council v. Department of Energy*, 353 F.3d 40 (D.C. Cir. 2004).

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*Dong v. Smithsonian Institution*, 125 F.3d 877 (D.C. Cir. 1997), *cert. denied*, 524 U.S. 922 (1998).

If the specific exemptions do not resolve the question, there are several principles that are relevant in assessing applicability. They are, unfortunately, often difficult to apply, and we do little more than note them and allude to the problem areas.<sup>25</sup>

(2) Advisory versus operational

By its terms, the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) applies to committees which are purely advisory. In general, it does not apply to bodies that are “operational.” See 5 U.S.C. app. § 9(b) (“[u]nless otherwise specifically provided by statute or Presidential directive, advisory committees shall be utilized solely for advisory functions”); § 2(b)(6) (“the function of advisory committees should be advisory only”). With respect to these provisions, as one court has said, “Congress intended that federal decision makers, not their advisers or delegates, execute federal policy.” *Consumers Union v. Department of Health, Education and Welfare*, 409 F. Supp. 473, 477 (D.D.C. 1976), *aff’d*, 551 F.2d 466 (1977). The Justice Department has offered a useful test: does the body make or implement decisions itself, or does it offer advice to federal officials who themselves will then make the decisions? 5 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 283, 285 (1981).

Illustrative cases include *Sofamor Danek Group, Inc. v. Gaus*, 61 F.3d 929 (D.C. Cir. 1995), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 1112 (1996) (the Low Back Panel, although established by the government, was charged with developing guidelines for health care practitioners rather than providing advice to the federal government, and was therefore operational); *Public Citizen v. Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution*, 622 F. Supp. 753 (D.D.C. 1985) (Bicentennial Commission primarily operational and therefore exempt); 57 Comp. Gen. 51 (1977) (same result for National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year); B-222831-O.M., May 30, 1986 (Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation). The fact that the commission may be required to submit reports to the President and/or Congress when it has finished its work does

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<sup>25</sup> Good references are Stephen P. Croley, *Practical Guidance on the Applicability of the Federal Advisory Committee Act*, 10 Admin. L.J. 111 (1996); Stephen P. Croley and William F. Funk, *The Federal Advisory Committee Act and Good Government*, 14 Yale J. on Reg. 451 (1997).

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not change the result. *Public Citizen*, 622 F. Supp. at 758. These cases, by the way (except for *Sofamor*), point to one type of body which is almost always operational—the commemorative or memorial commission. Their role is usually to plan, coordinate, and implement a particular celebration. Further examples of this type are the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, Pub. L. No. 98-375, 98 Stat. 1257 (Aug. 7, 1984); the Civil War Centennial Commission, Pub. L. No. 85-305, 71 Stat. 626 (Sept. 7, 1957); and the National Capital Sesquicentennial Commission, Pub. L. No. 80-203, 61 Stat. 396 (July 18, 1947).

The more difficult situation arises when a body has both advisory and operational functions. FACA clearly anticipates its applicability to committees with some operational functions. For example, a covered committee's charter must specify "a description of the duties for which the committee is responsible, and, if such duties are not solely advisory, a specification of the authority for such functions." 5 U.S.C. app. § 9(c)(F). Also, the fragment of section 9(b) of FACA quoted above explicitly recognizes the inclusion of nonadvisory functions if specifically provided by statute or Presidential directive. The General Services Administration (GSA) regulations implement these distinctions by exempting committees which are "established to perform primarily operational as opposed to advisory functions." 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.40(k). An illustrative case is *Natural Resources Defense Council v. EPA*, 806 F. Supp. 275 (D.D.C. 1992) (the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Governors' Forum on Environmental Management primarily operational because participating state governors acted as independent chief executives in partnership with EPA in implementing pertinent legislation). GSA's regulation provides further, however, that a primarily operational committee can become subject to FACA "if it becomes primarily advisory in nature." 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.40(k).

(3) Who is being advised?

The definition of an advisory committee in section 3(2) of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), 5 U.S.C. app. § 3(2) quoted above, refers to bodies established or utilized "in the interest of obtaining advice or recommendations for the President or one or more agencies or officers of the Federal Government." Section 3(3) of FACA expressly incorporates the Administrative Procedure Act definition of "agency," 5 U.S.C. § 551(1), which specifically excludes Congress. *See also* 5 U.S.C. app. § 2(a). Thus, assuming the absence of any other disqualifying factors, an advisory committee will be subject to FACA if it advises the President and/or an

executive agency, but not if it advises Congress. *E.g.*, [B-135945, Mar. 29, 1973](#) (National Study Commission established by Federal Water Pollution Control Act exempt from FACA because it advises Congress). As that decision points out, language to specifically include Congress was contained in earlier versions of FACA but was deleted prior to enactment. Similarly, a body established to advise the Comptroller General, an official of the legislative branch, is for that reason not subject to FACA. [B-130961-O.M., Feb. 12, 1974](#).

What if an advisory body is required to report both to Congress and to the President and/or an executive agency? An early decision espoused the view that merely including Congress on the list of recipients is enough to invoke the exemption. [B-178395, Apr. 26, 1973](#). However, this essentially “form over substance” approach has not been followed, and later opinions by GAO and the Justice Department stress the need to examine the committee’s nature and essence. For example, the legislation establishing the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research directed the commission to report to the President, the Congress, and the Secretary of the then Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Considering all relevant factors—the legislative scheme in its entirety, the legislative history, and the real essence of the commission’s functions—GAO concluded that the commission was “viewed by Congress as a body intended primarily to provide assistance to the Secretary,” and therefore subject to FACA. [B-143181, Oct. 9, 1975](#). Similarly, the Justice Department concluded that the Native Hawaiians Study Commission was established primarily to advise Congress and was accordingly exempt from FACA, even though it was required to report as well to the President. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 39 (1982).

Justice has applied the same type of approach where an advisory committee reports to several executive branch recipients, some of which are covered by FACA and some of which are exempt. *See* 12 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 11 (1988) (Presidential Task Force on Market Mechanisms exempt from FACA because of its relationship to the Federal Reserve Board, notwithstanding that it also reports to the President and Secretary of the Treasury).

(4) “Established or utilized”

A key portion of section 3(2) of the Federal Advisory Committee Act’s (FACA) definition of advisory committee is that the group be “established

or utilized” by the President or by one or more agencies “in the interest of obtaining advice or recommendations for the President or one or more agencies.” Of the two words, “established” tends to be the easier to apply. It generally means created directly by a statute, the President, or a federal agency. “Established by statute” requires that the statute at least directly authorize the creation of advisory committees, if not the specific committee in question; committees “which merely can be said to owe their existence to legislation” do not meet the standard. *Lombardo v. Handler*, 397 F. Supp. 792, 796 (D.D.C. 1975), *aff’d mem.*, 546 F.2d 1043 (D.C. Cir. 1976), *cert. denied*, 431 U.S. 932 (1977). A group established by a government contractor is not, for FACA purposes, established by the government. *E.g.*, *Food Chemical News v. Young*, 900 F.2d 328 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 498 U.S. 846 (1990).

Also, since section 3(3) of FACA defines agency by incorporating the Administrative Procedure Act definition, 5 U.S.C. § 551(1), FACA will not apply to a body, however advisory it may be, created by a government entity not covered by the APA definition. For example, an advisory body established by the United States Sentencing Commission, an agency in the judicial branch, was found exempt from FACA in *Washington Legal Foundation v. United States Sentencing Commission*, 17 F.3d 1446 (D.C. Cir. 1994). The reason is that the APA definition excludes “the courts” and “the Congress,” and the courts have broadly construed this as excluding basically the entire judicial and legislative branches. *Id.* at 1449. *See also Aluminum Company of America v. National Marine Fisheries Service*, 92 F.3d 902 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996) (group formed by federal and nonfederal litigants to advise on compliance with court order was prompted, if by any single agency, by the district court and therefore exempt from FACA).

The word “utilized” is much more difficult. Prior to 1989 at least, there was no universally accepted approach to its application. The problem is that giving “utilized” its ordinary meaning, “make use of,” would bring in a variety of private bodies seemingly beyond the scope of FACA’s intended reach. Some courts applied a fairly straightforward approach. *E.g.*, *Food Chemical News, Inc. v. Davis*, 378 F. Supp. 1048 (D.D.C. 1974) (agency which solicited comments from private industry group incident to considering change to regulations indisputably utilized that group to obtain advice). Others, viewing the term “utilized” as ambiguous, were guided more by legislative history. *E.g.*, *Lombardo*, 397 F. Supp. at 800.

The Supreme Court confronted the issue in *Public Citizen v. United States Department of Justice*, 491 U.S. 440 (1989). The question was whether

FACA applied to consultations between the Justice Department and a standing committee of the American Bar Association regarding potential nominees for federal judgeships. Clearly, the standing committee was not established by the President or by the Justice Department. Equally clearly, if “utilized” were given its ordinary meaning, then the ABA committee was utilized by Justice.

However, the Court realized that a literal reading of section 3(2) would expand FACA’s coverage far beyond what Congress had in mind, and would also implicate constitutional concerns. In what may become the most quoted judicial statement since “I know it when I see it,” the Court called the word “utilize” a “woolly verb, its contours left undefined by the statute itself.” *Public Citizen*, 491 U.S. at 452. This being the case, the Court looked to legislative history to shear the wool, and found that Congress seemed concerned mostly with “groups organized by, or closely tied to, the Federal Government, and thus enjoying quasi-public status.” *Id.* at 461. The Court continued:

“The phrase ‘or utilized’ . . . appears to have been added simply to clarify that FACA applies to advisory committees established by the Federal Government in a generous sense of that term, encompassing groups formed indirectly by quasi-public organizations . . . ‘for’ public agencies as well as ‘by’ such agencies themselves.”

*Id.* at 462. Under this approach, the ABA committee—privately formed and “in receipt of no federal funds and not amenable to . . . strict management by agency officials” (*id.* at 457–58)—was clearly excluded.

Several lower courts have suggested that *Public Citizen* treated “utilize” essentially as a form of “established.” *E.g.*, *Aluminum Company of America*, 92 F.3d at 905. While there is some truth to this and the distinction surely has been blurred, the fact remains that the statute uses the word “or” and that therefore they are two separate and exclusive concepts. *Huron Environmental Activist League v. EPA*, 917 F. Supp. 34, 40 n.6 (D.D.C. 1996). “Established” refers to a government-formed body while “utilized” refers to a group formed by nongovernment sources but which is nevertheless sufficiently close to an agency as to be amenable to management or control by that agency. *Food Chemical News*, 900 F.2d at 332–33. As the D.C. Circuit phrased it in *Sofamor Danek Group, Inc. v. Gaus*, 61 F.3d 929 (D.C. Cir. 1995), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 1112 (1996), in light of the *Public Citizen*’s interpretation of “utilize,” “FACA can only



apply if the committee is established, managed, or controlled for the purpose of obtaining advice or recommendations for the federal government.” *Sofamor*, 61 F.3d at 936.

If one point emerges from *Public Citizen* and its progeny, it is that FACA will be difficult to apply to a body not established by the government. To cite a few examples, the courts have found that the following entities were not subject to FACA because they were not utilized in the *Public Citizen* sense:

- Working groups created to aid in implementing a court order regarding the protection of an endangered species. The groups were not funded by the government, nor were they subject to federal management. *Aluminum Company of America*, 92 F.3d 902.
- A group of experts established by a contractor to advise on food and cosmetic safety issues. Not only did the contractor, a private organization, not enjoy “quasi-public status,” it set the group’s agenda, scheduled its meetings, and reviewed its work. *Food Chemical News*, 900 F.2d at 333.
- A cement industry group that met with EPA. Although EPA determined the schedule and made other logistical arrangements for meetings with the cement industry group, there was no showing that the group was subject to EPA’s management or control or that it was “so closely tied to the executive branch of the government as to render it a functionary thereof.” *Huron Environmental Activist League*, 917 F. Supp. at 40.
- An advisory committee to the Sentencing Commission was not utilized by the Justice Department because, as a judicial branch entity, it was not, and could not be, managed or controlled by Justice. Minority membership on the committee (in this case, 2 Justice officials out of 16 members) is not control. *Washington Legal Foundation*, 17 F.3d at 1450–51.

As noted above, all of these cases involved the interpretation of the term “utilized” in section 3(2) of FACA. However, the term is also used in section 4(b) of FACA, which expressly exempts from FACA requirements advisory committees that are “established or utilized” by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA): “Nothing in this Act shall be construed to apply to any advisory committee established or utilized by—(1) the Central Intelligence Agency.” The use of the term “utilized” in the section 4(b)

sense was addressed in *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation v. Lago*, Civ. A. No. 05-682(RMC) (D.D.C. Nov. 15, 2006). By Executive Order No. 13328, Feb. 6, 2004, the President established the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (Commission) to investigate the intelligence communities' prior assessments of and current capabilities to confront weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and submit a report on its findings and recommendations by March 31, 2005. The Executive Order also provided that the "Central Intelligence Agency and other components of the Intelligence Community shall utilize the Commission and its resulting report." Exec. Order No. 13328, ¶ 2(d). The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation (Center)<sup>26</sup> sought the materials used in developing the Commission's report, and in the process the Center brought suit complaining that the Commission had failed to comply with certain of FACA's requirements, such as keeping detailed minutes of each meeting and making records available for public inspection. See 5 U.S.C. app. §§ 10(b), (c), and 11(a).

In determining whether the Commission was an advisory committee under FACA, the court considered the cases such as *Public Citizen* and its progeny, which addressed the definition of "utilized" in the context of FACA section 3(2), and summarized the definitions in those circumstances: "[A] committee is 'established' when it is formed by a Government agency, and 'utilized' when it is organized by a non-governmental entity 'but nonetheless so closely tied to an agency as to be amendable to strict management by agency officials.'" *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, slip op. at 6 (citations omitted). The court found these definitions did not apply to the concept of "utilized" as used in FACA section 4(b), which should be read more broadly to ensure that FACA's requirements "would not interfere with or jeopardize the confidentiality of the workings of the CIA." *Id.* at 8. The court instead read the word "utilized" in section 4(b) in light of its common meaning "to put to use." *Id.* In this case, although the CIA did not have any particular management role *vis-à-vis* the Commission's work, the fact that the CIA could "utilize" or, using the court's definition, "put to use" the Commission and its report was sufficient to trigger the FACA exemption in section 4(b). *Id.*

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<sup>26</sup> The Center is a private, nonprofit policy organization that seeks the reduction and eventual elimination of all weapons of mass destruction as a significant tool of U.S. national security policy. More information is available at the Center's Web site, [www.armscontrolcenter.org](http://www.armscontrolcenter.org) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

(5) Other factors

The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) applies to a group acting as a group; it does not apply to individuals acting as individuals just because they happen to be in the same place while they are doing it. *Association of American Physicians & Surgeons (AAPS) v. Clinton*, 997 F.2d 898, 915 (D.C. Cir. 1993) (court opined that FACA does not apply to a “collection of individuals who do not significantly interact with each other”); *Aluminum Company of America v. National Marine Fisheries Service*, 92 F.3d 902, 907 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996) (*quoting AAPS*). The GSA regulations reflect this point. See 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.40 (formerly 41 C.F.R. § 101-6.1004), discussed in [B-202455, Aug. 30, 1984](#), and [B-202455, Mar. 21, 1985](#). As the Justice Department has put it:

“FACA applies by its terms to ‘advisory committees.’ ‘Advisory committee’ is a term that connotes a body that deliberates together to provide advice. Therefore, as a matter of statutory construction, we believe that FACA does not apply to a group which simply acts as a forum to collect individual views rather than to bring a collective judgment to bear.”

14 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 53, 55 (1990). The requirement that a committee act as a committee does not mean that it must give “consensus advice.” *AAPS*, 997 F.2d at 913.

Consensus or not, the advice must relate directly to governmental policy issues. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Clinton*, 76 F.3d 1232, 1233 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (Presidential legal expense trust, established to help defray personal legal fees, not subject to FACA); *Grigsby Brandford & Co. v. United States*, 869 F. Supp. 984, 1001 (D.D.C. 1994); 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.25 (the General Services Administration’s definition of advisory committee).

An important, although not in and of itself necessarily conclusive, factor is the degree of formality attaching to the group. An early and often-cited FACA case held the statute inapplicable to a group whose “meetings are unstructured, informal and not conducted for the purpose of obtaining advice on specific subjects indicated in advance.” *Nader v. Baroody*, 396 F. Supp. 1231, 1234–35 (D.D.C. 1975). Other cases, however, have applied FACA to informal meetings. *E.g.*, *National Nutritional Foods Ass’n v. Califano*, 603 F.2d 327 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1979); *Food Chemical News, Inc. v. Davis*, 378 F. Supp. 1048 (D.D.C. 1974). The more recent trend seems to be

to follow the approach of *Baroody*. Thus, the D.C. Circuit has stated: “In order to implicate FACA, the President, or his subordinates, must create an advisory group that has, in large measure, an organized structure, a fixed membership, and a specific purpose.” *AAPS*, 997 F.2d at 914, *cited in Aluminum Company of America*, 92 F.3d at 906 (“existence of a formal and structured group leans toward a finding of FACA applicability”). *See also Huron Environmental Activist League v. EPA*, 917 F. Supp. 34, 42 (D.D.C. 1996); *Grigsby Brandford & Co.*, 869 F. Supp. at 1001.

A group’s funding is also relevant but not conclusive. One of the factors the Supreme Court noted in holding FACA inapplicable to the American Bar Association’s committee on federal judgeships was that it was “in receipt of no federal funds.” *Public Citizen v. Department of Justice*, 491 U.S. 440, 457 (1989). *See also Aluminum Company of America*, 92 F.3d at 906. Thus, the absence of federal funding is a factor supporting a conclusion of nonapplicability. In view of all the other ways to fall outside the statute, the presence of federal funding would not appear to be particularly revealing one way or the other. While the mere existence of federal funding may not tell you very much, its precise source may. For example, in determining that a particular committee was designed primarily to advise Congress rather than the President, the Justice Department found it relevant that the committee was originally funded from the contingent fund of the Senate. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 39, 41–42 (1982). *See also* 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 285, 290 n.11 (1989) for a case in which no clear inferences could be drawn.

The status of subcommittees or subgroups is not entirely clear. The FACA definition expressly includes boards, committees, *etc.*, “or any subcommittee or other subgroup thereof.” 5 U.S.C. app. § 3(2). One court has found that task forces of the President’s Private Sector Survey on Cost Control were not subject to FACA because “[t]hey do not directly advise the President or any federal agency, but rather provide information and recommendations for consideration to the Committee.” *National Anti-Hunger Coalition v. Executive Committee*, 557 F. Supp. 524, 529 (D.D.C.), *aff’d*, 711 F.2d 1071 (D.C. Cir. 1983). Under this approach, the subgroup operates essentially as staff of the parent committee. GAO questioned whether this is really what Congress had in mind:

“One would expect most subcommittees or subgroups to report to their parent committee, rather than bypassing the parent committee and reporting directly to a Federal official. . . . There is no reason to presume that Congress

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intended subcommittees or subgroups to be included only in those unusual circumstances where they side-step their parent committees.”

[B-199008-O.M., June 14, 1983](#), at 9.

As discussed earlier, the D.C. Circuit revisited the issue in the 1993 case, *Association of American Physicians & Surgeons v. Clinton*, 997 F.2d 898, where the court examined the status of a working group set up to assist the President’s Task Force on National Health Care Reform. Although not expressly repudiating the *Anti-Hunger* reasoning in all cases, the court now pointed out that “we did not explicitly approve the judge’s reasoning relating to the supposed staff groups.” *AAPS*, 997 F.2d at 912. While the court did not have sufficient information to decide the issue, it hinted strongly that subgroups would be subject to different degrees of stringency depending on whether the parent group was (as in *Anti-Hunger*) or was not (as in *AAPS*) itself subject to FACA.

“In contrast to the situation here, in *Anti-Hunger* the top levels of the *outside* advisory groups were covered by FACA. . . . In that scenario, there is less reason to focus on subordinate advisers or consultants who are presumably under the control of the superior groups. . . . But when the Task Force itself is considered part of the government—due to the government officials exemption—we must consider more closely FACA’s relevance to the working group. For it is the working group that now is the point of contact between the public and the government.”

*AAPS*, 997 F.2d at 913 (emphasis in original). The court did not address the extent to which the distinction would be relevant, if at all, where the parent body is exempt from FACA for some reason other than the government officials’ exemption.

b. Creation and Funding

Funding of a federal advisory committee depends largely on how it was created. Creation is addressed in section 9(a) of the Federal Advisory Committee Act:

“(a) No advisory committee shall be established unless such establishment is—

- (1) specifically authorized by statute or by the President; or
- (2) determined as a matter of formal record by the head of the agency involved after consultation with the Administrator [of General Services] with timely notice published in the Federal Register, to be in the public interest in connection with the performance of duties imposed on that agency by law.”

5 U.S.C. app. § 9(a). As this provision indicates, and as the GSA regulations reflect (41 C.F.R. § 102-3.50), there are several ways to create an advisory committee:

- by statute;
- by the President, usually by executive order;
- by the President pursuant to statutory authorization;
- by an agency head.

Indeed, one of the significant features of section 9(a) is its explicit recognition of the nonstatutory creation of advisory committees by the executive branch.

(1) Statutory committees: creation

Congress, of course, can legislatively create committees or other groups, advisory and/or operational. Therefore, the discussion under this heading is not limited to advisory bodies. Statutes creating a board, commission, committee, or similar group may include the following elements:

*It may prescribe the group’s functions and duties.* Unless otherwise provided, this description will determine whether the group is “primarily operational” and thus exempt from the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). If the group’s functions include holding hearings or taking testimony, the statute may address such topics as the expenses of witnesses and the treatment of subpoenas. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 104-169, § 5(a), 110 Stat. 1482, 1484–85 (Aug. 3, 1996) (National Gambling Impact Study Commission).

*It may address the group’s status under FACA.* The statute may expressly provide that the group is subject to FACA. *E.g.*, 20 U.S.C. § 9252(e)(3)

(National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board). It may render the group wholly exempt from FACA. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 98-399, § 5(c), 98 Stat. 1473, 1474 (Aug. 27, 1984) (Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission). Or, it may exempt the group from certain portions of FACA. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 93-348, § 211(a), 88 Stat. 342, 351–52 (July 12, 1974) (stating that section 14 of FACA—termination and renewal—shall not be applicable to the National Advisory Council for the Protection of Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research).

*It may prescribe the group’s membership and composition.* To the extent the group will include or consist of private members, it will prescribe who is to appoint them. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 86-380, § 3, 73 Stat. 703, 704 (Sept. 24, 1959) (Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations members shall be appointed by the President, the President of the Senate, or the Speaker of the House); Pub. L. No. 93-348, § 211(a) (members shall be appointed by the department head). The statute may prohibit members from holding any other position as an officer or employee of the United States during their period of service.<sup>27</sup> *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 90-515, § 2(b), 82 Stat. 868 (Sept. 26, 1968) (National Water Commission). Absent a provision of this nature, nothing prohibits a private individual from serving on more than one committee. Similarly, a government official may serve on more than one body as long as “the person receives only one salary, the positions are not ‘incompatible’ from the standpoint of public policy, and there is no augmentation of relevant appropriations.” 14 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 157, 160 (1990). *See also* 8 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 200, 205–06 (1984).

*It may address the compensation of members and, if applicable, the hiring of staff.* Members may or may not be compensated for their services, and members serving without compensation may nevertheless be allowed travel expenses. An example is Pub. L. No. 98-399, § 4(d) (Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission). Enabling statutes frequently provide that members who are officers or employees of the government or Members of Congress may not receive compensation for their service as members (because of the dual compensation laws, primarily 5 U.S.C. § 5533), but may be allowed travel expenses. *E.g.*,

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<sup>27</sup> *See* 50 Comp. Gen. 736 (1971) (holding that membership on an advisory council was a position as an officer or employee of the United States for purposes of such a provision). For similar holdings in other contexts, see 24 Comp. Gen. 498, 500 (1945); 16 Comp. Gen. 495, 497 (1936); 23 Comp. Dec. 372, 374 (1917); 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 321, 322–23 (1979).

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Pub. L. No. 91-129, § 5(a), 83 Stat. 269, 271 (Nov. 26, 1969) (Commission on Government Procurement).

Payment of a *per diem* amount in lieu of subsistence is available only where authorized by statute. [20 Comp. Gen. 361, 363 \(1941\)](#) (Commission on Fine Arts); [10 Comp. Gen. 239, 240 \(1930\)](#) (George Washington Bicentennial Commission). For committees subject to it, FACA provides the necessary authority. 5 U.S.C. app. § 7(d)(1)(B). For other groups, the authority must be found elsewhere. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 2303(a) (Holocaust Memorial Council).

In most cases, compensation is provided in one of two ways: (1) the “daily equivalent” of a specified grade/level of the General Schedule or Executive Schedule, or (2) a *per diem* basis, that is, a fixed number of dollars per day. In either case, compensation is payable only for days the member actually performs duties. The compensation is payable in full regardless of how much or how little the person works on any given day. [45 Comp. Gen. 131, 133 \(1965\)](#) (addressing *per diem* payments); [28 Comp. Gen. 211–12 \(1948\)](#) (same). (Of course, to trigger the entitlement at all, the “little” must exceed zero.)

Another type of compensation provision authorizes compensation in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 3109, the expert and consultant statute. This will limit compensation to the highest rate for a GS-15 unless a higher rate is expressly provided by statute. [51 Comp. Gen. 224, 226 \(1971\)](#); [43 Comp. Gen. 509 \(1964\)](#); [29 Comp. Gen. 267, 268–69 \(1949\)](#).

For advisory committees under FACA, the statute imposes a compensation ceiling of the rate specified for level IV of the Executive Schedule. 5 U.S.C. app. § 7(d); 5 U.S.C. §§ 5315, 5376 note. However, GSA’s FACA regulations require the agency head to personally authorize any rate higher than GS-15. 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.130. Both the statute and regulations authorize the payment of travel expenses for duties performed away from home or regular place of business. 5 U.S.C. app. § 7(d); 41 C.F.R. § 102-3.130.

A common provision exempts members and/or staff from the so-called civil service laws. GAO has held that the phrase “civil service laws” refers to the statutes and regulations governing appointments, and does not include the provisions, now also in title 5, United States Code, addressing salary rates. [53 Comp. Gen. 531, 532 \(1974\)](#). A more precise version of this language is “without regard to the provisions of [5 U.S.C.] governing appointments in the competitive service.” Pub. L. No. 93-348, § 211(a). If exemption from



both is desired, the modern language is “without regard to the provisions of [5 U.S.C.] governing appointments in the competitive service, and without regard to chapter 51 and subchapter III of chapter 53 of such title relating to classification and General Schedule pay rates.” *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 108-458, § 1061(g)(1), 116 Stat. 3638, 3687–88 (Dec. 17, 2004) (Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board); Pub. L. No. 100-94, § 5, 101 Stat. 700, 701 (Aug. 18, 1987) (Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission).

*It may make some provision for support services.* The committee may need office space, office equipment, staff, *etc.* Especially if the committee is tied in by subject matter to some existing department, the legislation may direct that department to provide support services. Such support services may or may not be reimbursable. For example, the Interior Department is authorized to provide services and support to the Holocaust Memorial Council “on a reimbursable basis.” 36 U.S.C. § 2304(d). In contrast, support services provided to the National Commission on Restructuring the Internal Revenue Service by the General Services Administration or the Treasury Department are to be “on a nonreimbursable basis.” Pub. L. No. 104-52, § 637(d)(4), 109 Stat. 468, 511 (Nov. 19, 1995). Still another variation leaves it to the parties to fight it out. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 93-556, § 7(b), 88 Stat. 1788, 1792 (Dec. 27, 1974) (Commission on Federal Paperwork may obtain services from any government agency, “reimbursable or otherwise, as may be agreed” by the Commission and the agency).

*It may prescribe applicable reporting requirements.* (See section A.4.a(3) of this chapter.)

*It may provide for the group’s termination, at least for groups intended to have a short duration or single-project groups.* A common provision mandates termination a specified number of days or months after submission of required reports. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 88-606, § 4(b), 78 Stat. 982, 983 (Sept. 19, 1964) (Public Land Law Review Commission shall terminate on the earlier of a fixed date or 6 months after submission of its report). Some entities may simply terminate on a fixed date, an approach suitable for memorial commissions, for example. *E.g.* Pub. L. No. 98-101, § 7, 97 Stat. 719, 722 (Sept. 29, 1983) (Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution “shall terminate on December 31, 1989”).

For groups subject to it, FACA addresses termination if the establishing legislation is otherwise silent. An advisory committee will terminate two

years after its date of establishment unless its duration is “otherwise provided for by law.” 5 U.S.C. app. § 14(a)(2)(B). The Justice Department has concluded that the nature of a group’s functions may exempt it from the automatic termination of section 14. Specifically:

“In our view, the duration of a statutorily created advisory committee may be ‘otherwise provided for by law’ either expressly or by implication. Such duration is provided for by implication if the statute that creates or assigns functions to an advisory committee provides for it a specific function that is continuing in nature and is an integral part of the implementation of a statutory scheme.”

3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 170, 171 (1979). The requirement to make “periodic reports and recommendations” meets this test. *Id.* at 173–74.

(2) Statutory committees: funding

A board or committee created by Congress is generally funded under the standard two-step procedure: “first the program is authorized and, subsequently, appropriations are made available to carry out the program.” [B-39995-O.M., Apr. 28, 1983](#), at 2 (referring to the Cost Accounting Standards Board). The Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), 5 U.S.C. app. §§ 5(b)(4) and (5), contains provisions dealing with authorization of appropriations and the assurance that the advisory body will have funds available for its necessary expenses (although no precise mechanism is prescribed).

The authorization of appropriations may be indefinite, that is, such sums “as may be necessary.”<sup>28</sup> Others may include a monetary ceiling.<sup>29</sup> Still others may cover multiple year periods either year-by-year or in the

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<sup>28</sup> Examples are the Glass Ceiling Commission, Pub. L. No. 102-166, § 209, 105 Stat. 1071, 1087 (Nov. 21, 1991); the Commission on Government Procurement, Pub. L. No. 91-129, § 9, 83 Stat. 269, 272 (Nov. 2, 1969), and the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government (the so-called Second Hoover Commission), Pub. L. No. 83-108, § 8, 67 Stat. 142, 144 (July 10, 1953).

<sup>29</sup> *E.g.*, Civil War Centennial Commission, Pub. L. No. 85-305, § 9, 71 Stat. 626, 628 (Sept. 7, 1957).

aggregate.<sup>30</sup> A variation provides a specific dollar authorization for the first year and “such sums as may be necessary” thereafter.<sup>31</sup> There appear to be no significant consequences flowing from which form is used, nor are we able to generalize as to when a particular form may be regarded as more appropriate.

The authorization is sometimes combined with language prohibiting expenditures except to the extent provided in advance in appropriation acts. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 2310 (Holocaust Memorial Council); Pub. L. No. 104-169, § 9(b), 110 Stat. 1482, 1488 (Aug. 3, 1996) (National Gambling Impact Study Commission). Even without language of this sort, an appropriation would still be necessary to carry out the authorization.

The next step is the actual appropriation. It can be an appropriation made directly to the entity; it can be an appropriation to an existing agency to be funneled to the entity; or it can be included in a lump-sum appropriation to a department or agency related in subject matter. The authorization of appropriations may influence this choice. Some authorizing provisions, for example, expressly authorize funds to be directly appropriated to the board or commission while others use more discretionary language (funds appropriated “for the activities of” the particular commission or simply “to carry out this act”).

Whichever form is used, there is nothing particularly exotic about an appropriation for a miscellaneous board or commission. It is essentially no different from an appropriation for any other entity, and is governed by the same rules of purpose, time, and amount. The following paragraphs illustrate the application of some of these rules.

A board, committee, or other such entity must use an appropriation only for its intended purposes. This means the purposes stated in the appropriation and other pertinent legislation, as amplified by the “necessary expense” doctrine expounded in Chapter 4, section B. *E.g.*, [B-211149, June 22, 1983](#) (because Holocaust Memorial Council had specific

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<sup>30</sup> *E.g.*, Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, Pub. L. No. 98-375, § 11(a), 98 Stat. 1257, 1262 (Aug. 7, 1984) (year-by-year); Commission on Merchant Marine and Defense, Pub. L. No. 98-525, § 1536(i), 98 Stat. 2492, 2635 (Oct. 19, 1984) (aggregate).

<sup>31</sup> Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution, Pub. L. No. 98-101, § 8, 97 Stat. 719, 723 (Sept. 29, 1983).

authority to solicit donations, it could pay employees or consultants who engage in fund-raising).

Entertainment is not a proper expenditure unless Congress has authorized it. One way Congress does this is to appropriate part of a lump sum for “official reception and representation expenses.” While this is the device most commonly used for larger agencies, it works just as well for a small board or commission. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 98-411, 98 Stat. 1545, 1568 (Aug. 30, 1984) (1985 appropriation for the Japan-United States Friendship Commission). Another device Congress has used—primarily with celebration/memorial commissions—is to include in the enabling statute authority to act “without regard to the laws and procedures applicable to Federal agencies.” A commission with this authority can expend public funds for food and entertainment virtually at will. [B-138969, Apr. 16, 1959](#) (Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission); [B-138925, Apr. 15, 1959](#) (Civil War Centennial Commission); [B-129102, Oct. 2, 1956](#) (Woodrow Wilson Centennial Celebration Commission).

In making expenditures from a lump-sum appropriation, an agency’s discretion is not legally limited by restrictions expressed in legislative history that are not carried into the statute itself. *E.g.*, [31 Comp. Gen. 412 \(1952\)](#) (National Capital Sesquicentennial Commission could spend its appropriation on authorized activities and was not bound to follow instructions contained only in a committee report).

Money received for the use of the government, in accordance with the so-called miscellaneous receipts statute, 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), must be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury, subject to exceptions discussed in detail in Chapter 6, section E.2.a. For the most part, a body which is purely advisory should not be in a position to generate receipts. Operational bodies, on the other hand, are more likely to be involved in activities that generate receipts and must therefore contend with the miscellaneous receipts statute.

Specific authority to credit receipts to its operating appropriation makes those funds available for expenditure without further congressional action, at least during the appropriation’s period of obligational availability. [B-90476, June 14, 1950](#) (charges for admission to exhibits, plays, and dramatic productions by the National Capital Sesquicentennial Commission). As noted above, language authorizing an agency to act without regard to the laws applicable to federal agencies is sufficient to remove the restriction on entertainment expenditures. Such language is

equally sufficient to overcome the miscellaneous receipts statute. [B-136051, Aug. 27, 1959](#) (concerning the sale of publications and commemorative medals by Civil War Centennial Commission). If the board or commission does not have specific authority to charge fees, it must rely on the so-called User Fee Statute, 31 U.S.C. § 9701, in which case the fees are fully subject to the miscellaneous receipts requirement.

In a 1936 case, the Northwest Territory Celebration Commission found itself in a dilemma. As part of the celebration, it wanted to print and sell cartographic maps of the Northwest Territory and to produce a “moving pageant.” The states formed from the Northwest Territory, with whom the Commission was statutorily charged to cooperate, would each order, and pay for, the desired number of maps and performances. While the states were perfectly willing to pay their proportionate shares, the problem was that the Commission lacked authority to retain the receipts, and thus would have depleted its appropriation without reimbursement. The solution was to somehow furnish the goods and services without charge to the Commission’s appropriation. The way to do this was for each participating state to advance its estimated share, which would be held in the Treasury in a trust fund account, from which expenditures could be made. If this approach were followed, it would be necessary to account for each state’s funds separately so that any remaining unexpended balances could be refunded. [A-51645, Nov. 6, 1936](#).

In the case of a small celebration/memorial commissions, GAO recommended that the statute authorize payment of the appropriation to the commission in one lump sum, at least where the statute does not otherwise address the handling of the commission’s finances:

“It is the view of this office that in cases of small appropriations for sectional celebrations, memorials, etc., where the authorizing resolution does not provide for the administrative handling of obligations and expenditures from such appropriations by an existing Government agency, it is preferable that the money be appropriated for payment as a gift in one lump sum to an established local body without any further accounting to the Federal accounting officers. [This procedure] . . . would remove the task of attempting at considerable cost to inform the inexperienced local person or body of persons in the field of the regulations, forms, and procedures required in accounting for public funds.”

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[B-8474, Feb. 19, 1940](#), at 2. The subject of that discussion was the Benjamin Harrison Memorial Commission, established by statute. Pub. L. No. 76-352, 53 Stat. 1274 (Aug. 9, 1939). Shortly after GAO’s opinion, the authorized amount was appropriated “to be paid to the Commission for expenditure within its discretion” for authorized purposes. First Deficiency Appropriation Act, 1940, Pub. L. No. 76-447, 54 Stat. 82, 83 (Apr. 6, 1940). However, it is not free money and the commission did have a record-keeping responsibility: “[I]t is felt desirable that [the commission] maintain an adequate record of such funds and of the expenditure thereof.” [A-84233, June 3, 1937](#), at 2 (Charles Carroll of Carrollton Bicentenary Commission).

Thus far, we have been talking about the fairly straightforward situation where Congress creates a body, authorizes the appropriation of funds, and then makes the appropriation. There are variations. Instead of creating the commission directly, Congress can authorize or direct the President to create it. *E.g.*, Pub. Res. No. 106, 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., ch. 556, 49 Stat. 1516 (June 15, 1936) (President authorized to establish Charles Carroll of Carrollton Bicentenary Commission); Department of Defense Authorization Act, 1985, Pub. L. No. 98-525, § 1511, 98 Stat. 2492, 2626 (Oct. 19, 1984) (President directed to establish Chemical Warfare Review Commission). Congress can fund the body by a direct appropriation (*e.g.*, First Deficiency Appropriation Act, Fiscal Year 1937, Pub. L. No. 75-4, 50 Stat. 8, 10 (Feb. 9, 1937)—Carroll Bicentenary Commission), or it can tell the President, in effect, to go hunt for the money. *See, e.g.*, 15 U.S.C. § 1022f(b) (describing compensation for advisory boards on national economic programs and policies). These statutes tend to be less detailed than their direct-creation siblings, the detail being filled in by the implementing executive order. *E.g.*, Exec. Order No. 12502, *Chemical Warfare Review Commission*, 50 Fed. Reg. 4,195 (Jan. 28, 1985).

Congress also, either in conjunction with a direct appropriation or without it, may require an existing department or agency to provide financial support services. For example, the law creating the Civil War Centennial Commission provided: “Expenditures of the Commission shall be paid by the National Park Service as general administrative agent, which shall keep complete records of such expenditures and shall account also for all funds received by the Commission.” Pub. L. No. 85-305, § 6(b)(1), 71 Stat. 626, 627 (Sept. 7, 1957). Section 201 of the ICC Termination Act of 1995, Pub. L. No. 104-88, 109 Stat. 803, 939 (Dec. 29, 1995), codified at 49 U.S.C. § 726(d)(2), authorizes the Secretary of Transportation or the Chairman of the Surface Transportation Board to “pay the reasonable and necessary expenses incurred by” the Railroad-Shipper Transportation Advisory

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Council. Another variation is to appropriate money to an existing agency, to be transferred to the board or commission when it is legally capable of receiving them. *E.g.*, 2 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 366 (1977).<sup>32</sup>

Still another variation is found in the law establishing the National Commission on Restructuring the Internal Revenue Service: “The Secretary of the Treasury is authorized on a nonreimbursable basis to provide the Commission with administrative services, *funds*, facilities, staff, and other support services for the performance of the Commission’s functions.” Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government Appropriations Act, 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-52, § 637(d)(4), 109 Stat. 468, 511 (Nov. 19, 1995) (emphasis added). Absent a direct appropriation, this would appear to be sufficient authority for Treasury to fund the Commission. However, if Congress had been making direct appropriations and then stopped, a provision of this sort would enable the supporting agency to provide various kinds of stopgap or perhaps even supplemental financial assistance, but would not permit funding of the commission’s entire operations. [B-39995-O.M., Apr. 28, 1983](#) (Cost Accounting Standards Board).

A provision for a designated agency to provide support services to a board or commission would normally imply that the board or commission is not authorized to obtain the services directly. [61 Comp. Gen. 69, 75 \(1981\)](#). However, in the cited case, the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy was able to bypass its support agency and contract directly for certain services because it also had specific authority to hire experts and consultants in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 3109.

For bodies created and funded by Congress, advisory or nonadvisory, FACA or non-FACA, the various funding restrictions described earlier in this section would not apply, except for the requirement for specific approval of interagency funding. One could concoct a scenario in which the Russell Amendment, 31 U.S.C. § 1347, might come into play (*e.g.*, a nonadvisory body created by statute, with no appropriations of its own but funded by an existing agency), but it would be rare.

To sum up, when Congress statutorily creates a board or commission, or authorizes or directs the executive branch to do so, it can fund the entity

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<sup>32</sup> Although not germane to the result or to the point made in the text, the “appropriation” cited in the Office of Legal Counsel opinion was merely an authorization.

through the traditional authorization-appropriation process used for larger agencies, or it can resort to techniques which are perhaps regarded as more suitable for certain small entities. Whether the body is advisory subject to FACA, advisory but not subject to FACA, operational, or mixed, would not appear to make any significant difference except that operational bodies are more likely to be funded by direct appropriations. Legislation establishing a FACA committee will almost surely make some provision for support services, possibly including some funding, but Congress has used this device in non-FACA bodies as well.

(3) Committees established by the executive branch

The Justice Department has concluded that, with the possible exception of performing constitutional responsibilities in an emergency, the President lacks the power to create a new operational agency in the executive branch: legislation is required. 9 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 76, 78 (1985). However, this inhibition on creating agencies does not exist in the case of an advisory committee. As we have seen, the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) explicitly recognizes, in 5 U.S.C. app. §§ 3(2) and 9(b), the inherent authority of the President, and of agency heads, to establish purely advisory bodies.<sup>33</sup>

A President creating an advisory body typically does so by issuing an executive order. The executive order may basically include the same elements that can be found in an enabling statute as outlined above. The executive order may establish the body, prescribe its functions, and address membership and composition, compensation, support services, and any reporting requirements. It may also address termination and the applicability of FACA.

As one court has noted, “FACA provides very little guidance as to the manner in which advisory committees are to be funded.” *Metcalf v. National Petroleum Council*, 553 F.2d 176, 180 (D.C. Cir. 1977). Be that as it may, the executive order must also provide for funding. While most of the committee’s needs will be met by the agency assigned to provide support services, it will still need some money for such things as travel

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<sup>33</sup> *Cf., e.g., Association of American Physicians & Surgeons v. Clinton*, 997 F.2d 898, 908 (D.C. Cir. 1993) (court refuses to apply FACA in a way that would interfere with “the President’s capacity to solicit direct advice on any subject related to his duties from a group of private citizens, separate from or together with his closest governmental associates”).



expenses and printing of reports. The President, lacking the authority to authorize or appropriate funds, must look to some existing source. The most common approach is to designate an existing agency to provide funding, subject to the availability of appropriations. The funding agency must be sufficiently related in subject matter to the advisory body so as to pass muster from the perspective of purpose availability. Some examples, which will also provide some indication of the range of advisory bodies that are created, follow:

- Exec. Order No. 13398, § 6(b), 71 Fed. Reg. 20,519 (Apr. 18, 2006): National Mathematics Advisory Panel, funded by Department of Education.
- Exec. Order No. 13353, § 6, 69 Fed. Reg. 53,585 (Aug. 27, 2004): President's Board on Safeguarding American Civil Liberties, funded by Department of Justice.
- Exec. Order No. 13256, § 10(b), 67 Fed. Reg. 6,823 (Feb. 12, 2002): President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, funded by Department of Education.
- Exec. Order No. 13037, § 4(b), 62 Fed. Reg. 10,185 (Mar. 3, 1997): Commission to Study Capital Budgeting, funded by Treasury Department.
- Exec. Order No. 13015, § 3(b), 61 Fed. Reg. 43,937 (Aug. 22, 1996): White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security, funded by Department of Transportation.
- Exec. Order No. 12961, § 3(c), 60 Fed. Reg. 28,507 (May 26, 1995): Presidential Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, funded by Department of Defense.
- Exec. Order No. 12546, § 3(c), 51 Fed. Reg. 4,475 (Feb. 3, 1986): Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, funded by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.
- Exec. Order No. 12367, § 3(b), 47 Fed. Reg. 26,119 (June 15, 1982): President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

- Exec. Order No. 12345, § 4(d), 47 Fed. Reg. 5,189 (Feb. 2, 1982): President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, funded by Department of Health and Human Services. (This was originally created by President Eisenhower in 1956, and has been renewed by successive Presidents.)
- Exec. Order No. 12229, § 1-301, 45 Fed. Reg. 50,699 (July 29, 1980): White House Coal Advisory Council, funded by Department of Labor.

The pertinent provisions of FACA are 5 U.S.C. app. §§ 5(b)(5), 5(c), 12, and 14. Section 5(b)(5) advises that support services and funding should be included in any legislation creating an advisory committee. Section 5(c) makes this applicable to the President or any other federal official creating an advisory committee.<sup>34</sup> Section 12(a) requires each agency to keep sufficient records to “fully disclose the disposition of any funds which may be at the disposal of its advisory committees and the nature and extent of their activities.” The General Services Administration does this for Presidential committees. Section 12(b) directs each agency to be “responsible for providing support services for each advisory committee established by or reporting to it unless the establishing authority provides otherwise.” Section 14 directs each advisory committee to terminate not later than 2 years after its creation, except that it can be renewed by the establishing authority for successive 2-year periods.<sup>35</sup> Thus, FACA clearly condones the practice of using existing agency appropriations to fund advisory committees. See [63 Comp. Gen. 110, 111 \(1983\)](#) (President’s Commission on Executive Exchange funded by Office of Personnel Management’s Salaries and Expenses appropriation); [61 Comp. Gen. 69 \(1981\)](#) (United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy funded by United States Information Agency).

If the agency providing funding has several appropriations, as in the case of cabinet departments, it must select the one most closely related to the committee’s functions, applying the principle that the specific prevails over

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<sup>34</sup> *National Anti-Hunger Coalition v. Executive Committee of the President’s Private Sector Survey on Cost Control*, 711 F.2d 1071, 1073 & n.1 (D.C. Cir. 1983); *Metcalf*, 553 F.2d at 179 n.35.

<sup>35</sup> A FACA committee can be terminated by its establishing authority or by operation of law. The General Services Administration cannot abolish another agency’s committee or refuse to recharter it. 5 U.S.C. app. § 7; [B-127685-O.M., Apr. 5, 1976](#). (To our knowledge, GSA has never tried to do so; the GAO memorandum refers to the Office of Management and Budget, whose FACA functions were later transferred to GSA.)

the general. *See* [B-202362, Mar. 24, 1981](#) (funding for United States-Japan Economic Relations Group, provided by State Department, is chargeable to appropriation for “International Conferences and Contingencies” rather than Salaries and Expenses).

Of course, any expenditure by the committee must be for an authorized purpose. *E.g.*, [61 Comp. Gen. 69 \(1981\)](#) (committee could procure outside legal advice on the extent of its independence). Restrictions in the funding agency’s appropriation act applicable to all funds appropriated in that act must be followed. [B-222758, June 25, 1986](#) (Chemical Warfare Review Commission violated anti-lobbying provision in Defense Department appropriation act). In addition, lobbying is not an advisory function. *Id.*

Most committees are funded in the manner described above—from the appropriations of a designated agency. Some are funded from one of the discretionary appropriations available to the President. For example, the so-called Warren Commission (Commission to Report Upon the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy) was funded from the “Emergency Fund for the President.” Exec. Order No. 11130, 28 Fed. Reg. 12,789 (Nov. 29, 1963). So was an earlier body, the Missouri Basin Survey Commission. Exec. Order No. 10318, 17 Fed. Reg. 133 (Jan. 3, 1952). (The Emergency Fund was later redesignated “Unanticipated Needs.”)

Some committees have mixed public-private funding. For example, the President’s Commission on Executive Exchange received funding support from the Office of Personnel Management, and was also statutorily authorized to impose certain fees and to place them in a revolving fund in the Treasury. This made it necessary to determine whether a given expenditure was direct support or a general administrative expense. GAO concluded in one such case that a word processor and a postage machine were “direct support” expenses and therefore could be charged to the private-sector account, whereas reupholstering furniture and procuring commercial insurance for loaned works of art were administrative expenses chargeable to OPM funds. [63 Comp. Gen. at 112](#).

A final funding approach should be noted, although it is not common. Congress can always choose to appropriate funds for a board or commission created by executive action, as it did, for example, in the case of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year. *See* [B-182398, Mar. 29, 1976](#).

The Justice Department has concluded that a funding agency may not delegate the authority to obligate funds to an advisory committee, the obligation of funds being a nonadvisory function. Memorandum Opinion for the Executive Director, National Committee on Libraries and Information Science, *Relationship Between National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and Advisory Committee to White House Conference on Library and Information Services*, OLC Opinion, Feb. 12, 1990. (The committee in that case was statutory, but the point is more general.) This led to the question of the potential liability of the committee chairman, as an accountable officer, for the unauthorized expenditure. Because, under the particular facts of that case, the government incurred no loss, it was not necessary to address this issue. [B-241668, Feb. 19, 1991.](#)

As in the case of Presidential committees, Congress may authorize a particular agency to create advisory committees, either specifically or in general terms. *E.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 5024 (authorizing Secretary of Navy to appoint Naval Research Advisory Committee); 42 U.S.C. § 7234 (authorizing Department of Energy to establish advisory committees). Alternatively, an agency head can establish an advisory committee without express statutory authority. The “establishing document” will vary with the agency’s own system of internal directives. For example, the Attorney General has a numbered series of “Attorney General Orders,” and used one of these to establish Law Enforcement Coordinating Committees. *See* 5 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 283 n.2 (1981). Whatever the precise mechanism, the establishment must be “determined as a matter of formal record” and published in the Federal Register. 5 U.S.C. app. § 9(a)(2). Other procedures are found in the GSA regulations. The committees are fully subject to the termination/renewal provisions of FACA, 5 U.S.C. app. § 14.

If Congress has the greatest latitude in funding options and the President has somewhat less, the individual agency has least of all. When an agency creates an advisory committee, it has only one way to fund it—from its own pocket. An Energy Policy Task Force, for example, was created by the Department of Energy in the 1980s under its statutory authority in what was then 15 U.S.C. § 776 (now in 42 U.S.C. § 7234). GAO found it legitimate to pay the expenses of a task force meeting—specifically expenses of travel and recording a transcript—from the Secretary’s salaries and expenses account. [60 Comp. Gen. 386, 397 \(1981\)](#). As with Presidential bodies, the agency with more than one appropriation should choose the one most closely related to the committee’s work, and expenditures may be made only for authorized purposes. It may be possible in some cases to obtain

private funding. *See, e.g., Metcalf*, 553 F.2d at 180 (noting that the National Petroleum Council, established by the Secretary of the Interior, was, apart from support services, “financed entirely from funds provided by the petroleum industry”).

An advisory committee, presidential or agency, subject to FACA will generally not have to concern itself with the funding restrictions of 31 U.S.C. § 1346 (which is set out in section A.2 of this chapter). A non-FACA body still must contend with them. Also, the Russell Amendment, 31 U.S.C. § 1347, does not apply to a FACA committee (see section A.2 of this chapter). In this connection, the Justice Department has said:

“Whether or not one assumes that the Russell amendment was originally intended to apply to nonstatutory advisers or advisory groups, [FACA] has intervened. It has specifically authorized the creation of purely advisory committees; it has provided that they may have a 2-year life; and it has contemplated, and made provision for, the practice of using agency funds to support advisory committees. Accordingly, if indeed agency funds may otherwise be lawfully expended for such a purpose, there is no longer any reason, under the Russell amendment, to bar an expenditure of funds in support of an advisory committee merely because the committee has been in existence for more than 1 year.”

3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 263, 266–67 (1979). That opinion also supports the conclusion that the Russell Amendment does not apply to purely advisory bodies, FACA or non-FACA. Of the various funding restrictions discussed earlier, the only one that would apply to a FACA committee (and alike to non-FACA bodies), as long as it remains in effect, is the requirement for specific approval for interagency funding.

In addition to the general funding statutes, there may be agency-specific laws which authorize or restrict agency activity in this area. For example, 22 U.S.C. § 2672 authorizes the State Department to fund the United States’ participation in certain international activities. This was one of the statutes State relied on—properly, GAO found—to participate in funding the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year in the mid-1970s. *See* GAO, *Activities of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year*, HRD-77-26 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 13, 1977), at 5–6. Section 2672(a) includes its own 1-year restriction similar to the Russell Amendment. *See* B-202362, Mar. 24, 1981.

(4) Donations

Given the ever-present pressure on Congress to hold down the costs of boards and committees, it is not uncommon for an enabling statute to authorize some level of private funding. Just as with any larger agency, a board or commission needs statutory authority to accept and use gifts or contributions. The reason, discussed in Chapter 6, section E.3, is that without such authority the funds would have to be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury.

The statute will prescribe exactly what can be accepted. A common version in statutes creating boards or committees is the authority to “accept donations of money, property, or personal services.” *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 98-375, § 7(a), 98 Stat. 1257, 1260 (Aug. 7, 1984) (Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission); Pub. L. No. 85-305, § 5(a), 71 Stat. 626, 627 (Sept. 7, 1957) (Civil War Centennial Commission). The statute may go a step farther and set a monetary limit on what can be accepted in a given year. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 98-375, *as amended by* Pub. L. No. 100-94, § 4, 101 Stat. 700, 701 (Aug. 18, 1987); Pub. L. No. 98-101, § 5(h)(2), 97 Stat. 719, 721 (Sept. 29, 1983) (Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution). Both of these laws prescribe separate limits, one on gifts from individuals and a somewhat higher one on gifts from others such as corporations, partnerships, and foreign governments.

The statute will normally not define who can make the contributions, but there are exceptions, such as: “The Commission is authorized to receive funds through grants, contracts, and contributions from State and local governments and organizations thereof, and from nonprofit organizations.” Pub. L. No. 89-733, § 6, 80 Stat. 1162 (Nov. 2, 1966). The “Commission” refers to the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR). This provision was not so much a deliberate attempt to exclude individuals, but a desire to foster increased participation by those most directly affected by ACIR’s work.

It should be apparent from the above statutory references that the authority to accept gifts occurs most often in statutes establishing operational bodies, most typically celebration/memorial commissions. As the ACIR provision shows, however, it can also appear with entities that are advisory.

The authority to accept gifts does not inherently include the authority to solicit them, especially since solicitation will almost invariably involve the use of other government funds, either for staff salaries and expenses or the procurement of some fund-raising capacity. *E.g.*, [B-211149, June 22, 1983](#). When Congress wants an entity to engage in solicitation, it specifically so provides in the gift acceptance provision. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 2307 (Holocaust Memorial Council); Pub. L. No. 98-101, § 5(h)(1) (Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution). In order to preclude questions of interpretation, it is always preferable for the statute to use the word “solicit” if that is desired. However, something less may suffice. For example, a statute which provided that nongovernment sources “shall be encouraged to participate to the maximum extent feasible . . . and to make contributions” has been construed as authorizing solicitation. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 541, 544–46 (1982).

In most cases, donated funds are seen merely as an authorized supplementation of the commission’s other funding sources. In some cases, however, there is a clear intent that the commission be funded in its entirety, or as close thereto as possible, from donated funds. For example, the statute creating the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal Holiday Commission specified that “[a]ll expenditures of the Commission shall be made from donated funds.” Pub. L. No. 98-399, § 7, 98 Stat. 1473, 1474 (Aug. 27, 1984). Similarly, the executive order creating the so-called Grace Commission directed that it be funded “to the extent practicable and permitted by law, by the private sector without cost to the Federal Government.” Exec. Order No. 12369, § 3(e), 47 Fed. Reg. 28,899 (June 30, 1982). The requirement may be limited to certain of the commission’s functions. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 2307 (Holocaust Memorial Council may use only donated funds to operate and maintain the museum). An interesting variation is the Railroad-Shipper Transportation Advisory Council, which is authorized to receive government funds and to solicit and use donations, but must “undertake best efforts to fund [its] activities privately” before making a request for federal money. Pub. L. No. 104-88, § 201(a), 109 Stat. 803, 939 (Dec. 29, 1995), *codified at* 49 U.S.C. § 726(d)(4).

Absent statutory authority to the contrary, donated funds must be deposited in the Treasury in a trust account, and are permanently appropriated for authorized uses. 31 U.S.C. § 1323(c). This means that they are available for expenditure without further legislation. [B-90476, June 14, 1950](#). The fiscal and budgetary issues associated with federal “trust” funds are discussed in detail later in this chapter. It is important here to distinguish a trust account for donated funds from the more

traditional fiduciary trust concept. *See* [B-274855, Jan. 23, 1997](#). Funds “held in trust,” as those words are commonly used to describe a fiduciary relationship, are held for the benefit of another. By comparison, placing donated funds in a “trust account” is largely, although not necessarily, an accounting device to distinguish the funds from general funds and to assure that their use will be limited to the purposes for which they were given. *Id.*

The governing legislation may authorize a different treatment. The Holocaust Memorial Council provides one illustration. In response to a request from a congressional committee, GAO reviewed the legislative history of the Council’s enabling statute and determined that, although the statute itself was silent, Congress intended a “no strings” treatment of donated funds. Accordingly, the Council could place donated funds in interest-bearing investments outside of the Treasury. [B-211149, Dec. 12, 1985](#). This case was applied and followed a few years later with respect to the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission. [68 Comp. Gen. 237, 238–39](#) (1989). In the Holocaust Memorial Council decision ([B-211149](#)), GAO recommended that the statute be amended to explicitly recognize the apparent intent. It was later amended to provide that the Council’s donated funds “are not to be regarded as appropriated funds and are not subject to any requirements or restrictions applicable to appropriated funds.” *See* [B-275959, May 5, 1998](#), at 4 (quoting the amendment, 36 U.S.C. § 1407, in confirming the earlier conclusion). A similar amendment was not so important for the Columbus Commission because it was a temporary body with a specified termination date, whereas the Council’s duration is permanent, or at least indefinite.

Authority broad enough to permit investing donated funds outside of the Treasury is also broad enough to authorize operations without regard to the statutes and regulations governing procurement by federal agencies. [68 Comp. Gen. at 239; B-211149, Dec. 12, 1985](#), at 4. However, GAO declined to apply these cases to the American Battle Monuments Commission, a permanent entity, because it could find no comparable authority. [B-275669.2, July 30, 1997](#).

Because title under a legal gift passes to the government, the donor has no claim for the refund of any unexpended balances upon termination of the board or commission. [B-274855, Jan. 23, 1997](#). Unless otherwise provided for by statute, the balances must be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. *Id.* A situation clearly warranting an exception is found in [36 Comp. Gen. 771](#) (1957). The Alexander Hamilton Bicentennial Commission thought it would be a good idea to use private funds to award



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scholarships to high school and college students, but it lacked the authority to accept donations. With this proposal in mind, Congress amended the Commission’s enabling statute to authorize the acceptance of donations. The problem was that the Commission would almost surely go out of existence before the disbursement of funds could be completed. Under these circumstances, GAO concurred with the Commission’s proposal to transfer, prior to its expiration, the balance of its donated funds to a “responsible private organization” in order to complete the administration of the scholarship awards. *Id.* Short of extending the Commission’s life for the sole purpose of disbursing the rest of the funds, this was the best way to comply with the requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 1323(c) that the funds be disbursed in accordance with the terms of the “trust.”

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## B. Government Use of Corporate Entities

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### 1. Introduction

The federal government has created entities using a corporate device, in various forms and contexts, for a long time. With respect to the basic rationale for government corporate entities, the Supreme Court observed in a 1927 case:

“[A]n important, if not the chief, reason for employing these incorporated agencies was to enable them to employ commercial methods and to conduct their operations with a freedom supposed to be inconsistent with accountability to the treasury under its established procedure of audit and control over the financial transactions of the United States.”

*United States ex rel. Skinner & Eddy Corp. v. McCarl*, 275 U.S. 1, 8 (1927).

This points to two key features associated with the use of government-created corporate entities, at least in theory: commercial activities and freedom, to a greater or lesser extent, from the laws that govern accountability to the Treasury of traditional government agencies.

Twenty years after the *Skinner & Eddy* decision, President Truman’s 1948 Budget Message, presented views on the proper standards for using the corporate device. A corporate form of organization, according to President

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Truman, is appropriate for the administration of governmental programs that—

- are predominantly of a business nature,
- produce revenue and are potentially self-sustaining,
- involve a large number of business-type transactions with the public, and
- require greater flexibility than the customary type of appropriations budget ordinarily permits.<sup>36</sup>

We see, again, commercial activities and autonomy from Treasury controls. President Truman proposed, in addition, that government-created corporate entities be “potentially self-sustaining.” Today, many, but not all, corporate entities operate using revolving funds.

Although there are no clear and universally accepted standards for using the corporate model, it is something the government has often turned to when it wants to do something that, for the most part, resembles a business enterprise. The practice has, however, engendered some controversy. As a matter of fact, one commentator in the 1950s called the government corporation “one of the most controversial institutional innovations of our time.”<sup>37</sup> At one extreme are advocates of the government corporation who view it “with almost religious devotion” and regard it “as a desirable end in itself, regardless of the purpose which it serves.”<sup>38</sup> These advocates may be driven by what a more recent writer terms a “cultural norm” that anything the private sector does is automatically and inherently “better” than anything the public sector does.<sup>39</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, one early critic went so far as to write that “there is no place in our

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<sup>36</sup> *Budget Message of the President*, H.R. Doc. No. 80-19, at M61 (1948), cited in, e.g., Ronald C. Moe, Congressional Research Service, *Managing the Public’s Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 7–8 (1995) (Moe 1995).

<sup>37</sup> Harold Seidman, *The Theory of the Autonomous Government Corporation: A Critical Appraisal*, 12 Pub. Admin. Rev. 89, 90 (1952) (Seidman 1952).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> Francis J. Leazes, Jr., *Accountability and the Business State: The Structure of Federal Corporation*, 4 (1987) (Leazes).

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constitutional government for the performance of governmental function by means of corporations.”<sup>40</sup> And, one more factor cannot, or at least should not, be ignored:

“Public funds (tax dollars), after all, are not freely given in voluntary market exchanges for goods and services; . . . At this level . . . the private and governmental sectors are fundamentally different. It is for this reason that the standards for governmental control and enforced adherence to prescribed processes and procedures are—and have to be—so much higher than those of the private sector.”<sup>41</sup>

In 1980, the Office of Management and Budget contracted with the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) to produce a report on existing government corporations and to make policy recommendations for future creation of corporations. Breaking out “enterprises” as a separate category, and mindful of the imprecision of definitional attempts, the report broadly defined “government corporation” as “a government entity created as a separate legal person by, or pursuant to, legislation,” with the powers to “sue and be sued, use and reuse revenues, and own assets.”<sup>42</sup>

The fact that “[n]o two Federal Government corporations are completely alike”<sup>43</sup> underscores the importance of the enabling legislation. A statutorily created entity, whether it be an agency or embody some form of the corporate model, “possesses only those powers which are enumerated in the act of Congress creating it.”<sup>44</sup> This of course includes any other legislation specifically made applicable. The governing legislation

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<sup>40</sup> O.R. McGuire, *Government by Corporations*, 14 Va. L. Rev. 182, 186 (1928).

<sup>41</sup> Ronald C. Moe and Robert S. Gilmour, *Rediscovering Principles of Public Administration: The Neglected Foundation of Public Law*, 55 Pub. Admin. Rev. 135, 143 (1995).

<sup>42</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *I Report on Government Corporations* 21 (1981) (NAPA 1981). For a more recent publication along these general lines, see Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Federal Government Corporations: An Overview*, No. RL30365 (Mar. 23, 2006). This report notes that while the number of federal corporations “is in moderate flux” (*id.* at 2), the corporate model seems to hold ever-enhanced appeal to federal policymakers.

<sup>43</sup> Moe 1995, at 47.

<sup>44</sup> Seidman 1952, at 93.

determines the body's powers and functions, its financial arrangements, and its degree of operating flexibility. As one commentator has stated: "Because there is no general incorporation law defining government corporations, Congress is free to call any entity a 'corporation' and assign to this corporation whatever characteristics it chooses."<sup>45</sup> Or, as the court put it in *United States v. Nowak*, 448 F.2d 134, 138 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1971), *cert. denied*, 404 U.S. 1039 (1972): "If it chooses to make use of a 'corporation,' Congress is not limited by traditional notions of corporate powers and organization but may mold its vehicle in any way which appears useful to the accomplishment of the legislative purpose."

Some of these variations can be illustrated by looking at the objectives, degrees of ownership and control, and the extent to which the corporate entity acts as an agent of the federal government for three corporate entities: Amtrak, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation.

(a) *Objectives.*

- Congress formed Amtrak as a private corporation to ensure profitability of the failing, but critical, passenger rail service.
- Congress chartered the Boy Scouts of America to help promote the patriotic and community service objectives of that organization.
- Congress created the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation to insure workers against defaulting pension plans.

(b) *Degree of ownership and control by the federal government.*

- Congress exercises nearly complete control over Amtrak's assets and liabilities (and provides substantial annual funding) and its operations through the presidential appointment of members of its board of directors.
- The federal government has no ownership in nor does it control the operations of the Boy Scouts of America. However, Congress by law established the Boy Scouts of America and the scope of its authorities.

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<sup>45</sup> Ronald C. Moe, *Administering Public Functions at the Margin of Government: The Case of Federal Corporations*, CRS No. 83-236GOV, 33 (1983).

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- Congress exercises control over the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation by appointing the board of directors and management officers, treating its employees like those of the federal government, and limiting its use of funds for administrative expenses.
- (c) *Extent to which the corporate entity acts as the agent of the federal government.*
- Congress declared Amtrak to be a private corporation, but specified in law, for example, that Amtrak is an agency of the government for purposes of sharing information with the public (*i.e.*, the Freedom of Information Act).
  - The Boy Scouts of America in no way represent or act on behalf of the U.S. government.
  - By law, Congress declared that the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation's liabilities are not liabilities of the U.S. government.

As you can see, depending upon the needs or the circumstances, the government has been creative in its use of the corporate form.

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## 2. The Problem of Definition

As noted in the prior section, largely because each corporate entity is the creature of its enabling legislation, and given the different forms that such entities can take, it is difficult to have a general definition applicable to the relationships between the federal government and the many corporate entities. As one commentator put it:

“Federal corporations should not be treated as if they constitute a single class of organizations type. Virtually all are unique creatures, and . . . what is distinctive about them as a group is that each embodies its own calculated mixture of public and private elements and of financing and controls, and each is a result of a particular congressional enactment after extensive controversy over rival policies and interests.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Francis J. Leazes, Jr., *Accountability and the Business State: The Structure of Federal Corporation*, 7 (1987).

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Without a single definition covering the universe of corporate bodies, the better approach may be to examine the common elements of particular kinds of entities. Therefore, in this section we will attempt to provide some definitional construct by the consideration of four types of corporate entities: government corporations; government-sponsored enterprises (referred to as GSEs); patriotic, fraternal, or charitable entities designated in title 36 of the United States Code (commonly referred to as “federally chartered corporations”); and federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs).

a. Government Corporations

“There is at present no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a government corporation, hence there are several listings of government corporations, each different and based upon the definition employed by the compiler,” according to one commentator.<sup>47</sup> GAO has also pointed out the lack of a uniform definition. GAO, *Congress Should Consider Revising Basic Corporate Control Laws*, GAO/PAD-83-3 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 6, 1983), at 8. Definitions found in the United States Code serve only limited purposes. For example, 5 U.S.C. § 103(1) defines the term “government corporation,” but only for purposes of title 5 of the United States Code, as “a corporation owned or controlled by the Government of the United States.” However, in 5 U.S.C. § 103(2), a “government controlled corporation” is defined as *not* including a corporation owned by the government. Noting that government corporations are operationally defined in 31 U.S.C. § 9101(1) (section 201 of the Government Corporation Control Act, which will be addressed in detail in section 4.a of this chapter) as either wholly owned or mixed-ownership government corporations, GAO has concluded that the term “government controlled corporation” used in title 5 refers to mixed-ownership government corporations, such as those listed in 31 U.S.C. § 9101(2) (but not exclusively). [B-221677, July 21, 1986](#). Therefore, when considering the various laws codified in title 5, it is necessary to check any separate definitional provisions to determine if a specific chapter is applicable to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership corporations. For example, the relocation allowance provisions in title 5 are covered by the definitional provisions in 5 U.S.C. § 5721, which specifically excludes government controlled corporations. Thus, wholly

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<sup>47</sup> Ronald C. Moe, Congressional Research Service, *Managing the Public’s Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18 (1995), at xii. For similar comments, see John T. Tierney, *Government Corporations and Managing the Public’s Business*, 99 Pol. Sci. Q. 73, 76 n.6 (1984), and Ronald C. Moe, Congressional Research Service, *Administering Public Functions at the Margin of Government: The Case of Federal Corporations*, No. 83-236GOV (1983), at 5.

owned corporations are subject to the personnel provisions of title 5 but mixed-ownership government corporations are not. [B-221677, July 21, 1986](#) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, as a mixed-ownership government corporation, is excluded from coverage under the title 5 relocation provisions). Further discussion of the various title 5 provisions is in section B.7.a of this chapter.

Also, “executive agency” in 40 U.S.C. § 102(4)(B) expressly includes “a wholly owned Government corporation” although without further defining the latter term. Thus, wholly owned government corporations are subject to much of title 40 of the United States Code as well as the procurement provisions of 41 U.S.C. §§ 251–266a. They are also subject to GAO’s bid protest jurisdiction under 31 U.S.C. § 3551(3), which references the 40 U.S.C. § 102 definition of agency. *See* [B-295737.2, Apr. 19, 2005](#). While these specialized definitions apply for certain purposes, the chief (and only) regulatory statute with some general application, chapter 91 of title 31 of the United States Code (commonly known as the Government Corporation Control Act), discussed in detail below, fails to include a specific definition but merely lists the entities it covers as either wholly owned or mixed-ownership.

The lack of a uniform, governmentwide statutory definition is not the only complication in determining the status of a corporate-type entity in relation to federal powers and obligations. Even when Congress has been quite specific in declaring that a corporation is not a federal instrumentality, it may still take on that status for constitutional purposes. This was the holding in *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 387, 395 (1995).

In *Lebron*, an artist sued the National Rail Passenger Corporation, better known as Amtrak, for violating his First Amendment rights by rejecting a billboard display. Amtrak claimed that it was not a federal entity for First

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Amendment purposes since its statutory charter declared that it “will not be an agency or establishment of the United States Government.”<sup>48</sup>

The Supreme Court concluded, however, that Amtrak’s reliance on this statutory disclaimer language was “misplaced”:

“[The statutory disclaimer] is assuredly dispositive of Amtrak’s status as a Government entity for purposes of matters that are within Congress’s control—for example, whether it is subject to statutes that impose obligations or confer powers upon Government entities . . . And even beyond that, we think [the disclaimer] can suffice to deprive Amtrak of all those inherent powers and immunities of Government agencies that it is within the power of Congress to eliminate . . . But it is not for Congress to make the final determination of Amtrak’s status as a Government entity for purposes of determining the constitutional rights of citizens affected by its actions. If Amtrak is, by its very nature, what the Constitution regards as the Government, congressional pronouncement that it is not such can no more relieve it of its First Amendment restrictions than a similar pronouncement could exempt the Federal Bureau of Investigation from the Fourth Amendment. The Constitution constrains governmental action ‘by whatever instruments or in whatever modes that action may be taken.’ *Ex parte Virginia*, 100 U.S. 339, 346–347, 25 L. Ed. 676 (1880). And under whatever congressional label.”

*Lebron*, 513 U.S. at 392–93. The Court went on to hold that Amtrak was “an agency or instrumentality of the United States for the purpose of individual rights guaranteed against the Government by the Constitution,” a conclusion it viewed as “in accord with public and judicial understanding

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<sup>48</sup> Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970, Pub. L. No. 91-518, § 301, 84 Stat. 1327, 1330 (Oct. 30, 1970). The current version of this language, codified at 49 U.S.C. § 24301(a)(3), provides that Amtrak “is not a department, agency, or instrumentality of the United States Government, and shall not be subject to title 31 [of the United States Code].” Over the years, Congress has continued to put distance between Amtrak and federal control for statutory purposes. For example, while Amtrak was originally designated a mixed-ownership government corporation, that designation was later dropped. For a discussion of the evolution of the statutory provisions affecting Amtrak, see *United States v. Bombardier Corp.*, 286 F.3d 542, 545 (D.C. Cir. 2002); see also *United States v. Bombardier Corp.*, 380 F.3d 488, 491–92 (D.C. Cir. 2004), *cert. denied*, 544 U.S. 1032 (2005).



of the nature of Government-created and -controlled corporations over the years.” *Id.* at 394. In this regard, the Court noted that Amtrak was “established and organized under federal law for the very purpose of pursuing federal governmental objectives, under the direction and control of federal governmental appointees.” *Id.* at 398.<sup>49</sup>

The Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) has taken the *Lebron* analysis considerably farther. In a memorandum opinion, OLC held that if a corporate entity would fall within the government for constitutional purposes, it has the same status for statutory purposes absent an explicit statutory provision to the contrary. In concluding that the National Veterans Business Development Corporation (NVBDC) was a government corporation within the definition of 5 U.S.C. § 103(1), the Office of Legal Counsel stated:

“Although the opinion in *Lebron* does not state that, if a corporation is part of the United States Government for constitutional purposes, it must also be considered an agency of the United States unless Congress (as in the case of Amtrak) expressly provides otherwise, we believe that when Congress has created a corporation after the decision in *Lebron*—as it has here—and, through the corporation’s structure and purpose, has placed it within the government for constitutional purposes, there is a strong presumption that the corporation is also part of the government for purposes of title 5 [of the United States Code], which deals with the internal organization of federal government agencies.”<sup>50</sup>

The opinion then observed that the statute creating the NVBDC lacked an Amtrak-type disclaimer and contained features suggesting that NVBDC was a federal instrumentality. Specifically, it was federally chartered, received federal appropriations, and its fiscal operations were subject to

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<sup>49</sup> The Supreme Court remanded the case for consideration of the First Amendment claims. On remand, the district court held that Amtrak had exercised its right to reject proposed advertising in good faith, given the artist/advertiser’s deception in concealing the political nature of the billboard display. *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 981 F. Supp. 279 (S.D.N.Y. 1997).

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum Opinion for the General Counsel, Office of Management and Budget, *Status of National Veterans Business Development Corporation*, OLC Opinion, Mar. 19, 2004.

congressional oversight and regulation. However, shortly after OLC issued this opinion, Congress amended NVBDC's statute by adding the following language: "Notwithstanding any other provision of law, the Corporation is a private entity and is not an agency, instrumentality, authority, entity, or establishment of the United States Government."<sup>51</sup>

Given the absence of a definitive legal definition of what constitutes a government corporation, we need to resort to other sources. As we have seen, one approach is to try to identify common attributes. One analyst identifies some of these attributes as "a public purpose, a federal government charter, some form of government supervision, and a public subsidy."<sup>52</sup> While this is useful in establishing a conceptual framework, it suffers when you break it down to the working level. If, for example, one equates "charter" with "enabling legislation"—and it is beyond question that the charter of a government corporation is its enabling legislation—the attributes apply equally to any government agency. Similarly, we previously noted a statement from a GAO report that government corporations "are generally federally chartered entities created to serve a public function of a predominantly business nature." GAO, *Government Corporations: Profiles of Existing Government Corporations*, GAO/GGD-96-14 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 1995), at 1. This again shows the hazard of generalization, saved by the fortunate inclusion of the word "generally," since some government corporations may perform primarily governmental functions (*e.g.*, the Commodity Credit Corporation, which stabilizes and protects farm income and prices).

Neither is it useful to construct a classification based on the mere presence or absence of the word "corporation" in the entity's name. An old state court case, considering the application of sovereign immunity to a state-created corporation, put it this way: "It is not necessary that the thing created by the legislature should be named by it a corporation. Its character depends upon the powers given it, and not upon the name by

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<sup>51</sup> 15 U.S.C. § 657c(a). Congress drove its point home, perhaps unintentionally, since it actually added the quoted language twice in the same appropriation act. Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2005, Pub. L. No. 108-447, div. B, title VI, § 636 and div. K, title I, § 146, 118 Stat. 2809, 2922, 3455 (Dec. 8, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Francis J. Leazes, Jr., *Accountability and the Business State: The Structure of Federal Corporations*, 18 (1987). Leazes also adopts the definitional approach of the Government Corporation Control Act by specifically identifying, by name, the entities he includes under his government corporation aegis. *Id.* at 9–10.

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which the legislature may call it.” *Gross v. Kentucky Board of Managers*, 49 S.W. 458, 459 (Ky. Ct. App. 1899).

Acknowledging that any classification is imperfect and open to debate (in fact, some corporations may fall in more than one category), we are concerned primarily with the following categories for purposes of this discussion:

- Entities subject to the Government Corporation Control Act. We say “entities” because they may or may not be in actual corporate form, although they usually are, and their names may or may not include the word corporation. The Control Act subdivides covered entities into two groups discussed in detail later—wholly owned government corporations and mixed-ownership government corporations.
- Entities created and fully or substantially funded by the United States Government, but not subject to the Control Act. Examples include the Legal Services Corporation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the State Justice Institute.<sup>53</sup>
- Entities created and at least partially funded by the federal government which are not designated as corporations but which have comparable powers, and are also at least partially exempt from the Control Act. Examples include the U.S. Postal Service, the Smithsonian Institution,

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<sup>53</sup> The Corporation for Public Broadcasting has strenuously objected to being included under any “government corporation” umbrella. See National Academy of Public Administration, *I Report on Government Corporations* app. 3 (1981). We include it under our umbrella listing because (1) it was statutorily created as a corporation and (2) it receives and spends federal money. See generally GAO, *Telecommunications: Issues Related to Federal Funding for Public Television by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting*, GAO-04-284 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 30, 2004). For information about the Legal Services Corporation and the State Justice Institute, see [B-308037, Sept. 14, 2006](#), and [B-307317, Sept. 13, 2006](#), respectively.

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and the Bonneville Power Administration.<sup>54</sup> (The main difference between this group and the second group is that the legislation creating an entity in this group does not confer corporate status on it. Of course, other differences flow from that distinction.)

The above groups, taken together, comprise our working “definition” for purposes of this discussion.

b. Government-Sponsored Enterprises

The term government-sponsored enterprise (GSE) refers to a “privately owned and operated federally chartered financial institution that facilitates the flow of investment funds to specific economic sectors.”<sup>55</sup> A conceptually similar but more detailed definition is found in the Congressional Budget Act, 2 U.S.C. § 622(8). GSEs are, largely but not exclusively, those entities with names that “sound like those of aging singers or the latest fast-food sandwich”<sup>56</sup>—Fannie Mae, Farmer Mac, *etc.* However, the Government National Mortgage Association (Ginnie Mae) is a wholly owned government corporation. 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3)(G).

Legislation creating GSEs has not used consistent terminology. The Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (Farmer Mac) is a “federally chartered instrumentality of the United States.” 12 U.S.C. § 2279aa-1(a)(1). So is the Financial Assistance Corporation. 12 U.S.C. § 2278b. The Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) is a “government-sponsored private corporation.” 12 U.S.C. § 1716b. The Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac) is simply a “body corporate.” 12 U.S.C. § 1452(a).

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<sup>54</sup> The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) is a true hybrid. It is not a government corporation although it has many of the powers of one and operates from a revolving fund. The office of the Administrator of BPA is an office in the Department of Energy and is under the jurisdiction and control of the Secretary of the department, although BPA is subject to many but not all of the provisions of the Government Corporation Control Act. *See* 16 U.S.C. §§ 832a(a), 838i(c) and (d). Also, the Administration’s contracting activities are governed by its own unique statutory and regulatory requirements. *See* B-291642.2, July 16, 2003, at n.1. Our discussion does not further address the Smithsonian, which the Supreme Court has called “the oldest surviving government corporation.” *Keifer & Keifer v. Reconstruction Finance Corp.*, 306 U.S. 381, 391 (1939).

<sup>55</sup> GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 59.

<sup>56</sup> Lori Nitschke, *Private Enterprise With Official Advantages*, 56 Cong. Q. Wkly. 1578 (1998).

For purposes of comparing GSEs to other forms of government-created corporate entities, the important points are that (1) GSEs are regarded as privately owned (which, in some cases and depending on how one frames one's definition, may be only partially true); (2) they are financial institutions; and (3) they are supervised but not directly managed by the government. Summary information on a number of GSEs may be found in GAO's *Budget Issues: Profiles of Government-Sponsored Enterprises*, GAO/AFMD-91-17 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 1991). For a more recent description, see Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Government-Sponsored Enterprises (GSEs): An Institutional Overview*, No. RS21663 (Dec. 20, 2005). GSEs are subject to audit by GAO only if specifically provided by statute. [B-114828, Nov. 25, 1975](#), at 2, 4.

While a GSE is, except as expressly provided, not subject to the laws governing federal agencies, it is nevertheless a creature of statute and exists to perform only those functions assigned to it in its enabling legislation. Any activity it undertakes must directly relate to the performance of one or more of those specified functions. *Association of Data Processing Service Organizations, Inc. v. Federal Home Loan Bank Board*, 568 F.2d 478 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1977) (federal home loan banks not authorized to sell on-line data processing services to member institutions); *Arnold Tours, Inc. v. Camp*, 472 F.2d 427 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1972) (national bank may not operate a full-scale travel agency); [71 Comp. Gen. 49 \(1991\)](#) (Farmer Mac is authorized to guarantee the timely payment of principal and interest on certain mortgage-backed securities but is not authorized to purchase those securities). The GAO decision stressed that a statute's purpose clause is not an independent grant of authority. [71 Comp. Gen.](#) at 52.

c. Title 36 Patriotic, Fraternal, or Charitable Corporate Entities

This group consists of the 80-plus corporate entities whose charters comprise title 36 of the United States Code, subtitles II and III.<sup>57</sup> Among the best-known examples are the American Red Cross,<sup>58</sup> American Legion, and the United States Olympic Committee. Each entity occupies its own chapter in title 36, and each is designated a "body corporate and politic" or a "federally chartered corporation." In addition, a provision no longer in

<sup>57</sup> All but one of these entities can be found in subtitle II, which consists of 36 U.S.C. §§ 10101 through 240112. Subtitle III, 36 U.S.C. §§ 300101–300111, is devoted entirely to the Red Cross.

<sup>58</sup> While commonly known as the American Red Cross, or more simply as the Red Cross, this organization's proper name is really "The American National Red Cross." 36 U.S.C. § 300101(b).

the Code used the term “private corporations established under Federal law.”<sup>59</sup> Of course this terminology can apply equally to GSEs. The difference is that the title 36 corporations are not business corporations; they are patriotic, fraternal, or charitable associations. The granting of a federal charter is viewed as a mark of prestige. Thus, the purpose of granting a federal charter to the Girl Scouts was “to bestow public honor and recognition on the works of the organization.” *Girl Scouts v. Personality Posters Mfg., Co.*, 304 F. Supp. 1228, 1232 (S.D.N.Y. 1969).

Although there is variation, the statutory charters “follow a common pattern.”<sup>60</sup> The typical charter starts by identifying the incorporators by name and declaring their corporate status. The incorporators range from a few to several dozen. *See, e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 86-680, 74 Stat. 572 (Aug. 31, 1960) (Agricultural Hall of Fame). The statute may be creating a new organization (*e.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 152301—National Music Council), it may merely be giving a federal charter to an organization already chartered under state law (*e.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 20902—American Ex-Prisoners of War), or it may direct that a corporation be incorporated in a state or the District of Columbia (*e.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 20301—American Academy of Arts and Letters). The statute will then state the corporation’s purposes and outline its general powers. A typical “powers” provision will include such things as to sue and be sued, adopt and use a corporate seal, adopt by-laws, hold and convey property, and enter into contracts. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 152305 (National Music Council).<sup>61</sup>

Most have perpetual succession, a feature common to private business corporations. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 30502 (c) (Blue Star Mothers of America). A relatively few have limited duration. For example, the Grand Army of the Republic, chartered in 1924 but in existence long before, consisted of those who had served in the United States armed forces during the Civil War and

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<sup>59</sup> 36 U.S.C. § 1101 (1994). Title 36 was recodified in 1998 by Pub. L. No. 105-225, 112 Stat. 1253 (Aug. 12, 1998). The former section 1101 was omitted as unnecessary. In addition, the American Red Cross was given its own subtitle, as indicated in note 58.

<sup>60</sup> Wesley A. Sturges, *The Legal Status of the Red Cross*, 56 Mich. L. Rev. 1, 23 (1957).

<sup>61</sup> Our choice of examples is intended to convey some idea of the types and range of organizations title 36 encompasses. By the way, in case you find our citation to 36 U.S.C. § 152305 for the National Music Council (as well as those for the other organizations in this discussion) a bit odd, rest assured that it is correct. The section numbers in title 36 of the United States Code go rather higher than seems normal for the Code—up to section 300111 at the writing of this chapter, to be precise.

were honorably discharged. The charter provided that the corporation would terminate when the last of its members died. Pub. L. No. 68-184, § 6, 43 Stat. 358, 360 (June 3, 1924). This of course happened some time ago, and the charter is no longer carried in the United States Code.

A common provision prohibits the corporation from issuing stock or paying dividends. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 22307(a) (American Symphony Orchestra League). Some go a step further and explicitly prohibit activities for pecuniary profit. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 152307(a) (National Music Council). Although this language is infrequent, it seems clear based on the stated purposes of these corporations<sup>62</sup> that they are not designed with profit-making in mind. Several charters require the corporation to maintain its tax-exempt status under the Internal Revenue Code. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 70108(b) (Fleet Reserve Association).

Another common provision prohibits the corporation or its officers or members from engaging in political activities. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 23106(b) (Aviation Hall of Fame). At least one variation includes a prohibition on attempting to influence legislation. 36 U.S.C. § 150108(b) (National Academy of Public Administration).

The charter will typically give the corporation the sole and exclusive use of its name. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 50305 (Disabled American Veterans). The exclusivity may extend to other symbols and emblems as well. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 220506(a)(2) (Olympic symbol of five interlocking rings).

For the most part, title 36 corporations do not receive federal appropriations. A few do or, at least, are explicitly authorized to seek federal grants, reimbursements, or other kinds of “support.” The National Film Preservation Foundation, for example, is authorized to receive up to \$530,000 for each of the fiscal years 2005 through 2009 from the Library of Congress, to be used only to match private contributions and not for administrative expenses. 36 U.S.C. § 151711. The National Academy of Public Administration is required to study and report on “any subject of government” when requested by the federal government, to be paid for

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<sup>62</sup> *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. §§ 20302 (American Academy of Arts and Letters—furthering the interests of literature and the fine arts); 20903 (American Ex-prisoners of War—encouraging fraternity, fostering patriotism, maintaining historical records); 21302 (American Historical Association—promoting historical studies collecting and preserving historical manuscripts); 21003 (American GI Forum of the United States—educational, patriotic, civic, historical, and research organization).

from appropriated funds available to the requestor. 36 U.S.C. § 150104. *See also* 36 U.S.C. § 150303 (similar provision for National Academy of Sciences). Even in these instances, the federal funds are only a portion, substantial though it may be, of the corporation's revenue. In a few instances, federal agencies are authorized to provide logistical support. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 70909 (Department of Education authorized to make available "personnel, services, and facilities" to the Future Farmers of America); 36 U.S.C. § 220107 (Defense Department authorized to make its resources available to United Service Organizations).

Most of the revenue of these corporations comes from donations and, in some cases, membership fees. Some of the corporations are expressly authorized to engage in income-producing activities. *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C. § 220305(7) (United States Capitol Historical Society may sell commemorative medals and other souvenir items); 36 U.S.C. §§ 40703(5), 40732 (Corporation for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and Firearms Safety may charge user fees and may sell surplus rifles).

Some title 36 charters include their own audit requirements. The American Red Cross, for example, must prepare an annual itemized report of receipts and expenditures, which is audited by the Department of Defense, and must reimburse the expenses Defense incurs in conducting these audits. 36 U.S.C. § 300110. Title 36 corporations whose charters do not include audit provisions are subject to the general requirements of 36 U.S.C. § 10101, subsection (a) of which requires an annual audit "in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards" by independent accountants. GAO does not audit these corporations. It does, upon request, conduct a limited "report audit" or "desk review," including a review of the corporation's financial statements, to determine whether the audit report complies with the financial reporting requirements of the statutory charter or 36 U.S.C. § 10101. GAO's report of this review is very brief and, if no problems are found, concludes simply that "[w]e did not identify any instance of noncompliance with the . . . financial reporting requirements of" 36 U.S.C. § 10101. *E.g.*, GAO, *Federally Chartered Corporation: Financial Statement Audit Report for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation for Fiscal Years 2003 and 2002*, GAO-06-691R (Washington, D.C.: May 12, 2006), at 1.

The relationship of a title 36 corporation to the federal government cannot be summarized in a simple statement. Several charters provide that the corporation "may not claim congressional approval or the authority of the United States Government for any of its activities." *E.g.*, 36 U.S.C.



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§ 154708(d) (Non-Commissioned Officers Association of America). Others include an explicit disclaimer of federal financial liability: “The United States Government is not liable for any debts, defaults, acts, or omissions of the corporation. The full faith and credit of the Government does not extend to any obligation of the corporation.” 36 U.S.C. § 151310 (National Fallen Firefighters Foundation). For another example, see 36 U.S.C. §§ 151710 (National Film Preservation Foundation).

Absent an explicit disclaimer provision, the question becomes whether the corporation can be deemed a “federal actor” or an instrumentality of the United States, and if so, for what purposes. The starting point in this analysis is the established proposition that the mere fact that Congress has conferred a federal charter does not make the corporation a government agent. *San Francisco Arts & Athletics, Inc. v. United States Olympic Committee*, 483 U.S. 522, 543–44 (1987); *Stearns v. Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 394 F. Supp. 138, 141 (D.D.C. 1975), *aff’d mem.*, 527 F.2d 1387 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 429 U.S. 822 (1976). In many cases this will provide the answer if there is no, or at least no significant, federal involvement beyond the granting of the charter and the requirement to submit annual reports to Congress. If this does not do the job, it becomes necessary to undertake “further examination of the nexus between the [corporation] and the Government.” *Stearns v. Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 500 F.2d 788, 790 (D.C. Cir. 1974). Unfortunately, “there is no simple test” for doing this. *Department of Employment v. United States*, 385 U.S. 355, 358 (1966).

If the corporation with no federal involvement beyond its charter is one extreme, the American Red Cross is arguably the other. It has certainly generated the lion’s share of cases. The Supreme Court has held that the Red Cross is an instrumentality of the United States, at least for purposes of immunity from state taxation of its operations. *Department of Employment*, 385 U.S. at 358–59. Among the factors the Court found relevant are (1) the provision for audit by the Defense Department, (2) presidential appointment of the principal officer and several governors, and (3) the receipt of “substantial material assistance”—not the least of which is a permanent headquarters building—from the federal government. *Id.* at 359.

The lower courts have considered the “instrumentality” status of the Red Cross in a variety of contexts. For example, the Red Cross cannot be required to pay state or local taxes on authorized gambling activities (such as bingo games). *United States v. City of Spokane*, 918 F.2d 84 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990), *cert. denied*, 501 U.S. 1250 (1991). Its employees share federal

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employees' limited immunity from personal liability. *Barton v. American Red Cross*, 829 F. Supp. 1290 (M.D. Ala. 1993), *aff'd mem.*, 43 F.3d 678 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 822 (1995). However, the Red Cross is not an agency of the government for purposes of the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552. *Irwin Memorial Blood Bank v. American National Red Cross*, 640 F.2d 1051 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981). Nor is it an instrumentality for purposes of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993.<sup>63</sup> *Hall v. American National Red Cross*, 86 F.3d 919 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996). Nor is it covered by the Federal Tort Claims Act (see section B.8.a(2) of this chapter).

On some issues regarding the Red Cross, the courts are in disagreement. One is the right to trial by jury. Some courts, treating the Red Cross more like a private party, have held that parties in civil litigation against the Red Cross are entitled to a jury trial. *E.g.*, *Marcella v. Brandywine Hospital*, 47 F.3d 618 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1995); *Doe v. American National Red Cross*, 847 F. Supp. 643 (W.D. Wis. 1994). Others, placing the Red Cross more on the instrumentality side of the ledger, have found jury trial unavailable. *E.g.*, *Barton v. American Red Cross*, 826 F. Supp. 412 (M.D. Ala. 1993), *aff'd mem.*, 43 F.3d 678 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 822 (1995). Another issue is the award against the Red Cross of punitive damages (available against private litigants but not the United States). Some courts have said “yes” to such awards. *Doe v. American National Red Cross*, 845 F. Supp. 1152 (S.D. W.Va. 1994). Others have held that the Red Cross shares the government’s immunity from punitive damage awards. *Barton v. American Red Cross*, 826 F. Supp. 407 (M.D. Ala. 1993), *aff'd mem.*, 43 F.3d 678 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994), *cert. denied*, 516 U.S. 822 (1995); *Doe v. American National Red Cross*, 847 F. Supp. at 648–49; *Doe v. American National Red Cross*, 837 F. Supp. 121 (E.D.N.C. 1992).

There are relatively few cases involving title 36 corporations other than the Red Cross. The court in *United States v. District of Columbia*, 558 F. Supp. 213 (D.D.C. 1982), *vacated as moot*, 709 F.2d 1521 (D.C. Cir. 1983), followed the Red Cross precedent and found the U.S. Capitol Historical Society to be an instrumentality of the United States for purposes of tax immunity. Among the facts the court thought relevant were that the Society receives rent-free space in the Capitol to operate a visitor’s center (see 2 U.S.C. § 2165), and that its charter expressly prohibits

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<sup>63</sup> 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000bb–2000bb-4. This act was held to be unconstitutional as applied to state and local governments. See *City of Boerne v. Flores*, 521 U.S. 507 (1987).

any of the Society's funds from inuring to the benefit of its members (36 U.S.C. § 220308(b)). The judgment was vacated on appeal because Congress passed legislation explicitly giving the Society tax-exempt status with respect to activities conducted within or on the grounds of the Capitol Building. *See* 36 U.S.C. § 220307.

In the *Stearns* litigation cited above, the court held that the Veterans of Foreign Wars was not a “government actor” for purposes of the antidiscrimination protections of the Fifth Amendment.<sup>64</sup> The Supreme Court reached the same conclusion (although far from unanimously) with respect to the United States Olympic Committee. *San Francisco Arts & Athletics, Inc. v. United States Olympic Committee*, 483 U.S. 522 (1987). Reaffirming that the mere fact of federal incorporation is not enough, the Court further emphasized that “[e]ven extensive regulation by the government” or the existence of a federal subsidy may not be enough. *Id.* at 544.

A charitable and benevolent corporation which operates without assistance or interference from the government is not a government agency for purposes of the dual compensation laws, even though government officials may be involved in its administration. [26 Comp. Gen. 192 \(1946\)](#). Similarly, travel for the benefit of such a corporation is not “official travel” and hence not compensable from appropriated funds, unless it can be shown that the travel also reasonably relates to some official duty of the traveler. [B-56268, June 20, 1946](#).

Another area in which the relationship of title 36 corporations to the federal government arises is the applicability of the Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA), which expressly applies to “corporations primarily acting as instrumentalities or agencies of the United States.” 28 U.S.C. § 2671. Under this standard, the Red Cross is not an agency or instrumentality for FTCA purposes. *Rayzor v. United States*, 937 F. Supp. 115 (D.P.R. 1996), *aff'd*

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<sup>64</sup> The *Stearns* litigation originated with a district court decision, *Stearns v. Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 353 F. Supp. 473 (D.D.C. 1972), which dismissed the suit on the ground that the Veterans of Foreign Wars' federal charter alone did not constitute governmental action. The D.C. Circuit reversed this decision in *Stearns v. Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 500 F.2d 788 (D.C. Cir. 1974), suggesting that while the charter alone probably was not sufficient, there might be other factors to establish enough governmental action to support the suit. On remand, the district court found in *Stearns v. Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 394 F. Supp. 138 (D.D.C. 1975), that additional factors were not sufficient in this regard. That decision was summarily affirmed on appeal. *Stearns v. Veterans of Foreign Wars*, 527 F.2d 1387 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 429 U.S. 822 (1976).

*mem.*, 121 F.3d 695 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1997). Nor is the Civil Air Patrol, another title 36 corporation. *Pearl v. United States*, 230 F.2d 243 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1956); *Kiker v. Estep*, 444 F. Supp. 563 (N.D. Ga. 1978). See also *Nazarro v. United States*, 304 F. Supp. 2d 605 (D.N.J. 2004) (Civil Air Patrol is a charitable organization entitled to tort immunity under New Jersey’s charitable immunity statute); *Campbell v. Civil Air Patrol*, 131 F. Supp. 2d 1303 (M.D. Ala. 2001) (Civil Air Patrol is not a “federal actor” subject to a lawsuit for violation of constitutional rights “under color of federal law”).

It is no accident that the issue has been raised against these two corporations. Much of what they do seems like “government work.” One of the purposes of the Red Cross is to furnish volunteer aid to sick and wounded members of the armed forces in time of war. 36 U.S.C. § 300102(1). A purpose of the Civil Air Patrol is to encourage citizen efforts “in maintaining air supremacy,” 36 U.S.C. § 40302(1)(a), a governmental purpose if there ever was one. Be that as it may, the corporation’s “chameleon-like existence” or the argument that it amounts to a “part-time federal agency” is not enough to make the FTCA applicable. *Estep*, 444 F. Supp. at 565. The test is whether the government controls its day-to-day operations. *Rayzor*, 937 F. Supp. at 119, citing *United States v. Orleans*, 425 U.S. 807, 815 (1976).

Still another area of controversy is the application of 28 U.S.C. § 1349, which prohibits federal courts from taking jurisdiction of a suit by or against a corporation solely because “it was incorporated by or under an Act of Congress, unless the United States is the owner of more than one-half of its capital stock.” The typical title 36 corporation being a nonstock corporation, some courts have applied section 1349 by using a “government control” test. Thus, for example, the American Red Cross “functions independently and is in no way controlled by the Government” for purposes of 28 U.S.C. § 1349, one reason being that the president appoints only 8 of its 50 governors. *C.H. v. American Red Cross*, 684 F. Supp. 1018, 1022 (E.D. Mo. 1987), followed in, e.g., *Collins v. American Red Cross*, 724 F. Supp. 353 (E.D. Pa. 1989). In *Burton v. United States Olympic Committee*, 574 F. Supp. 517, 524 (C.D. Cal. 1983), the court reached the same result for the United States Olympic Committee because (1) the Olympic Committee was the legal owner of its property, (2) any surplus funds do not revert to the U.S. Treasury, (3) it is self-governing and operates independent of federal control, and (4) it is not included in the Government Corporation Control Act.

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Other courts have applied the stock ownership requirement literally and held that section 1349 can never form the basis of federal jurisdiction of a nonstock corporation because the government cannot own half of what does not exist. *E.g.*, *Burton*, 574 F. Supp. at 523; *Stop the Olympic Prison v. United States Olympic Committee*, 489 F. Supp. 1112, 1117 (S.D.N.Y. 1980). The Supreme Court noted the split, but did not resolve it in *American National Red Cross v. S.G.*, 505 U.S. 247, 251 and n.3 (1992). Rather, the Court held in this case that the sue-and-be-sued provision of the Red Cross charter was sufficient in itself to confer federal jurisdiction. *Id.*

d. Federally Funded Research and Development Centers

A Federally Funded Research and Development Center (FFRDC) is a privately owned but government-funded entity which has a long-term contractual relationship with one or more federal agencies to perform research and development and related tasks.<sup>65</sup> One authority refers to them as “captive corporations’ which are legally private, but are almost entirely government financed.”<sup>66</sup> The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) states: “FFRDC’s are operated, managed, and/or administered by either a university or consortium of universities, other not-for-profit or nonprofit organization, or an industrial firm, as an autonomous organization or as an identifiable separate operating unit of a parent organization.” 48 C.F.R. § 35.017(a)(3).

The federal executive agency which manages, administers, monitors, funds, and is responsible for the overall use of the FFRDC, is called the sponsor.<sup>67</sup> 48 C.F.R. § 35.017(b). The FFRDC may be permitted to accept work from parties other than the sponsor if and to the extent specified in the sponsoring agreement. 48 C.F.R. § 35.017-1(c)(5). A sponsoring agreement may not exceed 5 years, but is renewable in 5-year increments. 48 C.F.R § 35.017-1(e). The FAR tells agencies to phase out FFRDCs which are no longer needed. 48 C.F.R § 35.017-5. Some better known FFRDCs are the Rand Corporation and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s

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<sup>65</sup> See 71 Comp. Gen. 155 (1992). Apart from this overview treatment, our discussion does not further address these entities.

<sup>66</sup> Harold Seidman, *Government Corporations in the United States*, 22 *Optimum* 40, 43 (1991) (Seidman 1991).

<sup>67</sup> Under 48 C.F.R. § 35.017(b), it is possible for an FFRDC to have multiple federal agency sponsorship. The regulation calls for a lead agency to be designated as primary sponsor.

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Lincoln Laboratory, both sponsored by the Department of the Air Force.<sup>68</sup> FFRDCs originated in the World War II era<sup>69</sup> and have proliferated in subsequent decades. The 1972 report of the Commission on Government Procurement, although expressing concern over the potential pitfalls of single-agency funding,<sup>70</sup> recommended that agencies continue to have “the option to organize and use FFRDCs to satisfy needs that cannot be satisfied effectively by other organizational resources.”<sup>71</sup> The Office of Management and Budget’s Office of Federal Procurement Policy implemented the Commission’s recommendation by issuing Policy Letter No. 84-1, 49 Fed. Reg. 14462, 14464 (Apr. 11, 1984), which was in turn implemented by the subsequent inclusion of coverage in the FAR at 48 C.F.R. § 35.017. See 48 C.F.R. § 35.017(a)(2) (“An FFRDC meets some special long-term research or development need which cannot be met as effectively by existing in-house or contractor services.”).

There is no requirement that the creation of an FFRDC be specifically authorized by statute. 71 Comp. Gen. 155 (1992) (Government Corporation Control Act requirement for specific authority not applicable to FFRDCs); B-145898-O.M., June 30, 1961 (same). The authority to establish and sponsor FFRDCs is viewed as incident to the agency’s authority to enter into contracts. 71 Comp. Gen. at 157. Although arguably unnecessary under this theory, in some cases Congress has specifically authorized agencies to establish FFRDCs, perhaps because of the amounts involved. For example, the 1991 appropriation for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) authorized the IRS to spend up to \$15 million to establish an FFRDC as part of its tax systems modernization program. Pub. L. No. 101-509, 104 Stat. 1389, 1395 (Nov. 5, 1990). Legislation enacted in 1987 authorized the Secretary of Defense to establish an FFRDC to provide support to the Strategic Defense Initiative program. Pub. L. No. 100-180, § 227, 101 Stat. 1019, 1057–59 (Dec. 4, 1987), 10 U.S.C. § 2431 note.

While there is no governmentwide statutory guidance on the creation and use of FFRDCs, there is legislation applicable to the military departments.

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<sup>68</sup> The National Science Foundation provides a list of FFRDCs as of February 2005 on its Web site at [www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf05306](http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/nsf05306) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

<sup>69</sup> 2 Report of the Commission on Government Procurement 17 (1972).

<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 18.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.* at 64 (app. E., Recommendation No. 5).

Before obligating or expending funds to operate an FFRDC, the sponsoring department must report to Congress on the “purpose, mission, and general scope of effort” of the proposed FFRDC, and must observe a 60-day waiting period. 10 U.S.C. § 2367(c)(1). An FFRDC generally may be used only for work that is within the center’s purpose, mission, and general scope of effort, as set forth in the sponsoring agreement. 10 U.S.C. § 2367(a).<sup>72</sup> Defense is to report to designated congressional committees “the actual obligations and the actual man-years of effort expended at each” FFRDC for each fiscal year. 10 U.S.C. § 2367(d).

The FFRDC is not an arm’s length contractor. By virtue of its access to government data, employees, and facilities, it is said to have a “special relationship” with the government. 48 C.F.R. § 35.017(a)(2). As one might suspect, the FFRDC concept is not free from controversy. One commentator states:

“The first FFRDCs were able to provide a research environment, capable of attracting and retaining the best scientists, which it was difficult to reproduce within the government structure. It is now claimed that establishment of FFRDCs sometimes is motivated more by the desire to evade government personnel and procurement regulations than by desire to create a research environment. It is alleged that some are little more than job shops for their government sponsors. Industry is unhappy because of what it sees as unfair competition.”<sup>73</sup>

The “job shop” allegation stems in part from the practice of granting “fringe benefits” which, although reimbursed directly from appropriated funds, exceed those of regular government employees, sometimes by a very wide margin. One example is discussed in a GAO report whose title is very revealing: *University Research: U.S. Reimbursement of Tuition Costs for University Employee Family Members*, GAO/NSIAD-95-19 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 15, 1995). The Office of Management and Budget subsequently inserted language in OMB Circular No. A-21, *Cost Principles for*

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<sup>72</sup> This limitation does not apply to an FFRDC that performs applied scientific research under laboratory conditions. 10 U.S.C. § 2367(b).

<sup>73</sup> Seidman 1991, at 43–44. For further discussion of the competition aspects, see GAO, *Competition: Issues on Establishing and Using Federally Funded Research and Development Centers*, GAO/NSIAD-88-22 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 7, 1988).

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*Educational Institutions*, § J.10.f(2) (May 10, 2004), to make tuition benefits allowable only for the employees themselves.

To help ameliorate industry’s concerns, the FAR requires each sponsoring agreement to prohibit the FFRDC from competing with any non-FFRDC for government contracts. 48 C.F.R. § 35.017-1(c)(4). This is not limited to the FFRDC as prime contractor. In a bid protest decision, for example, GAO found the regulation violated where an agency accepted a proposal in which an FFRDC would team with the awardee to perform a substantial amount of the work. [B-243650.2, Nov. 18, 1991](#), *aff’d on reconsideration*, [B-243650.3, May 11, 1992](#). GAO explained:

“[The FAR] does not make a distinction between an FFRDC’s role as a prime contractor or subcontractor. We think that the determination whether an FFRDC is in fact competing with a private firm in violation of the regulation depends not upon whether the FFRDC has submitted a proposal in its own name but upon the impact of its participation, both from a technical and a cost standpoint, upon the procurement.”

*Id.* at 5.

Similarly, where the contracting agency discovered the relationship after it had awarded the contract, it properly terminated the contract for the convenience of the government. [B-276240 et al.](#), May 23, 1997.

Even though it may be funded entirely, or nearly so, from federal funds, an FFRDC is regarded as a contractor and not an agency or instrumentality of the United States. [71 Comp. Gen. 155, 158 \(1992\)](#). For example, in deciding a 1981 dispute over reimbursement of costs, the Armed Services Board of Contract Appeals treated an FFRDC no differently than any other contractor, notwithstanding that it was “100 percent funded by the government.” *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, ASBCA No. 23079, 81-2 B.C.A. ¶ 15,451 (1981) (cited in [71 Comp. Gen. at 157 n.2](#)). Similarly, GAO analyzed the Mitre Corporation, an FFRDC, as follows:

“While the MITRE Corporation was established . . . for the purpose of engaging in and procuring services to or for the United States Government or any department or agency thereof, the company may not be said to be in any respect an agency or instrumentality of the United States. The



affairs of the company are in the hands of private persons, no element of control being vested in the United States; and no provision is made for distributing corporate assets to the United States upon dissolution of the company. Such interest as the United States might have in MITRE would arise solely under contracts entered into with the company in the same manner as under contracts with any other corporation.”

[B-145898-O.M., June 30, 1961](#), at 5–6.

The relationship of FFRDCs to the government also comes into play in protests against the award of subcontracts by FFRDCs. GAO will review a subcontract award if the subcontract is “by or for a Federal agency.” 4 C.F.R. § 21.13(a). The protester invariably argues that the FFRDC’s contracts are, by virtue of its status, “for the government.” GAO will not draw a conclusion either way solely from the contractor’s status as an FFRDC, but will examine the specific contractual relationship. The “by or for” standard contemplates situations in which the FFRDC is effectively acting as the government’s agent or is largely a conduit between the government and the subcontractor. This could happen, for example, where the FFRDC is operating and/or managing a government facility (as opposed to simply using government-furnished facilities), or otherwise providing large-scale management services. [69 Comp. Gen. 334 \(1990\)](#); [B-244711, Oct. 16, 1991](#).

Along the same lines, the court in *Vallier v. Jet Propulsion Laboratory*, 120 F. Supp. 2d 887 (C.D. Cal. 2000), *aff’d*, 23 Fed. Appx. 803 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001), held that the United States had no tort liability for alleged negligence in the California Institute of Technology’s (Caltech) operation of the laboratory’s waste disposal facilities because Caltech was not an “employee” of the United States under the Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA), 28 U.S.C. §§ 2671–2680. The court found that, although Caltech was subject to detailed federal regulations and inspections, the federal government did not control Caltech’s day-to-day operation of the laboratory’s waste disposal activities. *Vallier*, 120 F. Supp. 2d at 908. The court also observed that, unlike the contracts governing some FFRDCs, there was nothing in Caltech’s contract for operation of the laboratory making Caltech a government “employee” for purposes of the FTCA. *Id.* at 908–09. The court distinguished Caltech’s contract from others that specifically stated that the FFRDCs were “agents” of the government for purposes of the activities in question. *Id.* at 909.

A variation on the FFRDC theme is the so-called “GOCO”—a government-owned, contractor-operated facility. See, for example, *United States v. Anderson County, Tennessee*, 705 F.2d 184 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983), *cert. denied*, 464 U.S. 1017 (1983), describing a GOCO used by the Department of Energy. Energy also funds a group of GOCO research laboratories. A useful report on these is GAO, *Department of Energy: Uncertain Progress in Implementing National Laboratory Reforms*, GAO/RCED-98-197 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 1998). See also GAO, *Department of Energy: Additional Opportunities Exist for Reducing Laboratory Contractors Support Costs*, GAO-05-897 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005); *National Laboratories: Better Performance Reporting Could Aid Oversight of Laboratory-Directed R&D Program*, GAO-01-927 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 28, 2001).

e. Summing Up

“Developments in the last 20 years might make one suspect that the U.S. government is going quasi.”<sup>74</sup>

The categories we have described make up the primary ways the government has used the corporate device. They are, however, by no means exclusive. Other agency-specific or program-specific examples dot the federal landscape. One is the Production Credit Association (PCA). PCAs are corporate financial institutions chartered by the Farm Credit Administration under statutory authority. 12 U.S.C. §§ 2071–2077. See also 12 C.F.R. § 614.4040. They are statutorily designated as instrumentalities of the United States. 12 U.S.C. § 2071(a). As such, they have been held immune from awards of punitive damages. *Smith v. Russellville Production Credit Ass’n*, 777 F.2d 1544 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985); *Rohweder v. Aberdeen Production Credit Ass’n*, 765 F.2d 109 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985); *Matter of Sparkman*, 703 F.2d 1097 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983). However, they are not “primarily acting as instrumentalities of the United States” for purposes of the Federal Tort Claims Act. *South Central Iowa Production Credit Ass’n v. Scanlan*, 380 N.W.2d 699 (Iowa 1986); *Waldschmidt v. Iowa Lakes Production Credit Ass’n*, 380 N.W.2d 704 (Iowa 1986). Also, they are sufficiently independent of the federal government so as not to share the government’s exemption from 28 U.S.C. § 1341, which bars federal jurisdiction of state tax cases in favor of remedies under the state courts. *Arkansas v. Farm Credit Services*, 520 U.S. 821 (1997). One court analogized them to national banks in the Federal Reserve System. *United States v. Haynes*,

<sup>74</sup> Harold Seidman, *The Quasi World of the Federal Government*, 6 Brookings Rev. 23 (1988) (Seidman 1988).

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620 F. Supp. 474, 477 (M.D. Tenn. 1985) (holding that they were not independent agencies for purposes of 18 U.S.C. § 208, the criminal conflict of interest statute).<sup>75</sup>

Another example is the entity addressed in *Varicon International v. OPM*, 934 F. Supp. 440 (D.D.C. 1996), a corporation formed by former Office of Personnel Management (OPM) employees, with OPM's encouragement. OPM awarded it a sole-source contract to conduct background investigations previously conducted by the agency itself. The court viewed this as nothing more than "a private corporation which was awarded a government contract" (*id.* at 447), and thus not subject to the Government Corporation Control Act's requirement for statutory authority. *See also* 53 Comp. Gen. 86 (1973).

Some analysts believe that an increasing portion of the government's business is being done outside the traditional structure. They also suggest that "[t]he line between what is 'public' and what is 'private' has become indistinct."<sup>76</sup> The literature uses terms like "quasi-private," "quasi-government," and "hybrid organizations."<sup>77</sup> Leazes calls them "twilight-zone corporations."<sup>78</sup> Moe regards them as "relatively unaccountable units at the margin of government."<sup>79</sup> Seidman consigns them to a "*terra incognita*, somewhere between the public and private sectors."<sup>80</sup> The National Academy of Public Administration (itself a title 36 corporation) has reported that "[t]he boundary between the public and private sectors

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<sup>75</sup> For cases reaching similar results with respect to other corporations under an earlier version of the statute, see *United States v. Chemical Foundation, Inc.*, 272 U.S. 1 (1926), and 16 Comp. Gen. 613 (1936).

<sup>76</sup> Ronald C. Moe and Thomas H. Stanton, *Government-Sponsored Enterprises as Federal Instrumentalities: Reconciling Private Management with Public Accountability*, 49 Pub. Admin. Rev. 321 (1989); Lloyd D. Musolf and Harold Seidman, *The Blurred Boundaries of Public Administration*, 40 Pub. Admin. Rev. 124, 125 (1980). Adding those purely private entities whose doors would close in a matter of weeks if the federal money stopped flowing further emphasizes the point.

<sup>77</sup> *See* Musolf and Seidman, at 124.

<sup>78</sup> Francis J. Leazes, Jr., *Accountability and the Business State: The Structure of Federal Corporations*, 36 (1987).

<sup>79</sup> Ronald C. Moe, *Administering Public Functions at the Margin of Government: The Case of Federal Corporations*, 3 (1983).

<sup>80</sup> Seidman 1988, at 25.

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has been blurred so that one cannot say with assurance to which sector many corporations belong or to whom they are accountable.”<sup>81</sup>

Students of public administration disagree over whether this blurring is good or bad.<sup>82</sup> Whether it is good, bad, or somewhere in between, it is here, likely to remain, and must be included in any consideration of federal spending issues.

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### 3. Creation

To create a private business corporation, the incorporators file articles of incorporation with a designated office in the jurisdiction—state or District of Columbia—in which they wish to incorporate. Each state, as well as the District of Columbia, has an incorporation statute that details these procedures and addresses other aspects of the corporation’s existence, such as corporate powers, liability of officers, and issuance of stock. For example, the D.C. law is the District of Columbia Business Corporation Act, 29 D.C. Code §§ 29.101.01–29.101.170.

There is no such thing as a federal incorporation statute. Rather, Congress ordinarily provides a charter for a government corporation<sup>83</sup> by specific legislation that sets out its purposes, powers, structure, obligations, and sources of funding. The statute may also require the government corporation to incorporate in a particular state or the District of Columbia. The corporation may be specifically designated an agency or instrumentality of the United States government, or it may be specifically designated not to be such entities, which can be important when it comes

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<sup>81</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *I Report on Government Corporations* 4 (1981). If this passage is evocative of Moe and Seidman, it may be because both were members of the panel which conducted the NAPA study. *Id.* at app. 1.

<sup>82</sup> See, e.g., Benjamin A. Templin, *Comment on Neil H. Buchanan’s Social Security and Government Deficits: When Should We Worry?*, 92 Cornell L. Rev. 291, 295–96 (2007); Richard Scott Carnell, *Handling the Failure of a Government-Sponsored Enterprise*, 80 Washington L. Rev. 565 (2005); Donna M. Nagy, *Playing Peekaboo with Constitutional Law: The PCAOB (Public Company Accounting Oversight Board) and Its Public/Private Status*, 80 Notre Dame L. Rev. 975 (2005); Seidman 1988, at 23–24. For an examination of the hybrid nature of Amtrak, see Arnold Adams, *The National Railroad Passenger Corporation [Amtrak]—A Modern Hybrid Corporation Neither Private Nor Public*, 31 Bus. Law. 601 (1976).

<sup>83</sup> For ease of discussion in this section, we will use the term “government corporation” to refer generically to the various corporate devices discussed in section B.2 of this chapter unless a more specific term is warranted.

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to determining whether particular federal statutes apply to the corporation (discussed in detail in section B.7 of this chapter). Congress may also charter a government corporation by delegating the power to the executive branch or to another government corporation. Either way, the creation of a government corporation must be explicit; it cannot be implied.

a. Historical Background and Purpose

While the proliferation of government corporations largely occurred during the twentieth century, the federal government has created or used government corporations since the beginning of the republic. The earliest examples were banking institutions. The first, predating even the adoption of the Constitution, occurred when the Continental Congress authorized the Bank of North America in 1781 and the Superintendent of Finance purchased approximately five-eighths of the capital stock in the name of the government, making the United States the majority owner.<sup>84</sup> In 1791, Congress created and incorporated the (First) Bank of the United States, authorizing the United States to subscribe 20 percent of the corporation's stock.<sup>85</sup> Act of February 25, 1791, ch. 10, 1 Stat. 191. Initial governmental participation in this and other banking enterprises consisted of investment in stock as opposed to management of the corporation.

The Second Bank of the United States was incorporated by the Act of April 10, 1816, ch. 44, 3 Stat. 266, in which the United States would subscribe 20 percent of the Bank's capital stock and the President would appoint, by and with the consent of the Senate, 5 of the Bank's 25 directors, the rest to be elected annually by shareholders other than the United States. The legality of the Second Bank was challenged, resulting in the landmark case of *McCulloch v. Maryland*, 17 U.S. (4 Wheat.) 316 (1819). In that decision, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Second Bank of the United States and the federal government's authority to create or involve itself in commercial enterprises. The Court held that although the Constitution did not specify creating corporations as one of the federal government's enumerated powers, the Necessary and Proper Clause of the Constitution (art. I, § 8, cl. 18) allowed Congress to charter and use a corporation for the public purpose of banking. Chief Justice Marshall stated:

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<sup>84</sup> John McDiarmid, *Government Corporations and Federal Funds*, 21 (1938).

<sup>85</sup> A capsule history starting with the 1791 act may be found in *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corporation*, 513 U.S. 374, 386–91 (1995).

“The power of creating a corporation, though appertaining to sovereignty, is not, like the power of making war, or levying taxes, or of regulating commerce, a great substantive and independent power, which cannot be implied as incidental to other powers, or used as a means of executing them. It is never the end for which other powers are exercised, but a means by which other objects are accomplished.”

*Id.* at 411.

Later in the opinion, the Chief Justice wrote what has become one of the most famous statements in American constitutional law: “Let the end be legitimate, let it be within the scope of the constitution, and all means which are appropriate, which are plainly adapted to that end, which are not prohibited, but consist[ent] with the letter and spirit of the constitution, are constitutional.” *Id.* at 421.

The courts have never seriously questioned Congress’s power to create or employ corporate entities as a means of carrying into effect the substantive powers granted to it by the Constitution. For example, in *Luxton v. North River Bridge Co.*, 153 U.S. 525 (1894), the Supreme Court held that Congress, in exercising its power to regulate interstate commerce, indisputably has the power to create a corporation to construct a bridge across navigable water between two states.<sup>86</sup> Congress is not restricted to creating a new corporation, but can acquire or employ an existing private corporation to carry out its substantive constitutional powers. *New York ex rel. Rogers v. Graves*, 299 U.S. 401 (1937). Here, Congress acquired the entire capital stock of a private corporation and elected its board of directors to carry out constitutional powers of regulating commerce and providing for national defense in maintaining, operating, and protecting the Panama Canal.

Congress has created or employed corporations to carry out varied purposes. Turning again to Chief Justice Marshall’s words, “[t]he power of

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<sup>86</sup> Other cases upholding the constitutionality of various government corporations include *Smith v. Kansas City Title & Trust Co.*, 255 U.S. 180 (1921) (federal land banks); *Doherty v. United States*, 94 F.2d 495 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 303 U.S. 658 (1938) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation); *Weir v. United States*, 92 F.2d 634 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 302 U.S. 761 (1937) (same); *Langer v. United States*, 76 F.2d 817 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1935) (Reconstruction Finance Corporation).

creating a corporation is never used for its own sake, but for the purpose of effecting something else.” *McCulloch*, 17 U.S. at 411. One analyst has noted that “[g]overnment-sponsored corporations are simply a means of securing governmental objectives.”<sup>87</sup> Some government corporations are charged with developing projects or functions not adaptable to private industry while others are responsible for meeting needs in the market that are unmet by private industry. Those purposes include governance, as well as social and educational programs. Government corporations have also been created, usually in bunches, to meet war or economic emergencies. The twentieth century saw three such surges: World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II.

First, during World War I, government corporations were created to mobilize the war effort by transacting business in the same manner as private commercial firms. These included the War Finance Corporation,<sup>88</sup> the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation,<sup>89</sup> and the United States Spruce Production Corporation,<sup>90</sup> among others. After the war, many of the corporations were liquidated since they were intended to be temporary and had fulfilled their missions to support the war effort.

It was not long after World War I that another crisis erupted and led to the next surge of government corporations. The role of the federal government changed dramatically in response to the Great Depression, even more than it changed as a result of World Wars I and II. During the Depression, the federal government used government corporations extensively to stabilize

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<sup>87</sup> Ronald J. Krotoszynski, Jr., *Back to the Briarpatch: An Argument in Favor of Constitutional Meta-Analysis in State Action Determinations*, 94 Mich. L. Rev. 302, 312 (1995).

<sup>88</sup> The War Finance Corporation was organized under Pub. L. No. 65-121, 40 Stat. 506 (Apr. 5, 1918), to provide financial assistance to industries important to the successful prosecution of the war.

<sup>89</sup> The Emergency Fleet Corporation was organized on April 16, 1917 to purchase, construct, and operate merchant vessels under the authority of the original Shipping Board Act, Pub. L. No. 64-260, § 11, 39 Stat. 728, 731 (Sept. 7, 1916). See John McDiarmid, *Government Corporations and Federal Funds*, 21, 24–25 (1938).

<sup>90</sup> Public Law No. 65-193, 40 Stat. 845, 888 (July 9, 1918), authorized the War Department’s Director of Aircraft Production to form corporations to aid the government’s production of aircraft and related equipment. Under this authority, the United States Spruce Production Corporation was created on August 20, 1918, to make available aircraft lumber for war use.

the economy and encourage economic growth.<sup>91</sup> For example, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation had a central role in planning and financing recovery programs by providing loans to banks, railroads, business enterprises, mining interests, public agencies, agricultural marketing organizations, and purchasing stock in banks, insurance companies, mortgage corporations, and corporations engaged in defense activities.<sup>92</sup> The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation was created to promote and preserve public confidence in banks and protect the money supply by insuring deposits, periodically examining insured banks, and regulating certain securities, mergers, consolidations, acquisitions and assumption transactions of the banking sector.<sup>93</sup> The Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) was created for the purpose of “stabilizing, supporting, and protecting farm income and prices, of assisting in the maintenance of balanced and adequate supplies of agricultural commodities . . . and of facilitating the orderly distribution of agricultural commodities.”<sup>94</sup> The primary method the CCC uses to achieve its purpose is providing loans. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was established to encourage improvement in housing standards and conditions, to provide an adequate home financing system by insurance of housing mortgages and credit, and to exert a stabilizing influence on the mortgage market.<sup>95</sup> The primary method used by FHA to fulfill its purpose is providing mortgage insurance.

World War II provided the impetus for the third major surge in twentieth century government corporations. Over 20 government corporations were

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<sup>91</sup> Francis J. Leazes, Jr., *Accountability and the Business State: The Structure of Federal Corporations*, 21 (1987).

<sup>92</sup> Pub. L. No. 72-2, 47 Stat. 5 (Jan. 22, 1932). *See also* Pub. L. No. 76-664, § 6, 54 Stat. 572, 574 (June 25, 1940).

<sup>93</sup> Banking Act of 1933, Pub. L. No. 73-66, § 8, 48 Stat. 162, 168 (June 16, 1933), *superseded by* Federal Deposit Insurance Act, Pub. L. No. 81-797, 64 Stat. 873 (Sept. 21, 1950), *codified as amended at* 12 U.S.C. §§ 1811–1831z.

<sup>94</sup> 15 U.S.C. § 714. The Commodity Credit Corporation was given a statutory charter in 1948 by Public Law No. 80-806, 62 Stat. 1070 (June 29, 1948).

<sup>95</sup> National Housing Act, Pub. L. No. 73-479, § 1, 48 Stat. 1246 (June 27, 1934). Its provisions now appear primarily at 12 U.S.C. §§ 1707–1715z-22a. The Federal Housing Administration is now part of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Some interesting statutory phrasing provides that “‘wholly owned Government corporation’ means . . . the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development when carrying out duties and powers related to the Federal Housing Administration Fund.” 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3)(M).



created to meet the wartime production needs of World War II. These included the War Damage Corporation<sup>96</sup> (to provide insurance and reasonable protection against loss or damage to property, real or personal, resulting from enemy attack, including any action taken by the military, naval, or air forces of the United States in resisting enemy attack), the Smaller War Plants Corporation<sup>97</sup> (to aid in mobilizing the productive facilities of small business in the interest of successful prosecution of the war), and the Defense Plant Corporation<sup>98</sup> (to aid the Government in its national defense by financing or engaging in the construction, extension, and operation of plants engaged in war production).

Of course, the end of World War II did not end the practice of creating and using government corporations. Since then, government corporations have continued to be created to address myriad economic, social, and other issues affecting the nation. For example, Congress created the Government National Mortgage Association (Ginnie Mae) in 1968 to provide the means of transferring funds from the nation's securities markets into the residential housing mortgage market. 12 U.S.C. §§ 1716b, 1717. The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation was created in 1974 to administer the pension plan termination insurance program created under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA) by encouraging the continuation and maintenance of voluntary private pension plans, providing uninterrupted payment of pension benefits to beneficiaries under plans covered by ERISA and maintaining premiums at the lowest level consistent with carrying out its obligations under ERISA. 29 U.S.C. § 1302. The Resolution Trust Corporation was established in 1989, in response to the savings and loan crisis, to manage and resolve all cases involving failed depository institutions insured by the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation before the enactment of the

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<sup>96</sup> The War Damage Corporation was actually created by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation under statutory authority. *See* 15 U.S.C. § 606b (1946).

<sup>97</sup> The Smaller War Plants Corporation was created by Public Law No. 77-603, § 4, 56 Stat. 351, 353 (June 11, 1942).

<sup>98</sup> The Defense Plant Corporation was created by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation on August 22, 1940, under the same statutory authority as the War Damage Corporation. *See* GAO, *Reference Manual of Government Corporations*, S. Doc. No. 79-86, at 32 (1945).

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Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery and Enforcement Act (FIRREA) of 1989. 12 U.S.C. § 1441a(b).<sup>99</sup>

At any given time, it seems, several new corporations are being proposed or studied. *See, e.g.*, GAO, *Government Corporations: Profiles of Recent Proposals*, GAO/GGD-95-57FS (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 30, 1995). The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a document in 1995 entitled *Specifications for Creating Government Corporations* (OMB Memorandum M-96-05, (Dec. 8, 1995)). This presents OMB's standards and approach for evaluating proposals for new corporations. The OMB paper incorporates many of the principles of the 1981 National Academy of Public Administration report noted in section B.1 of this chapter.

Congress has categorized or designated some government corporations as nonprofit (*e.g.*, Legal Services Corporation, 42 U.S.C. § 2996b(a)) while others are designated as for-profit. For example, the United States Enrichment Corporation (USEC) was created to operate as a business enterprise on a profitable and efficient basis by marketing and selling enriched uranium, and uranium enrichment and related services, primarily for use by electric utilities worldwide. 42 U.S.C. §§ 2297b, 2297b-2 (1994).<sup>100</sup> Another example is Amtrak, whose organic legislation currently specifies that it “shall be operated and managed as a for-profit corporation.” 49 U.S.C. § 24301(a)(2). Originally, Amtrak's statute simply declared it to be a “for profit corporation” (Pub. L. No. 91-518, § 301, 84 Stat. 1327, 1330 (Oct. 30, 1970)), but the language was changed to recognize the realities of the situation. For a history of Amtrak's legislation *vis-à-vis* corporate status, see *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 388–89 (1995).

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<sup>99</sup> The Resolution Trust Corporation has terminated and its remaining responsibilities were transferred to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. *See* 12 U.S.C. § 1441a(m).

<sup>100</sup> Congress enacted legislation in 1996 to “privatize” USEC. *See* USEC Privatization Act, enacted as part of the massive Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-134, title III, ch. 1, subch. A, 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-335 (Apr. 26, 1996). For background, see [B-307137, July 12, 2006](#); [B-286661, Jan. 19, 2001](#); GAO, *U.S. Enrichment Corporation Privatization: USEC's Delays in Providing Data Hinder DOE's Oversight of the Uranium Decontamination Agreement*, GAO-06-723 (Washington, D.C.: June 16, 2006); *Uranium Enrichment: Observations on the Privatization of the United States Enrichment Corporation*, GAO/T-RCED-95-116 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 24, 1995). The “omnibus” act is itself a fascinating document. Its publication in Statutes at Large begins with a footnote stating that the act's “original hand enrollment as signed by the President . . . is printed without corrections. Footnotes indicate missing or illegible text in the original.”

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b. Need for Statutory Authority

Prior to 1946, government corporations came into being in one of three ways. They were (1) specifically created by statute, (2) created by an executive branch department or another government corporation under statutory authorization or delegation, or (3) created by the executive branch through purely administrative action, with no specific statutory authorization. *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 388–89 (1995). The power of Congress to create government corporations, either directly or by delegation, had been settled since *McCulloch v. Maryland*<sup>101</sup> in 1819. The issue of executive authority to create corporations came to a head in the 1940s. The lines of battle were formed when the Farm Security Administration, which wanted to purchase land but lacked the requisite statutory authority, created several corporations whose officers and directors were Department of Agriculture employees. The Department then made loans to the corporations, which in turn bought the land. Not surprisingly, the legality of this arrangement was questioned. On the issue of whether the Department could create corporations without statutory authority, the parties split along predictable lines. The Comptroller General said “No.” B-23881, Mar. 5, 1942. See also 21 Comp. Gen. 892, 893 (1942). The Attorney General said “Yes.” 40 Op. Att’y Gen. 193 (1942). See also 37 Op. Att’y Gen. 288 (1933).

GAO’s conclusion was based partially on considerations of sovereign immunity. The power to sue and be sued is an important power of any corporation. The Supreme Court had recently decided *Federal Housing Administration v. Burr*, 309 U.S. 242 (1940), and *Keifer & Keifer v. Reconstruction Finance Corp.*, 306 U.S. 381 (1939), which strongly implied that this power could be granted only by Congress. B-23881, Mar. 5, 1942, at 18. It was not necessary for the Court to directly address the question because neither case dealt with a corporation created purely by executive action, but it would seem fundamental that an agency could not confer powers, authorities, or exemptions it did not have, unless of course it was operating under express statutory authority.<sup>102</sup>

Of course, as the sue-and-be-sued point suggests, the heart of the question was never the creation of corporate entities *per se*. Rather, the issue centered on the powers that could be given to them. One decision stated

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<sup>101</sup> 17 U.S. (4 Wheat.) 316 (1819). See the discussion in section B.3.a of this chapter.

<sup>102</sup> The Attorney General’s opinion did not address this point, but did remind GAO that GAO had at least implicitly condoned the practice by issuing decisions concerning nonstatutory corporations—without questioning the legality of their creation. 40 Op. Att’y Gen. at 201.

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that “the Virgin Islands Co. was created without specific Congressional authorization and . . . therefore, the corporate character of the company did not serve to free its funds from the provisions of law to which they would have been subject if administered by an unincorporated Government agency.” [21 Comp. Gen. 928, 930 \(1942\)](#).

After its creation, however, Congress had given the corporation statutory recognition. In light of this, GAO concluded that the corporation could, if reasonably necessary to corporate business, go beyond certain use limitations imposed as a matter of policy on funds available to other agencies, and advised that the corporation could use its funds to buy insurance on its property. *Id.* at 931. A 1934 decision contained a stronger statement:

“There is a clear and vital difference between a corporation created pursuant to statutory direction with clear statutory grant to remove its transactions from the safeguards surrounding appropriations and to avoid not only Executive direction but accountability for the public moneys entrusted to it, and a corporation created within the Government [without such specific authority]. . . . In some instances, it is true, the laws creating corporations have been so broad as to exclude Executive control and permit escape from accountability. A corporation of the other class, however, created as an additional administrative agency, can have no such status or uncontrolled authority. It can exercise no wider authority than as though operating as an unincorporated unit in the Executive branch. By the act of incorporating Executive responsibility is not shifted, Executive control avoided, nor accountability escaped.”

[A-53085, Jan. 11, 1934](#), at 5.

The idea of a legislative requirement was not new. Interestingly, opposition to government corporations in the 1930s stemmed not so much from the accountability perspective as from the fact that they competed with the private sector. As a congressional report put it, “[g]overnment corporations to a great degree do business in competition with private enterprise. They encroach upon and compete with business, which is under serious disadvantage [while the government corporation’s

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advantages, like tax exemptions and cheap credit, make it] an invincible competitor.”<sup>103</sup>

The idea of a legislative charter became law several years later as section 304(a) of the Government Corporation Control Act, Pub. L. No. 79-248, 59 Stat. 597, 602 (Dec. 6, 1945). Now codified at 31 U.S.C. § 9102, it provides: “An agency may establish or acquire a corporation to act as an agency only by or under a law of the United States specifically authorizing the action.”

The legislative history of the Government Corporation Control Act noted the existence of several government corporations created without legislative authority and the potential for problems arising when such corporations were created under state law.<sup>104</sup> The House Report accompanying the legislation stated:

“The committee does not consider the practices of chartering wholly owned Government corporations without prior authorization by the Congress or under State charters to be desirable. It believes that all such corporations should be authorized and chartered under Federal statute. The bill provides that in the future all corporations which are to be established for the purpose of acting as agencies or instrumentalities of the United States must be established by act of Congress or pursuant to an act of Congress specifically authorizing such action.”

H.R. Rep. No. 79-856, at 11 (1945).

Section 9102 by its terms applies to acquisition as well as creation of corporations. With respect to existing nonstatutory corporations, the statute directed them to either seek a legislative charter or liquidate. Pub. L. No. 79-248, § 304(b).

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<sup>103</sup> Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures, *Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures—Government Corporations*, S. Doc. No. 78-227, at 25 (1944).

<sup>104</sup> S. Rep. No. 79-694, at 13 (1945).

There is little case law, administrative or judicial, invoking the requirements of 31 U.S.C. § 9102. However, a number of cases have found section 9102 inapplicable. We have previously noted two of these: [71 Comp. Gen. 155 \(1992\)](#) (federally funded research and development centers) and *Varicon International v. OPM*, 934 F. Supp. 440 (D.D.C. 1996) (corporation formed by former government employees to do the same work they did when they were on the payroll). A 1975 GAO opinion to a committee chairman also found the statute inapplicable to so-called “proprietary” of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—corporations formed by CIA largely to provide “cover” for CIA activities. GAO found “irreconcilable conflict” between the public accountability requirements of section 9102 and CIA’s need to keep these corporations “covert.” This being the case, GAO concluded that CIA’s mandate had to “prevail . . . over the general requirements otherwise applicable to Government corporations, in the absence of any indication that Congress intended to curtail or control the use of corporations for covert purposes incident to accomplishment of [CIA’s] mission.” [B-179296, Dec. 10, 1975](#), at 3–4. A later opinion found the statute inapplicable to the creation of subsidiaries by a federally chartered private institution which had been converted from a mixed-ownership government corporation. [B-219801, Oct. 10, 1986](#). Had the institution still been a mixed-ownership government corporation, section 9102 would have applied. *Id.*

A 1970 GAO case dealt with grants by the old Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to a nonprofit corporation established for the purpose of carrying out OEO programs by hopefully generating closer private-sector involvement. The question was whether the nonprofit was a legitimate grantee or merely an agent of the OEO. GAO’s review showed that the nonprofit was wholly independent of the OEO and was not a disguised government corporation. Therefore, there was no violation of 31 U.S.C. § 9102. [B-130515, Aug. 11, 1970](#). The analysis was very similar to that employed in [B-145898-O.M., June 30, 1961](#), with respect to the MITRE Corporation.

An example of what GAO regarded as a clear violation of the statute is found in [B-278820, Feb. 10, 1998](#). The question was whether the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was authorized to establish two not-for-profit corporations to administer certain functions of the universal

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service program for schools, libraries, and rural health care providers.<sup>105</sup> The FCC argued that it did not establish or acquire the corporations, but had directed the National Exchange Carrier Association, Inc. to create them. While it was true that the Association and not the FCC was the incorporator, an examination of the FCC's role showed that it was involved in approving the proposed articles of incorporation and bylaws, approving the chief executive officers of the corporations, determining the size, composition, and term of office of the boards of directors, as well as selecting or approving the directors themselves. In GAO's view, the corporations were created to carry out governmental functions (specifically, the implementation of a statutory mandate), and the Association had simply acted as the incorporator for the convenience of the FCC. Under these circumstances, although the FCC did not directly establish or acquire the corporations, GAO held that section 9102 applied. The identity of the incorporator was not the determinant of section 9102's applicability; the prohibition would be meaningless if agencies could avoid it simply by using another party to act as incorporator. Thus, for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 9102, an agency may not cause, directly or indirectly, a corporation to be created to carry out government functions without specific statutory authority.

Once GAO determined that the FCC had "established" a corporation within the meaning of section 9102, the next issue was whether the FCC had the requisite statutory authority. The FCC suggested that it was authorized to establish the corporations pursuant to sections 254 and 4(i) of the Communications Act. Section 254, 47 U.S.C. § 254, assigns the FCC a variety of universal service program functions, such as defining universal service, developing specific and predictable support mechanisms, and providing for equitable contributions by service providers. However, nowhere does it authorize the creation of corporations. Section 4(i), 47 U.S.C. § 154(i), provides: "The Commission may perform any and all acts, make such rules and regulations, and issue such orders, not inconsistent with this chapter [the Communications Act], as may be necessary in the execution of its functions."

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<sup>105</sup> The statutory mandate for this program is section 254(h) of the Communications Act of 1934, as added by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, 47 U.S.C. § 254(h). The two not-for-profit corporations at issue were the Schools and Libraries Corporation and the Rural Health Care Corporation.

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GAO held that this admittedly broad but nevertheless general authority was not sufficient to satisfy the specific requirement of section 9102. GAO concluded that the FCC exceeded its authority and violated section 9102 when it directed the creation of the corporations in question. In reaching this conclusion, GAO noted a line of judicial decisions treating section 4(i), part of the FCC's 1934 organic legislation, as the agency's "necessary and proper" clause. None of them, however, stands for the proposition that the FCC may invoke section 4(i) to disregard specific requirements of later-enacted statutes. Citing *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 396 (1995), GAO noted that the Supreme Court had described section 9102 as "evidently intended to restrict the creation of *all* Government-controlled policy-implementing corporations, and not just some of them." B-278820, at 7. The FCC not unexpectedly disagreed. The two corporations in question were subsequently merged into a larger entity.

Another skirmish involved creation of the now-defunct Federal Asset Disposition Association (FADA). In a series of assignments relating to the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, GAO reviewed the Board's authority to create various entities operating under its direction. One of those entities was FADA, created pursuant to statutory authority to organize new federal savings and loan associations. Problem was, GAO reasoned that an entity created under that authority should bear some resemblance to a federal savings and loan association. FADA, on the contrary, exercised none of the basic functions of a savings and loan association. Most tellingly, it did not accept savings and it did not make loans. B-226708.4, Mar. 15, 1989 (Enclosure at 4). In fact, GAO found that the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation (FSLIC) held all of FADA's stock, the Bank Board appointed its board of directors, and FADA's self-described sole purpose was to assist FSLIC in managing and disposing of assets. It was hard to escape the conclusion that FADA was a federal savings and loan association "only on paper." *Id.* at 3-4. Accordingly, GAO concluded that FADA was in fact a corporation wholly owned and controlled by the federal government and engaged in the performance of federal functions, and that



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its creation exceeded the Bank Board's authority.<sup>106</sup> In addition to B-226708.4 cited above, see [B-226708.3, Dec. 12, 1988](#), [B-226708.2, Sept. 29, 1988](#), [B-226708, Sept. 6, 1988](#), and GAO, *Failed Thrifts: No Compelling Evidence of a Need for the Federal Asset Disposition Association*, GAO/GGD-89-26 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 12, 1988).

The Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) addressed 31 U.S.C. § 9102 in the Memorandum Opinion for the General Counsel, Office of Management and Budget, *Status of National Veterans Business Development Corporation*, OLC Opinion, Mar. 19, 2004, which held that the National Veterans Business Development Corporation (NVBDC) was a government corporation for purposes of title 5, United States Code. For essentially the same reasons that the opinion viewed NVBDC as a government corporation, it also concluded that NVBDC was an agency for purposes of 31 U.S.C. § 9102. NVBDC was created by the government to perform federal functions and received federal funding. Thus, NVBDC could not establish or acquire other corporations without specific statutory authority.

A corporation created without legislative authority can be, in effect, "ratified" by subsequent legislation. An example is [21 Comp. Gen. 928 \(1942\)](#), the Virgin Islands case discussed earlier in this section. Although the corporation in that case had been created without statutory authority, subsequent legislation made it clear that "Congress has recognized . . . the corporate existence and status." *Id.* at 930. See [17 Comp. Gen. 50 \(1937\)](#) for another example. Subsequent legislation was also involved in the FADA case, but GAO did not regard it as rising to the level of congressional ratification. [B-226708, Sept. 6, 1988](#).

As noted previously, Congress may create a corporation directly or it may authorize another agency or government corporation to do the creating. This is the reason for the "by or under" language in 31 U.S.C. § 9102. Of course this was true even prior to the Government Corporation Control

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<sup>106</sup> FADA was dissolved under the provisions of the Financial Institutions Reform Recovery and Enforcement Act of 1989 (FIRREA). Pub. L. No. 101-73, 103 Stat. 183 (Aug. 9, 1989). FIRREA also abolished both the Federal Home Loan Bank Board and the FSLIC. *Id.* § 401. Thus, all of the principal entities discussed in the GAO materials cited in the text are gone. The case remains useful, however, to illustrate the proposition that a goose does not become a swan merely because someone calls it one. For more on the FADA saga, see Ronald C. Moe, *Managing the Public's Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 22-26 (1995); and Harold Seidman, *The Quasi World of the Federal Government*, 6 Brookings Rev. 23, 26 (1988).

Act. For example, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), described briefly earlier, was so authorized and did in fact create several other government corporations.<sup>107</sup> For a more recent example, the Farm Credit System banks, which include the federal land banks, federal intermediate credit banks, and banks for cooperatives, are mixed-ownership government corporations listed in 31 U.S.C. § 9101(2) and are therefore governed by the restriction contained in 31 U.S.C. § 9102. Thus, when it became desirable for Farm Credit System banks to be able to organize subsidiary corporations to perform certain functions the banks were authorized to perform, Congress enacted that specific statutory authority.<sup>108</sup>

Where Congress authorizes or delegates the creation of a corporation to some existing agency, the statute necessarily implies the authority for the creating agency to use its funds for the expenses of incorporation. [21 Comp. Gen. 892 \(1942\)](#). This can include subscription to initial capital stock where required. [37 Op. Att’y Gen. 437 \(1934\)](#). Logically enough, incorporation expenses of a corporation whose creation is not statutorily authorized are improper. [A-90344, Sept. 30, 1938](#); [A-71172, Feb. 26, 1936](#).

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## 4. Management

### a. Government Corporation Control Act

#### (1) Origin

Many of the government corporations<sup>109</sup> created to meet production needs during World War I were liquidated promptly after the war. As a result, before the 1930s, “there was not a pressing need for general procedures to

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<sup>107</sup> Section 5d of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation Act, as amended by Pub. L. No. 76-664, § 5, 54 Stat. 572, 573 (June 25, 1940). The RFC seized the opportunity “with gusto.” *Lebron*, 513 U.S. at 389. Some of the government corporations the RFC created are the Defense Plant Corporation, Defense Supplies Corporation, Rubber Reserve Company, Metals Reserve Company, War Damage Corporation, United States Commercial Company, Petroleum Reserves Corporation, and the Rubber Development Corporation. *See* S. Doc. No. 78-227, at 10–14.

<sup>108</sup> 12 U.S.C. §§ 2211 and 2212; H.R. Rep. No. 96-1287, at 23, 42 (1980) (accompanying report of House Agriculture Committee).

<sup>109</sup> For ease of discussion in this section, we will use the term “government corporation” to refer generically to the various corporate devices discussed in section B.2 of this chapter unless a more specific term is warranted.

govern the management of government corporations.” GAO, *Congress Should Consider Revising Basic Corporate Control Laws*, GAO/PAD-83-3 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 6, 1983), at 3. *See also* [B-103455, May 21, 1951](#). During the Depression and New Deal eras, many corporations were formed to serve various economic needs, and others were created to meet the production needs of World War II. These were not so quick to go away. By the mid-1940s, “there were 63 wholly owned and 38 partly owned Federal corporations.” GAO/PAD-83-3, at 3. Government corporations “had gotten out of hand, in both their number and their lack of accountability.” *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 389 (1995). Control procedures, such as they were, were developed through piecemeal administrative action that was not necessarily consistent and did not include all government corporations.

The initial congressional response was a 2-year study by the Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures. Noting the lack of overall control, the resulting report recommended the prompt enactment of legislation to (1) require government corporations to prepare business-type budgets for inclusion in the President’s budget submitted to Congress; (2) provide for a measure of Treasury control over a corporation’s accounts; and (3) require GAO audits.<sup>110</sup> This became the blueprint for what was to become the Government Corporation Control Act.

The first legislative step to implement these recommendations was the so-called George Act, Pub. L. No. 79-4, § 5, 59 Stat. 5, 6 (Feb. 24, 1945). This statute required GAO to audit the financial transactions of all government corporations annually, in accordance with the principles and procedures applicable to commercial corporate transactions and under rules prescribed by GAO. The law further required that each audit report “shall also show specifically every program, expenditure, or other financial transaction or undertaking, which, in the opinion of the Comptroller General, has been carried on or made without authority of law.” *Id.* § 5(b). Because the statute used the words “all Government corporations,” it applied to mixed-ownership as well as wholly owned corporations. [25 Comp. Gen. 7 \(1945\)](#). Under section 5(c) of the George Act, the cost of the audits was to be borne by GAO’s own appropriations, but a corporation

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<sup>110</sup> Joint Committee on Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures, *Reduction of Nonessential Federal Expenditures—Government Corporations*, S. Doc. No. 78-227, at 30 (1944).

could agree to pick up the audit tab. (Why it might want to do so is not clear.)

When Congress enacted the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA), Pub. L. No. 79-248, 59 Stat. 597, (Dec. 6, 1945) (now codified at 31 U.S.C. §§ 9101–9110), the audit requirements of the George Act were essentially incorporated into the GCCA. The new law was designed to provide an overall control of government corporations by making them more accountable to Congress for their operations while allowing them the flexibility and autonomy needed for their commercial activities.<sup>111</sup> The declared congressional policy was “to bring Government corporations and their transactions and operations under annual scrutiny by the Congress and provide current financial control thereof.”<sup>112</sup> The GCCA addresses budget controls, financial controls, and audit controls.

## (2) Definitions

As noted earlier, the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA) made no attempt to define the term “government corporation.” Instead, it merely declared that there were two types of corporations subject to its provisions—the wholly owned government corporation and the mixed-ownership government corporation. *See* 31 U.S.C. § 9101(1). The GCCA lists the entities covered under each type. Wholly owned government corporations include the Commodity Credit Corporation, Export-Import Bank, Federal Prison Industries, Government National Mortgage Association, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, and the Tennessee Valley Authority, plus several others. 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3). Examples of mixed-ownership government corporations are the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Federal Home Loan Banks, Federal Land Banks, and the Central Liquidity Facility of the National Credit Union Administration. 31 U.S.C. § 9101(2).

In trying to understand the two types of GCCA corporations, the plain meaning of the law’s language is the proper starting point, although in this instance it does not help very much. The House report accompanying the

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<sup>111</sup> H.R. Rep. No. 79-856, at 3 (1945). An unimpressed Dr. Seidman has called the law the “government corporation de-control act.” Harold Seidman, *Government Corporations in the United States*, 22 *Optimum* 40, 41 (1991).

<sup>112</sup> Pub. L. No. 79-248 § 2.

original GCCA legislation stated: “The bill distinguishes between wholly owned Government corporations, in which the Government holds all the stock or other capital interests, and mixed-ownership Government corporations, in which the Government has only a partial interest.” H.R. Rep. No. 79-856, at 5 (1945).

The 1981 report of the National Academy of Public Administration followed suit. Wholly owned corporations “pursue a governmental mission assigned in their enabling statute and are financed by appropriations. Their assets are owned by the government and managed by board members or an administrator appointed by the President or Secretary of a Department.” On the other hand, mixed-ownership corporations “have a combination of governmental and private equity; hence their assets are owned and managed by board members selected by both the President and private stockholders. They are usually intended for transition to the private sector.”<sup>113</sup>

Thus, one might conceptualize the two types as corporations owned in their entirety by the federal government and corporations with some nonfederal ownership or joint financial participation. This, however, is not always the case. For example, the now-defunct United States Railway Association was designated as a mixed-ownership government corporation when in fact it operated solely and exclusively under direct annual appropriations from Congress, the same as a typical federal agency.<sup>114</sup>

The only safe generalization is that a wholly owned government corporation is one listed in 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3) or so designated in its enabling legislation; a mixed-ownership government corporation is one listed in 31 U.S.C. § 9101(2) or so designated in its enabling legislation.<sup>115</sup> Of course, Congress remains free to create corporations wholly outside the

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<sup>113</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, *I Report on Government Corporations*, 21 (1981). An example of such a transition is discussed in B-219801, Oct. 10, 1986 (National Consumer Cooperative Bank).

<sup>114</sup> GAO, *Is the Administrative Flexibility Originally Provided to the U.S. Railway Association Still Needed?*, CED-78-19 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 22, 1978), at 2. The U.S. Railway Association was created by Pub. L. No. 93-236, title II, 87 Stat. 985, 988 (Jan. 2, 1974). The mixed-ownership designation was in section 202(g). A typical appropriation was Pub. L. No. 94-134, 89 Stat. 695, 709 (Nov. 24, 1975). The association was abolished in 1987. See 45 U.S.C. § 1341(a).

<sup>115</sup> See also GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 67, 101.

GCCA structure. Examples are the Legal Services Corporation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Accordingly, the wholly owned/mixed-ownership classification is relevant only for purposes of applying the rest of the GCCA.

The express language of the GCCA underscores this point. The lead to 31 U.S.C. § 9101 is “[i]n this chapter.” (The original language, 59 Stat. at 597, was “[a]s used in this Act.”) Applying this limitation, GAO concluded in *38 Comp. Gen. 565 (1959)*, that the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) was a wholly owned corporation for some purposes and a mixed-ownership corporation for others, both at the same time. Fannie Mae had originally been chartered as a wholly owned corporation. It was rechartered in 1954 as a mixed-ownership corporation, but kept its place on the GCCA’s list of wholly owned corporations, apparently out of a desire to remain subject to the wholly owned provisions of the GCCA. (It subsequently became a government-sponsored enterprise.) The question in *38 Comp. Gen. 565* was whether Fannie Mae was authorized to lease space independent of the General Services Administration (GSA). Wholly owned corporations have to utilize GSA, mixed-ownership corporations do not. GAO concluded that the proper approach was to look at what the corporation was in reality—mixed-ownership—especially since the GCCA designations do not purport to apply to other laws.

The GCCA did not attempt to address corporations created after its enactment—nor could it, since one Congress cannot bind a subsequent Congress. There is evidence in the legislative history, however, of an expectation that the act would be made applicable to future corporations. In this connection, the report of the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency stated: “The committee contemplates that any new corporation so created or authorized hereafter will be made subject to the appropriate provisions of this bill by the creating or authorizing legislation.” S. Rep. No. 79-694, at 14 (1945).

This expectation has met with limited success. Of the 30 corporations created by Congress from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, 17 were not made subject to the GCCA. GAO, *Congress Should Consider Revising Basic Corporate Control Laws*, GAO/PAD-83-3 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 6, 1983), at 5; Harold Seidman and Robert Gilmour, *Politics, Position, and Power*, 285 (1986).

(3) Budget provisions

A key feature of the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA) is the imposition of budgetary controls on wholly owned government corporations. Under 31 U.S.C. § 9103, each wholly owned government corporation must submit a “business-type budget” to the President each year. Neither the statute nor its legislative history attempts to define “business-type budget,” but the law sets forth minimum requirements. These, set forth in 31 U.S.C. § 9103(b), include the following:

- Estimates of the financial condition and operations of the corporation for the current and following fiscal years and the condition and results of operations in the last fiscal year.
- Statements of financial condition, income and expense, and sources and use of money as well as information regarding its financial condition and operation.
- Estimates of administrative expenses (similarly not defined), borrowing, the amount of United States Government capital that will be returned to the Treasury during the fiscal year, and the appropriations needed to restore capital impairments.
- Provision for emergencies and contingencies.

Apart from these minimum requirements, the President, acting through the Office of Management and Budget, has broad discretion to determine the form and content of the corporate budgets. 31 U.S.C. § 9103(a).<sup>116</sup> The President may revise a corporation’s budget program. 31 U.S.C. § 9103(c). The President then must include it as part of the budget submitted to Congress under 31 U.S.C. § 1105. *Id.* For examples of what this all looks like in real life, see *Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2008—Appendix*, at 89–90 (Federal Crop Insurance Corporation), 98–104 (Commodity Credit Corporation), 690–91 (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation), and 1132–34 (Tennessee Valley Authority).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> The source provision is more explicit on this point. See Pub. L. No. 79-248, § 102, 59 Stat. 597, 598 (Dec. 6, 1945) (“[t]he budget program shall be a business-type budget, or plan of operations”).

<sup>117</sup> This budget material is available at [www.omb.gov/budget/fy2008/appendix.html](http://www.omb.gov/budget/fy2008/appendix.html) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

Congress then considers the budget programs for wholly owned government corporations along with the rest of the federal budget, which may include making appropriations as authorized by law; making corporate financial resources available for operating and administrative expenses; and providing for repaying capital and the payment of dividends. 31 U.S.C. § 9104. Section 9104 does not prevent a corporation from carrying out or financing its activities as authorized by some other law, nor does it affect the corporation's authority to make commitments without fiscal year limitation. 31 U.S.C. § 9104(b). An example of a budget approval provision is the following from the Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, the District of Columbia, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-115, 119 Stat. 2396, 2421 (Nov. 30, 2005):

“The Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation is hereby authorized to make such expenditures, within the limits of funds and borrowing authority available to the Corporation, and in accord with law, and to make such contracts and commitments without regard to fiscal year limitations as provided by [31 U.S.C. § 9104], as may be necessary in carrying out the programs set forth in the Corporation's budget for the current fiscal year.”

The statute then goes on to appropriate funds to the Corporation from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund. *Id.*

The President may include with the budget submission a recommendation that a wholly owned corporation be treated as an agency for fiscal purposes. If Congress approves, the corporation retains its corporate identity, but is thereafter subject to the laws governing budgets, appropriations, expenditures, receipts, accounting, and other fiscal matters in the same manner as agencies. 31 U.S.C. § 9109.

In addition to 31 U.S.C. § 9109, sections 9103 (GCCA's budget provisions) and 9104 (congressional action on budgets) apply only to wholly owned corporations. The exclusion of mixed-ownership corporations was deliberate. The legislative history explains the rationale: “The budget provisions of the bill do not apply to the mixed-ownership corporations in which private stockholders have an interest in the net worth and in the profits or losses of the corporations.” S. Rep. No. 79-694, at 7 (1945). *See also* H.R. Rep. No. 79-856, at 7 (1945). Although subsequent changes in the nature of government corporations have made this premise inapplicable in



many cases, the fact remains that the budget provisions apply only to wholly owned corporations.

The only budget-related provision of the Government Corporation Control Act applicable to mixed-ownership corporations was relocated as part of the 1982 recodification of title 31 and is now found at 31 U.S.C. § 1105(a)(24). It provides that the President's budget submission to the Congress may include "recommendations on the return of Government capital to the Treasury by a mixed-ownership corporation (as defined in section 9101(2) of this title) that the President decides are desirable."

(4) Other financial controls

While the corporation control legislation was being considered, the Treasury Department was urging that all government funds should be kept in the Treasury. The statute addressed this concern in what is now 31 U.S.C. §§ 9107(b) and (c). Subsection (b) requires that the accounts of all government corporations, both wholly owned and mixed-ownership, be kept in the Treasury. However, if the Secretary of the Treasury approves, they may be kept in a Federal Reserve Bank or a bank designated as a depository or fiscal agent of the United States. Treasury is authorized to waive these requirements. Such an account might include, for example, a corporate checking account whose checks would be signed by authorized corporation officials accountable directly to the board of directors. *E.g.*, [B-68830, Oct. 6, 1947](#).

Section 9107(c) exempts the following from the requirements of section 9107(b):

- A temporary account of not more than \$50,000 in one bank.
- A mixed-ownership corporation from which government capital has been entirely withdrawn, during the period it remains without government capital.
- Certain specified farm credit institutions, which are nevertheless required to report to Treasury annually the names of depositories in which their accounts are kept.

Congress regarded these provisions as "both practical and desirable as a matter of fiscal policy" (S. Rep. No. 79-694, at 11 (1945)), and felt that they

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would “contribute toward a unification of the [government’s] depository system” (H.R. Rep. No. 79-856, at 10 (1945)).

Three years later, in 1949, Congress added to the Government Corporation Control Act what is now 31 U.S.C. § 9107(a), which authorizes government corporations, with the Comptroller General’s concurrence, to consolidate their cash, from whatever source, including appropriations, into one or more accounts for banking and checking purposes.<sup>118</sup> Of course, the funds are to be used only for authorized purposes. In reviewing proposals under this provision, GAO’s concern is to avoid the diminution of internal controls. *E.g.*, B-58312, Nov. 14, 1950 (approving an unspecified proposal by the Tennessee Valley Authority because it would simplify procedures without lessening internal control).

Unless specifically authorized by statute, a corporation maintaining an account in the Treasury under 31 U.S.C. § 9107(b) is not entitled to receive interest on those funds, directly or indirectly. [B-114839-O.M., Jan. 9, 1976](#). The law also includes provisions, which we will address later, dealing with Treasury control over the debt obligations of government corporations.

#### (5) Audit

In the 1940s, any discussion of government auditing meant auditing by GAO. The original Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA) essentially incorporated the audit provisions of the George Act, which had been enacted less than a year earlier. Under these provisions, GAO was to audit annually every wholly owned government corporation and every mixed-ownership government corporation for any period in which government capital was invested in it, and report the results to Congress. Pub. L. No. 79-248, §§ 105, 106, 202, 203, 59 Stat. 597, 599–600 (Dec. 6, 1945).

The audit was to be a “commercial-type audit” rather than the customary governmental audit. The customary governmental audit principally included examining and passing upon each voucher prepared by the agencies’ clerks and each account maintained by the agencies and their accountable officers. The legislative history explained:

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<sup>118</sup> Independent Offices Appropriation Act, 1950, Pub. L. No. 81-266, § 309, 63 Stat. 631, 662 (Aug. 24, 1949).

“The Comptroller General and the Congress have recognized that the regular governmental type of audit may not be suitable to the operations of a Government corporation. In general, the purpose of the governmental type of audit is to determine the validity of expenditures under appropriations made by the Congress in the light of restrictions and limitations placed by the Congress generally upon expenditures from appropriated funds. . . . On the other hand, the commercial type of audit, as applied to a business corporation, is separate and distinct from the accounting system and internal financial controls of the corporation, and is designed to determine the financial condition of the corporation as of a given date and the results of its financial operations during the period under audit, and to establish whether the corporate funds have been regularly expended in accordance with corporate authorization.”

H.R. Rep. No. 79-856, at 7–8 (1945). For further elaboration, see pages 95–96 of the House report and S. Rep. No. 79-694, at 8–9 (1945). In 1975, the audit requirement was reduced from every year to at least once every 3 years.<sup>119</sup> GAO’s auditing of government corporations, first under the George Act and then under the GCCA, is widely credited with providing the stimulus for GAO to modernize its audit concepts and practices from the old “voucher auditing” system.<sup>120</sup>

The GCCA’s audit and reporting provisions were completely overhauled by sections 305 and 306 of the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-576, 104 Stat. 2838, 2853–54, (Nov. 15, 1990), amending 31 U.S.C. §§ 9105 (audits) and 9106 (management reports). Under these amendments, an audit of the financial statements required under 31 U.S.C. § 9106 is now to be conducted by the corporation’s Inspector General or by an independent external auditor chosen by the inspector general. For a corporation that does not have an inspector general, the head of the corporation selects the independent auditor. 31 U.S.C. § 9105(a)(1). The

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<sup>119</sup> General Accounting Office Act of 1974, Pub. L. No. 93-604, § 601, 88 Stat. 1959, 1962 (Jan. 2, 1975).

<sup>120</sup> See Frederick C. Mosher, *The GAO: The Quest for Accountability in American Government*, 105–08 (1979); Ellsworth H. Morse, Jr., *The Government Corporation Control Legislation of 1945*, 10 GAO Rev. 11 (No. 4, 1975).

audit is to be conducted “in accordance with applicable generally accepted government auditing standards.” 31 U.S.C. § 9105(a)(2). This means the standards set forth in GAO’s so-called “Yellow Book,” *Government Auditing Standards*, GAO-07-162G (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2007). These differ from the more commonly known “generally accepted auditing standards” in that the government auditing standards require reporting on internal controls and compliance with laws and regulations. GAO, *Government Corporations: CFO Act Management Reporting Could Be Enhanced*, GAO/AIMD-94-73 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 19, 1994), at 4 n.2. Audit reports are to be submitted to the head of the corporation and to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Reform. 31 U.S.C. § 9105(a)(3).

The revised 31 U.S.C. § 9106 requires each government corporation to submit a management report each fiscal year to Congress, with copies to the President, the Director of OMB and the Comptroller General. The management report must include statements of financial position, operations, cash flows, a reconciliation to the corporation’s budget report where applicable, a statement on internal accounting and administrative control systems, the report regarding the audit of the corporation’s financial statements, and any other comments and information necessary to inform Congress about the operations and financial condition of the corporation. The Office of Management and Budget issues instructions to government corporations on the submission of annual management reports. OMB Cir. No. A-136, *Financial Reporting Requirements*, §§ I.5–I.6 (June 29, 2007).

Nothing in 31 U.S.C. § 9105 specifies the timing of the audits, but, as noted, section 9106 requires the annual management report to include the report of the audit conducted under section 9105. Thus, audit frequency returned to annual, and in this sense the 1990 legislation can be said to have strengthened the audit requirement. *See* GAO/AIMD-94-73, at 3. Sections 9105 and 9106 do not distinguish between wholly owned and mixed-ownership corporations.

While the 1990 revision of 31 U.S.C. § 9105 shifted primary responsibility for auditing government corporations from GAO to the inspectors general, GAO continues to have a role. GAO (1) may review any audit conducted under section 9105(a)(1), reporting its results to Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, and the head of the corporation, and (2) may conduct its own financial statement audit at the discretion of the

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Comptroller General or at the request of a congressional committee.  
31 U.S.C. § 9105(a)(4).

The original GCCA generally prohibited government corporations from using their funds to pay for private audits. Pub. L. No. 79-248, § 301(d). This was intended to prevent duplication of efforts during the time that the law required GAO to conduct the audits. [B-205488-O.M., Jan. 19, 1982](#). Since the statute now explicitly permits the use of external auditors, this prohibition was dropped. However, the concern over duplication is reflected in 31 U.S.C. §§ 9105(a)(4) and (c). Section 9105(a)(4) provides that an audit by GAO under that subsection will be in lieu of the otherwise required inspector general audit.

Section 9105(c) recognizes that other laws include specific audit requirements for GAO to carry out. It provides that Comptroller General audits made under section 9105 are “in lieu of” any audit of a government corporation’s financial transactions that is required by another law. *Id.* Reconciling GCCA audits with other statutory audits is largely an exercise in common sense. For example, where other legislation requires GAO to conduct annual audits of a corporation’s financial statements, the audits serve the purposes of section 9105 as well, obviating the need for the inspector general audit. [B-239201.3, July 25, 1991](#) (finding that an audit of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation conducted by GAO under the requirements of 12 U.S.C. § 1827(d) would satisfy the audit requirements of 31 U.S.C. § 9105). An enabling act provision authorizing or directing GAO to audit the “operations” of a corporation gives GAO broad discretion over how to conduct that audit. While such a requirement can be satisfied by a financial audit, it can also extend to a full program audit. [B-200951-O.M., Dec. 24, 1980, as clarified by B-200951-O.M., May 11, 1981](#).

A GAO audit under the GCCA is financed initially from GAO’s own appropriations, but its “full cost . . . as determined by the Comptroller General” must be reimbursed by the corporation.<sup>121</sup> 31 U.S.C. § 9105(a)(5). The purpose of the reimbursement requirement is to prevent government corporations from receiving a hidden subsidy from the taxpayers. [B-207203-O.M., June 4, 1982](#). “Full cost,” GAO has determined, includes both direct costs (employee salaries and travel expenses, for example) and

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<sup>121</sup> Mandatory reimbursement originated with language in GAO’s appropriation in the First Deficiency Appropriation Act for 1945, Pub. L. No. 79-40, 59 Stat. 77, 81 (Apr. 25, 1945), enacted just 2 months after the George Act.

indirect costs, including overhead. *Id.* See also [B-96792, Aug. 10, 1950](#) (GAO billed Federal Prison Industries for every last penny in its administrative expense allocation). Section 9105(a)(5) further requires that the reimbursements be deposited as miscellaneous receipts. However, this requirement was superseded by the following proviso attached to GAO's appropriation in the Legislative Branch Appropriations Act, 1995, Pub. L. No. 103-283, 108 Stat. 1423, 1440 (July 22, 1994):

“[N]otwithstanding 31 U.S.C. 9105 hereafter amounts reimbursed to the Comptroller General pursuant to that section shall be deposited to the appropriation of the [GAO] then available and remain available until expended, and not more than \$6,000,000 of such funds shall be available for use in fiscal year 1995.”

This language provides permanent authority for GAO to credit the reimbursements to its then-current appropriation, to remain available until expended. Congress can then, as it did in Public Law 103-283, appropriate a specific sum from the “no-year” account for use during the current fiscal year.

The original GCCA authorized GAO's audit reports to include essentially the items now included by the corporations in their management reports, plus several other things, such as any impairments of capital, any recommendations for the return of government capital, and any transactions or expenditures believed to be illegal. Pub. L. No. 79-248, §§ 106 and 203. That reporting requirement displaced GAO's authority to disallow corporate expenditures. [37 Comp. Gen. 666, 668–69 \(1958\)](#); [B-58302, Apr. 29, 1947](#). The current reporting language, codified at 31 U.S.C. § 9105(a)(4)(B), is more general, providing that GAO shall report “the results of the review and make any recommendation [it] considers appropriate.” This language certainly is broad enough to include the elements that the original GCCA specified.

When GAO makes an audit recommendation to the head of an agency, the agency head must, within specified time limits, submit a written report on the action taken on the recommendation to certain congressional committees. 31 U.S.C. § 720(b). For purposes of this requirement, “agency” includes wholly owned but not mixed-ownership government corporations. 31 U.S.C. § 720(a); [B-114831-O.M., July 28, 1975](#) (requirement for compliance report not applicable to Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation).

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- b. **Appointment and Control of Directors** A government corporation’s management, like its other key features, is determined by its enabling legislation. For the great majority of corporations, this means a board of directors. However, there is no statutory model for government corporations, nor is there any legal requirement for a board of directors.

The need for a board of directors has been questioned from the managerial perspective, as well. For example, one commentator wrote:

“Even the use of the term ‘corporation’ is unfortunate because it tends to encourage improper borrowing of concepts from the private sector. For instance, there is no particular reason for government corporations to have boards of directors, yet this feature is found in most proposals for new corporations apparently because corporations in the private sector have boards of directors.”<sup>122</sup>

Another commentator agreed, quoting a Brookings Institution report to the effect that “there appears to be nothing inherent in the corporate form of organization to require a board instead of a single administrator.”<sup>123</sup> Be that as it may, if a government corporation does have a board of directors it should, of course, be a good one. According to Marshall Dimock, an early observer of government corporations, “[a]n effective board of directors is the key to program success.”<sup>124</sup>

The federal government’s involvement in the selection or appointment of directors has evolved along with the development of government corporations. As we have seen, the United States’ initial participation in the creation of government corporations involved chartering of the entity and ownership of stock. However, with the creation of the Second Bank of the United States in 1816, the President was authorized to appoint, by and

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<sup>122</sup> Ronald C. Moe, Congressional Research Service, *Administering Public Functions at the Margin of Government: The Case of Federal Corporations*, No. 83-236GOV (Dec. 1, 1983), at 3-4.

<sup>123</sup> Harold Seidman, *The Theory of the Autonomous Government Corporation: A Critical Appraisal*, 12 Pub. Admin. Rev. 89, 92 (1952).

<sup>124</sup> Marshall E. Dimock, *Government Corporations; A Focus of Policy and Administration (Part I)*, 43 Am. Pol. Sci. Rev. 899, 915 (1949).

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with the consent of the Senate, 5 of the Bank's 25 directors. The rest were to be elected annually by shareholders other than the United States. During the nineteenth century, the federal government "continued to charter private corporations . . . but only once participated in such a venture itself," that being the Union Pacific Railroad. *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 387 (1995). The Union Pacific Railroad was chartered in 1862 with the President appointing two of its directors. Act of July 1, 1862, ch. 120, § 1, 12 Stat. 489.

The twentieth century saw considerable variation in the managerial structure of corporations, mostly within a framework of increased government involvement. In 1902, as part of the statute providing for construction of the Panama Canal, Congress authorized the President to purchase all stock and property of the Panama Railroad Company, making the government the sole shareholder. Pub. L. No. 57-183, 32 Stat. 481 (June 28, 1902). The Secretary of War, as holder of the stock, appointed all of the company's directors. According to *Lebron*, 513 U.S. at 387, this was the first instance in which the government appointed a majority of directors.

The most common management system, at least with respect to corporations subject to the GCCA, is a board of directors appointed entirely by the President. The typical statutory provision will (1) vest the corporation's management and control in the board of directors, (2) prescribe the number of directors and how they are to be appointed, (3) specify what will constitute a quorum, (4) set forth the powers and duties of the directors, and (5) address their compensation. *E.g.*, 22 U.S.C. § 2193(b) (Overseas Private Investment Corporation). In addition, the statute may (1) specify the number of directors to come from various sources (government, industry, *etc.*), or prescribe other qualifications, (2) designate certain government officials to serve *ex officio*, and (3) address the board's political composition. Additional examples of government corporations all of whose directors are appointed by the President are the African Development Foundation,<sup>125</sup> Commodity Credit

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<sup>125</sup> The African Development Foundation is not listed in the GCCA, but its enabling legislation makes it subject to the act's provisions for wholly owned corporations. *See* 22 U.S.C. § 290h-6.



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Corporation, Export-Import Bank, and the Tennessee Valley Authority.<sup>126</sup> In at least one instance, certain directors are appointed by a department head. *See* 7 U.S.C. § 1505(a) (Federal Crop Insurance Corporation’s private sector directors appointed by Secretary of Agriculture). The Tennessee Valley Authority legislation includes an interesting qualification: directors must “affirm support for the objectives and missions of the Corporation.” 16 U.S.C. § 831a(b)(5).

When Congress wants the federal government to participate more actively in the management of a government corporation and to ensure that the government’s views and interests are represented, the enabling statute designates specified officials to serve as directors *ex officio*. These are usually heads of departments or agencies with a logical subject-matter relationship to the corporation. For example, two of the five directors of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation are the Comptroller of the Currency and the Director of the Office of Thrift Supervision. 12 U.S.C. § 1812. *See also* 7 U.S.C. § 1505(a) (certain Agriculture Department officials are *ex officio* directors of the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation). Sometimes Congress also takes the next step and makes all of the directors government officials. *E.g.*, 29 U.S.C. § 1302(d) (directors of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation are the Secretaries of Labor, Treasury, and Commerce).

Cabinet members serving *ex officio* may delegate their functions as directors even if the enabling statute does not expressly authorize it. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 257 (1982). This follows from the nature of *ex officio* service. Such appointments are made “based not on individual personal attributes, but on the contribution Congress believed each one’s agency could make to the [corporation’s] operations.” *Id.* at 260.

Another way the government can exert management influence or control is to designate a corporation as an entity within a particular department or agency and under the control of the head of that department or agency. For example—

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<sup>126</sup> Our source for these examples is GAO, *Government Corporations: Profiles of Existing Government Corporations*, GAO/GGD-96-14 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 1995). The information for each corporation includes a “management structure” summary and a citation to the corporation’s enabling legislation.

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- the Commodity Credit Corporation is “an agency and instrumentality of the United States, within the Department of Agriculture” (15 U.S.C. § 714);
  - the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation is “subject to the direction and supervision of the Secretary of Transportation” (33 U.S.C. § 981);
  - the Overseas Private Investment Corporation is “an agency of the United States under the policy guidance of the Secretary of State” (22 U.S.C. § 2191);
  - Federal Prison Industries, Inc. is in the Department of Justice (Reorg. Plan No. 2 of 1939, § 3(a), 53 Stat. 1431, *noted at* 5 U.S.C. app. I).

The enabling legislation will also provide for officers of the corporation. In many instances, the officers are appointed by the President. *E.g.*, 22 U.S.C. § 2193 (Overseas Private Investment Corporation). In other instances, the board of directors appoints the officers. *E.g.*, 16 U.S.C. § 831b (Tennessee Valley Authority). Whether the board of directors or the “chief executive officer” is the “head” of the corporation depends on the statutory powers given to each. If the enabling legislation vests management and control in the board of directors, the head of that corporation, unless the statute provides differently, is the board of directors acting as a body. [25 Comp. Gen. 467 \(1945\)](#). An example of a different statutory model is the Corporation for National and Community Service. It has a board of directors, 42 U.S.C. § 12651a, but the law specifies that the Corporation “shall be headed by . . . [a] Chief Executive Officer . . . appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.” 42 U.S.C. § 12651c. A few government corporations (*e.g.*, Amtrak and the Legal Services Corporation) are subject to the Inspector General Act, discussed in section B.7.c(1) of this chapter, which assigns certain duties to the head of the entity. For purposes of the act, the Office of Management and Budget annually identifies the heads of these entities and publishes them in the Federal Register. *See, e.g.*, OMB, *Revised 2006 List of Designated Federal Entities and Federal Entities*, 71 Fed. Reg. 39690 (July 13, 2006).

A board of directors can delegate power to an executive committee, but this has been construed to apply to ordinary and routine matters, not radical departures from corporate policy. [B-58302-O.M., Sept. 14, 1949](#). This device cannot be used, however, to avoid a statutory quorum requirement. *See* [B-197710-O.M., Jan. 14, 1983](#). In that case, a government

corporation had only two directors out of five, and the statute designated a majority of the board as a quorum. Under the circumstances, GAO thought it unlikely that a court would support treating those two directors as an executive committee. The answer would have been different if the statute permitted a majority of board members currently in office to constitute a quorum. *Id.*

As noted earlier, while most government corporations have boards of directors, a few do not. One commentator identified three which, at the time he wrote, did not have boards of directors—the Government National Mortgage Association, Resolution Trust Corporation (since terminated), and the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation.<sup>127</sup> Another such corporation that was later created is the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, which is not subject to GCCA. 12 U.S.C. § 4703(f). Its management consists of a presidentially appointed administrator and an advisory board. 12 U.S.C. § 4703.<sup>128</sup>

The appointment of most or all of a board of directors by federal officials is most appropriate for corporations owned or controlled by the United States. As you move farther away from federal ownership or control, the government's managerial involvement usually diminishes as well. For example, in the typical government-sponsored enterprise, the government will appoint some directors to make sure its voice will be heard, but the majority is appointed by nongovernment sources. Thus, the President appoints 5 out of 18 of Fannie Mae's directors (12 U.S.C. § 1723(b)), 5 out of 18 for Freddie Mac (12 U.S.C. § 1452(a)(2)(A)), and 5 out of 15 for Farmer Mac (12 U.S.C. § 2279aa-2(b)(2)).

One would expect a minimal federal managerial role in a federally chartered corporation expressly designated as not an agency or instrumentality of the United States. However, this is not always the case. Both the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Legal Services Corporation are chartered as nonprofit corporations and are not to be

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<sup>127</sup> Ronald C. Moe, *Managing the Public's Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 58 (1995).

<sup>128</sup> For several years in the mid-1990s, this provision was overridden by an appropriation act proviso which made the Secretary of the Treasury the Administrator and placed the Fund in the Treasury Department. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-294 (Apr. 26, 1996) (fiscal year 1996). The proviso was dropped in fiscal year 1997. *See* Pub. L. No. 104-204, 110 Stat. 2874, 2907 (Sept. 26, 1996).

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regarded as agencies or establishments of the United States. See, respectively, 47 U.S.C. § 396(b), 42 U.S.C. §§ 2996b and 2996d(e)(1). Neither is subject to the GCCA. Nevertheless, perhaps because both are federally funded as well as federally created and perform essentially public service rather than commercial functions, their entire boards of directors are appointed by the President and subject to Senate confirmation. 47 U.S.C. § 396(c); 42 U.S.C. § 2996c.

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## 5. Sources of Funds and Financing

There is no single model for the funding structure of a government corporation.<sup>129</sup> The corporate form alone does not dictate any particular type of funding. Just as with the corporation's organization and powers, its funding structure varies according to its purpose and activities as reflected in the enabling legislation. As one court has noted, "Congress is not limited by traditional notions of corporate powers and organization" and it "need not capitalize corporate instrumentalities of the United States in any rigidly prescribed manner."<sup>130</sup> *United States v. Nowak*, 448 F.2d 134, 138 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1971), *cert. denied*, 404 U.S. 1039 (1972). In fact, Congress has funded government corporations using a variety of sources and methods: direct appropriations of funds, federal borrowing, authorizing user fees or other charges for services provided to the public, federal ownership of stock, private investment or financing (*e.g.*, sale of debt securities) with actual or implied backing by the United States, or some combination of these methods.

### a. Types of Financing: Government

#### (1) Direct appropriations

One funding option is the direct appropriation of funds from the general fund of the Treasury, the same method used for most federal agencies. In its 1995 study, GAO found that, out of 24 corporations then listed in the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA), 15 had received federal appropriations in fiscal year 1994. GAO, *Government Corporations: Profiles of Existing Government Corporations*, GAO/GGD-96-14 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 1995), at 21–22. As a general proposition,

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<sup>129</sup> For ease of discussion in this section, we will use the term "government corporation" to refer generically to the various corporate devices discussed in section B.2 of this chapter unless a more specific term is warranted.

<sup>130</sup> "Capitalize" in this context means simply "to furnish with capital, to provide capital for the [corporation's] operation." B-24827, Apr. 3, 1942, at 11.

wholly owned corporations were more likely to receive direct appropriations than mixed-ownership corporations. However, some mixed-ownership corporations received appropriations while some wholly owned corporations did not. In addition, several corporate entities not subject to the GCCA received appropriations. *Id.*

Direct appropriations may provide all or part of a corporation's funding. Examples of government-created corporations substantially funded by congressional appropriations are the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Legal Services Corporation.<sup>131</sup> Fully funded corporations tend to be those with noncommercial functions. There is no nexus between full funding status and inclusion in the GCCA. For example, the Corporation for National and Community Service is subject to the GCCA, while Legal Services is not. An example of partial funding by direct appropriations is the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). Largely because the CCC administers a variety of relatively high-risk programs, the typical year produces nonrecoverable losses which are funded from a "net realized losses" appropriation.<sup>132</sup> Congress may provide appropriations for certain start-up costs, with the expectation that private financing will then take over. An example is discussed in [69 Comp. Gen. 289 \(1990\)](#) (Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation could amortize construction consultants' fees as a cost of construction because they were not the kind of start-up costs for which Congress had provided appropriations).

Congress can structure a corporation's appropriation however it wishes. For example, the appropriation cited above for the Legal Services Corporation is relatively brief and consists of five major line items.<sup>133</sup> By contrast, the appropriation for the Corporation for National and

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<sup>131</sup> See, respectively, the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-149, 119 Stat. 2833, 2871-73 (Dec. 30, 2005) ("For expenses necessary for the Corporation for National and Community Service to carry out the provisions of the Domestic Volunteer Service Act of 1973, as amended, \$316,212,000 . . ."), and the Science, State, Justice, Commerce, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-108, 119 Stat. 2290, 2330-31 (Nov. 22, 2005) ("For payment to the Legal Services Corporation to carry out the purposes of the Legal Services Corporation Act of 1974, \$330,803,000 . . .").

<sup>132</sup> *E.g.*, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-97, 119 Stat. 2120, 2133 (Nov. 10, 2005).

<sup>133</sup> Pub. L. No. 109-108.

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Community Service takes up several pages of the appropriation act and contains numerous line items and other specifications.<sup>134</sup>

Most corporate appropriations are definite in amount; some are not. For example, the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation's (FCIC) 2006 appropriation to the FCIC Fund was "such sums as may be necessary, to remain available until expended," that is, an indefinite, no-year appropriation.<sup>135</sup> The CCC is authorized to receive its "net realized losses" appropriation on a "current, indefinite" basis. 15 U.S.C. § 713a-11. This is merely an authorization, however, and Congress remains free to structure the appropriation some other way. 67 *Comp. Gen.* 332 (1988). The CCC's 2006 appropriation was "[f]or the current fiscal year, such sums as may be necessary," but subject to a monetary ceiling.<sup>136</sup> Since the CCC receives a direct appropriation for net losses, it is logical that net gains, should they ever occur, would be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts, and this is what the law requires. 15 U.S.C. § 713a-12. *Cf. Knowles v. War Damage Corp.*, 171 F.2d 15, 19–20 (D.C. Cir. 1948), *cert. denied*, 336 U.S. 914 (1949) (not "invalid" for a statute to require a government corporation to pay its surplus funds into the Treasury).

(2) Federal borrowing

Another method of funding for government corporations is borrowing authority, also known as public debt financing. This means the authority to borrow money from the Treasury and to issue obligations to the Treasury to evidence the indebtedness. This authority must be conferred by statute. Examples include 29 U.S.C. § 1305(c) (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC)), 15 U.S.C. § 713a-4 (Commodity Credit Corporation), and 7 U.S.C. § 947 (Rural Telephone Bank). The PBGC provision is fairly typical:

"The [PBGC] is authorized to issue to the Secretary of the Treasury notes or other obligations in an aggregate amount of not to exceed \$100,000,000, in such forms and denominations, bearing such maturities, and subject to such terms and conditions as may be prescribed by the Secretary

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<sup>134</sup> Pub. L. No. 109-149.

<sup>135</sup> Pub. L. No. 109-97.

<sup>136</sup> Pub. L. No. 109-97.

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of the Treasury. Such notes or other obligations shall bear interest at a rate determined by the Secretary of the Treasury . . . . The Secretary of the Treasury is authorized and directed to purchase any notes or other obligations issued by the [PBGC] under this subsection . . . .”

29 U.S.C. § 1305(c). Some borrowing provisions, like the PBGC statute, have a fixed dollar ceiling. Others have a variable ceiling, like 7 U.S.C. § 947(a) (amount borrowed by Rural Telephone Bank which is outstanding at any one time “shall not exceed twenty times the paid-in capital and retained earnings” of the Bank). In determining the amount of unused borrowing authority, a corporation may exclude interest on outstanding obligations already held by the Treasury. [B-89366-O.M., Sept. 9, 1964](#). If a contrary congressional intent can be established, however, the answer will be different. *See* [B-125007, B-127378, July 20, 1956](#).

Treasury may be required to purchase the obligations, as in the PBGC provision quoted above, or may have discretion in the matter as is the case for the Commodity Credit Corporation and the Rural Telephone Bank (15 U.S.C. § 713a-4, 7 U.S.C. § 947(b), respectively). Congress may specify the time period within which the borrowing authority must be used. If it does not, the authority remains available until used or repealed. *See Nowak*, 448 F.2d at 138 n.4.

In lieu of direct borrowing from the Treasury, a corporation’s borrowing may go through an intermediary, the Federal Financing Bank (FFB). The FFB was created in 1973 to coordinate federal and federally assisted borrowings in order to reduce their costs. 12 U.S.C. § 2281. The FFB is itself a corporate entity under the general direction and supervision of the Secretary of the Treasury, and an instrumentality of the United States. 12 U.S.C. § 2283. While not listed in the GCCA, the FFB is subject to the GCCA’s budget and audit provisions for wholly owned government corporations. 12 U.S.C. § 2293. For present purposes, two provisions of the act creating the FFB are relevant. Under 12 U.S.C. § 2285(a), “[a]ny Federal agency which is authorized to issue, sell, or guarantee any obligation is authorized to issue or sell such obligations directly to the [FFB].” “Federal agency” includes “a corporation or other entity established by the Congress which is owned in whole or in part by the United States.” 12 U.S.C. § 2282(1). Thus, at least certain corporations with statutory borrowing authority can issue their obligations directly to the FFB, which can then issue its own securities either in the private market or, more likely, to the Treasury. 12 U.S.C. § 2288. For information

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on the background of the FFB, see GAO, *Federal Financing Bank: The Government Incurred a Cost of \$2 Billion on Loan Prepayments*, GAO/AFMD-89-59 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 22, 1989); *The Federal Financing Bank*, No. 121084 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 5, 1983) (GAO testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Credit Programs).

In 14 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 20 (1990), the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) tackled the question of how to determine which corporations could avail themselves of the FFB. A detailed analysis led the OLC to conclude that Congress intended to include corporations "that receive substantial funding from the government, that are subject to significant federal control, and that issue obligations guaranteed by the federal government." *Id.* at 26. This being the case, corporations "that are wholly privately funded, that have a significant measure of independence in their management, and that issue obligations not backed by the full faith and credit" of the United States are excluded. *Id.* OLC recognized that a given corporation may not have all of the principal characteristics of either the included or excluded corporations, or may have a mix. The approach in such a case is to determine "whether the corporation's principal characteristics render it most analogous to those corporations that were intended to be covered by the [law creating the FFB] or to those that were not." *Id.* at 26 n.14. Applying this analysis, OLC concluded that the former Resolution Trust Corporation was a federal agency for purposes of 12 U.S.C. § 2282(1), and could therefore issue promissory notes directly to the FFB.

In two opinions to Members of Congress, GAO reviewed the financing arrangements for building construction at the government-owned Federal Triangle site in the District of Columbia. The former Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, a wholly owned government corporation, was responsible for the planning, development, and construction oversight of the project. The original plan was to obtain private financing for the construction. It was later decided, however, that financing through the FFB would save the government interest costs. The project's trustee obtained the financing through a promissory note issued to the FFB, and secured by the trustee's assignment to the FFB of the trustee's rights to receive statutorily required rental payments from the General Services Administration. GAO concluded that the FFB was an appropriate source of financing because the Federal Triangle building—designated the Ronald Reagan Federal Building—was fundamentally a project being constructed by the federal government. Several factors supported this conclusion. The federal government, by statute, bore the full risks of developing and owning



the project; the land on which the project was being built belonged to the United States; and the government carried the principal rights and obligations associated with ownership of the project, including the project's design and specifications for construction. The Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation most likely would have met the Justice Department's eligibility criteria, except that there was no need to apply that test because, under the Federal Triangle legislation, the promissory note issued for financing purposes was in effect an obligation of GSA rather than the Corporation. [B-248647, Dec. 28, 1992](#); [B-248647.2, Apr. 24, 1995](#).

As the 1995 opinion pointed out, a corporation (or agency, for that matter) with statutory borrowing authority does not need further specific authority to use the FFB. The provisions of the law creating the FFB noted above supply the necessary authority. [B-248647.2, Apr. 24, 1995](#).

(3) Federal ownership of stock

The federal government has also funded government corporations by subscribing to part or all of a corporation's capital stock. As we saw in our historical summary above, the government's early involvement in government corporations consisted of purchasing stock in the name of the United States. In the case of the Panama Railroad Company, the government acquired the entire capital stock of a private corporation, elected its board of directors, and used it to carry out commerce and defense functions in the Panama Canal. *See New York ex rel. Rogers v. Graves*, 299 U.S. 401 (1937).

Of the modern (post-Government Corporation Control Act) government corporations, some issue stock, many do not. A government corporation issues stock if it is authorized to do so in its enabling legislation. The statute will specify the amount of stock that may be issued and who may or must subscribe to it. For example, the federal government owns 100 percent of the capital stock of the Commodity Credit Corporation (15 U.S.C. § 714e), the Export-Import Bank (12 U.S.C. § 635b), and the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (7 U.S.C. § 1504(a)). The Rural Telephone Bank is authorized to issue three classes of stock, one owned by the government, one by loan recipients, and one by specified classes of purchasers. 7 U.S.C. § 946.

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b. Types of Financing: Private (1) Sources of private financing

Private financing can take one of three forms: fees and charges, stock ownership, and borrowing. For the most part, authority to assess fees and charges will be spelled out in the pertinent legislation. The kinds of receipts vary with the type of program being administered. The Tennessee Valley Authority receives income from the sale of electric power (including sales to government agencies, [44 Comp. Gen. 683 \(1965\)](#)). The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation collects premiums from sponsors of covered pension plans. 29 U.S.C. § 1306. The Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation for many years received its income from tolls (33 U.S.C. § 988; [35 Comp. Gen. 267 \(1955\)](#)), but Congress suspended this authority with respect to commercial vessels in 1994 (33 U.S.C. § 988a), and began funding the Corporation from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund. *See* 33 U.S.C. § 2238; 26 U.S.C. § 9505. Before its termination on October 1, 2004, the Panama Canal Commission’s revolving fund received toll receipts and was authorized to retain interest generated by amounts deposited in financial institutions outside the Treasury. 22 U.S.C. § 3712(c).

If there is no express authority, it may nevertheless be possible for a corporation to assess fees under 31 U.S.C. § 9701, the so-called “user charge statute,” covered in detail in Chapter 12, section D. Section 9701 by its terms applies to wholly owned, but not mixed-ownership, government corporations. The limitation to wholly owned corporations is because they are the closest to regular government agencies. This does not mean that other types of government-created corporations may not charge fees, merely that they must find the authority elsewhere.

A government-created corporation designated as private may also find itself on the other end of the transaction—having to pay government agencies for services rendered to it. For example, the Communications Satellite Act authorized certain services to be provided to Comsat on a reimbursable basis, but did not further address how the charges were to be determined. Absent anything to the contrary in the law or its legislative history, GAO found it legitimate to determine the charges in accordance with the standards under 31 U.S.C. § 9701. [B-168707-O.M., May 11, 1970](#).

Of course, statutory authorizations to charge fees have their limitations. The Export-Import Bank, for example, is authorized to charge fees for conferences, seminars, and publications. 12 U.S.C. § 635(a)(1). Then, similar to authority given to the executive branch generally, the statute authorizes the Bank to accept voluntary contributions for travel and

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subsistence expenses incurred by its officers or employees. Such amounts received are credited to the fund which initially paid for such activities and are to be offset against the expenses of the Bank for such activities. *Id.* However, GAO found that this statute did not go so far as to authorize the Bank to *require* its customers to pay its travel and subsistence expenses. [B-272254, Mar. 5, 1997](#). The decision reasoned that the statute was not intended to sanction what would clearly amount to an augmentation of the Bank's appropriations.

The second form of private financing is private subscription to stock. Naturally, one would not expect to find this in the case of a wholly owned government corporation, but it is a theoretical option for Congress to consider for mixed-ownership corporations and it is commonly found in government-sponsored enterprises (GSE). Statutory provisions for GSEs may prescribe classes of common stock, voting and nonvoting stock, preferred stock, and may address institutional *versus* general subscription. Examples are 12 U.S.C. § 1453 (Freddie Mac); 12 U.S.C. § 2124 (banks for cooperatives); and 12 U.S.C. § 2279aa-4 (Farmer Mac). The Justice Department has concluded that, as long as no statute prohibits it, a corporation can use preferred stock as a dividend to its shareholders of common stock. 9 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 19 (1985). (This case involved Freddie Mac, whose legislation later changed, but the point is still good.)

The third type of private financing is borrowing—the issuance of promissory notes, bonds, or other debt obligations to the public. An example is 7 U.S.C. § 947, which authorizes the Rural Telephone Bank to borrow from the public as well as from the Treasury. The Commodity Credit Corporation has comparable authority in 15 U.S.C. § 713a-4.

The obligations may be expressly guaranteed by the United States. Commodity Credit Corporation obligations, for example, “shall be fully and unconditionally guaranteed both as to interest and principal by the United States.” *Id.* A question given much attention has been the extent to which obligations of government corporations are backed by the “full faith and credit” of the United States in the absence of express statutory provision to that effect. Attorney General opinions addressing whether a bond or other obligation is a valid obligation of the United States, even in the absence of full faith and credit language, are set forth and discussed in more detail in Chapter 11, section D.1. It is sufficient here to note that two of the Attorney General's opinions concerned government corporations—42 Op. Att'y Gen. 21 (1961) (Development Loan Fund) and 42 Op. Att'y Gen. 327 (1966) (Export-Import Bank). In both cases the Attorney General

concluded that Congress's choice of the corporate form did not alter the status of its obligations. Thus, if the underlying statutory provisions are sufficient to authorize the creation of obligations of the United States, it is immaterial that this authority is vested in a corporate entity. GAO adopted the Attorney General's position in [68 Comp. Gen. 14 \(1988\)](#) (promissory notes and assistance guarantees issued by the now-defunct Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation were obligations of the United States).

Congress can include express disclaimer language in the statute, which will then of course control. *E.g.*, 12 U.S.C. § 1721(b) (Ginnie Mae's obligations "are not guaranteed by the United States and do not constitute a debt or obligation of the United States or of any agency or instrumentality thereof" other than Ginnie Mae). If, however, the test for an obligation of the United States (as set out in the Attorney General's opinions) is met, disclaimer language found only in legislative history is not enough. [68 Comp. Gen. at 18–19](#).

As with borrowing from the Treasury, borrowing from the public can also be handled through the Federal Financing Bank. Indeed, individual agency offerings to the public were the main focus of the law creating the Federal Financing Bank. See, in this regard, 12 U.S.C. § 2281. *See also* H.R. Rep. No. 93-299, at 2 (1973).

(2) Market perception of implied backing by United States

"As one wag puts it: With GSEs, you privatize the profits and socialize the risk."<sup>137</sup>

The preceding discussion outlines when a government corporation's obligations may be backed by the full faith and credit of the United States. Government-sponsored enterprises (GSEs), introduced in section B.2.b of this chapter, are generally regarded as one step further removed from "government status" and, therefore, further removed from government backing, at least official backing. Of course, Congress is free to provide federal backing whenever it wishes. *E.g.*, 12 U.S.C. § 2278b-6(d)(4)(A) (if Financial Assistance Corporation is unable to pay principal or interest on its obligations, Treasury is required to pay and try to recover from the defaulting bank). More often than not in the case of GSEs, however,

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<sup>137</sup> Ronald C. Moe, *The "Reinventing Government" Exercise: Misinterpreting the Problem, Misjudging the Consequences*, 54 Public Administration Review 111, 113 (1994).

Congress has enacted express disclaimers. For example, 12 U.S.C. § 4503 disclaims any federal guarantee of the obligations or liability of the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae), the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac), and the Federal Home Loan Banks, and any implication that they are backed by the full faith and credit of the United States. (The Home Loan Banks are mixed-ownership government corporations; the other two are GSEs.)

Even in the presence of a statutory disclaimer, many commentators who have examined GSEs emphasized the existence of a market perception of implied backing by the United States because, presumably, the GSE will not be allowed to fail. As one commentator stated, very simply, “[t]he Federal Government implicitly guarantees the value of GSE obligations and mortgage-backed securities.”<sup>138</sup> This implied guarantee has been called the “single most distinguishing characteristic”<sup>139</sup> of GSEs and their “most valuable perk.”<sup>140</sup> Another writer suggests that in the event of GSE failure, the government would have “no real alternative but to deliver on the implicit guarantee” in order to avoid disruption in the credit markets.<sup>141</sup>

The perception of an implied guarantee arises because GSEs are regarded as instrumentalities of the United States, and their obligations have many of the characteristics of Treasury obligations.<sup>142</sup> As another commentator has pointed out, some of the most prominent private credit-rating agencies

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<sup>138</sup> Ronald C. Moe, *Managing the Public's Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 38 (1995) (Moe 1995).

<sup>139</sup> Ronald C. Moe and Thomas H. Stanton, *Government-Sponsored Enterprises as Federal Instrumentalities: Reconciling Private Management with Public Accountability*, 49 Pub. Admin. Rev. 321, 322 (1989); Ronald C. Moe, *Liabilities of the Quasi Government*, 20 Government Executive 47, 49 (1988). Moe and Stanton, at 321, go so far as to include the implicit guarantee as an element of the definition of a GSE. *See also* Moe 1995, at 38.

<sup>140</sup> Lori Nitschke, *Private Enterprise With Official Advantages*, 56 Cong. Q. Wkly. 1578, 1580 (1998).

<sup>141</sup> A. Michael Froomkin, *Reinventing the Government Corporation*, 1995 U. Ill. L. Rev. 543, 580 (1995).

<sup>142</sup> The common characteristics are listed in Thomas H. Stanton, *Federal Supervision of Safety and Soundness of Government-Sponsored Enterprises*, 5 Admin. L.J. 395, 404-05 (1991).

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“have rated enterprise securities based on the strength of this implied government guarantee, in spite of the knowledge that no actual guarantee exists.”<sup>143</sup>

This market perception of a federal guarantee confers significant economic benefits on GSEs. Primarily, it enables them to borrow money at rates much lower than private corporate obligations, and almost as low as the rates Treasury itself pays on its borrowings.<sup>144</sup>

GAO has issued detailed reports on the government’s exposure to risks stemming from its use of GSEs. See GAO, *Government-Sponsored Enterprises: The Government’s Exposure to Risks*, GAO/GGD-90-97 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 15, 1990); *Government-Sponsored Enterprises: A Framework for Limiting the Government’s Exposure to Risks*, GAO/GGD-91-90 (Washington, D.C.: May 22, 1991). In 1992, Congress enacted the Federal Housing Enterprises Financial Safety and Soundness Act,<sup>145</sup> 12 U.S.C. §§ 4501–4641, to provide a measure of federal supervision and regulation over Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. The law established an Office of Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight (OFHEO) whose job it is to see that Fannie and Freddie are adequately capitalized and operating safely. 12 U.S.C. §§ 4502(6), 4511, 4513(a).

Nevertheless, the risks associated with the GSEs have become more severe in recent years as both their financial exposure and questions about their management have increased dramatically. The combined obligations of five GSEs was \$4.4 trillion as of September 30, 2003.<sup>146</sup> See GAO, *Government-Sponsored Enterprises: A Framework for Strengthening GSE Governance and Management*, GAO-04-269T (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 10, 2004), at 1. The GSEs also pose risks to the stability of the United States financial system. Because the financial markets expect that the

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<sup>143</sup> Carrie Stradley Lavargna, *Government-Sponsored Enterprises Are ‘Too Big to Fail’: Balancing Public and Private Interests*, 44 *Hastings L.J.* 991, 1011 (1993).

<sup>144</sup> See, e.g., GAO, *Budget Issues: Profiles of Government-Sponsored Enterprises*, GAO/AFMD-91-17 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 1991), at 7; Lavargna, at 1010–11; Thomas H. Stanton, *Federal Supervision of Safety and Soundness of Government-Sponsored Enterprises*, 5 *Admin. L.J.* 395, 404 (1991).

<sup>145</sup> Pub. L. No. 102-550, title XIII, 106 Stat. 3672, 3941 (Oct. 28, 1992).

<sup>146</sup> The five GSEs examined in the cited GAO testimony were Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Farmer Mac, the Federal Home Loan Banks (FHLBanks), and the Farm Credit System (FCS).

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United States will be unwilling to permit GSE obligations to fail, the volume of GSE obligations, potentially, may have consequences for the federal taxpayer. *See* GAO-04-269T, at 5–6. Unfortunately, there are serious concerns over the management of the GSEs and federal oversight of their operations. By way of summary, GAO’s 2004 testimony observed in this regard:

“[T]o ensure that the GSEs operate in a safe and sound manner, it is essential that effective governance, reasonable transparency, and effective oversight systems are established and maintained. In particular, the GSEs should lead by example in the area of corporate governance; GSE regulators must be strong, independent, and have necessary expertise; and GSE mission definitions and benefit measures need to be established. However, our work found that GSE corporate governance does not always reflect best practices . . . Furthermore, the regulatory structure for the housing GSEs is fragmented and serious questions exist as to the capacity of GSE regulators to fulfill their responsibilities.”

*Id.* at 2. Among other remedial measures, GAO recommended that Congress establish a single federal regulator for the housing GSEs and equip it with the necessary authorities to carry out its mission.

GAO is far from alone in identifying problems with the GSEs. One commentator described Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac as “huge, fast-growing, highly leveraged, lightly regulated, and susceptible to failure.” Richard Scott Carnell, *Handling the Failure of a Government-Sponsored Enterprise*, 80 Wash. L. Rev. 565, 567 (2005). Another said:

“GSEs are completely excluded from the presidential budget and the congressional budget resolution; they simply are not reported in either the on-budget or the off-budget figures. Although GSEs were originally designed to serve a public purpose, they can easily be used as a budget accounting gimmick to reduce the size of apparent deficits.”

Cheryl D. Block, *Congress and Accounting Scandals: Is the Pot Calling the Kettle Black?*, 82 Neb. L. Rev. 365, 438–39 (2003) (footnotes omitted).

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In May 2006, Fannie Mae agreed to pay a \$400 million penalty to settle charges brought against it by the Securities and Exchange Commission relating to misstatements in its financial statements from at least 1998 through 2004 that gave its shareholders and the public the false impression of stable and predictable earnings. In announcing the settlement, the Commission observed:

“In its settlement with the Commission, the company agreed, without admitting or denying the allegations, to the entry of a final judgment that permanently enjoins the company from violations of the anti-fraud, reporting, books and records and internal controls provisions of the federal securities laws. The root cause of the accounting fraud described in the Commission’s Complaint, was a corporate culture that placed significant emphasis on stable earnings growth and avoidance of income statement volatility, and insufficient emphasis on ensuring compliance with applicable accounting regulations and federal securities laws. The company’s misconduct took various forms. For example: At the end of 1998, senior management manipulated the company’s earnings in order to obtain bonuses they otherwise would not have received.”<sup>147</sup>

(3) Statutory controls

In addition to the budget, audit, and accounting controls previously described, the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA), 31 U.S.C. § 9108, addresses the debt obligations of all government corporations, wholly owned and mixed-ownership, covered by the act (see discussion of GCCA in section B.4.a of this chapter). Under section 9108(a), a GCCA government corporation may not issue or offer obligations to the public unless the Secretary of the Treasury has prescribed the form, denomination, maturity, and interest rate of the obligations and the

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<sup>147</sup> Securities and Exchange Commission, *SEC and OFHEO Announce Resolution of Investigation and Special Examination of Fannie Mae: Fannie Mae Agrees to Pay \$400 Million Penalty*, Press Release No. 2006-80 (May 23, 2006), available at [www.sec.gov/news/press.shtml](http://www.sec.gov/news/press.shtml) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007). See also OFHEO, *Report to Congress 2007* (Mar. 30, 2007), available at [www.ofheo.gov/media/annual\\_reports/OFHEOReporttoCongress07.pdf](http://www.ofheo.gov/media/annual_reports/OFHEOReporttoCongress07.pdf) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007) (annual examination of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac revealed inadequacies in the areas of accounting systems, internal controls, risk management, human resources, and corporate governance).



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conditions to which they will be subject; the manner and times of their issuance; and the price for which they will be sold.

Under section 9108(b), a GCCA government corporation must get the Secretary of the Treasury’s approval (or waiver) before buying or selling either a direct obligation of the United States or an obligation whose principal, interest, or both is guaranteed by the United States, if the obligations aggregate over \$100,000.

Section 9108(c) authorizes the Secretary of the Treasury to delegate functions under sections 9108(a) and (b) to any officer or employee of any federal agency.

Section 9108(d) contains the exemptions. The approval requirements of sections 9108(a) and (b) do not apply to certain named mixed-ownership government corporations, nor to any mixed-ownership corporation when the corporation has no government capital.

Finally, a provision added to the GCCA in 1986 directs the Secretary of the Treasury to issue standards for depository institutions concerning the safeguarding and use of GSE securities that they hold for their customers. 31 U.S.C. § 9110.

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## 6. Fiscal Autonomy

### a. Account Settlement

GAO’s “account settlement” authority refers to the first portion of 31 U.S.C. § 3526(a)—“The Comptroller General shall settle all accounts of the United States Government.” During the pre-World War II period and for a while thereafter, this meant that all accounts had to be physically transmitted to GAO, where GAO auditors scrutinized them, line by line, “disallowing” or “taking an exception to” expenditures found to be illegal. Subsequently, GAO’s application of this authority underwent major evolution. Now, agencies retain their own accounts, keeping them available for audit,<sup>148</sup> and an account is regarded as “settled” by operation of law after 3 years except for unresolved items. *See* 31 U.S.C. § 3526(c). Nevertheless account settlement remains relevant in determining such things as (1) the kinds of audit GAO is authorized to perform, (2) who may

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<sup>148</sup> GAO advised government corporations to this effect in [27 Comp. Gen. 429 \(1948\)](#).

request a legal decision from GAO, and (3) the application of the accountable officer relief statutes. *See* 31 U.S.C. §§ 3523, 3526, 3527, 3528, 3529.

During the decades preceding enactment of the Government Corporation Control Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 9101–9110, the relationship of GAO to government corporations was a major battlefield. The corporations argued that they should be exempt from GAO’s account settlement authority; GAO argued the opposite.<sup>149</sup> In 1927, the Supreme Court decided the case of *United States ex rel. Skinner & Eddy Corp. v. McCarl*, 275 U.S. 1 (1927). A contractor sought a writ of mandamus to compel GAO to consider its claim against the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation. The Supreme Court affirmed the determination of the lower court that the claim was not within GAO’s *claims* settlement jurisdiction,<sup>150</sup> which was separate from GAO’s *account* settlement authority. The executive branch cited this case to support a blanket proposition that GAO’s account settlement authority did not extend to government-owned corporations. *E.g.*, 40 Op. Att’y Gen. 84 (1941). While this was certainly an arguable position, GAO’s initial reaction was to distinguish *Skinner & Eddy*, pointing out that the Court had not directly ruled on the question of GAO’s account settlement authority over government corporations. [B-29072, Nov. 16, 1943](#). GAO tried to reconcile the conflicting views, holding that accountable officers still had to render their accounts, but that GAO, in performing its settlement audit, would recognize the corporations’ exemption from various laws. [B-24827, May 22, 1942](#).

Two developments have largely resolved the issue. First was the enactment of the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA), which mandated a commercial-type audit—as opposed to the traditional governmental audit—and told GAO to include in its audit reports anything it believed to be illegal (see discussion of GCCA in section B.4.a of this chapter). 31 U.S.C. § 9105. Although some decisions reflect

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<sup>149</sup> Many of the squabbles are recorded in John McDiarmid, *Government Corporations and Federal Funds* (1938).

<sup>150</sup> This claims settlement authority is discussed in detail in Chapter 14, section B.

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ambivalence,<sup>151</sup> GAO tended to view the GCCA requirements as supplanting its account settlement authority with respect to the corporations. *E.g.*, [B-150556, May 29, 1968](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation); [B-146820, June 2, 1967](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation); [B-152534-O.M., Dec. 4, 1963](#) (Panama Canal Company); [B-58302, Apr. 29, 1947](#) (former Reconstruction Finance Corporation).

The second development was the refinement of certain charter provisions and a trend toward standardization. Congress has authorized most post-Government Corporation Control Act corporations to determine the character and necessity of their expenditures. For example, the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation provision states:

“The Corporation shall determine the character and necessity for its expenditures . . . and the manner in which they shall be incurred, allowed, and paid, without regard to the provisions of any other laws governing the expenditure of public funds and such determinations shall be final and conclusive upon all other officers of the Government.”

7 U.S.C. § 1506(i).

There are variations in language. GAO views the “character and necessity” provision as precluding its account settlement authority. *E.g.*, [B-226708.3, Dec. 12, 1988](#) (then Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation); [B-200103, Mar. 5, 1981](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation); [B-34706, Dec. 5, 1947](#) (government corporations in general). Some decisions also mention other corporate powers like the power to sue and be sued or to conclusively settle claims, but the “character and necessity” power is the crucial element.

The first step in the analysis is to examine a corporation’s particular legislation. If Congress has addressed the matter one way or the other, there is no need to go further. Congress is always free to make a particular corporation subject to GAO’s account settlement. *E.g.*, [B-123943-O.M.](#),

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<sup>151</sup> The ambivalence of the accounting officers did not start with GAO. For example, in 24 Comp. Dec. 118 (1917), the Comptroller of the Treasury held that the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation was not required to account to the Treasury for the use of its funds, yet held in later decisions that the corporation had violated laws governing the purchase of typewriters (27 Comp. Dec. 140 (1920)) and prohibiting advance payments (27 Comp. Dec. 311 (1920)).

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[July 1, 1955](#). An example is Federal Prison Industries, whose legislation provides: “Accounts of all receipts and disbursements of the corporation shall be rendered to the Government Accountability Office for settlement and adjustment, as required by the Comptroller General.” 18 U.S.C. § 4126(d). *See* [B-98983-O.M., Dec. 18, 1950](#). The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) has an interesting structure. The TVA is expressly made subject to the account settlement laws, but a determination of necessity by the TVA Board of Directors will override a GAO finding to the contrary. 16 U.S.C. § 831h(b). *See, e.g.*, [B-209585, Jan. 26, 1983](#); [B-114850-O.M., Sept. 21, 1977](#).

If a corporation’s enabling legislation does not address account settlement, then, for the two reasons noted above, GAO will conclude that the authority does not exist. Most of the cases cited in the preceding paragraphs have involved wholly owned corporations.<sup>152</sup> However, the same is true for mixed-ownership corporations like the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation ([B-210496, Feb. 1, 1983](#)), and for corporations created and funded by the government but designated as “private,” like the Legal Services Corporation ([B-241591, Mar. 1, 1991](#); [B-203901, July 9, 1982](#); [B-204886, Oct. 21, 1981](#)).<sup>153</sup>

If the account settlement laws do not apply to a particular corporation, neither do the laws providing for the relief of accountable officers. In such a case, any accountability of officers or employees of the corporation is up to the corporation itself to determine; accountability would be to the corporation, not the United States.<sup>154</sup> [B-88578-O.M., Aug. 21, 1951](#). *See also* [B-83360-O.M., Apr. 8, 1949](#) (Certifying Officers’ Act, ch. 641, 55 Stat. 875 (Dec. 29, 1941), not applicable to Federal Crop Insurance Corporation).

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<sup>152</sup> For example, under 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3)(M), the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is considered to be acting as a wholly owned government corporation when carrying out duties and powers related to the Federal Housing Administration Fund. For a discussion of GAO’s limited authority with respect to this HUD program, see [B-182653, Jan. 16, 1975](#); [B-181961, B-182280, Nov. 26, 1974](#); [B-99262-O.M., Jan. 11, 1951](#).

<sup>153</sup> Several of the cases cited in this paragraph are bid protest decisions. Prior to the 1984 enactment of the Competition in Contracting Act, account settlement authority was the basis for GAO bid protest jurisdiction.

<sup>154</sup> GAO did not always feel this way. Earlier decisions purporting to grant or deny relief to certifying officers of the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation, such as [B-44435, Oct. 5, 1944](#) (or for that matter any government corporation with the “character and necessity” authority), have been effectively superseded and should be disregarded to that extent.

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b. Status of Funds Received  
by Corporate Entities

If money received by a government agency must be deposited in the Treasury and an appropriation is needed to get it back out, logic would seem to dictate that statutory authority for an agency to retain specified receipts and to spend them for specified purposes is a permanent or continuing appropriation of those receipts. GAO has consistently applied this principle to a variety of revolving funds, user fee accounts, proceeds from sales of goods or services, *etc.* This principle is explored in more detail, with case citations, in Chapter 2, section B.1. Further support is found in the title 31, United States Code, definition of “appropriations,” which is not limited to direct appropriations from the general fund of the Treasury but includes “other authority making amounts available for obligation or expenditure.” 31 U.S.C. §§ 701(2)(C), 1101(2)(C).

Viewing the principle in the abstract, that is, setting aside for the moment the question of the consequences of the status determination, there is no reason the principle should not apply to government corporations as well as unincorporated agencies. Thus, GAO has applied the principle and found that there was a statute which authorized the deposits of receipts in a specific fund, and made the fund available for carrying out specific purposes without needing further congressional action, which constituted a permanent or continuing appropriation, in the following situations:

- Tolls assessed and collected by the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation. [B-193573, Jan. 8, 1979, modified and aff’d, B-193573, Dec. 19, 1979, restated in B-217578, Oct. 16, 1986.](#) (The Corporation stopped being funded from tolls in the mid-1990s.)
- The Prison Industries Fund operated by Federal Prison Industries, Inc. (FPI), the receipts of which consist primarily of proceeds from the sale of FPI products and services. [60 Comp. Gen. 323 \(1981\); B-230304, Mar. 18, 1988.](#)<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> No less a supporter of corporate autonomy than John McDiarmid has referred to the Prison Industries Fund as a “permanent appropriation.” See John M. McDiarmid, *Government Corporations and Federal Funds*, 55 (1938). On the other hand, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, discussing 60 Comp. Gen. 323, declined to adopt GAO’s characterization of the Prison Industries Fund as an appropriation for the purpose of determining whether jurisdiction exists under the Tucker Act. *Core Concepts of Florida, Inc. v. United States*, 327 F.3d 1331, 1337-38 (Fed. Cir. 2003). See the discussion of these decisions in section B.1 of Chapter 2.

- Revolving funds of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation in its capacity as insurer of private pension plans. [B-223146, Oct. 7, 1986](#); [B-217281-O.M., Mar. 27, 1985](#); GAO, *Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation: Statutory Limitation on Administrative Expenses Does Not Provide Meaningful Control*, GAO-03-301 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2003), at app. II. Compare [B-307849, Mar. 1, 2007](#) (since PBGC did not have authority to retain reimbursements for financial analysis services, amounts received must be deposited into the general fund of the Treasury).
- Power program funds (revenue and bonds) of the Tennessee Valley Authority. [64 Comp. Gen. 756, 761–62 \(1985\)](#).
- Bonneville Power Administration Fund, a revolving fund consisting of all receipts of the Bonneville Power Administration, proceeds from the sale of its bonds, and appropriations Congress may make (16 U.S.C. § 838i). [67 Comp. Gen. 8, 10 \(1987\)](#).
- Capitalization obtained from the United States Treasury under borrowing authority. [B-223857, Feb. 27, 1987](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation); [B-193573, Dec. 19, 1979](#) (Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation).
- Filing fees collected under 28 U.S.C. § 1931 collected and retained for the operation and maintenance of the courts of the United States. [73 Comp. Gen. 321 \(1994\)](#).

It makes no difference whether the statutory language authorizing retention and use is found in an appropriation act or in other legislation. [B-193573, Dec. 19, 1979](#). The fact that the fund has repaid its initial capitalization to the Treasury and has become self-supporting is also immaterial. [60 Comp. Gen. 323, 326 \(1981\)](#).

These cases have one important thing in common—they all involve wholly owned government corporations (plus Bonneville, the functional equivalent of one). This should not seem strange because, considering the various types of government-created corporations (wholly owned, mixed-ownership, GSEs, so-called “private,” *etc.*), the wholly owned government corporation is closest to an agency.

This being the case, application of the principle to a mixed-ownership government corporation, although possible in theory and perhaps even

desirable in some instances, would seem less appropriate. Thus, assessments levied on insured banks by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and used to pay the FDIC's operating expenses are not regarded as "appropriated funds." [23 Comp. Gen. 83 \(1943\)](#); [B-20892, Dec. 11, 1941](#); [B-214157-O.M., Apr. 2, 1984](#), at 8–9. *See also* [A-91137, Apr. 11, 1938](#) (FDIC's assessment-derived funds, while not an appropriation, are the equivalent of an appropriation for purposes of availability for necessary expenses). (None of these cases use the term "mixed-ownership" corporation because they all predate the explicit legislative recognition of that term in the Government Corporation Control Act.)

The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) illustrates a situation in which funds in the hands of a wholly owned corporation are not regarded as appropriated funds. The PBGC has two very different functions: it insures certain private pension plans, and it is authorized to serve as trustee for terminated plans. In [B-217281-O.M., Mar. 27, 1985](#), the issue was whether the PBGC had to follow the federal procurement regulations in obtaining investment manager services for (1) excess capital in its revolving funds and (2) assets of terminated plans in its hands as trustee. As noted above, when the PBGC is acting in its capacity as pension plan insurer, its revolving funds are treated as appropriated funds. Accordingly, the procurement regulations applied to PBGC when procuring services for the revolving funds. However, when serving in its trustee capacity, the PBGC is treated as a private fiduciary and its powers include collecting amounts due the plan, paying plan benefits, liquidating plan assets, and recapturing prior payments. 29 U.S.C. § 1342(d)(1)(B).<sup>156</sup> The funds of terminated plans PBGC administers are trust funds, privately created and privately funded, and are not appropriated funds. Therefore, the PBGC is not bound by the federal procurement regulations when procuring services for its trust funds. Similarly, when using trust funds in its trustee capacity, the PBGC could modify existing contracts and could enter into a contingent-fee arrangement with outside counsel for litigation, without regard to the laws governing the expenditure of appropriated funds. [B-223146, Oct. 7, 1986](#); [GAO-03-301](#), at app. II.

In the case of an unincorporated agency, the question of whether certain funds are appropriated funds has very significant consequences. Appropriated funds, unlike nonappropriated or private funds held by

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<sup>156</sup> An illustrative case of the Corporation's activities under this authority is *Pension Benefit Guaranty Corp. v. Carter & Tillery Enterprises*, 133 F.3d 1183 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1998).



agencies for the benefit of others, “are subject to the various restrictions and limitations on the uses of appropriated moneys.” [35 Comp. Gen. 615, 618 \(1956\)](#). In the case of a government corporation, the result is still to subject the corporation to certain laws governing appropriated funds (or to determine the scope of exemptions for “nonappropriated funds”), but, as discussed next, the range of applicable laws is much narrower and varies depending on the precise terms of a given corporation’s governing legislation.

c. Application of Fiscal Laws

As we have seen, fiscal autonomy is one of the key features of government corporations, and, in some cases, the primary impetus for their creation. “Government corporations,” GAO conceded long ago, “are conceived not for the purpose of limiting the Government prerogative . . . but of accelerating and enlarging it and of making it more flexible.” [B-37981, June 1, 1944](#), at 52. The earliest battles, centering on the effect of corporate status *per se*, were inconclusive.<sup>157</sup> Changes in the law since that time now provide a framework.

(1) “Character and necessity” provision

GAO has often stated that the funds of “regular” agencies, including the various forms of authority to retain and use receipts, are, absent statutory provision to the contrary, “subject to the statutory controls and restrictions applicable to appropriated funds.” *E.g.*, [63 Comp. Gen. 285, 287 \(1984\)](#). In the corporate context, however, this statement is too broad and must be qualified. [B-193573, Dec. 19, 1979, restated, B-217578, Oct. 16, 1986](#). The reason, and perhaps the most significant element in the fiscal autonomy of a government corporation, is what we will call the “character and necessity” provision appearing in many, if not most, legislative charters. The provision seems to have originated in the 1930s and there are several variations. An example of the simplest form is 15 U.S.C. § 714b(j), which provides that the Commodity Credit Corporation “[s]hall determine the character of and the necessity for its obligations and expenditures and the manner in which they shall be incurred, allowed, and paid.” A variation is 33 U.S.C. § 984(a)(9), providing that the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation “shall determine the character of and the

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<sup>157</sup> “[M]y attention has never been drawn to an act of Congress specifying that the laws of the land do not apply to Government corporations merely because they are Government corporations.” [B-34706, Dec. 5, 1947](#), at 4 (letter from Comptroller General to committee chairman).



necessity for its obligations and expenditures, and the manner in which they shall be incurred, allowed, and paid, subject to provisions of law specifically applicable to Government corporations.” There is no material difference between these versions.

As we discussed throughout Chapter 4, the so-called purpose statute, 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), prohibits the use of appropriations for other than their intended purpose, although purposes are stated in appropriations acts with varying degrees of specificity, leaving room for administrative discretion. When you add “character and necessity” authority to the discretion already inherent under 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), the result is that a government corporation has much more spending discretion than agencies do. In addition, it has the power to make its own final and conclusive decisions. However, it is still subject to the overall limitation that its discretion be exercised “within the limitations and for the purposes of the statutes providing [its] funds and prescribing [its] activities.” [14 Comp. Gen. 698, 700 \(1935\)](#). In this sense, the concept of purpose—using the standards of corporate autonomy—along with the public policy concerns noted earlier, may be said to define the outer limits of a corporation’s discretion. There is a further discussion of this with specific corporate case studies in the section on program implementation in section B.6.d of this chapter.

Another thing a “character and necessity” provision does is it permits the corporation to avoid various rules established in case law that result from application of the “necessary expense” rule to an agency’s appropriation. *See* Chapter 4, section C.5. The one that comes immediately to mind is entertainment. A corporation empowered to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures can spend its money on the range of items discussed in Chapter 4, section C.5, subject of course to any applicable statutory restrictions. [B-127549, May 18, 1956](#); [B-35062, July 28, 1943](#). Accordingly, a corporation operating with appropriated funds but without the “character and necessity” provision, is subject to the same entertainment rules agencies are. [B-270199, Aug. 6, 1996](#). (The decision does not mention the lack of “character and necessity” authority, but that was in fact the case and indeed the essential prerequisite to applying the rules.)<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> As is probably obvious from the case law applying “character and necessity” provisions, a “character and necessity” provision limits the Comptroller General’s role in settling the accounts of the corporate entity. *See, e.g.*, [64 Comp. Gen. 124 \(1984\)](#); [B-209585, Jan. 26, 1983](#); [B-200103, Mar. 5, 1981](#).

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A corporation statutorily designated as “private,” even though government-created and government-financed, does not need the “character and necessity” language, and may spend money on entertainment unless statutorily restricted. [B-131935, July 16, 1975](#) (Corporation for Public Broadcasting). Congress subsequently amended the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s enabling legislation to prohibit the use of appropriated funds for the entertainment of federal, state, or local officials. 47 U.S.C. § 396(k)(2)(A).

Another category of expenditures legally unobjectionable under “character and necessity” authority are items discussed in Chapter 4, section C.13. Examples are:

- Physical examinations for certain employees of the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation. [41 Comp. Gen. 531 \(1962\)](#).
- Expenses necessary to qualify an employee to do his or her job. [B-2835, Apr. 18, 1939](#) (qualification as notary).
- Payment of travel expenses for chairman’s spouse; installing storm windows and door and window locks on chairman’s house; paying for his membership in a private tennis club. GAO, FOD-77-14 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 29, 1977) (untitled letter report).

Hazard insurance on various types of property is another type of expenditure that is permissible under a corporations “character and necessity” provision but is generally not available to agencies (*see* Chapter 4, section 10). [16 Comp. Gen. 453 \(1936\)](#) (Federal Housing Administrator can insure property acquired in exchange for debentures); [B-200103, Mar. 5, 1981](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) can pay for hazard insurance on CCC-owned and stored commodities). *See also* [B-290162, Oct. 22, 2002](#); [B-287209, June 3, 2002](#); [55 Comp. Gen. 1321 \(1976\)](#); [11 Comp. Gen. 59 \(1931\)](#). This applies as well to creating a reserve for fire, theft, and similar losses. [B-123709-O.M., June 29, 1955](#).

Another major consequence of “character and necessity” authority is to permit the corporation to avoid general statutory restrictions (as opposed to restrictions specifically applicable to government corporations). As GAO put it in [B-34706, Dec. 5, 1947](#), at 3:

“Where [character and necessity] language appears in the act chartering the corporation, there can be no question but

that Congress has determined that the Congressional or statutory rules otherwise directing how the public monies shall be spent are not of their own force to apply to the corporation, but rather that the corporation shall determine for itself what methods, procedures, *etc.* should be employed.”

One example of a general statutory provision that corporations with “character and necessity” language need not follow is 44 U.S.C. § 501, requiring the Government Printing Office to do all printing and binding for the government. (This provision is discussed in more detail in section B.7.f of this chapter.) Two additional examples, noted in [B-193573, Dec. 19, 1979](#), are 5 U.S.C. § 3107 (prohibiting use of appropriated funds to pay publicity experts) and 31 U.S.C. § 1345<sup>159</sup> (prohibiting use of appropriated funds to pay lodging or feeding of nongovernment persons at meetings or conventions). *See also* [B-7067, July 10, 1940](#); [B-3163, Apr. 24, 1939](#) (both decisions examined now-obsolete portions of predecessor of 5 U.S.C. § 3106 restricting hiring of attorneys).

A formulation GAO has often used is that a wholly owned government corporation with the power to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures is subject to (1) its own charter (*i.e.*, enabling legislation); (2) the Government Corporation Control Act, if and to the extent applicable; (3) applicable restrictions contained in annual appropriation acts; and (4) statutes expressly applicable to wholly owned corporations. *E.g.*, [B-58305-O.M., Apr. 10, 1951](#) (Federal Intermediate Credit Banks, subsequently converted to mixed-ownership but listed as wholly owned in the original Government Corporation Control Act); [B-58305-O.M., Mar. 8, 1951](#) (then Production Credit Corporation); [B-58306\(2\)-O.M., Nov. 14, 1950](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation); [B-58318-O.M., Oct. 27, 1950](#) (Export-Import Bank); [B-90250-O.M., Mar. 28, 1950](#) (corporate functions of Federal Housing Administration).<sup>160</sup> Similar statements appear in a number of more recent decisions. *E.g.*, [B-289219, Oct. 29, 2002](#); [B-217578, Oct. 16, 1986](#).

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<sup>159</sup> A 1935 decision, [14 Comp. Gen. 638](#), seemed to say the opposite with respect to this statute, but it apparently overlooked the significance of the “character and necessity” power, although it was mentioned in the request for decision, and for that reason and to that extent should be disregarded.

<sup>160</sup> These examples are from a series of internal GAO memoranda dated shortly after enactment of the Government Corporation Control Act, when GAO was refining its conduct of corporate audits.

A mixed-ownership corporation is subject to its own statutory charter, the Government Corporation Control Act, if and to the extent applicable, and applicable provisions in appropriation act. In addition, it is subject to laws enacted after its enabling statute that are specifically applicable to mixed-ownership corporations. *See* [B-58300-O.M., Nov. 30, 1950](#) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC)). Some earlier mixed-ownership corporations included the “character and necessity” authority or its functional equivalent in their enabling legislation. *E.g.*, 12 U.S.C. § 1820(a) (FDIC “shall determine and prescribe the manner in which its obligations shall be incurred and its expenses allowed and paid”). Later legislation may not have such language. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 93-236, title II, 87 Stat. 985, 990 (Jan. 2, 1974) (the now-defunct U.S. Railway Association). For a mixed-ownership corporation, at least one not receiving a direct appropriation, this specific language is probably not necessary. Our review of cases involving the FDIC indicates that its autonomy is abetted by the “character and necessity” clause, but that it would most likely have the same degree of autonomy without it, by virtue of its mixed-ownership status and the source of its funding. For example, the FDIC is not required to follow the obligation recording statute, 31 U.S.C. § 1501 ([B-121541, Dec. 30, 1954](#)); the statutory restrictions on the purchase of motor vehicles and aircraft, 31 U.S.C. § 1343 ([B-94685-O.M., May 8, 1950](#)); or the statutory provision restricting the funding of interagency groups, 31 U.S.C. § 1346 ([B-174571, Jan. 5, 1972](#)).

(2) “Without regard” clause

In addition to the various minor linguistic variations, there is one major variety of the “character and necessity” clause, illustrated by the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation statute quoted above in section 6.a of this chapter. It confers the “character and necessity” power, “without regard to the provisions of any other laws governing the expenditure of public funds.” 7 U.S.C. § 1506(i). Clearly, as a matter of basic statutory construction (or reading the English language), this version confers more than the basic “character and necessity” clause that does not include the “without regard” language. For example, in [B-94115, Nov. 15, 1950](#), GAO reviewed the “without regard” clause of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). GAO determined that the clause permitted the RFC to avoid laws existing on May 25, 1948, the date of the clause’s enactment, even laws expressly applicable to government corporations. However, the broad latitude of the “without regard” clause had been modified by the enactment after 1948 of legislation expressly applicable to government corporations. *Id.* Several months earlier, the Comptroller General had told

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GAO's auditors essentially the same thing with respect to the corporate functions of the Federal Housing Administration. [B-90250-O.M., Mar. 28, 1950](#). The “without regard” language, then, gives the corporation, in addition to everything it gets under the basic “character and necessity” clause, the further ability to avoid laws expressly applicable to government corporations (but not, of course, specifically applicable to the particular corporation), provided the laws are on the books at the time the “without regard” language was enacted.<sup>161</sup>

While a government corporation with a “character and necessity” provision which includes the “without regard” clause has considerable discretion, the discretion is not unlimited. It is “a legal discretion to be exercised within the limitations and for the purposes of the statutes providing the funds and prescribing the activities of the [corporation].” [14 Comp. Gen. 698, 700 \(1935\)](#). Nor does the “without regard” clause place the corporation “beyond all law or accountability with respect to its expenditures.” [14 Comp. Gen. 755, 758 \(1935\)](#). GAO has not attempted to draw the outer limits of this discretion, other than to suggest a broad “public policy” limitation. The practice GAO found illegal in [14 Comp. Gen. 755](#) was permitting attorneys employed by a government corporation to represent, on a fee basis, private parties in their dealings with the corporation. “The permitting of employees to practice before the public agency by which employed would seem so improper and so out of line with sound public policy as to suggest no need for a prohibiting statute.” *Id.* at 758.

The corporation's discretion must be exercised in accordance with the corporation's established decision-making machinery and procedures. Rubber-stamping an expenditure already made—merely because it was made—“does not constitute the exercise of discretion . . . but a condoning of what has already been done.” [14 Comp. Gen. 698, 700](#). *See also* [18 Comp. Gen. 479 \(1938\)](#); [B-56550, Mar. 28, 1946](#). This does not mean that the decision-making machinery must be invoked for each individual transaction. In some cases, the exercise of discretion on a categorical basis is legitimate, as long as it is done under the established procedures and documented. *E.g.*, [A-98289, A-60495, Jan. 18, 1939](#) (corporation's board issued the requisite formal board resolution stating that the requirement to

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<sup>161</sup> We are aware of the seemingly inconsistent discussion in [65 Comp. Gen. 226 \(1986\)](#). While that case was correctly decided, some of the discussion appears to misinterpret earlier decisions. The matter is covered in more detail in section B.7.f of this chapter.

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have printing done at Government Printing Office is not applicable to the corporation).

(3) Laws expressly applicable

It is clear at this point that it is important to know what laws are expressly applicable to government corporations. GAO prepared a list many years ago which is still useful (B-34706, B-56550-O.M., Nov. 9, 1949), but amendments, recodifications, and inter-title transfers, *etc.*, over the years have in many cases separated the substantive and definitional provisions. Consider, for example, the Administrative Expenses Act of 1946, ch. 744, 60 Stat. 806 (Aug. 2, 1946). After the first 17 sections set out substantive provisions, section 18 provided the following definitions: “The word ‘department’ as used in this Act shall be construed to include wholly owned Government corporations. . . . The word ‘appropriation’ shall be construed as including funds made available by legislation under . . . the Government Corporation Control Act.” *Id.*

Thus, any of the first 17 provisions containing the word “department” or the word “appropriation” is expressly applicable to wholly owned government corporations. *E.g.*, 27 Comp. Gen. 757, 758 (1948) (Tennessee Valley Authority may avail itself of authority in section 1 of Administrative Expenses Act, now found in 5 U.S.C. § 5724, to pay travel expenses incident to permanent change of station). The provisions of the Administrative Expenses Act ended up in various locations in the United States Code. Some of the provisions that found their way into title 5 of the United States Code have retained the appropriate definitional language. *E.g.*, 5 U.S.C. §§ 3109 (employment of experts and consultants), 7903 (purchase of special clothing or protective equipment). As we noted in section B.2.a of this chapter, sometimes it is necessary to look beyond the provision itself. For example, for purposes of title 5, the term “executive agency” includes government corporations (5 U.S.C. § 105), which in turn means corporations “owned or controlled by the government of the United States” (5 U.S.C. § 103(1)). Under 5 U.S.C. § 103(2), the term “government controlled corporation” does not include “a corporation owned by the government of the United States,” and, as we noted in section B.2.a. of this chapter, refers to mixed-ownership government corporations such as those listed in 31 U.S.C. § 9101(2).

The travel expense authority of 5 U.S.C. § 5724 requires this kind of analysis. Section 5724(a) of title 5 of the United States Code refers to “agency.” Section 5701(1) of title 5 defines agency as including “executive

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agency” (which includes wholly owned corporations) but not “government controlled corporation.” *See* 5 U.S.C. § 5701 note. Applying 5 U.S.C. § 103 again, section 5724 is applicable to wholly owned government corporations but not mixed-ownership corporations.

Some of the provisions of the Administrative Expenses Act are now in title 31 of the United States Code. For example, section 11 amended the first sentence of the advance payment statute to read, “No advance of public money shall be made in any case unless authorized by the appropriation concerned or other law.” *See* 31 U.S.C. § 3324. The 1982 recodification of title 31 was not intended to make substantive changes. Therefore, applying the definitions contained in section 18, the advance payment statute applies to wholly owned corporations. GAO applied the identical reasoning to conclude that statutory restrictions on home-to-work transportation, 31 U.S.C. § 1344 (whose source is section 16 of the Administrative Expenses Act) apply expressly to wholly owned government corporations. [B-210555.11, Apr. 1, 1986](#). However, that home-to-work statute was completely overhauled later in 1986. The revised statute expressly applies to government corporations and government controlled corporations as defined in 5 U.S.C. § 103 (31 U.S.C. §§ 1344(h)(2)(D) and (E)) and specifically includes mixed-ownership corporations subject to the Government Corporation Control Act in 31 U.S.C. §§ 9101–9110 (31 U.S.C. § 1344(h)(2)(F)), thus covering all the terminology.

Still another provision of the Administrative Expenses Act, section 9, amended the statutory requirement for advertising proposals for purchases and contracts for supplies and services now found in 41 U.S.C. § 5. That provision specifically applies only to the administrative transactions of wholly owned corporations.

A similar situation occurs in the apportionment requirement of 31 U.S.C. § 1512. The apportionment provisions were substantially overhauled in 1950. The revision included language making these provisions applicable to “any corporation wholly or partly owned by the United States which is an instrumentality of the United States” (Act of September 6, 1950, ch. 896, § 1211, 64 Stat. 595, 766). The 1982 recodification of title 31, United States Code, dropped this definitional language. The former Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, chartered in the 1930s, argued that its nonadministrative funds should not be subject to apportionment because it was empowered to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures without regard to any other provision of law governing the



expenditure of public funds. Upon a detailed analysis, the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel concluded that the “specifically crafted, later-enacted” apportionment law applied to all of the corporation’s funds, administrative and nonadministrative. 7 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 22, 26 (1983). GAO had reached the same conclusion in [43 Comp. Gen. 759 \(1964\)](#). (Apparently, the FSLIC never tried to argue in either case that its “without regard” power should affect the applicability of the later-enacted apportionment provisions to its administrative funds.) A statutory exception is 12 U.S.C. § 1817(d) (funds of Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, however derived, not subject to apportionment).

(4) Appropriation act provisions

Another source of expressly applicable laws is appropriation acts. Worthy of note is section 808 of the Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, the District of Columbia, and Independent Agencies Appropriation Act, 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-115, title VIII, § 808, 119 Stat. 2396, 2497 (Oct. 30, 2005) (emphasis added):

“Funds made available by this or any other Act for administrative expenses in the current fiscal year of the corporations and agencies subject to [the Government Corporation Control Act] shall be available, in addition to objects for which such funds are otherwise available, for rent in the District of Columbia; services in accordance with 5 U.S.C. 3109; and *the objects specified under this head, all the provisions of which shall be applicable to the expenditure of such funds unless otherwise specified* in the Act by which they are made available . . .”

The ancestor of this provision first appeared in the very first Government Corporation Appropriation Act, 1947 (Act of July 20, 1946, ch. 589, § 301, 60 Stat. 586, 595), enacted a short 6 months after the Government Corporation Control Act. Since 1972, this provision has appeared in the Treasury-General Government appropriation acts, now the Transportation, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, the Judiciary, the District of Columbia, and Independent Agencies appropriation acts, in the title containing the governmentwide general provisions, so “this head” refers to that title (*e.g.*, title VIII in Public Law 109-115). Therefore, there may be other laws expressly applicable to government corporations, by virtue of the italicized language above, in the pertinent title each year. Although this



provision has been around since 1946, GAO does not appear to have addressed the italicized language in any decision or opinion.

There is no governmentwide definition of “administrative expenses.” Generally, the term refers to overhead-type expenses, like certain salaries, office supplies and equipment, payroll taxes, and telephone and other utility expenses. *Leonard v. S.G. Frantz Co.*, 49 N.Y.S.2d 329, 332–33 (N.Y. App. Div. 1944). In contrast, nonadministrative or program expenses are things such as loan guarantee or subsidy payments. GAO has suggested that a fixed definition in other than the most general terms would probably be impossible because the status of a given expense depends on the particular program, the governing legislation, and congressional intent, and what may be an administrative expense under one program or law may not be under another. [B-24341, Mar. 12, 1942](#). Program statutes or regulations may include their own definitions, which of course would control. *E.g.*, 12 U.S.C. § 1702 (National Housing Act). Congress may also address the issue in appropriation acts by providing that specific items of expense shall or shall not be considered administrative expenses for purposes of a statutory limit. *E.g.*, Pub. L. No. 105-78, 111 Stat. 1467, 1472 (Nov. 13, 1997) (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation); Pub. L. No. 105-118, 111 Stat. 2386, 2387 (Nov. 26, 1997) (Export-Import Bank).

Another form of language Congress has used is a restriction applicable to “any appropriation contained in this or any other Act, or of the funds available for expenditure by any corporation or agency.”<sup>162</sup> This language has been held to embrace both wholly owned corporations ([B-114823, Dec. 23, 1974](#), Export-Import Bank) and mixed-ownership corporations ([B-164497\(5\), Mar. 10, 1977](#), U.S. Railway Association).

(5) Other provisions of title 31, United States Code

The post-recodification title 31 defines “agency” to mean “a department, agency, or instrumentality of the United States Government.” 31 U.S.C. § 101. The codification note following 31 U.S.C. § 1511 makes it clear that “instrumentality” is intended to include those government corporations which are instrumentalities of the United States. This applies to all of title 31 unless another more specific provision intervenes, which it does on several occasions. For example, GAO’s authority to prescribe accounting principles and standards (31 U.S.C. § 3511) does not apply to government

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<sup>162</sup> See, *e.g.*, Pub. L. No. 96-74, title VI, § 607(a), 93 Stat. 559, 575 (Sept. 29, 1979).

corporations. [B-207435, July 7, 1982](#). This is because, for purposes of the chapter in which section 3511 appears, the definition of “executive agency” specifically excludes corporations or other entities subject to the Government Corporation Control Act. 31 U.S.C. § 3501. Similarly, 31 U.S.C. §§ 717 (program evaluations) and 720 (agency reports on GAO recommendations) include their own definitions under which they apply to wholly owned, but not mixed-ownership, government corporations.

The Antideficiency Act’s prohibition against overobligation and overspending, 31 U.S.C. § 1341, has been applied to wholly owned corporations with “character and necessity” authority (see section B.6.c(1) of this chapter) because the funds used by the corporations to finance their operations were appropriated funds subject to the restrictions imposed by the Antideficiency Act. [B-223857, Feb. 27, 1987](#) (Commodity Credit Corporation); [B-135075-O.M., Feb. 14, 1975](#) (Inter-American Foundation). In [B-223857](#), GAO found also that the Commodity Credit Corporation violated the voluntary services prohibition, 31 U.S.C. § 1342, by directing contractors to continue performance after its borrowing authority had been depleted. A government-created corporation statutorily designated as private or not an agency or instrumentality of the United States is not subject to the Antideficiency Act. [B-308037, Sept. 14, 2006](#) (Legal Services Corporation). Congress, of course, could choose to subject such a corporation to the Antideficiency Act by amending its enabling statute or imposing restrictions specifically when it appropriates funds to the corporation. For an example of a restriction in an annual appropriations act subjecting specific appropriations received by private entities to the restrictions of the Antideficiency Act, see Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1998, Pub. L. No. 105-66, 111 Stat. 1425, 1435 (Oct. 27, 1997) (“any obligation or commitment by [Amtrak] for the purchase of capital improvements with fund appropriated herein which is prohibited by this Act shall be deemed a violation of 31 U.S.C. § 1341”).

The statute which prescribes the standards for recording obligations, 31 U.S.C. § 1501, also applies to government corporations which are agencies or instrumentalities of the United States. *E.g.*, [34 Comp. Gen. 825 \(1954\)](#) (GAO’s initial guidance on implementing the then recording statute); [B-123943-O.M., July 1, 1955](#) (Institute of Inter-American Affairs). See also *United States v. American Renaissance Lines, Inc.*, 494 F.2d 1059 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 419 U.S. 1020 (1974) (Commodity Credit Corporation), and [37 Comp. Gen. 691 \(1958\)](#) (Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation), in which the court and GAO, respectively, treated the statute

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as applicable without directly addressing the issue. The original enactment of 31 U.S.C. § 1501 was section 1311 of the Supplemental Appropriations Act for 1955 (Pub. L. No. 83-663, ch. 935, 68 Stat. 800, 830 (Aug. 26, 1954)).

The Economy Act, Act of June 30, 1932, § 601, 47 Stat. 417, as amended, applies to “independent establishments of the Government,” which would include wholly owned government corporations and entities chartered as “instrumentalities of the government.” See 31 U.S.C. § 1535 note; [B-116194, Oct. 5, 1953](#) (since the Panama Canal Company was created as an instrumentality of the government, it is an independent establishment within the meaning of that term in the Economy Act); [B-39199, Jan. 19, 1944](#) (Rubber Development Corporation, as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which in turn is owned by the United States, is an independent establishment under the Economy Act). The corporation can be the requisitioning agency ([13 Comp. Gen. 138 \(1933\)](#); [B-27842, Aug. 13, 1942](#)), or the performing agency ([B-116194, Oct. 5, 1953](#); [B-39199, Jan. 19, 1944](#); [A-46332, Jan. 9, 1933](#)). If a corporation has specific charter authority to provide goods or services to other government establishments, the specific authority will displace the Economy Act. *E.g.*, [44 Comp. Gen. 683 \(1965\)](#) (sale of electric power by Tennessee Valley Authority to other government agencies).

The so-called “Stale Check Act,” Pub. L. No. 80-171, ch. 222, 61 Stat. 308 (July 11, 1947), codified at 31 U.S.C. § 3328, prescribes requirements for handling Treasury checks. The original language applied expressly to checks “drawn by wholly owned and mixed-ownership Government corporations,” except for “transactions regarding the administration of banking and currency laws.” Pub. L. No. 80-171, § 1. The 1982 recodification dropped the definitional language as “surplus.” See 31 U.S.C. § 3328 note. Nevertheless, in view of the original language, the statute still applies to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. *Id.*; see also [B-70248, Nov. 6, 1947](#); [B-100893-O.M., Mar. 27, 1951](#). The statute also has been held applicable to a government corporation with “character and necessity” power including the “without regard” clause (see sections B.6.c(1) and (2) of this chapter for a discussion of these clauses). [B-70248, Sept. 1, 1950](#).

The decision in [B-70248, Sept. 1, 1950](#), involved the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which received its “without regard” authority in 1948, a year after enactment of the Stale Check Act. At first glance, therefore, this would appear to contradict our earlier discussion in section B.6.c(2) that a “without regard” clause permits the corporation to avoid expressly

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applicable laws already in existence. The answer is that it depends on what kind of law you're talking about and whose discretion or responsibility is at issue. The decision stated:

“[W]here the Corporation has decided a payment should be made, and issued a check drawn on the Treasurer of the United States, it appears that the discretion of the Corporation has then been exercised. . . . The obligation after issuance of the checks . . . appears clearly to be a Treasury obligation, not one of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. As such, it does not appear to be one over which the Corporation’s determination is final and conclusive, but one over which the Treasury Department . . . under the ‘Stale Check Act’ [has] jurisdiction.”

[B-70248, Sept. 1, 1950](#), at 5.

Another provision with relevance to government corporations is 31 U.S.C. § 3301(a)(1), which directs the Secretary of the Treasury to “receive and keep public money.” This provision, as reinforced by the Government Corporation Control Act (31 U.S.C. §§ 9107(b) and (c)), applies to the appropriated funds of a government corporation (both wholly owned and mixed-ownership) unless waived pursuant to section 9107(c). Thus, a government corporation is not entitled, solely by virtue of its corporate status, to have its appropriation paid over directly to it “up front” in a lump sum. Rather, like any other agency, the money stays in the Treasury until needed for a valid purpose. [21 Comp. Gen. 489 \(1941\)](#). Congress can, of course, provide differently. An example is the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, whose appropriations “shall be disbursed by the Secretary of the Treasury on a fiscal year basis.” 47 U.S.C. § 396(k)(2)(B).

A final provision we will note is 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b), the miscellaneous receipts statute. If “character and necessity” authority is one major leg upon which the fiscal autonomy of a government corporation rests, user fee or revolving fund-type financing is the second. If a government corporation is realistically expected to perform business-type functions with any efficiency, the requirement to deposit all receipts in the Treasury and await congressional appropriations would be a serious impediment, especially for federally chartered but private, nonprofit entities like the State Justice Institute, which by statute is not to be considered a department, agency, or instrumentality of the government. [B-307317, Sept. 13, 2006](#). Therefore, money received by the State Justice Institute

would not be money received “for the government,” so the miscellaneous receipts statute does not apply. *Id.* However, other types of government corporate entities, which act as agents of the government would need statutory authority to overcome 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b); corporate status alone is not enough. B-300218, Mar. 17, 2003; 52 Comp. Gen. 54, 55 (1972); 5 Comp. Gen. 1004 (1926). For most corporations, the solution is the charter authority to retain and reuse receipts, the exact type of receipts varying with the particular corporation. These are called “public enterprise revolving funds” and effectively displace 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b).<sup>163</sup> Revolving funds are covered in Chapter 12, section C, and we will not repeat that discussion here, except to emphasize that the legislation creating the fund determines what can go into it and what it can be used for. For example, the statute for the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), 22 U.S.C. § 2196, uses very broad language—“all revenues and income . . . from whatever source derived.” See 52 Comp. Gen. 54 (1972) (interest earned by OPIC on foreign currencies held in designated depositories pending their sale for dollars may be retained and used).

Along similar lines, a provision in a 1945 appropriation act limited expenditures for long-distance telephone calls to 90 percent of the agency’s budget estimate for that purpose. The resulting savings were to be deposited as miscellaneous receipts. GAO interpreted the provision as contemplating “the return of such funds to the source from which made available,” and advised the Commodity Credit Corporation that it could retain its savings and did not have to deposit them in the general fund of the Treasury. 24 Comp. Gen. 514, 517 (1945).

d. Program Implementation

Thus far, our discussion of fiscal autonomy has focused on the ability of a government corporation to avoid laws applicable to the rest of the government. There is another dimension, however. The discretion of a government corporation also helps determine the scope of the corporation’s program activities, wholly apart from questions of compliance with specific laws.

It would seem hardly open to question that the very common-sense statute, 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), which prohibits the use of appropriations for other than their intended purposes, applies to the “appropriated funds”—as we

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<sup>163</sup> For the distinctions between government corporation revolving funds and those of agencies, see Ronald C. Moe, *Managing the Public’s Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 62 (1995).

have described that term earlier—of a government corporation. The analytical approach to purpose availability is essentially the same for a corporation as for agencies. The expenditure must bear a logical relationship to furthering some authorized function or activity, and must not be otherwise prohibited or otherwise expressly provided for. For example, it is within the discretion of Federal Prison Industries, Inc., (FPI) to engage in the business of manufacturing envelopes for sale to the rest of the government. [B-240914, Aug. 14, 1991](#). While FPI is generally supposed to seek out more labor-intensive activities, this is not an absolute legal requirement, and the corporation could properly determine that envelope manufacturing would further its objectives. Similarly, the Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation could use its funds for minor work on the Canadian side of the border if closely related and ancillary to its primary works on the United States side. [34 Comp. Gen. 309 \(1954\)](#).

While the corporations cited in the preceding paragraph are wholly owned, the principle applies equally to funds appropriated to a mixed-ownership corporation. For example, the National Credit Union Administration could not avoid restrictions on paying relocation expenses to one of its officials by transferring the charge to the accounts of the Central Liquidity Facility (CLF) where the official was clearly an employee of, and whose salary was paid entirely by, the Administration and not the CLF. [63 Comp. Gen. 31, 36–37 \(1983\)](#).

As we noted in section B.6.c(1) of this chapter, when you add “character and necessity” authority to the discretion already inherent under 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), the result is that a government corporation has much more spending discretion than other agencies, although it is still subject to the overall limitation that its discretion be exercised “within the limitations and for the purposes of the statutes providing [its] funds and prescribing [its] activities.” [14 Comp. Gen. 698, 700 \(1935\)](#).

An illustration of how all this can work is [B-48184, Mar. 14, 1945](#). The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) had acquired title to a rental housing development under its mortgage insurance program. The FHA could retain and operate the development or could, within its discretion, sell it. A major drawback was that, except for a “low grade combination grocery store and beer parlor,” there were no shopping facilities in the development or nearby area. After unsuccessfully trying to interest private capital, the FHA proposed using its own funds to provide a shopping center consisting of a food store, drug store, barber shop, beauty shop, shoe repair shop, laundry, gasoline station, and a management office. FHA thought

that the shopping center would help significantly to make the development livable during the period of FHA operation, and would enhance its value if and when the FHA decided to sell it. The FHA had statutory authority to “deal with, complete, rent, renovate, modernize . . . or sell” the property, and to determine the necessity of its expenditures. *Id.* at 4. In light of this authority and the FHA’s justification, GAO concurred with the proposal, notwithstanding the lack of statutory authority for new construction.

A sampling of cases involving three additional entities—the Commodity Credit Corporation, the Bonneville Power Administration, and Amtrak—further illustrates the role of corporate discretion, and its limitations, in program implementation.

(1) Commodity Credit Corporation

Created in 1933, the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) operates a variety of price support programs for agricultural commodities (including such things as direct subsidy payments and loans) and export programs designed to develop foreign markets for American agricultural products. It is a wholly owned government corporation and “an agency and instrumentality of the United States, within the Department of Agriculture.” 15 U.S.C. § 714. It is unusual in that it has no employees. It is managed by a presidentially appointed board of directors (15 U.S.C. § 714g), but its day-to-day operations are carried out by Department of Agriculture employees who, in effect, wear two hats. It has the authority to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures. 15 U.S.C. § 714b(j).

In a 1982 case, the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel reviewed two programs that CCC had created to promote agricultural exports by guaranteeing exporters or their financing institutions against certain risks. There was no explicit statutory authority for the programs, but CCC is authorized to “use its general powers” to “[e]xport or cause to be exported, or aid in the development of foreign markets for, agricultural commodities.” 15 U.S.C. § 714c(f). One of those general powers is the “character and necessity” power discussed in section B.6.c(1) of this chapter. Since the programs were unquestionably designed to promote exports, they had adequate statutory authority. 6 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 233 (1982). The following year, GAO reviewed payments made under these programs to United States banks which had financed exports to the then Polish People’s Republic. While the CCC had not strictly complied with its own regulations, the deviations were essentially on matters of procedure,



which the CCC could waive. Therefore, GAO found nothing objectionable. [B-208610, Sept. 1, 1983.](#)

In [B-213761, July 27, 1984](#), GAO considered aspects of the CCC's tobacco price support program. Specifically, there were differences between the procedures Treasury used in charging interest and crediting repayments against loans to the CCC and the procedures the CCC used in charging interest and crediting repayments on loans it made to tobacco producers. The impact was to increase the amount of the CCC's net losses, for which appropriations are made annually. While GAO felt that the CCC should change its procedures to more closely align with Treasury's procedures, and had made this recommendation on more than one occasion, the CCC was under no legal requirement to do so. The terms and conditions of its loans were within its discretion.

Much of the detail in CCC's programs comes from its regulations. *See generally* 7 C.F.R. subtitle B, ch. XIV. The extent to which it may deviate with impunity from the terms of its regulations suggests another test of the range of the corporation's discretion. A 1965 case involved price support payments to tobacco producers under regulations which made the payments available only for sales within the annual normal marketing season. A temporary funding shortage forced suspension of payments. The question was whether, once the funds became available, the CCC could make payments to producers for sales occurring shortly after the normal marketing season. If legal liability to those producers could be established, the answer of course would be yes. GAO did not think it could, but found the matter sufficiently doubtful, especially in light of prior practice, and therefore advised the CCC that the payments would be unobjectionable. [44 Comp. Gen. 735 \(1965\)](#). As noted above, the CCC, like any other government agency, can deviate from procedural regulations, at least as long as the action does not prejudice other parties. Its discretion does not extend, however, to retroactively waiving substantive regulations without statutory authority. [53 Comp. Gen. 364 \(1973\)](#); [B-208610, Sept. 1, 1983.](#)

Cases involving the price support program for milk and milk products illustrate a situation in which corporate discretion must be subordinated to the terms of the program statute. The pertinent law provided that price support "shall be provided through loans on, or purchases of, milk and the products of milk and butterfat." Agricultural Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81-439, title II, § 201(c), 63 Stat. 1051, 1053 (Oct. 31, 1949), *currently amended and codified at* 7 U.S.C. § 1446(c). Some within Agriculture wanted to make direct price support payments, relying on CCC's broad general



powers. Both the Department's Solicitor and the Attorney General agreed that under existing law the CCC is limited to loans on, and purchases of, dairy products "in supporting the price of milk and butterfat to producers." See 41 Op. Att'y Gen. 183, 187 (1954). The CCC's general powers "cannot reasonably be deemed to enlarge the specific powers granted in [the price support statute]." *Id.* at 186. Agriculture then proposed to purchase the products at one price and sell them back to the same parties at a lower price, without the products ever moving. GAO determined that this was not a *bona fide* purchase and that the payments were therefore unauthorized. B-124910, Aug. 15, 1955. Upon GAO's determination of unauthorized payments, Justice proceeded to initiate recovery of the amounts improperly paid. This determination has been upheld by at least three courts of appeals, which agreed that the payments were illegal and could be recovered.<sup>164</sup> See also B-211462-O.M., Oct. 31, 1983 (statutory payment limitation applies to in-kind payments as well as cash, CCC's broad discretion notwithstanding).

In 1961, CCC made another proposal, strikingly similar on the surface. The CCC would accept grain in satisfaction of loans it had made to the producer, and then sell the grain—which never moved—back to the same producer at current support rates. This case was different, however. The resale back to the producer was under an emergency assistance program, separate and distinct from the program under which the loans had been made. There was no lack of genuineness to the transaction, and selling back to the same producer made sense because it would save money for all concerned by eliminating moving and handling charges. Accordingly, GAO found this proposal to be within the CCC's authority and discretion. 40 Comp. Gen. 571 (1961).

An illustration of an expenditure expressly "otherwise provided for" is B-142011, June 19, 1969, very similar in principle to 63 Comp. Gen. 31 (1983), the Central Liquidity Facility decision summarized earlier in section B.6.d of this chapter. Some had suggested that the Agriculture Department could avoid a limitation in its salaries and expenses appropriation by having certain salaries paid from CCC funds. Agriculture felt this would be improper. GAO agreed:

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<sup>164</sup> *Kraft Foods Co. v. Commodity Credit Corporation*, 266 F.2d 254 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir.), cert. denied, 361 U.S. 832 (1959); *Land O'Lakes Creameries, Inc. v. Commodity Credit Corporation*, 265 F.2d 163 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1959); *Swift & Co. v. United States*, 257 F.2d 787 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir.), cert. denied, 358 U.S. 837 (1958).

“We see no significant distinction between using an otherwise available general appropriation for a particular object, when there is a specific appropriation for such object, and using corporate funds for a purpose for which a specific appropriation has been made, in order to avoid a limitation pertaining to the specific appropriation.”

[B-142011, June 19, 1969](#), at 12.

A case in which the expenditure bore no relationship to a legitimate corporate purpose is [B-129650](#), May 11, 1977. A practice had developed of using the CCC revolving fund to purchase foreign currencies to be used for congressional travel expenses, beyond the limited authority then found in 22 U.S.C. § 1754(b) (1975). Finding no authority for this practice, the decision stated, at page 3:

“While included among the general powers of the CCC is the authority to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures . . . the broad administrative discretion thereby conferred must be exercised in conformity with the congressional purpose of the CCC . . . and in accordance with the specific powers granted to the CCC [by statute]. . . . Nothing in these provisions . . . suggest[s] a congressional intent to allow conversions of dollar funds to foreign currencies for use for congressional travel.”<sup>165</sup>

(2) Bonneville Power Administration

The Bonneville Power Administration is one of the four Department of Energy regional power marketing administrations, which were established to “sell and transmit the power generated at various federal hydroelectric plants.”<sup>166</sup> Created in 1937, Bonneville markets and transmits electric

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<sup>165</sup> The statute was subsequently amended to give Treasury a permanent indefinite appropriation to purchase the necessary currencies. International Security Assistance Act of 1978, Pub. L. No. 95-384, § 22, 92 Stat. 730, 742 (Sept. 26, 1978); see also [B-129650, Mar. 27, 1979](#).

<sup>166</sup> See [B-303180, July 26, 2004](#), for a detailed background description of power marketing administrations. See also GAO, *Power Marketing Administrations: Their Ratesetting Practices Compared with Those of Nonfederal Utilities*, GAO/AIMD-00-114 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 30, 2000), at 6–8.

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power in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>167</sup> It is not a government corporation but “an office in the Department of [Energy] . . . under the jurisdiction and control of the Secretary of [Energy].” 16 U.S.C. § 832a(a).<sup>168</sup> Nevertheless, its statutory powers are comparable to those of a wholly owned government corporation. It is financed through a revolving fund,<sup>169</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 838i, and has the following general powers:

“Subject only to the provisions of this Act, the Administrator is authorized to enter into such contracts, agreements, and arrangements, including the amendment, modification, adjustment, or cancellation thereof and the compromise or final settlement of any claim arising thereunder, and to make such expenditures, upon such terms and conditions and in such manner as he may deem necessary.”

“The administrator may make such expenditures for offices, vehicles, furnishings, equipment, supplies, and books; for attendance at meetings; and for such other facilities and services as he may find necessary for the proper administration of this Act.”

16 U.S.C. §§ 832a(f), 832h(b) (respectively).

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<sup>167</sup> Bonneville Project Act of 1937, Pub. L. No. 75-329, 50 Stat. 731 (Aug. 20, 1937), *codified at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 832–832m. As summarized in one opinion, Bonneville’s main purposes as set forth in 16 U.S.C. § 832a are “to operate and maintain the Federal electric power transmission system in the Pacific Northwest and to market the electric power generated by the Federal generating plants in that area.” 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 419 (1979). *See also* 16 U.S.C. § 832a.

<sup>168</sup> Bonneville Power Administration was transferred from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Energy in 1977 when the Department of Energy was created. *See* Pub. L. No. 95-91, title III, § 302(a), 91 Stat. 565, 578 (Aug. 4, 1977), *codified at* 42 U.S.C. § 7152(a)(1)(c). *See also* [B-303180, July 26, 2004](#).

<sup>169</sup> As discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, section E.2.g, a revolving fund is generally a statutorily created fund in which receipts are credited to the fund and are then available for fund purposes without the need for further appropriation. However, BPA’s revolving fund is “subject to such limitations as may be prescribed by any applicable appropriation act effective during such period as may elapse between [the funds] transfer and the approval by the Congress of the first subsequent annual budget program of the [BPA] Administrator.” 16 U.S.C. § 838i(a).

Although not a corporation, Bonneville is subject to the Government Corporation Control Act provisions for wholly owned corporations. 16 U.S.C. § 838i(c). Thus, Bonneville has essentially the same range of spending discretion as a wholly owned corporation. It is also subject to the same overall purpose limitation which, in addition to 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a) (the purpose statute), is spelled out in 16 U.S.C. § 838i(c) (“Moneys heretofore or hereafter appropriated shall be used only for the purposes for which appropriated”).

Before the enactment of 16 U.S.C. § 832a(f), Bonneville’s spending discretion was not materially different from that of other government agencies. *E.g.*, [B-49169, May 5, 1945](#) (appropriations unavailable for entertainment). However, the enactment of that provision in October 1945 made a material change:

“The legislative history of [16 U.S.C. § 832a(f)] indicates that its purpose was to free the Administration from the requirements and restrictions ordinarily applicable to the conduct of Government business and to enable the Administrator to conduct the business of the project with a freedom similar to that which has been conferred on public corporations carrying on similar or comparable activities.”

[B-105397, Sept. 21, 1951](#), at 3.

Naturally, anything Bonneville could do before the amendment was unaffected. An example would be [20 Comp. Gen. 566 \(1941\)](#) (Bonneville’s appropriations available for photographic identification cards for its employees). Other examples, validated under 16 U.S.C. § 832h(b), which predated § 832a(f), are [18 Comp. Gen. 843 \(1939\)](#) (purchase of motion picture equipment to record key aspects of construction program), and [B-25800, May 20, 1942](#) (expenses of attendance at meetings).

The latitude given Bonneville has enabled it to structure its dealings to reflect the nature of the business in which it is involved, the characteristics of the geographical region in which it operates, and changing circumstances. In a 1962 case, for example, Bonneville proposed an agreement with the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS) under which WPPSS would furnish to Bonneville electric power purchased from the Atomic Energy Commission’s Hanford reactor, and Bonneville would provide “firm power” (*i.e.*, not subject to interruptions) in exchange. The agreement would terminate if the reactor were discontinued prior to

commencement of commercial operations, in which event Bonneville would reimburse WPPSS for certain expenses incurred up to that point. As long as the Atomic Energy Commission's participation received congressional approval, GAO found no problem with Bonneville's authority to enter into the agreement. [B-149016](#), [B-149083](#), [July 6, 1962](#).<sup>170</sup>

In [46 Comp. Gen. 349 \(1966\)](#), Bonneville was acquiring high-powered circuit breakers, and decided to spread the risk among several manufacturers to minimize risk of major power failure until the circuit breakers had been in service for sufficient time to assure that they were free from defects. Bonneville's discretion permitted it to do this, and to exclude from the solicitation two firms from which it had already purchased circuit breakers.

Bonneville is required to give "preference and priority to public bodies and cooperatives" in disposing of electric energy generated at a Bonneville project. 16 U.S.C. § 832c(a). It is also authorized to sell electric power "either for resale or direct consumption, to public bodies and cooperatives and to private agencies and persons," as well as to other federal agencies. 16 U.S.C. § 832d(a). While Bonneville is thus authorized to sell directly to private consumers, it is not legally required to do so, and is therefore under no obligation to sell power to every applicant. [B-158903](#), [July 6, 1966](#).

A concept frequently arising in the Bonneville cases is the concept of "net billing." This is, in oversimplified terms, a system under which Bonneville, in billing its customers, liquidates certain of its payment obligations by reducing the bill by the amount the customer has paid either to Bonneville under some separate arrangement or to some other party under a variety of complex arrangements. GAO approved the concept as within Bonneville's authority in [B-170878](#), [Oct. 21, 1970](#). (Congress had already recognized the concept in legislation.) A few years later, it became apparent that, in the particular situation addressed in [B-170878](#), net billing would be inadequate to sustain the purchase of sufficient power. Bonneville then proposed to

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<sup>170</sup> For more information on the relationship between Bonneville and WPPSS, see GAO, *GAO Products on Bonneville Power Administration*, RCED-93-133R (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 1993), at enclosure VII; *The Bonneville Power Administration's Oversight Activities Related to Washington Public Power Supply System*, No. 123637 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 1984) (testimony); *Bonneville Power Administration and Rural Electrification Administration Actions and Activities Affecting Utility Participation in Washington Public Power Supply System Plants 4 and 5*, GAO/EMD-82-105 (Washington, D.C.: July 30, 1982).

purchase power for its preference customers under what it called a “trust-agency” agreement. While finding this authorized as well, GAO stressed the purpose limitation on Bonneville’s discretion: “While 16 U.S.C. § 832a(f) is intended to confer broad administrative discretion on the Administrator, that discretion must always be exercised in furtherance of the purposes, and subject to the provisions, of the [program legislation].” [B-137458, Sept. 13, 1974](#), at 5.

The financing mechanism of net billing agreements has been judicially approved, as well. In *City of Springfield v. Washington Public Power Supply System*, 564 F. Supp. 90, 95 (D. Ore. 1983), the court described one system as follows.

“The net billing agreements are contracts between the United States, acting through BPA, WPPSS, and the Northwest utilities. Under these contracts, utilities buy power from BPA. Instead of paying BPA, however, utilities pay WPPSS, which uses the money to retire bonds. . . . Thus BPA ‘net-bills’ for power and those bills are paid to WPPSS as third party beneficiary of the BPA-utility contracts and in satisfaction of WPPSS’ rights under the net billing agreements.”

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals modified the district court’s decision in certain respects, but affirmed its holding that these were essentially contracts for the purchase of electricity and thus within Bonneville’s authority. *City of Springfield v. Washington Public Power Supply System*, 752 F.2d 1423 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985), *cert. denied*, 474 U.S. 1055 (1986). One factor both courts noted was that Bonneville had assumed “dry-hole risk,” that is, Bonneville would pay even if the generating plants were never completed or never produced saleable power, thus insulating public bodies from having to resort to future taxation. *City of Springfield*, 564 F. Supp. at 93, 95; 752 F.2d at 1429.

The extent to which Bonneville’s range of discretion permits it to tailor arrangements to fit specific program needs is illustrated in [B-210929, Aug. 2, 1983](#). As construction of one of the WPPSS plants approached completion, WPPSS found itself unable to obtain further bond financing. Bonneville proposed, and GAO concurred, to pay, by direct disbursement or net billing, to complete construction of the WPPSS project. The argument against direct payment was that Bonneville had not presented this as an option when seeking congressional approval. However, GAO

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found that direct payment would not be inconsistent with congressional approval of the net billing approach since direct payment funds would be derived at least ultimately from rate adjustments, and the end result—costs borne by Bonneville’s ratepayers rather than taxpayers—would be the same. It would amount simply to “[doing] directly what Congress otherwise authorized it to do indirectly.” *Id.* at 16.

Still another area in which Bonneville’s discretion has been upheld is the Pacific Northwest-Pacific Southwest Intertie, a system of high-voltage transmission lines partially owned by Bonneville and designed to permit the regions to help each other during times of heavy demand. Bonneville is required to first give itself preference and then to make excess capacity available to others. 16 U.S.C. § 837e. The courts have upheld Bonneville’s policies for the allocation of excess Intertie capacity as within its discretion, as long as done in a fair and nondiscriminatory manner (16 U.S.C. § 838d). *California Energy Resources Conservation and Development Commission v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 831 F.2d 1467 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987); *Department of Water and Power of Los Angeles v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 759 F.2d 684 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985).

Rate-making decisions under 16 U.S.C. § 839e have also been accorded deference by the courts, as long as the rates are supported by sound business practices. *See, e.g., Public Power Council, Inc. v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 442 F.3d 1204, 1209 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2006); *California Energy Commission v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 909 F.2d 1298, 1306 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990).

Finally, Bonneville has the discretionary authority to engage in certain energy conservation programs. [B-114858, July 10, 1979](#); 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 419 (1979). The question was whether energy conservation is consistent with Bonneville’s statutory mandate to encourage widespread use of federally generated power. In other words, is its main job to push the stuff, or save it? Bonneville’s argument, successful as it turned out, was that it viewed conservation as an investment in increased production rather than a demand reduction device. Once again, the GAO opinion stressed that Bonneville’s discretion, broad though it may be, “must always be exercised in furtherance of the purposes, and subject to the provisions, of BPA’s enabling legislation.” [B-114858, July 10, 1979](#), at 4.



(3) Amtrak

Amtrak was created by the Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970, Pub. L. No. 91-518, title III, § 301, 84 Stat. 1327, 1330 (Oct. 30, 1970).<sup>171</sup> Its purpose is to provide modern and efficient intercity and commuter rail passenger transportation. 49 U.S.C. § 24101(b). Amtrak was the federal government’s response to declining railroad passenger ridership resulting in the railroad companies losing money on a service they were legally required to provide. Congress created Amtrak to ensure a minimum level of intercity passenger rail service for the public while relieving the railroad companies of this financial burden so that they could focus on the more profitable freight services. See Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Amtrak Profitability: An Analysis of Congressional Expectations at Amtrak’s Creation*, No. RL 31473 (June 26, 2002), at 1–3. Congressional and administration leaders in 1970 predicted that Amtrak would ultimately be profitable as a result of reductions in money-losing routes and federal investment that would yield faster, safer rail travel, neither of which have occurred. *Id.* at 7. See also [B-277814, Oct. 20, 1997](#). The current status of Amtrak and passenger rail travel is addressed in GAO, *Intercity Passenger Rail: National Policy and Strategies Needed to Maximize Public Benefits from Federal Expenditures*, GAO-07-15 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 13, 2006).

Although federally created and receiving substantial federal financial assistance, Amtrak is to be “operated and managed as a for-profit corporation,” and is “not a department, agency, or instrumentality of the United States Government, and shall not be subject to title 31 [of the United States Code].” 49 U.S.C. §§ 24301(a)(2) and (3).<sup>172</sup> It was originally

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<sup>171</sup> Much of Amtrak’s legislation was transferred from title 45 of the United States Code to title 49 as part of a 1994 recodification. While 45 U.S.C. § 1104(1) still defines Amtrak as the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, the recodified provisions in title 49 have dropped that designation and use only “Amtrak.” See the codifier’s note to 49 U.S.C. § 24101.

<sup>172</sup> The version in effect immediately prior to the 1994 recodification said that Amtrak will not be “an agency, instrumentality, authority, or entity, or establishment” of the United States. 45 U.S.C. § 541 (1988). The Amtrak Reform and Accountability Act of 1997 amended 49 U.S.C. § 24301(a)(3) to specify that Amtrak “shall not be subject to title 31.” Pub. L. No. 105-134, § 415(d)(1), 111 Stat. 2570, 2590 (Dec. 2, 1997). That same year, however, the annual appropriation act provided that “any obligation or commitment by [Amtrak] for the purchase of capital improvements with funds appropriated herein which is prohibited by this Act shall be deemed a violation of 31 U.S.C. § 1341,” the Antideficiency Act. Department of Transportation and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1998, Pub. L. No. 105-66, 111 Stat. 1425, 1435 (Oct. 27, 1997).



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designated a mixed-ownership government corporation,<sup>173</sup> but this was dropped in 1997.<sup>174</sup> It is also classed as a railroad carrier for purposes of certain portions of the Interstate Commerce Act (49 U.S.C. § 24301(a)(1)), and is thus subject to the jurisdiction of the Surface Transportation Board, successor to the Interstate Commerce Commission, to that limited extent.<sup>175</sup> GAO is authorized to conduct “performance audits of [Amtrak’s] activities and transactions.” 49 U.S.C. § 24315(e); [B-175155-O.M., Oct. 21, 1981](#).

The congressional objective is eventual profitability and elimination or at least minimization of federal subsidies. See 49 U.S.C. § 24101(d), as amended by Public Law 105-134, § 201, mandating that Amtrak operate without federal operating grants by fiscal year 2004. Section 301 of Public Law 105-134, codified at 49 U.S.C. § 24104(a), authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary of the Treasury declining amounts ranging from \$1.14 billion in fiscal year 1998 to \$0.96 billion in fiscal year 2002 to support Amtrak. Nevertheless, federal financial assistance has always been necessary. Despite the goals set out in the 1997 act, fiscal year 2004 has come and gone, and Amtrak still cannot operate without federal subsidies. In fact, GAO reported that between 1971 and 2005, Amtrak received cumulative subsidies of \$29 billion. See GAO, *Amtrak Management: Systemic Problems Require Actions to Improve Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Accountability*, GAO-06-145 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 4, 2005), at 2.

This federal financial assistance takes the form of appropriations made to the Secretary of Transportation for the purpose of making grants to Amtrak. For example, in the Department of Transportation appropriations act for 2006, \$495 million was made available until expended for Amtrak operational subsidy grants. Pub. L. No. 109-115, 119 Stat. 2396, 2413–15 (Nov. 30, 2005). Congress also appropriated \$780 million for capital and debt service grants and \$40 million for efficiency incentive grants, both amounts also to be available until expended, for a total of \$1.315 billion in

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<sup>173</sup> Pub. L. No. 91-518, § 804.

<sup>174</sup> Pub. L. No. 105-134, § 415(d)(2), which amended 31 U.S.C. § 9101 to delete Amtrak from the list of agencies statutorily defined as mixed-ownership government corporations for purposes of title 31 of the United States Code.

<sup>175</sup> Section 24301(a)(1) was amended by Pub. L. No. 105-134, § 401, to clarify Amtrak’s relationship to the Interstate Commerce Act. See H.R. Rep. No. 105-251, at 36 (1997).

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appropriations for fiscal year 2006. *Id.*<sup>176</sup> Amtrak makes its funding requests to the Secretary of Transportation, who in turn includes them as part of Transportation’s portion of the President’s budget. B-175155, Sept. 26, 1978 (requirement in 31 U.S.C. § 1105(a)(5) for 5-year projection not applicable to Amtrak’s funding requests to Secretary). As with the fiscal year 2006 appropriation, the funds are made available until expended, and may include separate amounts for operating losses and capital improvements.

The statutory payout schedule “has virtually assured” that Amtrak will receive more money that it immediately needs for current expenses. B-175155(2), Apr. 22, 1975, at 4. Congress did not restrict the use of these funds but “expects Amtrak to utilize them in accordance with its best business judgment.” *Id.* Thus, a line of Comptroller General decisions held that Amtrak could use its grant funds for such things as advances on capital equipment (B-175155(2), Apr. 22, 1975); investment to the extent funds are not currently needed (B-175155, June 11, 1975); payment of operating expenses while funds from other sources are temporarily invested (*id.*); retirement of long-term debt obligations under a since-repealed provision for the Secretary of Transportation to guarantee loans to Amtrak (B-175155(2), July 26, 1976); and installing fire fighting equipment in railroad tunnels in New York City to comply with a safety order of the New York City Fire Department (B-175155, May 22, 1978). When investing excess funds, Amtrak may retain the interest earned notwithstanding their designation as grant funds. B-175155, June 11, 1975.

In surveying decisions and opinions relating to Amtrak, the details are of secondary importance because virtually every provision of Amtrak’s legislation has changed, sometimes repeatedly. The cases are intended to illustrate the operational and spending freedom of a noninstrumentality corporation in principle. The Supreme Court has said that Amtrak’s noninstrumentality disclaimer “is assuredly dispositive of Amtrak’s status . . . for purposes of matters that are within Congress’ control.” *Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 392 (1995). Thus, the answer to the typical question of whether this or that law applicable to government entities applies to Amtrak is “no.” *E.g., National Railroad Passenger Corp. v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Public*

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<sup>176</sup> These are the amounts before an across-the-board rescission that was enacted as part of the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2006, Pub. L. No 109-148, § 3801, 119 Stat. 2680, 2791–92 (Dec. 30, 2005).

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*Utility Commission*, No. Civ. A. 86-5357 (E.D. Pa. Sept. 15, 1997) (Amtrak does not share the government’s Eleventh Amendment rights in relation to jurisdiction to suit in state courts); *Hill International, Inc. v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 957 F. Supp. 548 (D.N.J. 1996) (Amtrak is not subject to federal procurement regulations); *Sentner v. Amtrak*, 540 F. Supp. 557 (D.N.J. 1982) (Amtrak does not share the government’s immunity from awards of punitive damages). See also [B-277814, Oct. 20, 1997](#) (U.S. government is not liable for Amtrak’s debts in the event of an Amtrak bankruptcy); [B-252085, Jan. 26, 1993](#), and [B-215893, Oct. 29, 1984](#) (GAO does not have jurisdiction to hear a protest of an Amtrak procurement award); [B-206638-O.M., Apr. 1, 1982](#) (Amtrak not required to follow the Federal Acquisition Regulations or the mandatory provisions of the Federal Supply Schedule).

Of course, since we are talking about matters within Congress’s control, Congress does have a certain freedom in defining the applicability of laws. For example, Amtrak is not subject to the Antideficiency Act, 31 U.S.C. § 1341. See [B-175155, July 26, 1976](#). Yet, as noted above, Amtrak’s 1998 appropriation included a proviso that “the incurrence of any obligation or commitment by the Corporation for the purchase of capital improvements with funds appropriated herein which is prohibited by this Act shall be deemed a violation of 31 U.S.C. 1341.” Pub. L. No. 105-66. However, this Antideficiency Act proviso expired at the end of fiscal year 1998, and Congress did not include the proviso in the Amtrak appropriation for any subsequent fiscal year, such as fiscal year 2006. See Pub. L. No. 109-115. The point is that making the Antideficiency Act applicable, even to the limited extent in Public Law 105-66, required legislation specifically applicable to Amtrak.

Another group of GAO cases deals with compensation issues. The 1970 legislation creating Amtrak placed no limit on the compensation of the corporation’s officers. A 1972 amendment limited compensation to level 1 of the Executive Schedule.<sup>177</sup> A question arose as to whether the value of fringe benefits had to be counted in applying the ceiling. Amtrak wanted to provide fringe benefits normal in the rail industry. These included group life insurance, travel accident insurance, long-term disability benefits, hospital surgical and major medical coverage, noncontributory retirement benefits, and free transportation for employees and their dependents on Amtrak trains. Noting that the ceiling was the same as that for cabinet

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<sup>177</sup> Pub. L. No. 92-316, § 1(a), 86 Stat. 227 (June 22, 1972).

members, who receive fringe benefits in addition to their statutory compensation, and finding nothing to indicate a contrary intent for Amtrak officers, GAO concluded that the fringe benefits need not be considered compensation for purposes of the ceiling. [B-175155, Jan. 7, 1974](#). The limitation was changed in 1988<sup>178</sup> to prohibit rates of compensation greater than “the general level of pay for officers of rail carriers with comparable responsibility.” 49 U.S.C. § 24303(b). While the ceiling is now more amorphous than the fixed-dollar ceiling of 1974, the principle of [B-175155, Jan. 7, 1974](#), should remain valid, unless practices in the private rail industry change so as to include fringe benefits as part of compensation.

Amtrak was also offering its officers separation agreements, under which they would receive an additional payment of up to a year’s salary upon termination of their services. If somehow the payments could be regarded as payments for post-termination services, they would be permissible. If, however, they were nothing more than a form of deferred compensation to avoid the statutory limitation, they would violate the statute. [B-175155, May 1, 1974](#); [B-175155, Jan. 7, 1974](#). Amtrak developed an agreement under which the officer agreed to perform whatever services might be necessary, for a period of 6 months, to accomplish an orderly transition of responsibilities to his or her successor, and to complete unfinished assignments. This was sufficient to avoid the “deferred compensation” objection and therefore did not violate the limitation. [B-175155, Oct. 3, 1974](#); [B-175155, Sept. 5, 1974](#).

Another source of Amtrak’s powers is the District of Columbia Business Corporation Act, which applies to Amtrak to the extent consistent with the Rail Passenger Service Act. 49 U.S.C. § 24301(e). Thus, Amtrak can sell real property ([B-175155, June 14, 1978](#)),<sup>179</sup> and it can make loans provided they serve a corporate purpose ([B-207880-O.M., Nov. 5, 1982](#)), because both actions are authorized under the District of Columbia law.

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<sup>178</sup> Pub. L. No. 100-342, § 18(c), 102 Stat. 624, 636 (June 22, 1988).

<sup>179</sup> Sometimes, dealing with GAO case law can be a complicated, confusing, and even daunting task. For one thing, in the past GAO sometimes reused “B” file designations for similar subjects—counting on “subnumbers” like (2) and dates to distinguish between different cases. This made proofing this manual difficult and careful reading of it critical. For example, in the preceding textual discussion of Amtrak, how many different GAO items with the B-file designation “B-175155” can you find? (Hint: There are 11.)

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## 7. Application of Other Laws

As discussed in the previous sections, a government corporation's<sup>180</sup> autonomy, while conferring considerable spending discretion, does not remove it from the coverage of various laws of the United States. We set forth here several other laws governing the operations of federal agencies. As one would expect, wholly owned corporations are subject to more of the laws than mixed-ownership corporations, which are in turn subject to more than the so-called noninstrumentality corporations. A summary chart, including some laws not covered here, may be found in GAO, *Government Corporations: Profiles of Existing Government Corporations*, GAO/GGD-96-14 (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 13, 1995), app. III. See also Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Federal Government Corporations: An Overview*, No. RL30365 (Mar. 15, 2005), at app. 1; Thomas H. Stanton and Ronald C. Moe, "Government Corporations and Government-Sponsored Enterprises," in Lester M. Salaman, *The Tools of Government: A Guide to the New Governance*, 80, 92 table 3-1 (2002).

### a. Civil Service Laws

We use the term "civil service laws" to mean the body of laws in title 5 of the United States Code governing the appointment, classification, pay, allowances, and other benefits of federal officers and employees. The applicability of title 5, or portions thereof, to a government corporation depends on (1) the definitions in title 5, and (2) the corporation's own charter.<sup>181</sup> Title 5 includes a few general definitions and a great many specific ones. As discussed in section B.2.a of this chapter, section 105 of title 5 defines "executive agency" to include government corporations. "Government corporation" is defined as "a corporation owned or controlled by the Government of the United States." 5 U.S.C. § 103(1). "Government controlled corporation" does not include a corporation owned by the government of the United States. 5 U.S.C. § 103(2). In addition, 5 U.S.C. § 2105(a) defines "employee" as someone appointed in

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<sup>180</sup> For ease of discussion in this section, we will use the term "government corporation" to refer generically to the various corporate devices discussed in section B.2 of this chapter unless a more specific term is warranted.

<sup>181</sup> GAO observed in 1943 that "there can not be stated any broad generality that persons employed by the Government's corporations are or are not employees of the United States for all purposes." B-37559, Nov. 5, 1943, at 3, quoted in 23 Comp. Gen. 815, 816 (1944). A commentator wrote in 1995 that approximately one half of the government corporations were subject to the civil service laws and that the exemptions, "both partial and complete," were "numerous and complex." That statement has retained its veracity. Ronald C. Moe, *Managing the Public's Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 56 (1995).

the civil service by, as pertinent here, the President, “an individual who is an employee under this section” (which would include wholly owned corporations), or “the head of a Government controlled corporation.” GAO has interpreted the term “government controlled corporation” in these definitions to mean a mixed-ownership government corporation. B-221677, July 21, 1986.

Thus, unless it specifically provides otherwise, a provision in title 5 that applies to an executive agency, a government corporation, or an employee applies to wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. *E.g.*, 5 U.S.C. § 2301(a) (merit system principles apply to “an Executive agency”); 5 U.S.C. §§ 8701(a)(1) and 8901(1)(A) (provisions for group life and group health insurance, respectively, apply to an employee as defined in § 2105).

Some provisions of title 5 do specifically provide otherwise. A provision applicable to an “executive agency” but not a “government controlled corporation” applies to wholly owned, but not mixed-ownership, government corporations. A good example is what is perhaps the heart of the civil service system, the provisions governing classification (5 U.S.C. §§ 5101–5115) and General Schedule pay rates (5 U.S.C. §§ 5331–5338). The classification provisions apply to executive agencies (5 U.S.C. § 5102(a)(1)(A)), but specifically do not apply to government controlled corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 5102(a)(1)(i). The General Schedule pay provisions adopt the definition of section 5102. 5 U.S.C. § 5331(a). Thus, unless specified otherwise, the classification and pay provisions apply to wholly owned, but not mixed-ownership, corporations. An illustrative case containing important discussion is *Dockery v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 64 M.S.P.R. 458, 460–62 (1994) (FDIC, as a mixed-ownership corporation, held not subject to the classification provisions).

The following inventory does not purport to be complete:

- *Whistleblower Protection Act*—excludes both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations, except with respect to improper personnel actions resulting from disclosure of information the employee reasonably believes evidences a violation of law, gross mismanagement, gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or substantial danger to public health or safety, with certain qualifications. 5 U.S.C. §§ 2302(a)(2)(C), (b)(8).

- *Experts and consultants*—applies to wholly owned, but not mixed-ownership, government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 3109(a) (incorporating the definition for agency included in 5 U.S.C. § 5721(1), which includes an executive agency but specifically excludes a government controlled corporation).
- *Senior Executive Service*—not applicable to either wholly owned or mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 3132(a)(1).
- *Government Employees Training Act*—applies to a “Government corporation subject to chapter 91 of title 31,” that is, both wholly owned and mixed-ownership corporations subject to the Government Corporation Control Act (see section B.4.a of this chapter). 5 U.S.C. § 4101(1)(C).
- *Performance appraisal system*—not applicable to either wholly owned or mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 4301(1)(i). *E.g.*, [B-233528, Dec. 14, 1988](#) (Overseas Private Investment Corporation not required to submit its performance appraisal system for review by Office of Personnel Management).
- *Government Employees Incentive Awards Act*—applies to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership corporations (5 U.S.C. §§ 4501(1)(A), (2)(A)), except it specifically excludes the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Central Bank for Cooperatives (5 U.S.C. §§ 4501(1)(i), (ii)).
- *Dual compensation laws*—apply to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 5531(2). *E.g.*, [B-238303, B-236399, May 29, 1991](#) (retired military officer employed by Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation).<sup>182</sup> However, they do not apply to corporations statutorily designated as not agencies or instrumentalities of the United States. [B-170582, July 15, 1976](#). For a corporation subject to the dual compensation laws, using a personal

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<sup>182</sup> Under an earlier version of the statute without the explicit definition, the Court of Claims had held that the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation was a private corporation and not part of the government for purposes of the dual compensation laws. *Dalton v. United States*, 71 Ct. Cl. 421 (1931). Apart from the statutory changes, the case can be disregarded, even though not directly overruled, because it was one of the rare instances in which Congress refused to appropriate funds to pay the judgment. See First Deficiency Act, 1932, Pub. L. No. 72-5, title II, § 3, 47 Stat. 15, 28 (Feb. 2, 1932); [23 Comp. Gen. 815, 817 \(1944\)](#).



services contract rather than employment in order to avoid the statutory restrictions is improper. [B-222334, June 2, 1986](#).<sup>183</sup>

- *Severance pay*—applies to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 5595(a)(1)(A). *E.g.*, [B-114839-O.M., Aug. 11, 1978](#) (former Panama Canal Company). The statute expressly excludes employees, other than members of the Senior Executive Service (SES), paid at or in excess of Executive Schedule levels. 5 U.S.C. § 5595(a)(2)(i). Since the SES does not extend to government corporations, the president of a government corporation who is compensated at an Executive Schedule level is not entitled to severance pay. [B-215273, June 28, 1984](#).
- *Back Pay Act*—applies to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 5596(a)(1). *E.g.*, *Payne v. Panama Canal Co.*, 607 F.2d 155 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979) (former Panama Canal Company subject to Back Pay Act notwithstanding its power to sue and be sued in its own name).
- *Travel and transportation*—The travel and transportation provisions in 5 U.S.C. §§ 5701–5739 apply to wholly owned, but not mixed-ownership, corporations. 5 U.S.C. §§ 5701(1)(A), (i) and 5721(1). *E.g.*, [B-214811-O.M., July 25, 1984](#) (Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, a wholly owned corporation, should not reimburse travel expenses of official’s spouse unless spouse was providing some sort of direct service to government). The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, as a mixed-ownership corporation, is not subject to the provisions governing service agreements in return for payment of relocation expenses. However, work for the FDIC qualifies as “government service” for purposes of fulfilling the agreement. [B-221677, July 21, 1986](#).
- *Uniform allowance*—applies to wholly owned government corporations but not mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 5901(a).

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<sup>183</sup> As noted earlier, a government corporation empowered to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures, as was the Tennessee Valley Authority in this case, is not required to follow the government’s policy on personal service contracts. Intimations to the contrary notwithstanding, the contract in [B-222334](#) was objectionable, not because it was a personal services contract *per se*, but because it was used to circumvent the statutory restriction on compensation.



- *Annual and sick leave*—applies to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 6301(2)(A).
- *Federal Employees Compensation Act*—FECA’s definition of employee includes “an officer or employee of an instrumentality wholly owned by the United States.” 5 U.S.C. § 8101(1)(A). FECA, where it applies, is the employee’s exclusive remedy just as it is for employees of agencies. *Posey v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 93 F.2d 726 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1937) (TVA); *Pinto v. Vessel “Santa Isabel,”* 492 F. Supp. 689 (D.C.Z. 1980) (former Panama Canal Company).
- *Retirement*—Both the Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) and the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS) apply to employees as defined in 5 U.S.C. § 2105, and therefore apply to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. §§ 8331(1)(A) (CSRS), 8401(11)(A) (FERS).

A law related in subject matter to title 5 of the United States Code is the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), 29 U.S.C. §§ 201–219, which provides, among other things, for overtime compensation for nonexempted employees for time worked in excess of 40 hours in a week. 29 U.S.C. § 207(a)(1). The FLSA adopts the definition of executive agency of 5 U.S.C. § 105, and therefore includes both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 29 U.S.C. § 203(e)(2)(A)(ii). *E.g.*, [54 Comp. Gen. 617 \(1975\)](#) (FLSA applicable to former Panama Canal Company). Another relevant statute is Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Its employment discrimination provisions apply to “executive agencies as defined in section 105 of title 5, United States Code (including employees and applicants for employment who are paid from nonappropriated funds).” 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-16(a).

The general and specific title 5 definitions determine the applicability of various provisions to government corporations only in the absence of more specific direction in the legislative charter. Government corporations are commonly empowered to “appoint and fix the compensation of such officers, attorneys, employees, and agents as may be required.” *E.g.*, 29 U.S.C. § 1302(b)(6) (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation). This alone, while affording some discretion, does little more than authorize appointment and compensation within the civil service structure. A variation specifically makes the authority subject to the civil service laws. *E.g.*, 33 U.S.C. § 984(a)(7) (Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation). The comparable provision for the Inter-American

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Foundation limits the total number of employees. 22 U.S.C. § 290f(e)(5). An example of seemingly broader language is section 723 of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-127, 110 Stat. 888, 1115–18 (Apr. 4, 1996), providing that officers or employees of the now-defunct Alternative Agricultural Research and Commercialization Corporation “shall be subject to all laws of the United States relating to governmental employment.”<sup>184</sup>

An important variation authorizes appointment and compensation “without regard” to the civil service laws applicable to officers and employees of the government. *E.g.*, 16 U.S.C. § 831b (Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)); 7 U.S.C. § 943(d) (Rural Telephone Bank). The “without regard” authority is not an all or nothing proposition. The corporation, in its discretion, may appoint some employees in accordance with the civil service laws and invoke the exemption for others. 37 Op. Att’y Gen. 7 (1932). Of course, the discretion should be reasoned and not arbitrary. Some charters exempt only a portion of the corporation’s employees from the civil service laws. *E.g.*, 22 U.S.C. § 2193(d) (Overseas Private Investment Corporation may hire, pay, and fire up to 20 of its employees without regard to civil service laws). A corporation possessing the “without regard” authority is, to the extent of its coverage, not required to follow, for example, the dual compensation laws (19 Comp. Gen. 926 (1940); B-9113, Apr. 30, 1940),<sup>185</sup> or the laws governing annual and sick leave (A-49652, June 28, 1933). It is free to set up its own parallel system. *See, e.g., Tennessee Valley Authority v. Kinzer*, 142 F.2d 833 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1944), discussing TVA’s retirement system. As the Attorney General has pointed out, the inclusion of the “without regard” clause in some charters evidences the congressional understanding that the employees would otherwise be subject to the civil service system, else there would be no need to exempt them. 39 Op. Att’y Gen. 238, 241 (1939). (For more on “without regard” clauses, see section B.6.c(2) of this chapter.)

One thing GAO has been reluctant to sanction is the making of deductions from an employee’s salary for payment to private organizations, and has advised that statutory authority should be obtained before making

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<sup>184</sup> The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-171, § 6201(a), 116 Stat. 134, 418 (May 13, 2002), repealed the authorization for the Alternative Agricultural Research and Commercialization Corporation, but we include this for illustrative purposes.

<sup>185</sup> Earlier decisions to the contrary, such as 14 Comp. Gen. 527 (1935) and 14 Comp. Gen. 822 (1935), must be regarded as implicitly overruled by the decisions cited in the text. Why this was not done explicitly is not clear.

deductions for union dues ([B-105819, Dec. 19, 1951](#)) or a union pension and welfare fund ([32 Comp. Gen. 572 \(1953\)](#)). Both decisions suggest, however, that the corporation could use its power to fix compensation to include these items in the amount of compensation actually paid to the employee, who would then make the contributions, subject to any statutory limits on total compensation payable. *See also* [B-82293, Jan. 3, 1949](#) (similar holding with respect to life and health insurance premiums prior to the enactment of the general legislation now in title 5 of the United States Code). Presumably, had the authority to fix compensation in these cases included the “without regard” clause, there would have been no objection to making the deductions.

The “without regard” authority may itself have qualifications which may extend beneficial provisions and/or impose restrictions. For example, 16 U.S.C. § 831b includes two qualifications for TVA employees: they are covered by the Federal Employees Compensation Act, and their salaries may not exceed that of board members. In GAO’s view, the authority to fix compensation, even with the “without regard language,” is not sufficient to overcome explicit salary restrictions in TVA’s charter, and GAO has found unauthorized payments variously called retention payments, management staffing incentive payments, merit incentive supplemental retirement income payments, *etc.*, although TVA itself has the last word, at least at the administrative level. [B-222334, June 2, 1986](#); [B-205284, Nov. 16, 1981](#).

In addition to charter exemptions, other specific exemptions are scattered throughout title 5. For example, the Government Employees Incentive Awards Act does not apply to TVA or the Central Bank for Cooperatives, 5 U.S.C. § 4501(1)(i), (ii); the severance pay statute does not apply to TVA, 5 U.S.C. § 5595(a)(2)(vii); and the annual and sick leave laws and the group health insurance provisions do not apply to corporations supervised by the Farm Credit Administration “if private interests elect or appoint a member of the board of directors,” 5 U.S.C. §§ 6301(2)(vii), 8901(1)(i). The exemption for the farm credit corporations is repeated in 5 U.S.C. § 6308(a), which authorizes the transfer of annual and sick leave balances when an employee transfers to a position under a different leave system without break in service. The exemption was repeated to permit those corporations to make lump-sum payments for leave rather than transferring the balances. *See* [B-124592, Dec. 1, 1955](#).

If a corporation is designated as not an agency or instrumentality of the United States, its employees are not employees of the United States. *Hrubec v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 49 F.3d 1269, 1270 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir.

1995) (Amtrak). Accordingly, title 5 of the United States Code would not apply. However, Congress may incorporate restrictions in the corporate charter. For example, employees of the Legal Services Corporation are not considered employees of the United States but are subject to title 5 provisions relating to retirement, life insurance, health insurance, and work injuries. 42 U.S.C. §§ 2996d(e), (f). Officers and employees of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting are similarly not officers or employees of the United States, but their annual rate of pay may not exceed the “rate of basic pay in effect from time to time for level I of the Executive Schedule.” 47 U.S.C. § 396(e)(1).

b. Procurement Laws and Regulations

In contrast to the civil service laws, the applicability of procurement laws and regulations to government corporations is fairly simple: By statute, they apply, for the most part, to wholly owned government corporations, but not to mixed-ownership corporations and certainly not to noninstrumentalities.

(1) 41 U.S.C. § 5

Perhaps the oldest general procurement law still on the books, 41 U.S.C. § 5—the old Revised Statutes § 3709—requires that, unless otherwise provided and with several stated exceptions, “purchases and contracts for supplies or services for the Government may be made or entered into only after advertising a sufficient time previously for proposals.” As noted in our earlier discussion of the applicability of fiscal laws in section B.6.c of this chapter, this statute was revised as part of the Administrative Expenses Act of 1946, Pub. L. No. 79-600, § 9, 60 Stat. 806, 809 (Aug. 2, 1946). It applies to the administrative expenses of wholly owned government corporations. 41 U.S.C. §§ 5 (last sentence), 5a. It does not apply to any transactions of mixed-ownership corporations. *E.g.*, [B-138105-O.M., Mar. 4, 1959](#) (Federal National Mortgage Association).

GAO has not attempted to define “administrative expenses” for this statute. Rather, GAO has followed a case-by-case approach. For example, “[t]he procurement of grain storage structures [by the Commodity Credit Corporation] obviously is not an administrative expense” for purposes of the advertising statute. [B-119791, Oct. 22, 1954](#), at 2. Nor is the construction and equipping of a substation by the former Panama Canal Company. [B-122655, Apr. 7, 1955](#). Nor is the purchase of a generating set for supplying electric power. [B-114990, Aug. 19, 1953](#). See generally GAO, *Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation’s Statutory Limitation on Administrative Expenses Does Not Provide Meaningful Control*, GAO-03-

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301 (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 28, 2003); *Corporation for Public Broadcasting: Congressional Guidance Needed on Administrative Expenses*, GAO/HRD-90-5 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 22, 1990).

(2) Federal Property and Administrative Services Act

The primary statute governing the procurement of goods and services by the civilian agencies of the federal government is title III of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 (the Property Act), Pub. L. No. 81-152, §§ 301–310, 63 Stat. 377, 393–97 (June 30, 1949), as amended, codified at 41 U.S.C. §§ 251–266a. Sections 3(a) and (b) of the original Property Act defined “federal agency” to include “executive agency,” which in turn includes “any wholly owned Government corporation.” Therefore, the procurement provisions of the Property Act, as amended, apply to wholly owned government corporations (but not mixed-ownership corporations) unless exempt under 40 U.S.C. § 113 or comparable statutory authority.<sup>186</sup>

The Property Act applies to the procurement of property and services, but not to every type of contractual arrangement an agency or corporation may enter into. For example, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation is authorized to enter into arrangements with the private insurance industry for risk sharing under its foreign investment insurance program. 22 U.S.C. § 2194(f). GAO reviewed one such pooling proposal and found that it was not the procurement of goods or services, but was more in the nature of a cooperative agreement. Therefore, it was not subject to the procurement laws and regulations. [B-173240, June 16, 1975](#).

The statute also addresses the relationship of the Property Act procurement provisions to 41 U.S.C. § 5. Basically, 41 U.S.C. § 5 does not apply to procurements under the Property Act. An agency or wholly owned corporation which is exempt from the Property Act provisions remains subject to 41 U.S.C. § 5 unless it has specific authority to contract without regard to 41 U.S.C. § 5. An entity with such authority must still follow the Property Act provisions for other than sealed-bid procedures unless exempt from that too. 41 U.S.C. §§ 252(a)(2), 260.

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<sup>186</sup> The Property Act addresses property management as well as procurement. The property management portions are located in title 40 of the United States Code, along with the definitions, now found in 40 U.S.C. §§ 102(4) and (5). Placing the operative provisions in more than one title of the United States Code does not change the application of the statutory definitions.

(3) Office of Federal Procurement Policy Act

The Office of Federal Procurement Policy Act, Pub. L. No. 93-400, 88 Stat. 796 (Aug. 30, 1974), established the Office of Federal Procurement Policy in the Office of Management and Budget to “provide overall direction of Government-wide procurement policies, regulations, procedures, and forms for executive agencies.” 41 U.S.C. § 404(a). This Act defines executive agency to include “a wholly owned Government corporation fully subject to the provisions of [the Government Corporation Control Act].” 41 U.S.C. § 403(1)(D). Thus, wholly owned government corporations must comply with governmentwide procurement policies and procedures.

(4) Federal Acquisition Regulation

The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), found in title 48 of the Code of Federal Regulations, is the governmentwide body of procurement regulations which implement the Property Act and the Office of Federal Procurement Policy Act. The FAR defines the term “federal agency” as including an executive agency, and the term “executive agency” as including any wholly owned government corporation listed in the Government Corporation Control Act. 48 C.F.R. § 2.101.

The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, as a wholly owned corporation, is subject to the FAR for purposes of its administrative activities, but not when serving as trustee for terminated pension plans. Of course, as with any exemption, the corporation can, in its discretion, elect to follow the established procedures. [B-217281-O.M., Mar. 27, 1985](#) (procurement of investment manager services in its trustee capacity).

The procurement statutes and the FAR have no application to corporations which are designated as not agencies or instrumentalities of the United States, even though they may be federally created and funded. [B-223852, Sept. 9, 1986](#) (Legal Services Corporation); GAO, *Analysis of Amtrak’s Acquisition of Office Copying Equipment*, GAO/CED-82-111 (Washington, D.C.: July 12, 1982).

(5) Competition in Contracting Act

The Competition in Contracting Act (CICA), title VII of the massive Deficit Reduction Act of 1974, Pub. L. No. 98-369, div. B, title VII, 98 Stat. 494, 1175 (July 18, 1984), made a number of revisions in procurement-related provisions. As relevant here, section 2741 of CICA gave a statutory basis to



GAO's bid protest function (31 U.S.C. §§ 3551–3556). Prior to CICA, GAO's bid protest authority was not explicit but was derived from its account settlement authority. *E.g.*, *Wheelabrator Corp. v. Chafee*, 455 F.2d 1306, 1313–14 (D.C. Cir. 1971). CICA divorced the bid protest function from account settlement. CICA applies to procurements by a “federal agency,” which it defines by reference to the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act (Property Act), 40 U.S.C. § 102(5). In other words, it expressly includes wholly owned government corporations. *E.g.*, [B-295737](#), [B-295737.2](#), [Apr. 19, 2005](#) (under CICA GAO has jurisdiction over bid protests involving procurements by wholly owned corporations such as the Federal Prison Industries).

Since CICA hinges on the definition of federal agency, account settlement authority is irrelevant, and GAO has CICA jurisdiction over corporations exempt under the pre-CICA system. [64 Comp. Gen. 756 \(1985\)](#) (Tennessee Valley Authority). As with the pre-CICA system, the jurisdiction does not extend to mixed-ownership corporations. *E.g.*, [B-252085](#), [Jan. 26, 1993](#) (Amtrak); [B-220302](#), [Sept. 24, 1985](#) (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation).

Also not dispositive is the applicability or nonapplicability of the Property Act and the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR). The Bonneville Power Administration, for example, is not subject to the Property Act's procurement provisions or to the FAR. *See* 16 U.S.C. § 832a(f); 40 U.S.C. § 113(e)(18). Nevertheless, it meets the CICA definition of federal agency, and is therefore subject to GAO's bid protest jurisdiction. [68 Comp. Gen. 447 \(1989\)](#); [67 Comp. Gen. 8 \(1987\)](#). Naturally, as was done in the two cited cases, GAO will apply Bonneville's own regulations rather than the FAR in evaluating the protest.

(6) Other statutes

The laws listed above are the ones we regard as most important to the procurement function in terms of the breadth of procurement activities. There are, however, several other procurement-related statutes, some of which address their applicability to government corporations. For example, the Walsh-Healey Act (which mandates wage and labor standards for supply or equipment contracts over \$10,000) applies to contracts made by “any corporation all the stock of which is beneficially owned by the United States.” 41 U.S.C. § 35. Others do not expressly define their applicability as, for example, the Competition in Contracting Act and the Property Act do. One example is the Brooks Architect-Engineers Act,

40 U.S.C. §§ 1101–1104, which establishes procedures for the acquisition of architectural and engineering services. It uses, but does not define, the term “agency.” 40 U.S.C. § 1102(1). In an internal memorandum, [B-215818-O.M., Aug. 10, 1984](#), GAO considered whether this act applies to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and concluded that it does not, consistent with the clear congressional pattern of excluding mixed-ownership corporations from the coverage of procurement laws.

Another example is the Service Contract Act of 1965, 41 U.S.C. § 351, which prescribes minimum standards for wages and working conditions under contracts “the principal purpose of which is to furnish services in the United States through the use of service employees.” 41 U.S.C. § 351(a). Like the Brooks Architect-Engineers Act, it does not define its own applicability. It has been held applicable to Federal Reserve banks. 2 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 211 (1978), *approved and followed in Brink’s, Inc. v. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System*, 466 F. Supp. 116 (D.D.C. 1979). It has also been held applicable to a contract between a personnel referral firm and a federally funded research and development center, even though it would not apply to the contract between the center and its sponsoring agency because the latter would not meet the “principal purpose” qualification quoted above. *Menlo Service Corp. v. United States*, 765 F.2d 805 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985).

c. General Management Laws

We have included under this caption the series of laws, enacted during the last quarter of the twentieth century, designed to enhance the management, general and financial, of government entities in the broad sense.

(1) Inspector General Act

The Inspector General Act of 1978 (Pub. L. No. 95-452, 92 Stat. 1101 (Oct. 12, 1978)), as amended, is found in the appendix to title 5 of the United States Code. Its purpose is to create independent and objective units to conduct audits and investigations of the agency’s programs and operations. 5 U.S.C. app. § 2.

This Act divides the federal government into three categories—establishments, designated federal entities, and other federal entities. The Act defines “establishment” by listing the agencies and instrumentalities covered, starting with the cabinet departments. 5 U.S.C. app. § 11(2). The listing includes a few government corporations, such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the Tennessee Valley Authority. *Id.* Each



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establishment is required to have an Office of Inspector General, the head of which is appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. 5 U.S.C. app. §§ 2, 3(a).

“Designated federal entity” is similarly defined by listing the entities covered, and includes several more government corporations and several noninstrumentalities—Amtrak,<sup>187</sup> the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Legal Services Corporation, and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. 5 U.S.C. app. § 8G(a)(2). It also includes the Farm Credit Administration and the National Credit Union Administration, which are not themselves government corporations but which supervise government corporations. A designated federal entity must have an Office of Inspector General, whose head is appointed by the head of the entity. 5 U.S.C. app. § 8G(b), (c).

The term “federal entity” includes government corporations as defined in 5 U.S.C. § 103, which means both wholly owned and mixed-ownership, except for corporations already listed as either establishments or designated federal entities, or which are part of an entity in either of those groups. 5 U.S.C. app. § 8G(a)(1). A federal entity is not statutorily required to have an Office of Inspector General, but must report annually on its internal audit structure to the Office of Management and Budget and to the Congress. 5 U.S.C. app. § 8G(h)(2). The corporations selected for “designated federal entity” status are those receiving over \$100 million annually in federal funds. *See* H.R. Rep. No. 100-771, at 2 (1988).

## (2) Federal Managers’ Financial Integrity Act of 1982

The Federal Managers’ Financial Integrity Act of 1982 (FMFIA), Pub. L. No. 97-255, 96 Stat. 814 (Sept. 8, 1982),<sup>188</sup> sets out a framework for establishing and evaluating internal controls. Section 2 requires each executive agency to develop, in accordance with standards prescribed by the Comptroller General,<sup>189</sup> a system of internal accounting and

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<sup>187</sup> Amtrak will be dropped from the statutory coverage when it is able to operate for a fiscal year without federal subsidy. Pub. L. No. 105-134, § 409, 111 Stat. 2570, 2586 (Dec. 2, 1997).

<sup>188</sup> Actually, the FMFIA was repealed by Public Law 97-452, § 4b, 96 Stat. 2467, 2480 (Jan. 12, 1983), but its operative provisions were codified at 31 U.S.C. §§ 3512(c) and (d).

<sup>189</sup> The Comptroller General’s standards are commonly referred to as the “Green Book.” GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, GAO/AIMD-00-21.3.1 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 1999).

administrative controls, and to report each year, under Office of Management and Budget guidelines,<sup>190</sup> on the extent of its compliance. The applicable definitional section is 31 U.S.C. § 3501, which excludes “a corporation, agency, or instrumentality subject to [the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA), 31 U.S.C. §§ 9101–9110].” Therefore, section 2 of FMFIA by its own force has no application to government corporations listed in the GCCA, 31 U.S.C. § 9101. However, because GCCA corporations were specifically excluded from the definition of “executive agency” by 31 U.S.C. § 3501, other non-GCCA corporate entities specifically designated as “agencies or instrumentalities” may be subject to FMFIA, since the general title 31 definition of “executive agency” in 31 U.S.C. § 102 includes agencies and instrumentalities in the executive branch of the government.

Also, the annual management report, added to the Government Corporation Control Act by the Chief Financial Officers Act (see below), requires the inclusion of “a statement on internal accounting and administrative control systems by the head of the management of the corporation, consistent with the requirements for agency statements on internal accounting and administrative control systems under the amendments made by the Federal Managers’ Financial Integrity Act of 1982.” 31 U.S.C. § 9106(a)(2)(E). Accordingly, while FMFIA does not apply to GCCA corporations by its own terms, the GCCA contains a parallel requirement.

### (3) Chief Financial Officers Act

The Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 (CFO Act), Pub. L. No. 101-576, 104 Stat. 2838 (Nov. 15, 1990), which enacted, among other things, provisions in 31 U.S.C. §§ 901–903, as amended, requires the establishment of Chief Financial Officers in specified agencies, but includes no government corporations. 31 U.S.C. § 901. However, other statutes do require some government corporations to establish Chief Financial Officers. For example, the Corporation for National and Community Service has a presidentially appointed, Senate-confirmed Chief Financial Officer. 42 U.S.C. § 12651e(c). The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation has an internally appointed Chief Financial Officer. 12 U.S.C. § 1821(a)(6)(E)(vi).

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<sup>190</sup> OMB Cir. No. A-123, *Management’s Responsibility for Internal Control* (Dec. 21, 2004).

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The CFO Act did, however, revise the audit and management reporting provisions of the Government Corporation Control Act, as summarized in our coverage of that act in section B.4.a of this chapter. Section 301 of the CFO Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3512(a), requires the Office of Management and Budget to include information about government corporations in the financial management status reports and governmentwide 5-year financial management plans it must prepare for the Congress.

(4) Government Performance and Results Act

The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993), is designed to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the federal government by requiring agencies to set performance goals and to measure results against those goals. Section 3 of GPRA, 5 U.S.C. § 306, requires each agency to submit to Congress, and requires the Office of Management and Budget to update periodically, a strategic plan, which must include a mission statement and the agency's goals and objectives for at least a 5-year period. Section 4 of GPRA, 31 U.S.C. §§ 1115 and 1116, requires agencies to prepare annual performance plans and program performance reports. GPRA's definition of agency is "an Executive agency defined under [5 U.S.C. §] 105," with several exceptions not relevant here. 5 U.S.C. § 306(f); 31 U.S.C. § 1115(g)(1). Therefore, GPRA applies to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations.

(5) Government Management Reform Act of 1994

The Government Management Reform Act of 1994 requires Treasury to prepare annual consolidated financial statements "covering all accounts and associated activities of the executive branch of the United States Government." Pub. L. No. 103-356, § 405(c), 108 Stat. 3410, 3416 (Oct. 13, 1994), 31 U.S.C. § 331(e)(1). GAO is required to audit these consolidated statements. 31 U.S.C. § 331(e)(2). Since the statements are to cover the entire executive branch, they include those government corporations that are in the executive branch. See U.S. Department of Treasury, *2005 Financial Report of the U.S. Government, Appendix: Significant Government Entities Included and Excluded from the Financial Statements* (December 2005), at 133-34.<sup>191</sup> In fact, the Office of

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<sup>191</sup> This report is available at [www.gao.gov/financial/fy2005financialreport.html](http://www.gao.gov/financial/fy2005financialreport.html) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

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Management and Budget and Treasury direct certain government corporations to submit special audit financial information to Treasury for consolidation. OMB Cir. No. A-136, *Financial Reporting Requirements*, § I.3 (June 29, 2007); I TFM 2-4700.

(6) Federal Financial Management Improvement Act of 1996

This law requires agencies to comply with federal accounting standards, financial management system requirements, and the United States Government Standard General Ledger. Pub. L. No. 104-208, div. A, § 101(f) [title VIII, § 803(a)], 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-390-92 (Sept. 30, 1996). It does not apply to government corporations because it defines agency by incorporating the definition in 31 U.S.C. § 901(b), which does not include any government corporations. Pub. L. No. 104-208, § 806(1).

(7) Improper Payments Information Act of 2002

This statute requires agencies to identify programs or activities that are susceptible to significant improper payments, annually estimate the amount of improper payments, and report those estimates and actions taken to reduce improper payments for highly-susceptible programs. Pub. L. No. 107-300, 116 Stat. 2350 (Nov. 26, 2002), 31 U.S.C. § 3321 note. The act uses the broad definition of executive agency in 31 U.S.C. § 102, which includes instrumentalities in the executive branch, meaning that both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations designated as executive branch instrumentalities are covered. Pub. L. No. 107-300, § 2(d)(1).

d. Property Management

The primary law governing the use and disposal of property is the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949. The pertinent definitions are found in 40 U.S.C. §§ 102(4) and (5), under which the term “federal agency” includes executive agency, and “executive agency” includes any wholly owned government corporation. Naturally, there are exceptions. For example, 40 U.S.C. § 113(c) exempts both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations subject to the Government Corporation Control Act (31 U.S.C. §§ 9101-9110) from the provisions relating to GAO approval of property accounting systems (40 U.S.C. § 121(b)) and GAO audit of property accounts (40 U.S.C. § 506(c)). The Tennessee Valley Authority is partially exempt by virtue of 40 U.S.C. § 113(e)(11). The rule is, therefore, that absent an applicable exemption, provisions of the Property Act applicable to federal agencies or executive agencies apply to wholly owned government corporations.

Section 501 of 40 U.S.C. gives the General Services Administration a variety of responsibilities with respect to the procurement and storage of personal property, including public utility services. This applies to wholly owned corporations by virtue of 40 U.S.C. § 102. The law further directs GSA to provide these services upon request to mixed-ownership corporations as well. 40 U.S.C. § 502(a)(2). This would include such services as the use of federal supply schedules.

The disposition of excess property is covered in 40 U.S.C. §§ 521–529. Reimbursement of fair value is required in the case of a transfer from one agency to another when either the transferring agency or the receiving agency is a corporation under the Government Corporation Control Act. 40 U.S.C. § 522(b). The purpose of this provision is to “maintain the integrity of the corporate accounts; that is, to prevent the impairment of the capital assets of a corporation disposing of excess property or the unjust enrichment of a corporation receiving such excess property.” [B-119819, Dec. 1, 1954](#), at 2.

Transfer may be made without reimbursement in situations where it would not impair a corporation’s capital structure—uncommon in the case of a government corporation, but possible nevertheless. *Id.*; [B-129149, Sept. 28, 1956](#).

Section 543 of title 40, United States Code, addresses surplus property and is also applicable to wholly owned corporations. Under this provision, the disposing agency may “execute documents to transfer title or other interest in the property and may take other action it considers necessary or proper to dispose of the property.” This includes transfers of title to real property from a wholly owned corporation to the United States, as and to the extent required by regulation. 41 Op. Att’y Gen. 15 (1949) (dealing with similar language in a predecessor statute).

Proceeds from the sale of surplus property, as well as reimbursements from the transfer of excess property, are governed by 40 U.S.C. §§ 571–574, which generally direct their deposit as miscellaneous receipts. 40 U.S.C. § 571. However, an exception specified in 40 U.S.C. § 574(a) provides that where the property transferred or disposed of was acquired by the use of funds either not appropriated from the general fund of the Treasury, or appropriated from the general fund but by law reimbursable from assessment, tax, or other revenue or receipts, then the net proceeds of the disposition or transfer shall be credited to the reimbursable fund or paid to the agency that determined the property to be excess.

GSA's leasing authority is found in 40 U.S.C. § 581(d). It, too, applies to wholly owned corporations by virtue of 40 U.S.C. § 102. As with personal property services, GSA may extend its buildings services (operation, maintenance, protection) to a mixed-ownership corporation upon request. 40 U.S.C. § 582(a). An odd situation occurred in [38 Comp. Gen. 565 \(1959\)](#). The Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) started out in life as a wholly owned government corporation, was rechartered as a mixed-ownership government corporation, and is now a government-sponsored enterprise. In 1959, it was a mixed-ownership corporation, but Congress had chosen to retain it in the Government Corporation Control Act as a wholly owned corporation. The question was whether Fannie Mae was required to do its leasing through GSA. The continued listing as a wholly owned corporation, the decision reasoned, was only for purposes of the Control Act. Absent some other definition, the "actual organic structure of the corporation" should determine its status. [38 Comp. Gen. at 567](#). Therefore, for purposes of leasing authority, Fannie Mae was a mixed-ownership corporation and thus not required to lease office space through GSA. *See also* [B-161531, June 29, 1967](#).

Another pertinent statute is the Public Buildings Act.<sup>192</sup> It applies to wholly owned corporations and to several specified mixed-ownership corporations, one of which is the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). 40 U.S.C. § 3301(a)(3)(E). Thus, an office building proposed to be constructed by the FDIC would be a "public building" and therefore subject to the Public Buildings Act, except for the prospectus approval requirement. [B-143167-O.M., Sept. 27, 1960](#).

The Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970,<sup>193</sup> which authorizes relocation assistance to individuals affected by federal projects, also applies to wholly owned government corporations. 42 U.S.C. § 4601(1).

e. Freedom of Information,  
Privacy Acts

The Administrative Procedure Act defines agency to mean "each authority of the Government of the United States, whether or not it is within or subject to review by another agency," with a list of exceptions not relevant to this discussion. 5 U.S.C. § 551(1). The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) provides that "agency" as defined in section 551(1) of this title

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<sup>192</sup> Pub. L. No. 86-249, 73 Stat. 479 (Sept. 9, 1959).

<sup>193</sup> Pub. L. No. 91-646, 84 Stat. 1894 (Jan. 2, 1971).

includes any . . . Government corporation [or] Government controlled corporation,” which includes both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 5 U.S.C. § 552(f)(1). The Privacy Act provides that “the term ‘agency’ means agency as defined in section 552([f]) of this title.” 5 U.S.C. § 552a(a)(1). Thus, the extent to which FOIA and the Privacy Act apply to government corporations should be the same since they use the same definition.

Given the plain statutory language, the traditional types of government corporations—wholly owned and mixed-ownership—do not appear to have presented problems. *E.g.*, *Dean v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 389 F. Supp. 2d 780 (E.D. Ky. 2005) (FOIA and Privacy Act held applicable in suit against the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation); *Stephens v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 754 F. Supp. 579 (E.D. Tenn. 1990) (Privacy Act suit against the Tennessee Valley Authority with no suggestion of concern over applicability); *Jones v. United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission*, 654 F. Supp. 130, 131 (D.D.C. 1987) (FOIA applies to the Tennessee Valley Authority). If these traditional government corporations are at the “clearly covered” extreme, at the other, “clearly not covered” extreme, are private corporations which receive federal financial assistance, even with a slight amount of federal supervision. *Irwin Memorial Blood Bank v. American National Red Cross*, 640 F.2d 1051 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1981) (holding FOIA inapplicable to the Red Cross); *Forsham v. Harris*, 445 U.S. 169 (1980) (holding FOIA inapplicable to a private grantee).

The difficult cases occupy the gray area between these poles. The case of *Rocap v. Indiek*, 539 F.2d 174 (D.C. Cir. 1976), found FOIA applicable to the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac), a government-sponsored enterprise. The court listed the factors it found relevant, acknowledging that none of them alone would be sufficient:

“It is federally chartered, its Board of Directors is Presidentially appointed, it is subject to close governmental supervision and control over its business transactions, and to federal audit and reporting requirements. In addition, the Corporation is expressly designated an ‘agency,’ and its employees are officers and employees of the United States, for a number of purposes.”

*Id.* at 180.

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Taken together, these “federal characteristics dictate the conclusion that it is the kind of federally created and controlled entity” that Congress intended to include under the term government-controlled corporation. *Id.* at 181.<sup>194</sup>

Amtrak is subject to FOIA by virtue of 49 U.S.C. § 24301(e), which makes FOIA applicable for any year in which Amtrak receives a federal subsidy. However, it is not a government-controlled corporation for purposes of the Privacy Act. *United States v. Jackson*, 381 F.3d 984 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004), *cert. denied*, 544 U.S. 963 (2005); *Ehm v. National Railroad Passenger Corporation*, 732 F.2d 1250 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 982 (1984). The issue had become somewhat clouded by some legislative history that could be used to support applicability, as GAO had done in [57 Comp. Gen. 773 \(1978\)](#). The *Ehm* court reviewed the legislative history, found it inconclusive, and found Amtrak closer to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which was indisputably intended to be excluded. *Ehm*, 732 F.2d at 1253–55.

A related statute is the Government in the Sunshine Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552b, which requires, among other things, that every meeting of an agency be announced in advance and open to the public, unless otherwise excepted. It defines agency as an agency (1) within the FOIA/Privacy Act definition, which explicitly includes both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations, and which is (2) “headed by a collegial body composed of two or more individual members, a majority of whom are appointed to such position by the President.” 5 U.S.C. § 552b(a)(1). A corporation’s board of directors is a “collegial body.” [63 Comp. Gen. 99 \(1983\)](#); [57 Comp. Gen. at 775](#). While *Ehm* supersedes these cases insofar as they deal with Amtrak, the general points remain valid, and many government corporations are subject to the Sunshine Act.

Of course, as it did with Amtrak, Congress can exclude or include government corporations under these laws. 1 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 126, 131–32 (1977).

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<sup>194</sup> Legislation in 1989 largely privatized Freddie Mac and severed most of its federal ties. We cite *Rocap* merely to illustrate the kinds of factors that influenced the court. The holding is no longer directly applicable. See *American Bankers Mortgage Corp. v. Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.*, 75 F.3d 1401, 1408 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 519 U.S. 812 (1996).



Another information-related statute is the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 (which replaced the Federal Reports Act of 1942), 44 U.S.C. §§ 3501–3520, which gives the Office of Management and Budget certain oversight and regulatory responsibilities with respect to the collection of information from the public. The statute’s definition of agency is essentially the same as that of FOIA and the Privacy Act in that it expressly includes both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. 44 U.S.C. § 3502(1).

In 2002, Congress passed the E-Government Act to enhance access to government information, to promote electronic government services, and to increase federal information security. Pub. L. No. 107-347, 116 Stat. 2899 (Dec. 17, 2002). The majority of the statute’s provisions employ the definition of agency in the Paperwork Reduction Act and thus apply to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. Pub. L. No. 107-347, §§ 201, 301. Title II of Public Law 107-347 ensures the acceptance by agencies, government corporations, and government controlled corporations of electronic signatures and requires the development of standards for agency Web sites. Title III of Public Law 107-347, titled the Federal Information Security Management Act, sets security standards for agencies’ information systems, which also apply to both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations.

f. **Printing and Binding**

Subject to a few exceptions, all printing and binding for “every executive department, independent office and establishment of the Government, shall be done at the Government Printing Office.” 44 U.S.C. § 501. Title 44 does not further define the applicability of this provision. Although the cases must be approached with some caution, the rule developed in the cases presented below is that a government corporation empowered to determine the character and necessity of its expenditures is not required to comply with 44 U.S.C. § 501.

The earliest decision appears to be [A-49652, June 28, 1933](#), in which GAO advised that the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) was not required to have its printing done at the Government Printing Office. Yet in [14 Comp. Gen. 695 \(1935\)](#), GAO held that the Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation (FSLIC) was subject to the requirement. The difference was that the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation had the statutory “character and necessity” power, whereas the FSLIC did not. FSLIC was given that power shortly thereafter, and GAO then confirmed that it, too, was now exempt. [A-60495, Oct. 4, 1938](#). The two corporations subsequently adopted resolutions to serve as their determination of

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nonapplicability, and GAO concurred. [A-98289, Jan. 18, 1939](#) (HOLC); [A-98289, A-60495, Jan. 18, 1939](#) (FSLIC). *See also* [18 Comp. Gen. 479 \(1938\)](#); [14 Comp. Gen. 698 \(1935\)](#). GAO has applied the same result to other government corporations and similar entities. *E.g.*, [B-209585, Jan. 26, 1983](#) (Tennessee Valley Authority); [B-114829, July 8, 1975](#) (U.S. Postal Service). A corporation not subject to 44 U.S.C. § 501 may still elect to follow it. [A-49217, June 5, 1933](#).

By coincidence, all of the government corporations GAO had considered possessed the variety of “character and necessity” authority which included the “without regard to other provisions of law” clause. See sections B.6.c(1) and (2) of this chapter. A 1986 decision, [65 Comp. Gen. 226](#), misinterpreted this coincidence and treated the “without regard” clause, rather than the basic “character and necessity” provision, as the basis for the exemption. While the actual holding of [65 Comp. Gen. 226](#) is correct—that a corporation not possessing the “character and necessity” power must follow 44 U.S.C. § 501—the discussion of the “without regard” clause is not. This is because 44 U.S.C. § 501 is a general statute; it does not expressly apply to government corporations. Therefore, as discussed in section B.6.c of this chapter, a “character and necessity” provision is sufficient to permit its avoidance, without the need for the additional “without regard” clause.

As further evidence, in 1949, the Institute of Inter-American Affairs responded to a budget cut by firing all of its auditors. An angered Congress threatened to respond by repealing its “character and necessity” power. *See* [B-24827, Mar. 24, 1949](#). As part of this process, GAO was asked to study which laws would be affected by such a repeal. The resulting statement listed the printing statute as one of the laws that had not previously applied but would in the event of repeal. *See* GAO, *General Accounting Office Statement Concerning Effect of “Determine and Prescribe” Language on Conduct of Business by the Institute of Inter-American Affairs*, June 22, 1949, 334 MS 1805A.<sup>195</sup>

g. Criminal Code

Regardless of a corporation’s autonomy, it is within the power of Congress to provide that a crime against a government corporation is a crime against the United States. The Supreme Court has said:

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<sup>195</sup> For an explanation of this citation format, see Chapter 1, section E.2.d, n.78.

“The United States can protect its property by criminal laws, and its constitutional power would not be affected if it saw fit to create a corporation of its own for purposes of the Government, under laws emanating directly or indirectly from itself, and turned the property over to its creature. The creator would not be subordinated to its own machinery.”

*United States v. Walter*, 263 U.S. 15, 17 (1923).

Congress has implemented this power through several provisions of the Criminal Code in title 18 of the United States Code. The definition of agency includes “any corporation in which the United States has a proprietary interest, unless the context shows that such term was intended to be used in a more limited sense.” 18 U.S.C. § 6.

Some statutes in which this definition can come into play are 18 U.S.C. §§ 286 (conspiracy to defraud the United States or agency thereof through a false claim); 287 (presenting a false claim to the United States or agency thereof); and 371 (conspiracy to defraud the United States or agency thereof “in any manner or for any purpose”). An illustrative case is *United States v. Samuel Dunkel & Co.*, 184 F.2d 894 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1950), *cert. denied*, 340 U.S. 930 (1951), holding that fraud upon the former Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation was the same as fraud upon the United States for purposes of 18 U.S.C. § 371. This was an easy case since the corporation in question was statutorily designated as an agency of the United States. *Id.* at 898. In view of the language of 18 U.S.C. § 6, however, that designation would not appear to be necessary. *See Walter*, 263 U.S. at 18.

The “proprietary interest” language of 18 U.S.C. § 6 replaced language in prior laws referring to “any corporation in which the United States is a stockholder.” *See* 18 U.S.C. §§ 286, 287 (Revision Notes). No minimum proprietary interest is specified to trigger applicability. Thus, the statute would apply to a corporation in which the proprietary interest is slight, the only qualification being that it must be an instrumentality of the government. *Walter*, 263 U.S. at 18. This ensures that the statute is restricted to its intended purpose, government corporations, and eliminates situations in which the United States might, for example, acquire an interest in a private corporation through some sort of forfeiture.

Proprietary interest also includes nonstock government corporations. The Revision Note to 18 U.S.C. § 6 makes clear that this phrase “is intended to

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include those governmental corporations in which stock is not actually issued.” A case applying this concept is *Acron Investments, Inc. v. Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation*, 363 F.2d 236, 239–40 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 385 U.S. 970 (1966), dealing with the identical proprietary interest language in 28 U.S.C. § 451 which was intended to parallel 18 U.S.C. § 6. Another is *Government National Mortgage Association v. Terry*, 608 F.2d 614 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979), applying *Acron* to Ginnie Mae.

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## 8. Claims and Lawsuits

### a. Administrative Claims

#### (1) Claims settlement authority

The structure of administrative claims settlement in the federal government consists of (1) a series of statutes, one example being the Federal Tort Claims Act, authorizing the final and conclusive settlement of claims either with or without judicial review, and (2) a general claims settlement statute, 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a), which picks up claims not covered by any of the specific statutes.

Government corporations<sup>196</sup> generally have their own claims settlement authority by virtue of specific charter provisions, and are therefore not subject to 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a). The most direct approach is illustrated by 15 U.S.C. § 714b(k), which provides that the Commodity Credit Corporation may “make final and conclusive settlement and adjustment of any claims by or against the Corporation or the accounts of its fiscal officers.”

While often cited in conjunction with a “sue-and-be-sued” clause (see section B.8.c(2) of this chapter) or a “character and necessity” clause (see section B.6.c(1) of this chapter), this provision is sufficient to permit the corporation to administratively settle its own claims. Government

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<sup>196</sup> For ease of discussion in this section, we will use the term “government corporation” to refer generically to the various corporate devices discussed in section B.2 of this chapter unless a more specific term is warranted.

corporations with this type of authority include the Tennessee Valley Authority,<sup>197</sup> and the Bonneville Power Administration.<sup>198</sup>

GAO also has held that the power to sue and be sued, combined with the power to determine the character and necessity of expenditures, even without the explicit claims settlement power, is still sufficient to remove the corporation from the scope of 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a). [B-179464, Mar. 27, 1974](#); [B-109766, Jan. 20, 1959](#) (both dealing with the former Panama Canal Company). The Federal Housing Administration has similar authority, from which it derives its claims settlement authority. 12 U.S.C. § 1702; [53 Comp. Gen. 337 \(1973\)](#); [27 Comp. Gen. 429, 432 \(1948\)](#); [B-156202, Mar. 9, 1965](#).

## (2) Federal Tort Claims Act

Prior to the Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA), 28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(b), 2671–2680, it was somewhat unclear whether government corporations were subject to common-law tort suits. By 1939, the answer became settled in the affirmative. *Keifer & Keifer v. Reconstruction Finance Corporation*, 306 U.S. 381 (1939); *Prato v. Home Owners' Loan Corporation*, 106 F.2d 128 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1939). See also [25 Comp. Gen. 685 \(1946\)](#). When the FTCA was enacted in 1946 to remove much of the government's tort immunity, it included most, if not all, of the then-existing government corporations in the waiver. The Act defines federal agency as including “corporations primarily acting as instrumentalities or agencies of the United States.” 28 U.S.C. § 2671. Far from establishing a black-letter rule, however, the definition raises as many questions as it answers.

At a minimum, the definition should pick up wholly owned government corporations. The following have been found subject to the Act:

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<sup>197</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 831h(b); [B-124078, June 7, 1955](#). Naturally, the GAO decisions and opinions we cite involve claims submitted to GAO during the 75-year span that GAO possessed the general claims settlement authority. While GAO is no longer directly involved in the process, the principles themselves remain sound. For details of the transfer of the general claims settlement authority, see [B-275605, Mar. 17, 1997](#), and Chapter 14, section B.

<sup>198</sup> 16 U.S.C. § 832a(f); [B-129395, Jan. 22, 1957](#); [B-132855-O.M., Oct. 1, 1957](#).

- The former Inland Waterways Corporation. *Wickman v. Inland Waterways Corporation*, 78 F. Supp. 284 (D. Minn. 1948). This appears to be the earliest published decision on the applicability of the FTCA to a government corporation.
- The former Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation. *Federal Savings & Loan Insurance Corp. v. Quinn*, 419 F.2d 1014 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1969); *Kohlbeck v. Kis*, 651 F. Supp. 1233 (D. Mont. 1987); *Colony First Federal Savings and Loan Ass'n v. Federal Savings & Loan Insurance Corp.*, 643 F. Supp. 410 (C.D. Cal. 1986).
- Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation. *Handley v. Tecon Corp.*, 172 F. Supp. 565 (N.D.N.Y. 1959).
- Federal Housing Administration. *Edelman v. Federal Housing Administration*, 382 F.2d 594 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1967).
- Federal Prison Industries (FPI). See *United States v. Demko*, 385 U.S. 149 (1966). The Court in that case held that a prisoner injured while working for FPI could not sue under the FTCA because the compensation remedy provided under 18 U.S.C. § 4126 was his exclusive remedy. If the FTCA did not apply to FPI, there would have been no need to tackle the exclusivity question.

Our research has disclosed no case in which the FTCA was found inapplicable to a wholly owned government corporation on the basis of the section 2671 definition.

Turning to mixed-ownership corporations, the situation is less uniform. One court has held a Federal Home Loan Bank is not a federal agency for FTCA purposes. *Rheams v. Bankston, Wright & Greenhill*, 756 F. Supp. 1004 (W.D. Tex. 1991). Another court reached the opposite result for the former Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC), influenced largely by the fact that “the RTC is an organization similar to, and in fact replaces the FSLIC,” which, as noted above, was an agency under the FTCA. *Park Club, Inc. v. Resolution Trust [Corporation]*, 742 F. Supp. 395, 398 (S.D. Tex. 1990), *aff'd in part and rev'd in part on other grounds*, 967 F.2d 1053 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992).

A sampling of cases involving the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), another mixed-ownership corporation, indicates some of the consequences of the FTCA's applicability. Numerous cases have held that

the FDIC is a federal agency for FTCA purposes. *E.g.*, *Davis v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 369 F. Supp. 277 (D. Colo. 1974). This is true regardless of whether the FDIC is acting in its receiver capacity or its corporate capacity. *Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Hartford Insurance Co.*, 877 F.2d 590 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1989), *cert. denied*, 493 U.S. 1056 (1990); *Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. diStefano*, 839 F. Supp. 110, 121 (D.R.I. 1993). One important consequence is that if the tort is subject to one of the exemptions listed in 28 U.S.C. § 2680, recovery is precluded just as if the agency involved were not a corporation, and the corporation’s “sue and be sued” power (see section B.8.c(2) of this chapter) cannot be used to get in through the back door. *Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Citizens Bank & Trust Co.*, 592 F.2d 364 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 444 U.S. 829 (1979) (misrepresentation); *Safeway Portland Employees’ Federal Credit Union v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 506 F.2d 1213 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1974) (misrepresentation and deceit); *Mill Creek Group, Inc. v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 136 F. Supp. 2d 36 (D.Conn. 2001) (misrepresentation, fraud, and breach of fiduciary duty); *Freeling v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 221 F. Supp. 955 (W.D. Okla. 1962), *aff’d*, 326 F.2d 971 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1963) (slander). One possible way around this is a valid recoupment claim, whereby a defendant can reduce a plaintiff’s monetary recovery because of a counterclaim arising out of the same transaction. *diStefano*, 839 F. Supp. at 123. Another important consequence of applicability is the requirement to attempt administrative resolution before going to court. *E.g.*, *Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Cheng*, 787 F. Supp. 625, 631 (N.D. Tex. 1991).

If the seemingly uniform application in the case of wholly owned corporations begins to break down with respect to mixed-ownership corporations, it breaks down even further for the government-sponsored enterprise (GSE). For example, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac) has been held not a federal agency under the FTCA. *Mendrala v. Crown Mortgage Co.*, 955 F.2d 1132 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992).

The original definitional language, quoted in *Wickman*, 78 F. Supp. at 285 (emphasis added) “corporations whose primary function is to act as, *and while acting as*, instrumentalities or agencies of the United States,” suggests an interesting twist.<sup>199</sup> At least in theory, it seems possible for a government corporation or GSE to be subject to the FTCA with respect to

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<sup>199</sup> The linguistic change resulting from the 1948 recodification of title 28 presumably works no substantive change.

its primary function, but not subject while performing some ancillary or incidental function.

As to the remaining types of government corporations, applicability of the FTCA would seem quite remote. In our definitional discussion in section B.2.c of this chapter we noted cases refusing to apply the FTCA to the American Red Cross and to the Civil Air Patrol. And, the FTCA does not apply to Amtrak. *Sentner v. Amtrak*, 540 F. Supp. 557, 561 (D.N.J. 1982).

For most government corporations, applicability of the FTCA is determined under the definitional language of 28 U.S.C. § 2671. In a few instances, inclusion or exclusion is the subject of other specific legislation. For example, the Commodity Credit Corporation is subject to the FTCA by virtue of express language in 15 U.S.C. § 714b(c), although it is not clear why the CCC would not qualify under the definitional language in any event. The FTCA itself provides a few exemptions. Under 28 U.S.C. § 2680(n), the law does not apply to claims “arising from the activities of a Federal land bank, a Federal intermediate credit bank, or a bank for cooperatives.”

Another significant exemption is 28 U.S.C. § 2680(l): the FTCA does not apply to “[a]ny claim arising from the activities of the Tennessee Valley Authority.” From this, it is clear that the FTCA cannot form the basis of a claim or suit against the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). *E.g.*, *Robinson v. United States*, 422 F. Supp. 121 (M.D. Tenn. 1976); *Latch v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 312 F. Supp. 1069 (N.D. Miss. 1970). However, TVA still can be sued in tort under its “sue and be sued” clause. Courts have held that, subject to public policy limitations, it is “subject to common law liability and may be sued and held liable as may be a private individual.” *Brewer v. Sheco Construction Co.*, 327 F. Supp. 1017, 1019 (W.D. Ky. 1971). *See Smith v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 436 F. Supp. 151, 153–54 (E.D. Tenn. 1977) (following *Brewer*). Well, maybe not exactly like a private individual because TVA is an agency or instrumentality of the United States and the Fifth Circuit has held that it cannot be held liable for punitive damages without statutory authority. *Painter v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 476 F.2d 943 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1973).

### (3) Contract Disputes Act

The Contract Disputes Act (CDA), 41 U.S.C. §§ 601–613, applies to each executive agency, which includes a wholly owned government corporation



as defined by 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3). 41 U.S.C. § 601(2). See *APA, Inc. v. Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corp.*, 562 F. Supp. 884 (W.D. La. 1983) (CDA applied to former FSLIC because it was listed as a wholly owned government corporation). However, the Federal Circuit has ruled that the Contract Disputes Act does not apply to the Federal Prison Industries (FPI) because the CDA requires judgments rendered against the United States to be paid out of appropriated funds, and FPI is a nonappropriated fund instrumentality. *Core Concepts of Florida, Inc. v. United States*, 327 F.3d 1331, 1338 (Fed. Cir.), cert. denied, 540 U.S. 1046 (2003).

As is often the case, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) has its own specific provisions. TVA contracts “for the sale of fertilizer or electric power or related to the conduct or operation of the electric power system” are excluded from the CDA. 41 U.S.C. § 602(b). Other TVA contracts are covered only if they include a disputes clause mandating administrative resolution. 41 U.S.C. § 602(b). The TVA is authorized to establish its own board of contract appeals, and has its own direct payment authority. 41 U.S.C. §§ 607(a)(2), 612(d).

#### (4) Assignment of Claims Act

The Assignment of Claims Act (31 U.S.C. § 3727, 41 U.S.C. § 15) does not explicitly define its applicability. Therefore, absent some charter provision resolving the issue, applicability has been determined through case law.

The first wave of cases involved the U.S. Emergency Fleet Corporation, which seems to have spent as much time litigating as shipping cargo. The Comptroller of the Treasury ruled in 1919 that the statute should apply whenever payment is to be made from appropriated funds, and therefore it was not necessary to determine whether claims against the Corporation were claims against the United States. 25 Comp. Dec. 701, 703 (1919). The courts disagreed, however, and held that the Fleet Corporation, because of its distinct corporate entity, was not subject to the Act. *Rhodes v. United States*, 8 F. Supp. 124 (E.D.N.Y. 1934); *Charles Nelson Co. v. United States*, 11 F.2d 906 (W.D. Wash. 1926); *Providence Engineering Corp. v. Downey Shipbuilding Corp.*, 3 F.2d 154 (E.D.N.Y. 1924).

What was distinct about the Fleet Corporation, although not spelled out in the cases cited, was that the Shipping Board, which had organized the Fleet Corporation under statutory authority, was authorized to sell Fleet Corporation stock to the public as long as the Shipping Board remained

majority stockholder. See Pub. L. No. 64-260, § 11, 39 Stat. 728, 731 (Sept. 7, 1916). The Corporation had been organized “so that private parties could share stock ownership with the United States.” *Rainwater v. United States*, 356 U.S. 590, 593 (1958). While this may never have actually happened,<sup>200</sup> the Corporation was nevertheless legally designed to be more of a mixed-ownership corporation. Accordingly, the *Rainwater* Court noted in another context that enactments dealing with corporations like the Fleet Corporation were “of little value” in assessing “wholly owned and closely controlled” government corporations. *Id.* at 593–94. (A cynic might say that is equally true for case law.)

Later cases involving wholly owned corporations tend to regard the Assignment of Claims Act as applicable. The court in *Federal Insurance Co. v. Hardy*, 222 F. Supp. 68 (E.D. Mo. 1963), found it applicable to the Federal Housing Administration. Other cases have applied the Assignment of Claims Act to the Tennessee Valley Authority (*Sigmon Fuel Co. v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 709 F.2d 440 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983)), and the Export-Import Bank (*Balfour Maclaine International, Ltd. v. Hanson*, 876 F. Supp. 52, 57 (S.D.N.Y. 1995)). See also *In re Sunberg*, 35 B.R. 777 (Bankr. S.D. Iowa 1983), *aff’d*, 729 F.2d 561 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1984) (Commodity Credit Corporation).

It is also possible for a government corporation or government-sponsored enterprise which qualifies as a “financing institution” to be the *assignee* of the proceeds of a contract between the contractor and some other government agency. For example, in *In re Peoria Consolidated Manufacturers, Inc.*, 286 F.2d 642 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1961), the court noted that the plaintiff manufacturing company had obtained a loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and, as security assigned, to the corporation money due under a contract with the Army. *Id.* at 644.

#### (5) Estoppel

The classic case on estoppel against the government, *Federal Crop Insurance Corp. v. Merrill*, 332 U.S. 380 (1947), involved a wholly owned government corporation. The Corporation had denied a claim based on the eligibility criteria in its regulations. The Supreme Court upheld the denial, notwithstanding that the farmer had been misled into believing that his

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<sup>200</sup> As of at least 1927, the Shipping Board still held all of the stock. See *United States ex rel. Skinner & Eddy Corp. v. McCart*, 275 U.S. 1, 5 (1927).

crop would be covered. Speaking through Justice Frankfurter, the Court explained:

“[W]e assume that recovery could be had against a private insurance company. But the Corporation is not a private insurance company. . . . The Government may carry on its operations through conventional executive agencies or through corporate forms especially created for defined ends. . . . Whatever the form in which the Government functions, anyone entering into an arrangement with the Government takes the risk of having accurately ascertained that he who purports to act for the Government stays within the bounds of his authority.”

*Id.* at 383–84.

The D.C. Circuit has held Freddie Mac—the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation—to be a federal entity for purposes of a promissory estoppel claim. *McCauley v. Thygerson*, 732 F.2d 978 (D.C. Cir. 1984). (This was the preprivatization version of Freddie Mac dealt with in *Rocap v. Indiek*, 539 F.2d 174 (D.C. Cir. 1976), discussed in section B.7.e of this chapter in connection with the Freedom of Information Act.)

(6) Prompt Payment Act

The Prompt Payment Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3901–3907, requires the payment of an interest penalty when an agency makes late payment for the acquisition of property or services from a business concern. The definition of agency in 31 U.S.C. § 3901(a)(1) adopts the definition of the Administrative Procedure Act, 5 U.S.C. § 551(1), which is broad enough to include government corporations but does not explicitly apply to them. GAO has regarded this language as clearly applying, for example, to the Commodity Credit Corporation. B-223857, Feb. 27, 1987. Subsection (b) of 31 U.S.C. § 3901 states that the Act applies to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), but that “regulations prescribed under this chapter do not apply” to the TVA, which is authorized to prescribe its own implementing regulations.

Congress amended the Act in 1988 to make it applicable to certain assistance payments to farmers by the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) which are not payments for the acquisition of goods or services. Pub. L. No. 100-496, § 3, 102 Stat. 2455, 2456 (Oct. 17, 1988), *codified at* 31 U.S.C. § 3902(h). Under 31 U.S.C. § 3907, a claim for an interest penalty

may be brought under the Contract Disputes Act but, since that act has its own interest provision, Prompt Payment Act interest is limited to 1 year. However, by virtue of 31 U.S.C. § 3902(h)(4), section 3907 does not apply to payments owed by the CCC for agricultural commodity pricing and disaster assistance programs. Therefore, the 1-year limitation on interest payments does not apply to those payments. *Doane v. Espy*, 873 F. Supp. 1277 (W.D. Wis. 1995). As with any other statute, and subject, of course, to constitutional restrictions, Congress can expand or restrict the scope or applicability of 31 U.S.C. § 3902(h). See *Huntsman Farms, Inc. v. Espy*, 928 F. Supp. 1451 (E.D. Ark. 1996), *aff'd*, 105 F.3d 662 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1997), for one example.

(7) False Claims Act

The False Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3729–3733, imposes liability for presenting a false claim to, or conspiring to defraud, “the Government.” 31 U.S.C. § 3729(a). The question in the present context is whether defrauding a government corporation is the same as defrauding “the Government” for False Claims Act purposes. With respect to wholly owned corporations at least, the answer appears to be “yes.”<sup>201</sup>

One line of cases involves the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). The Supreme Court has held that a claim against the CCC is a claim against the government under the False Claims Act. *Rainwater v. United States*, 356 U.S. 590 (1958). See also *United States v. McNinch*, 356 U.S. 595 (1958); *United States v. Brown*, 274 F.2d 107 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1960). As the *Rainwater* Court put it: “In brief, Commodity is simply an administrative device established by Congress for the purpose of carrying out federal farm programs with public funds. . . . In our judgment Commodity is a part of ‘the Government of the United States’ for purposes of the False Claims Act.” *Rainwater*, 356 U.S. at 592.

Another line of cases says essentially the same thing with respect to the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). *McNinch*, 356 U.S. at 598; *United States v. Veneziale*, 268 F.2d 504 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1959); *United States v.*

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<sup>201</sup> There are cases where *qui tam* plaintiffs attempted to file False Claims Act actions against government corporations, but the courts rejected such claims. For example, the D.C. Circuit rejected a *qui tam* action alleging that the Federal Prison Industries (FPI) was filing false claims against the United States, because the claim was barred by FPI’s sovereign immunity. *Galvan v. Federal Prison Industries, Inc.*, 199 F.3d 461 (D.C. Cir. 1999). See also *Wood ex rel. United States v. American Institute in Taiwan*, 286 F.3d 526 (D.C. Cir. 2002).

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*Globe Remodeling Co.*, 196 F. Supp. 652 (D. Vt. 1960). However, the *McNinch* Court held that a lending institution's application for credit insurance from the FHA is not a claim under the False Claims Act, because an application for credit insurance is not usually understood as a claim against the government. *McNinch*, 356 U.S. at 598.

Other wholly owned corporations which have been regarded as part of "the Government" under the False Claims Act include the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (*Kelsoe v. Federal Crop Insurance Corp.*, 724 F. Supp. 448 (E.D. Tex. 1988)), and the former Reconstruction Finance Corporation (*United States v. Borin*, 209 F.2d 145 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 348 U.S. 821 (1954)). Whether there might be any basis for distinguishing these corporations from any other wholly owned corporation does not appear to have been addressed.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation—a mixed-ownership government corporation—has also been treated as part of the government under the False Claims Act. *United States ex rel. Prawer & Co. v. Verrill & Dana*, 946 F. Supp. 87 (D. Maine 1996), *reconsideration denied*, 962 F. Supp. 206 (D. Maine 1997). This case involved the so-called "reverse claim" provision of the False Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. § 3729(a)(7), imposing liability for knowingly making or using a false record or statement "to conceal, avoid, or decrease an obligation to pay or transmit money or property to the Government."

In a 2004 decision, the D.C. Circuit held that Amtrak is not part of the government for purposes of the False Claims Act. *United States ex rel. Totten v. Bombardier Corp.*, 380 F.3d 488 (D.C. Cir. 2004), *cert. denied*, 544 U.S. 1032 (2005). The court concluded that Congress had clearly specified that Amtrak is not an agency of the government, and that the False Claims Act requires presentment of a claim to a federal employee, which Amtrak employees are not.

When a government corporation recovers damages under the False Claims Act, it is entitled to retain those funds that represent reimbursement for actual losses and for investigative costs. However, double and treble damages recovered under the Act must be deposited into the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. [B-281064, Feb. 14, 2000](#) (disposition of damages recovered by the Tennessee Valley Authority under the False Claims Act).

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(8) Interagency claims

The conventional wisdom has traditionally been that an agency of the federal government may not sue the United States or another agency because the same person may not be on both ends of the same lawsuit. *E.g.*, *Defense Supplies Corporation v. United States Lines Co.*, 148 F.2d 311 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 326 U.S. 746 (1945). Based in part on this reasoning, GAO had held that an agency’s appropriations were not available to pay a claim for damage to the property of a government corporation. *25 Comp. Gen. 49 (1945)*. This was a straightforward application of the so-called “interdepartmental waiver doctrine,” which prohibits a federal agency or instrumentality from paying for the use or repair of real property controlled by another federal agency or instrumentality unless authorized by statute. *See* Chapter 6, section E.2.c. This doctrine is based on the concept that the property of instrumentalities of the government is not the property of separate entities but rather of the government as a single entity. *71 Comp. Gen. 1 (1991)*, and cases cited. However, this theory of the government as a single entity, while still true for the most part, is not an absolute. *See, e.g., United States v. Interstate Commerce Commission*, 337 U.S. 426 (1949) (suit by the United States to review a decision by the Interstate Commerce Commission); *Tennessee Valley Authority v. EPA*, 278 F.3d 1184 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003), *opinion withdrawn in part*, 336 F.3d 1236 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003), *cert. denied*, 541 U.S.1030 (2004) (dispute between the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and EPA over the meaning of the Clean Air Act); *Dean v. Herrington*, 668 F. Supp. 646 (E.D. Tenn. 1987) (suit by TVA against the Department of Energy over two long-term power contracts).

Other decisions have recognized the availability of an agency’s appropriations to pay damage claims to at least certain government corporations and corporate-like entities. For example, the Bonneville Power Administration could charge the National Weather Service for damage resulting from its use of Bonneville property. *71 Comp. Gen. 1 (1991)*. Under Bonneville’s financing structure, the burden otherwise would have fallen on Bonneville’s customers through rate increases caused by unrelated activities. *Id.* at 3–4. The Bonneville decision was followed and applied in [B-253613, Dec. 3, 1993](#), holding that the Federal Highway Administration could pay TVA for damage its construction caused to TVA’s electrical transmission towers because the burden would otherwise have fallen on TVA’s customers.

The reverse situation—payment by a government corporation to another agency or government corporation—occurred in [26 Comp. Gen. 235 \(1946\)](#). GAO concluded that the corporation could pay the claim as long as its funds were available for the payment of damages incurred in the course of its operations. In the cited case, the funds of the former Inland Waterways Corporation were available to operate the business of a common carrier by water, and therefore available to pay any lawful claims arising from that activity. The claimant in the 1946 case happened to be another government corporation. Either way, the fact that the agency or corporation suffering the damage may not have a legally enforceable claim does not prevent administrative settlement. Of course, the charter power to make final and conclusive claim settlements provides this authority too.

b. Debt Collection

The United States has inherent authority to recover amounts owed to it and does not need any special statutory authority to do so. *United States v. Wurts*, 303 U.S. 414, 416 (1938). There is no apparent reason this should not apply equally to government corporations. See *Bechtel v. Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation*, 624 F. Supp. 590 (D.D.C. 1984), *aff'd*, 781 F.2d 906 (D.C. Cir. 1986).

The typical claims settlement charter provision of government corporations applies to debt claims as well as payment claims. For example, 15 U.S.C. § 714b(k) authorizes the Commodity Credit Corporation to “make final and conclusive settlement and adjustment of any claims by or against the Corporation.” Just as with payment claims, this authority removes the corporation from the coverage of 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a), the general claims settlement statute. Since most debt collection became statutory during the last third of the twentieth century, this has less significance than it does in the payment context.

Much of the governmentwide debt collection legislation applies expressly to government corporations. The first governmentwide statute, the Federal Claims Collection Act of 1966, defined “agency” as including “government corporations,” which in turn includes both wholly owned and mixed-ownership government corporations. Pub. L. No. 89-508, § 2(a), 80 Stat. 308 (July 19, 1966). The provisions which originated in the 1966 Act are the duty to pursue collection action and the compromise, suspension, and termination authorities, all of which are now found in 31 U.S.C. § 3711. The Debt Collection Act of 1982 (Pub. L. No. 97-365, 96 Stat. 1749 (Oct. 25, 1982)) did not include its own definition, but many of its provisions were cast as amendments to the Federal Claims Collection Act, such as sections 10 (31 U.S.C. § 3716, administrative offset), 11 (31 U.S.C. § 3717,

interest), and 13 (31 U.S.C. § 3718, contracts for collection services). Thus, these became subject to the 1966 definition.

The 1982 recodification of title 31 of the United States Code dropped the definition as unnecessary. While this made no substantive change, it then required several steps of statutory construction to figure out which provisions applied to government corporations. In 1996, as part of the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996, the express reference to government corporations was restored. 31 U.S.C. § 3701(a)(4), as amended by Pub. L. No. 104-134, § 31001(c)(2), 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-359 (Apr. 26, 1996). Thus, for example, the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation is subject to 31 U.S.C. § 3718 and may contract for collection services to collect delinquent debts, but not for audit services to identify the debts. [B-276628, Aug. 19, 1998](#).

One authority a government corporation has which a regular agency does not (by virtue of either its specific claims settlement power or its sue-and-be-sued power in conjunction with other charter powers) is the authority to waive indebtedness independent of the waiver statutes applicable to the rest of the government. [B-194628, July 3, 1979](#) (Government National Mortgage Association); [B-190806, Apr. 13, 1978](#) (Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation). The power to waive includes the power to rescind a previously granted waiver if found to have been obtained under a material mistake of fact, error of law, fraud, or misrepresentation. [B-272467.2, Aug. 28, 1998](#) (Export-Import Bank).

In the majority of cases in which the fact that a government corporation is involved is relevant, the issue is whether a debt owed to the corporation is the same as a debt owed to the United States. The largest group of cases involves 31 U.S.C. § 3713, which gives priority to government claims under certain circumstances, and the earliest of these dealt with the Emergency Fleet Corporation. The courts held that debts owed to the Fleet Corporation were not entitled to the statutory priority. *Sloan Shipyards Corp. v. United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corp.*, 258 U.S. 549 (1922);<sup>202</sup> *United States v. Wood*, 290 F. 109 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir.), *aff'd mem.*, 263 U.S. 680 (1923); *West Virginia Rail Co. v. Jewett Bigelow & Brooks Co.*, 26 F.2d 503 (E.D. Ky. 1928).

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<sup>202</sup> The summary treatment in *Sloan*, 258 U.S. at 570, did not cite the priority statute but the lower court opinion, which *Sloan* affirmed, did. See *In re Eastern Shore Shipbuilding Corp.*, 274 F. 893 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1921), *aff'd*, 258 U.S. 549 (1922).



As we have seen in section B.8.a(4) of this chapter, Fleet Corporation cases must be applied with great caution, but this is one instance in which the courts have generally reached the same result. Debts to the following corporations have been held not to constitute debts to the United States for purposes of the priority statute: Government National Mortgage Association or “Ginnie Mae” (*United States v. Blumenfeld*, 128 B.R. 918 (E.D. Penn. 1991)); Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (*Lapadula & Villani, Inc. v. United States*, 563 F. Supp. 782 (S.D.N.Y. 1983)); and the former Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) (*Reconstruction Finance Corporation v. Brady*, 150 S.W.2d 357 (Tex. Civ. App. 1941)). Two cases giving priority to RFC debts are *In re Peoria Consolidated Manufacturers, Inc.*, 286 F.2d 642 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1961), and *In re Tennessee Central Railway*, 463 F.2d 73 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 409 U.S. 893 (1972). *Peoria* involved a loan program given to the RFC under the Defense Production Act of 1950, the funds for which “were obtained from the Treasury of the United States and did not involve the capital or assets of RFC.” *Peoria*, 286 F.2d at 645. The *Tennessee* litigation occurred long after the RFC had been liquidated and its assets transferred to various government agencies. See RFC Liquidation Act, Pub. L. No. 83-163, 67 Stat. 230 (July 30, 1953).

Since the fact of corporate identity seems to be the key factor in these cases, the courts have reached a different result with respect to the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which has corporate powers but is not organized as a corporation. Debts owed to the FHA are debts owed to the United States under 31 U.S.C. § 3713. *Korman v. Federal Housing Administrator*, 113 F.2d 743 (D.C. Cir. 1940). Also, Congress can extend the government’s priority to any government corporation by expressly so providing in the charter, as it has done, for example, for the Commodity Credit Corporation, which “shall have all the rights, privileges, and immunities of the United States with respect to the right to priority of payment with respect to debts due from insolvent, deceased, or bankrupt debtors.” 15 U.S.C. § 714b(e). See *Engleman v. Commodity Credit Corp.*, 107 F. Supp. 930 (S.D. Cal. 1952) (recognizing the priority but finding the statute inapplicable where the government acquired its claim after an assignment for the benefit of creditors).

In the area of offset, GAO and the courts have mostly recognized the concept of the government as a single entity (“unitary government”) and treated debts to government corporations as debts to the United States. Applying the common-law offset inherent under the general settlement authority of 31 U.S.C. § 3702(a), GAO took the position that a refund of

certain taxes was subject to offset to collect a debt owed to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. B-35182, Aug. 16, 1943. The debtor sued, the government filed a counterclaim, and the Supreme Court effectively upheld the offset. *Cherry Cotton Mills, Inc. v. United States*, 327 U.S. 536 (1946). The Court said:

“Every reason that could have prompted Congress to authorize the Government to plead counterclaims for debts owed to any of its other agencies applies with equal force to debts owed to the R.F.C. . . . That the Congress chose to call it a corporation does not alter its characteristics so as to make it something other than what it actually is, an agency selected by Government to accomplish purely governmental purposes.”

*Id.* at 539.

While the Court was ruling, strictly speaking, on the propriety of the counterclaim and not the propriety of the administrative action, the rationale clearly fits. *See also* B-35182, Nov. 30, 1945. While there now exists a comprehensive statutory provision for administrative offset, 31 U.S.C. § 3716, which applies to government corporations under 31 U.S.C. § 3701(a)(4), the common-law principles remain relevant in cases in which section 3716 does not apply. *See McBride Cotton & Cattle Corp. v. Veneman*, 296 F. Supp. 2d 1125 (D.Ariz. 2003) (the Commodity Credit Corporation has administrative offset authority outside of 31 U.S.C. § 3716 by virtue of its statutory authority to settle and adjust claims and to determine its obligations and expenditures). Just like an agency, a government corporation cannot use 31 U.S.C. § 3716 unless it has issued implementing regulations. *In re Art Metal U.S.A., Inc.*, 109 B.R. 74, 81 (Bankr. D.N.J. 1989).

The unitary government concept also applies for the most part in setoffs under the Bankruptcy Code. *E.g., In re Turner*, 84 F.3d 1294 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996). The bankruptcy law regarding setoff, 11 U.S.C. § 553, preserves any common-law offset arising before commencement of the bankruptcy case. 11 U.S.C. § 553(a). For purposes of this provision, most government corporations are part of the unitary government. This had also been the case under prior versions of the Bankruptcy Code. *Luther v. United States*, 225 F.2d 495, 498 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1954); B-120801, July 7, 1955. There is an exception, however, for “certain federal agencies such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation [which] are viewed as separate

governmental units when they act in their private receivership capacity.” *Doe v. United States*, 58 F.3d 494, 498 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1995); *In re Lopes*, 211 B.R. 443, 447 n.3 (D.R.I. 1997). Another exception which fits this formulation is the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation when serving as trustee for terminated plans. The fact that the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation is a wholly owned government corporation had no impact on the court’s decision. *In re Art Metal U.S.A., Inc.*, 109 B.R. at 78.

In one early case predating *Cherry Cotton Mills*, GAO applied the precedents under the priority statute in determining which debts can be collected by offset against judgments under 31 U.S.C. § 3728. [A-97085, June 13, 1942](#) (a debt owed to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation was not a debt owed to the United States for judgment offset purposes). While the result might still be the same for the corporation under the “private capacity” exception, the analysis probably should start by applying the offset cases rather than the priority cases.

c. Litigation in the Courts

(1) Sovereign immunity

We begin with the well-recognized principle that sovereign immunity protects the federal government and its agencies from suit. *E.g.*, *Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Meyer*, 510 U.S. 471, 475 (1994). Of course, the United States may waive that immunity by consenting to be sued. *Id.* The Supreme Court in *Meyer* described sovereign immunity as being jurisdictional in nature—“the terms of [the United States’] consent to be sued in any court define that court’s jurisdiction to entertain the suit.” *Id.* at 475, quoting *United States v. Sherwood*, 312 U.S. 584, 586 (1941). Since government corporations are not always considered to “be” the United States, we cannot rely solely upon the general theories of sovereign immunity to determine the status of government corporations.

(2) “Sue-and-be-sued” clauses

Most government corporation charters provide the power to sue and be sued; that is, sue and be sued in the name of the corporation rather than the United States. The simplest charter provision empowers the corporation to “sue and be sued in its corporate name.” *E.g.*, 16 U.S.C. § 831c(b) (Tennessee Valley Authority); 7 U.S.C. § 942 (Rural Telephone Bank). *See also* [B-281064, Feb. 14, 2000](#) (discussing the Tennessee Valley Authority’s power to sue and be sued). A variation includes one or two additional elements, such as 29 U.S.C. § 1302(b)(1), which authorizes the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) to “sue and be sued, complain and

defend, in its corporate name and through its own counsel, in any court, State or Federal.” See also [B-289219, Oct. 29, 2002](#) (describing PBGC’s authority to sue and be sued in its own name). Another version adds a whole paragraph of instructions on such things as jurisdiction, venue, and the time limitations in which suit may be filed. *E.g.*, 7 U.S.C. § 1506(d) (Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (FCIC)); 15 U.S.C. § 714b(c) (Commodity Credit Corporation). See, *e.g.*, *Texas Peanut Farmers v. United States*, 409 F.3d 1370 (Fed. Cir. 2005) (discussing proper venue for suit against FCIC under 7 U.S.C. § 1506(d)).

Whether a government corporation without a sue-and-be-sued clause also has sovereign immunity is open to some debate. In *Keifer & Keifer v. Reconstruction Finance Corp.*, 306 U.S. 381, 389 (1939), the Supreme Court said that the mere fact that corporations are created by Congress and act as agencies of the United States “would not confer on such corporations legal immunity even if the conventional to-sue-and-be-sued clause were omitted.” Other courts seized upon this proposition and proclaimed that a government corporation does not share the government’s sovereign immunity unless Congress expressly grants it. *E.g.*, *Reconstruction Finance Corp. v. Langham*, 208 F.2d 556 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1953); *United States v. Edgerton & Sons*, 178 F.2d 763 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1949). Taken to its logical conclusion, this position would render the sue-and-be-sued clause surplusage—the situation would be the same with or without it. In *Keifer*, however, the Court was dealing with legislation which authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to create certain regional corporations, and found that Congress contemplated that the powers of the parent corporation would flow through to its progeny. Many government corporations have come and gone in the decades since the *Keifer* decision, virtually all possessing the sue-and-be-sued power. It would seem that the omission of that power from a new statutory charter could not be summarily dismissed. Be that as it may, the question would likely turn on congressional intent (*Federal Land Bank v. Priddy*, 295 U.S. 229, 231 (1935)) and may well remain academic if Congress continues to routinely include the sue-and-be-sued clause.

Regardless of the arguable consequences of silence in a legislative charter, the important starting principle is that Congress has the power to control the matter by including appropriate language, one way or the other, in the charter. *Keifer*, 306 U.S. at 389; *Priddy*, 295 U.S. at 231–32. As the Supreme Court put it in *Federal Housing Administration v. Burr*, 309 U.S. 242, 244 (1940), “there can be no doubt that Congress has full power to endow [a

government corporation] with the government’s immunity from suit or to determine the extent to which it may be subjected to the judicial process.”

A very similar statement is found in *Priddy*, 295 U.S. at 231: “Immunity from suit is . . . given up when the language of the organic statute specifically waives it.” *See also Dollar v. Land*, 154 F.2d 307, 312 (D.C. Cir. 1946), *aff’d*, 330 U.S. 731 (1947). The most common legislative device for waiving sovereign immunity is the sue-and-be-sued clause. When Congress passes enabling legislation allowing a federal entity to be sued under a sue-and-be-sued clause, that waiver of sovereign immunity “should be given a liberal—that is to say, expansive—construction.” *United States Postal Service v. Flamingo Industries, Ltd.*, 540 U.S. 736, 741 (2004). The Supreme Court emphasized that sue-and-be-sued clauses could only be limited by implication in certain circumstances where there has been a—

“clea[r] show[ing] that certain types of suits are not consistent with the statutory or constitutional scheme, that an implied restriction of the general authority is necessary to avoid grave interference with the performance of a governmental function, or that for other reasons it was plainly the purpose of Congress to use the ‘sue and be sued’ clause in a narrow sense.”

*Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Meyer*, 510 U.S. 471, 480 (1994), quoting *Burr*, 309 U.S. at 245.

The fact that a government corporation can sue or be sued does not mean that it can be hauled into court for any perceived wrong. The Supreme Court pointed out in *Meyer* that the sovereign immunity waiver is only the first step in a two-step process: “The first inquiry is whether there has been a waiver of sovereign immunity. If there has been such a waiver, as in this case, the second inquiry comes into play—that is, whether the source of substantive law upon which the claimant relies provides an avenue for relief.” *Meyer*, 510 U.S. at 484.

The *Meyer* Court held that the sue-and-be-sued clause of the former Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation waived its immunity with respect to a constitutional tort claim, but that there was no legal basis—and the Court emphatically refused to create one—for asserting a constitutional tort claim against the corporation itself. In the *Meyer* case, the source of the substantive law upon which the suit relied did not provide an avenue for relief. *Id.* at 483–86. Thus, a sue-and-be-sued clause does not

furnish the legal basis for “liability if the substantive law in question is not intended to reach the federal entity.” *Flamingo Industries*, 540 U.S. at 744. See also *Young v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 763 F. Supp. 485 (D. Colo. 1991); *Atchley v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 69 F. Supp. 952 (N.D. Ala. 1947); *Grant v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 49 F. Supp. 564 (E.D. Tenn. 1942). The *Atchley* court put it this way:

“A distinction must be recognized between the procedural question of whether a government corporation is subject to suit and the substantive question of whether a given set of facts establishes its liability as a matter of substantive law. The sue-and-be-sued clause in the TVA Act does nothing but remove the procedural bar to suit against an agency of the Federal Government. It does not engender liability in a case where liability would not otherwise exist.”

*Atchley*, 69 F. Supp. at 954.

Some conflict has arisen regarding the source of payments for potential judgments and the effect, if any, on jurisdiction. The source of that conflict can be found in the *Burr* case. In *Burr*, the Supreme Court held that garnishment was available to litigants against the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), but stated that this did not mean “that any funds or property of the United States [could] be held responsible for this judgment.” *Burr*, 309 U.S. at 250. The Supreme Court pointed out that claims against private corporations are normally only collectible against corporate assets and that the same was true for the FHA. The National Housing Act directed that claims against the FHA involved in this case “shall be paid out of funds made available by this Act.” *Id.* at 250, quoting Pub. L. No. 73-479, §1, 48 Stat. 1246 (June 27, 1934). Thus, the Supreme Court concluded that only funds which were actually in the possession of FHA, “severed from Treasury funds and Treasury control, are subject to execution.” *Burr*, 309 U.S. at 250. On the other hand, FHA funds deposited with the Treasury were not subject to execution because there had been no consent to reach them and allowing execution “would be to allow proceedings against the United States where it had not waived its immunity.” *Id.* Recognizing that this restriction on execution deprived it of utility, the Supreme Court emphasized that this was an inherent limitation on the statutory scheme and remedies provided by Congress. *Id.* at 251.

Federal courts have differed in interpreting the *Burr* holding. Some courts have held that, in order to establish the government’s waiver of sovereign

immunity, the party suing a government corporation with a sue-and-be-sued clause must show that a judgment against the government corporation would come from funds in its possession and control. *Johnson v. Secretary of Housing & Urban Development*, 710 F.2d 1130, 1138 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983); *S.S. Silberblatt, Inc. v. East Harlem Pilot Block*, 608 F.2d 28, 36 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1979); *Marcus Garvey Square, Inc. v. Winston Burnett Construction Co.*, 595 F.2d 1126, 1131 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979); *Rawlins v. M&T Mortgage Corp.*, No. 05 Civ. 2572(RCC) (S.D.N.Y. Sept. 1, 2005); *Thomas v. Pierce*, 662 F. Supp. 519, 526 (D. Kan. 1987). See also *Oklahoma Mortgage Co. v. Government National Mortgage Association*, 831 F. Supp. 821, 823 (W.D. Okla. 1993) (the Government National Mortgage Association has no funds in its possession and control separate from Treasury funds, and statute precludes recovery from its assets, so claims against it were, in reality, claims against the United States barred by sovereign immunity).

Other courts reason that even if funds are in the possession and control of the federal entity, the action must be brought against the United States if the funds originated from the public treasury. *Housing Products Co. v. Flint Housing Commission*, No. 99-1551 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. Nov. 7, 2000) (*per curiam*); *Portsmouth Redevelopment and Housing Authority v. Pierce*, 706 F.2d 471 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1983). These courts note that funds appropriated to a federal entity “do not cease to be public funds after they are appropriated.” *Pierce*, 706 F.2d at 473–74. At least one court has criticized this approach on the basis that if funds appropriated to federal entities cannot be used to satisfy judgments acquired by the waiver of immunity provided by a sue-or-be-sued clause, it would “render such clauses ineffectual.” *C.D. Barnes Associates, Inc. v. Grand Haven Hideaway Ltd.*, 406 F. Supp. 2d 801, 818 (W.D. Mich. 2005).

Some courts have rejected both these approaches, reasoning that those cases misinterpret *Burr. Auction Co. of America v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 132 F.3d 746 (D.C. Cir. 1997). In deciding jurisdictional issues involving the FDIC, the *Auction* court criticized the distinction between suits against agencies and those against the United States because “this test was designed to distinguish suits against private individuals from ones against the sovereign,” and “[f]ederal agencies or instrumentalities performing federal functions *always* fall on the ‘sovereign’ side of [the] fault line; that is why they possess immunity that requires waiver.” *Id.* at 752. The *Auction* court stated that although the source of funds for recovery may become an issue, “it is not jurisdictional and does not bear on whether a suit against the FDIC as Receiver is a suit against the United States.” *Id.* at 752–53.

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Other courts have held that when sovereign immunity is waived by a sue-and-be sued clause, the court does not need to analyze whether there are funds within the government corporation's control for jurisdictional purposes. *C.H. Sanders Co. v. BHAP Housing Development Fund*, 903 F.2d 114, 120 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1990);<sup>203</sup> *Jackson Square Ass'n v. Department of Housing & Urban Development*, 797 F. Supp. 242, 245–46 (W.D.N.Y. 1992). Upon consideration of the government's petition for rehearing in the *C.H. Sanders* case, the Second Circuit addressed the concern that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was obliged to satisfy any judgment that might be rendered out of Treasury funds. *C.H. Sanders Co. v. BHAP Housing Development Fund*, 910 F.2d 33 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1990) (denying petition for rehearing). The Second Circuit held that HUD would be obliged to satisfy any judgment only out of non-Treasury funds that are available to it and would have no payment obligation if no such funds were available. *Id.*

Another court distinguished *Burr* on the basis that jurisdiction was derived from another source, such as the Tucker Act, which does not limit the source of judgment, instead of FHA's sue and be sued clause. *National State Bank of Newark v. United States*, 357 F.2d 704, 711 (Ct. Cl. 1966).

Finally, the court in *Far West Federal Bank v. Office of Thrift Supervision*, 930 F.2d 883, 890 (Fed. Cir. 1991), recognized the split, but avoided choosing one or the other because the court was able to identify funds in control of the government corporation from which any judgments would be paid. In *Far West*, the government argued that any judgment would be paid from Treasury funds and not funds in control of the government corporation and such a claim could only be asserted in the Claims Court under the Tucker Act. *Id.* at 890. The government's argument was based upon a "Treasury backup" provision stating that the Secretary of Treasury will fund amounts as may be necessary for fund purposes. *Id.* However, the court held that the liabilities of the fund were to be paid from the fund, the fund was to be administered by the government corporation and the Treasury backup provision simply implemented congressional intent that the fund have sufficient resources to carry out its obligations. *Id.* at 889–90. Thus, the court concluded that the Treasury backup provision did not

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<sup>203</sup> We note that the sue-or-be-sued clause at issue in *C.H. Sanders* has been amended since the case was decided. See 12 U.S.C. § 1701q. Although the clause has been superseded (see *United American Inc. v. N.B.C.-U.S.A. Housing Inc. Twenty Seven*, 400 F. Supp. 2d 59, 63–65 (D.C. Cir. 2005)), the proposition for which the case is cited (*i.e.*, waiver of sovereign immunity by a sue-or-be-sued clause) has not been disturbed.



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bar recovery under the sue-and-be-sued clause or impose exclusive Tucker Act jurisdiction. *Id.* at 890.

Notwithstanding the differences discussed above, generally, judgments against a government corporation are paid by the government corporation rather than from the Judgment Fund.<sup>204</sup> Judgments against government corporations are “otherwise provided for,” so when judgments are obtained against government corporations they can pay them, like private corporations, from those corporate assets. Both GAO and the Attorney General recognize this rule. *See, e.g., 62 Comp. Gen. 12 (1982); B-236414, Feb. 22, 1991; 22 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 141 (1998); 13 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 362 (1989).*

### (3) The Tucker Act

Sue-and-be-sued clauses are not the only waivers of sovereign immunity for government corporations. The Tucker Act waives sovereign immunity of the United States and sets out jurisdictional parameters for certain monetary claims against the United States, including those founded upon the Constitution, any act of Congress, any regulation of an executive department, or any express or implied contract with the United States. 28 U.S.C. § 1491(a)(1). Under the Tucker Act, the United States Court of Federal Claims has exclusive jurisdiction for civil suits of more than \$10,000 and concurrent jurisdiction with federal district courts for civil suits not exceeding \$10,000. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(a)(2) and 1491(a)(1). The Tucker Act provides jurisdiction for suits against the United States “whenever ‘a federal instrumentality acts within its statutory authority to carry out [the government’s] purposes’ as long as no other specific statutory provision bars jurisdiction.” *Auction Co. of America v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 141 F.3d 1198, 1199 (1998) (*Auction II*), quoting *Butz Engineering Corp. v. United States*, 499 F.2d 619, 622 (Ct. Cl. 1974). Several mixed-ownership government corporations, such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) as receiver, the Office of Thrift Supervision, and the Resolution Trust Corporation have been held to be federal instrumentalities for Tucker Act purposes. *Auction II*, 141 F.3d

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<sup>204</sup> Under section 1304 of title 31, United States Code, a permanent appropriation, commonly known as the Judgment Fund, was created to pay judgments against the United States when, among other things, “the payment is not otherwise provided for.” If an appropriation or fund under the control of the agency involved in the litigation is legally available to satisfy a particular judgment, then the judgment appropriation may not be used. *See, e.g., 62 Comp. Gen. 12 (1982); B-236414, Feb. 22, 1991; B-211389, July 23, 1984.*

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at 1199; *Auction Co. of America v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 132 F.3d 746, 750 (D.C. Cir. 1997) (*Auction I*). See, e.g., *Slattery v. United States*, 35 Fed. Cl. 180 (1996); *Seuss v. United States*, 33 Fed. Cl. 89 (1995).

A wholly owned government corporation is clearly a federal instrumentality for Tucker Act purposes where it can be demonstrated “that it is an agency selected by the Government to accomplish purely governmental purposes . . . and that it is doing work of the Government.” *Breitbeck v. United States*, 500 F.2d 556, 558 (1974) (Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation). See also *Oklahoma Mortgage Co. v. Government National Mortgage Association*, 831 F. Supp. 821 (1993) (company’s claim was an action founded upon a contract, against the United States, seeking relief in excess of \$10,000 which was within the exclusive jurisdiction of the United States Claims Court). Even where wholly owned government corporations carry out commercial activities that can be characterized as private, if their purpose is to further the policy interests of the government, they are considered to be federal instrumentalities for Tucker Act purposes. *Optiperu, S.A., v. Overseas Private Investment Corp.*, 640 F. Supp. 420, 424 (D.D.C. 1986). The *Optiperu* court reviewed the legislative history of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and found several instances where Congress set out OPIC’s governmental policy objectives while carrying out transactions that would otherwise normally be characterized as private, such as issuing and guaranteeing loans and insurance. *Id.* at 424–25. The court noted that under 22 U.S.C. § 2191 OPIC is “an agency of the United States under the policy guidance of the Secretary of State.” *Optiperu*, 640 F. Supp. at 424. The court also pointed out that OPIC was listed as a wholly owned government corporation in the Government Corporation Control Act, 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3)(H), and noted the various provisions dealing with OPIC’s budget submissions, appropriations, financial audits and account requirements with the government. *Optiperu*, 640 F. Supp. at 424 n.2. Finally, the court found that even if OPIC had to pay any judgments out of its funds rather than the Treasury, this did not eliminate its status as a federal instrumentality. *Id.* at 425–26. Rather, the United States would be jointly or severally liable for any money damages obtained against OPIC. *Id.* at 426.

The various waivers of sovereign immunity and jurisdictional authority may provide plaintiffs with several choices of forum. For example, in *Auction I*, 132 F.3d at 753, the court pointed out that plaintiffs suing the FDIC in contract could sue in the Court of Federal Claims for Tucker Act suits of more than \$10,000, in the Court of Federal Claims or federal district

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court for Tucker Act claims of less than \$10,000, or in any court of law or equity under the FDIC sue-or-be-sued clause.

(4) Liability for costs and remedies of litigation

Once government corporations sue, or are sued, they can expect to be subject to at least some of the typical costs of litigation. Courts have analyzed the sue-and-be-sued clauses of government corporations in order to determine which costs can be assessed against government corporations. In *Federal Housing Administration v. Burr*, 309 U.S. 242 (1940), for example, the Supreme Court held that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was subject to all civil process incident to the commencement or continuance of legal proceedings which included the garnishment of the wages of an FHA employee sought in that case.<sup>205</sup> The Supreme Court noted that garnishment is a well-known remedy available to litigants and “[t]o say that Congress did not intend to include such civil process in the words ‘sue and be sued’ would in general deprive suits of some of their efficacy.” *Id.* at 246. The Court pointed out two examples of government agencies with sue-and-be-sued clauses with specific prohibitions against attachment and garnishment, which added weight to the Court’s conclusion that Congress ordinarily intended that such civil process apply or it would have specifically prohibited them. *Id.* at 247 n.10.

The Supreme Court considered whether the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), as the unsuccessful litigant, could be held liable for costs incident to litigation. *Reconstruction Finance Corp. v. Menihan Corp.*, 312 U.S. 81 (1941). The Supreme Court noted that although the RFC acted as a governmental agency “its transactions are akin to those of private enterprises” and Congress provided it with the power to sue and be sued. *Id.* at 83. The Supreme Court held that sue-and-be-sued clauses “normally include the natural and appropriate incidents of legal proceedings” and that the “payment of costs by the unsuccessful litigant, awarded by the court in the proper exercise of the authority it possesses in similar cases, is manifestly such an incident.” *Id.* at 85. Although this statement was very broad, its application has been somewhat limited.

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<sup>205</sup> Compare 26 Comp. Gen. 907 (1947) (finding that a sue-and-be-sued clause did not authorize collection of an FHA employee’s federal tax indebtedness); 19 Comp. Gen. 798 (1940) (finding that a sue-and-be-sued clause did not authorize the FHA to purchase insurance to cover potential tort liability).

Generally, interest cannot be recovered in a suit against the United States unless there is an express waiver of sovereign immunity from an award of interest. *Library of Congress v. Shaw*, 478 U.S. 310, 311 (1986);<sup>206</sup> *see also* [B-243029, Mar. 25, 1991](#). Where a government corporation does not act like a private corporation, but acts as an agent for the government and there is no statute or authority for paying interest, interest cannot be imposed upon the United States directly or indirectly through the agent government corporation. *Riverview Packing Co. v. Reconstruction Finance Corp.*, 207 F.2d 361, 370 (3<sup>rd</sup> Cir. 1953).

However, interest can and has been recovered against government corporations under certain circumstances. A “commercial venture” exception to the no-interest rule has developed. Generally this exception recognizes that where an agency of the United States is involved in an essentially commercial and for-profit venture, its sue-and-be-sued clause waives sovereign immunity and may allow liability for pre- or post-judgment interest. *Standard Oil Co. v. United States*, 267 U.S. 76, 79 (1925); *R&R Farm Enterprises, Inc. v. Federal Crop Insurance Corp.*, 788 F.2d 1148 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986). If the party seeking payment of interest is a recipient of government benefits arising out of the agency’s noncommercial ventures, courts have refused to award interest because the payment would be in excess of what Congress or the agency has authorized by law or regulation. *R&R Farm Enterprises*, 788 F.2d at 1153. The waiver of sovereign immunity does not create a new liability upon the government for the payment of interest. *See McGehee v. Panama Canal Commission*, 872 F.2d 1213 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *rehearing denied*, 880 F.2d 413 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1989); *Pender Peanut Corp. v. United States*, 21 Cl. Ct. 95 (1990).

In cases where the government corporation is not engaged in a commercial enterprise, but is acting as a governmental, regulatory entity, it is not subject to prejudgment interest awards even where it has a sue-and-be-sued clause. For example, where the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) is acting as a regulatory agency protecting the banking system, it is not subject to prejudgment interest awards. *Far West Federal Bank v. Office of Thrift Supervision*, 119 F.3d 1358, 1366–67 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994);

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<sup>206</sup> The Civil Rights Act has been amended to allow interest on judgments against the United States since *Shaw* was decided. *See* Pub. L. No. 102-166, § 114, 105 Stat. 1071, 1079 (Nov. 21, 1991). While the statutory provision at issue in the case has been superseded (*see Landgraf v. U.S.I. Film Products*, 511 U.S. 244, 251 (1994)), the proposition for which the case is cited (*i.e.*, the need for an express waiver of immunity from an interest award) has not been overturned.

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*Spawn v. Western Bank-Westheimer*, 989 F.2d 830, 833–38 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1993), *cert. denied*, 510 U.S. 1109 (1994); *Gilbert v. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.*, 950 F. Supp. 1194, 1199–1200 (D.D.C. 1997).

The award of prejudgment interest may also be imposed against government corporations under the analysis recognized by the Supreme Court in *Loeffler v. Frank*, 486 U.S. 549, 556 (1988). Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress waived sovereign immunity for actions against federal agencies, but not for interest awards. *Shaw*, 478 U.S. at 323. In *Loeffler*, the Supreme Court identified two factors which waived any existing immunity of the Postal Service.<sup>207</sup> First, the Supreme Court recognized that Congress had designed the Postal Service to be run like a business by “launching” it into the commercial world. *Loeffler*, 486 U.S. at 556. Second, Congress included a sue-and-be-sued clause in the Postal Service’s charter. *Id.* However, since Congress did not expressly limit the waiver of sovereign immunity effected by the Postal Service’s sue-and-be-sued clause, interest could be recovered against the Postal Service in Title VII cases even though it could not be recovered against other agencies. The Supreme Court concluded that “Congress is presumed to have waived any otherwise existing immunity of the Postal Service from interest awards” which could be recovered from the Postal Service “to the extent that interest is recoverable against a private party as a normal incident of suit.” *Id.* at 556–57.

Finally, like federal agencies, government corporations may not be sued for punitive damages unless expressly authorized by Congress. *Springer v. Bryant*, 897 F.2d 1085, 1089 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990).

The Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) also authorizes fee awards against the United States, in various administrative and judicial actions which were not previously authorized. Pub. L. No. 96-481, 94 Stat. 2321, 2325–30 (Oct. 21, 1980), *amended by* Pub. L. No. 99-80, 99 Stat. 183–87 (Aug. 5, 1985). *See also* 63 *Comp. Gen.* 260, 261 (1984). Prior to the EAJA’s implementation, the award of attorney’s fees against the government was barred and a sue-and-be-sued clause that did not directly or expressly authorize an award of fees was not sufficient to override that bar.

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<sup>207</sup> The U.S. Postal Service is an independent establishment of the executive branch. 39 U.S.C. § 201. However, it shares many characteristics of government corporations including commercial or business-type operations and a sue-and-be-sued clause. 39 U.S.C. § 401.

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*Resolution Trust Corp. v. Miramon*, 935 F. Supp. 838, 842 (E.D. La. 1996), citing *Knights of the Ku Klux Klan v. East Baton Rouge Parish School Board*, 679 F.2d 64, 66 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1982).

The EAJA addressed judicial fee awards by extensively revising 28 U.S.C. § 2412. Section 2412 applies to the United States or “any agency and any official of the United States acting in his or her official capacity.” 28 U.S.C. § 2412(c)(2). The EAJA has been applied to both mixed-ownership and wholly owned government corporations, although without addressing the issue of the EAJA’s application to them. See, e.g., *Resolution Trust Corp. v. Eason*, 17 F.3d 1126 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994); *Miramon*, 935 F. Supp. 838; *Olenhouse v. Commodity Credit Corp.*, 922 F. Supp. 489 (D. Kan. 1996).

As is true with other federal agencies, the EAJA operates as a limited waiver of a government corporation’s sovereign immunity by permitting courts to award reasonable attorney’s fees to prevailing parties under common law or the terms of a statute, but the waiver must be strictly construed in favor of the government. *Eason*, 17 F.3d at 1134. In that case, the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC) sued officers of a failed savings and loan association alleging negligence and breach of fiduciary duty. *Id.* at 1128. The officers successfully defended against the action and attempted to recover attorney’s fees from RTC relying on a regulation that authorized indemnification for expenses incurred in defending charges arising out of their official conduct. *Id.* at 1135. However, that regulation only applied during the “life” of the savings and loan. By the time RTC brought the action, the entity had failed and RTC was not acting in the capacity of the savings and loan. *Id.* Thus, the regulation did not apply and the officers could not recover attorney’s fees. *Id.* at 1136.

The EAJA is specific in the items that may be awarded in a judgment against the United States for costs, fees and expenses, but does not authorize general compensatory damages for embarrassment or loss of reputation. *Miramon*, 935 F. Supp. at 843–44. Neither does a “naked” sue-and-be-sued clause, that is, one which does not directly or expressly authorize an award of fees. *Id.* at 843.

Finally, the terms “common law” and “statute” as used in the EAJA’s authorization of fees refers to federal common law or a federal statute, not state law. *Eason*, 17 F.3d at 1134 n.6; *Miramon*, 935 F. Supp. at 846.

(5) Sovereign immunity from state and local taxes

The oft-quoted principle that the federal government and its activities<sup>208</sup> are immune from taxation by state and local governments was recognized by the Supreme Court in a case involving a government corporation. *McCulloch v. Maryland*, 17 U.S. (4 Wheat.) 316 (1819).<sup>209</sup> The application of this principle to government corporations has varied since *McCulloch*, but the main debate has centered on whether one should assume that an entity has such immunity due to its status as a corporation carrying out governmental purposes, or whether Congress must expressly grant such immunity by statute.

*McCulloch* involved the Second Bank of the United States, which was chartered by Congress, had 20 percent of its capital stock subscribed to by the United States, and several of its directors appointed by the President. The Second Bank of the United States established a branch in Maryland. The state of Maryland imposed a tax on all banks or branches of banks in the state which were not chartered by the Maryland state legislature. The Supreme Court held that the Supremacy clause of the Constitution prevents a state from exercising any power, by taxation or otherwise, to retard, impede, burden, or in any manner control the operations of the federal government or its constitutional means of carrying out its powers. *Id.* at 436. The Supreme Court emphasized that the bank's purpose was to carry out a governmental function, and concluded that any effort to tax the bank directly affected the government. The Supreme Court put it this way: "But this is a tax on the operations of the bank, and is, consequently, a tax on the operation of an instrument employed by the government of the Union to carry its powers into execution. Such a tax must be unconstitutional." *Id.* at 436–37.

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<sup>208</sup> A federal instrumentality is also immune from state and local taxation if it is "so assimilated by the Government as to become one of its constituent parts." *United States v. Township of Muskegon*, 355 U.S. 484, 486 (1958) (here state taxation was not unconstitutional as applied to a corporation which was permitted to use government property in the performance of government contracts because the government had no control over the activities of the corporation or any other interest which would make the corporation part of the government). The Supreme Court has added that tax immunity for a federal instrumentality is appropriate when the agency or instrumentality is "so closely connected to the Government that the two cannot be realistically viewed as separate entities, at least insofar as the activity being taxed is concerned." *United States v. New Mexico*, 455 U.S. 720, 735 (1982).

<sup>209</sup> The United States' immunity from state and local taxation is discussed in Chapter 4, section C.15.

Although the act creating the Bank did not expressly prohibit the states from taxing it, the Supreme Court in *McCulloch* did not address that issue. Five years later, the Supreme Court took up this issue in *Osborn v. The Bank of the United States*, 22 U.S. (9 Wheat.) 738 (1824). In *Osborn*, the Supreme Court held that although Congress did not expressly prohibit taxing the Bank, immunity was implied as a consequence of Congress's power to create and protect the Bank. *Id.* at 865.

In later cases, the Supreme Court addressed Congress's power to exempt government corporations from state taxation without relying upon the "implied" immunity of the *McCulloch* and *Osborn* cases. *Federal Land Bank v. Crosland*, 261 U.S. 374 (1923); *Smith v. Kansas City Title & Trust Co.*, 255 U.S. 180 (1921). In those cases, Congress created government corporations—federal land banks—and specifically exempted their bonds and mortgages from state and local taxation. The Supreme Court held that Congress not only had the power to create the corporations, but to protect their operations by exempting them from taxation. *Crosland*, 261 U.S. at 377; *Smith*, 255 U.S. at 211–12. A few months after it decided *Crosland*, the Supreme Court returned to the *McCulloch* analysis in a case involving state taxation of another government corporation, the Spruce Production Corporation. *Clallam County v. United States*, 263 U.S. 341 (1923). In the words of the Supreme Court:

“It is true that no specific words forbid the tax, but the prohibition established by *McCulloch v. Maryland*, . . . was established on the ground that the power to tax assumed by the State was in its nature ‘repugnant to the constitutional laws of the Union’ and therefore was one that under the Constitution the State could not use. . . . The immunity is derived from the Constitution in the same sense and upon the same principle that it would be if expressed in so many words.”

*Id.* at 344, quoting *McCulloch*, 17 U.S. (4 Wheat.) at 425, 426, 430.

A statement by the *Clallam* court provides a clue as to what appears to be the distinction between these approaches. The Supreme Court noted that, unlike “the case of a corporation having its own purposes, as well as those of the United States and interested in profit on its own account,” the Spruce Production Corporation was incorporated only for the convenience of the United States to carry out its ends. *Clallam*, 263 U.S. at 345. Although not



addressed in either the *Smith or Crosland* cases, the federal land banks were mixed-ownership government corporations with private (read profit), as well as government purposes. See also *Federal Land Bank v. Priddy*, 295 U.S. 229, 234–35 (1935) (noting that Congress provided a specific grant of immunity from taxation to a corporation having its own as well as government purposes).

Subsequent decisions by the Supreme Court continued this analysis. For example, recognizing that Congress may grant immunity from state and local taxation to a federal instrumentality or government corporation in *Pittman v. Home Owners' Loan Corp.*, 308 U.S. 21 (1939), the Supreme Court explained that “Congress has not only the power to create a corporation to facilitate the performance of governmental functions, but has the power to protect the operations thus validly authorized.” *Id.* at 32–33.<sup>210</sup> The Supreme Court held that the creation of the corporation “was a constitutional exercise of the congressional power and that the activities of the Corporation through which the national government lawfully acts must be regarded as governmental functions and as entitled to whatever immunity attaches to those functions when performed by the government itself through its departments.” *Id.* at 32. See also *Federal Land Bank v. Bismark Lumber Co.*, 314 U.S. 95, 99 (1941) (statutory exemption from taxation for federal land banks includes sales taxes).

As seen in the cases discussed above, Congress has specifically prescribed the scope of immunity for many government corporations by wholly or partially exempting them from state and local taxation.<sup>211</sup> In other instances, Congress expressly waived immunity from taxation of any real property belonging to a government corporation. For example, under the provisions of the statute establishing the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), Congress waived the immunity of real property of the

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<sup>210</sup> The *Pittman* case involved the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a wholly owned and controlled government corporation, upon whose mortgages the state of Maryland imposed a tax. The act establishing the Home Owners' Loan Corporation provided that it, its franchises, capital, reserves, surplus, loans and income shall be exempt from all state and municipal taxes.

<sup>211</sup> Other examples include, but are not limited to, 7 U.S.C. § 1511 (Federal Crop Insurance Corporation); 22 U.S.C. § 2199(j) (Overseas Private Investment Corporation); 33 U.S.C. § 986 (Saint Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation); 29 U.S.C. § 1302(g) (Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation).

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RFC and its subsidiary corporations.<sup>212</sup> *Board of County Commissioners v. United States*, 123 Ct. Cl. 304 (1952). However, the RFC’s authority to pay taxes was contingent upon the corporation’s holding legal title and having full control and dominion over the property. [32 Comp. Gen. 164 \(1952\)](#). Once the RFC declared property to be surplus and transferred the title to the United States, the property was held by and for the use of the United States. Thus, the “cloak of immunity descended upon the property” so that no tax liability for state and local taxes could be imposed and agencies could not use appropriated funds to pay such taxes. *Board of County Commissioners*, 123 Ct. Cl. at 324 (property transferred to the Bureau of Mines). *See also* [36 Comp. Gen. 713 \(1957\)](#) (property transferred to the General Services Administration); [34 Comp. Gen. 319 \(1955\)](#) (same).

(6) Litigation authority

Once a government corporation decides to sue, or is sued, it must determine whether it must be represented in litigation by the Justice Department, or whether it can use or hire its own attorneys. The Justice Department has extremely broad authority with respect to litigation involving the federal government. “Except as otherwise authorized by law, the conduct of litigation in which the United States, an agency, or officer thereof is a party, or is interested” is reserved to the Justice Department. 28 U.S.C. § 516. Further, “the Attorney General shall supervise all litigation to which the United States, an agency, or officer thereof is a party.” *Id.* § 519. The term “agency” is defined for purposes of title 28 of the United States Code as including “any corporation in which the United States has a proprietary interest.” *Id.* § 451. Therefore, absent some form of exemption, 28 U.S.C. §§ 516 and 519 apply to wholly owned and at least some mixed-ownership government corporations. In some cases, the authority is reinforced by charter language. For example, 7 U.S.C. § 943(e) expressly makes the Rural Telephone Bank subject to the Attorney General’s litigation authority.

The Justice Department has expressed the position that exemptions from the Attorney General’s litigation authority should be clear and specific. *See* Department of Justice, Civil Division, *Compendium of Departments and Agencies With Authority Either by Statute or Agreement to Represent*

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<sup>212</sup> Act of January 22, 1932, § 10, 47 Stat. 10, *as amended by* Act of June 10, 1941, § 3, 55 Stat. 248.

*Themselves in Civil Litigation* (October 1982), at 9–10 (hereafter, *Civil Litigation Compendium*). The Department does not regard a simple sue-and-be-sued clause as enough. *Id.* at 11. An example of explicit authority is the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation statute, which provides that the Corporation may complain or defend a lawsuit “through its own counsel.” 29 U.S.C. § 1302(b)(1). Even where a corporation has independent litigating authority, Justice believes the corporation should invoke that authority only in programmatic litigation. In nonprogrammatic litigation which is of governmentwide import, like suits under the Freedom of Information Act or Federal Tort Claims Act, Justice urges the corporations to avail themselves of Department representation. *Civil Litigation Compendium*, at 18–19. The Department’s litigating authority does not apply to noninstrumentality corporations. *Id.* at 22 n.13.

The *Civil Litigation Compendium* recognizes that Justice has acquiesced in self-representation by two corporations, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which possess only the simple version of the sue-and-be-sued clause. *Id.* at 26–27. The courts have held Justice to that acquiescence and have upheld self-representation authority for FDIC and TVA. *Tennessee Valley Authority v. EPA*, 278 F.3d 1184, 1191–93 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2002), *withdrawn in part on other grounds*, 376 F.2d 1236 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003), *cert. denied*, 541 U.S. 1030 (2004); *Cooper v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 723 F.2d 1560 (Fed. Cir. 1983); *Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. v. Irwin*, 727 F. Supp. 1073 (N.D. Tex. 1989), *aff’d on other grounds*, 916 F.2d 1051 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1990); *Algernon Blair Industrial Contractors, Inc. v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 540 F. Supp. 551 (M.D. Ala. 1982).

Exemptions may be partial as well as complete. For example, the Export-Import Bank may represent itself “in all legal and arbitral proceedings outside the United States.” 12 U.S.C. § 635(a)(1). Under this provision, Justice has advised that it is required to conduct the Bank’s litigation inside the United States, and in addition may represent the Bank in stateside arbitration proceedings. 3 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 226 (1979).

One consequence of self-representation is that the corporation must pick up the responsibility of paying the actual representation costs and the various expenses of preparing and presenting the case which would otherwise be borne by the Justice Department’s litigation budget. 38 Comp. Gen. 343 (1958) (requiring the Federal Housing Administration to bear the costs of auctioneer fees and advertising costs incident to foreclosure proceedings); B-9850, May 23, 1940 (requiring the Home Owners’ Loan

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Corporation to bear the costs of attorney fees, cost of printing an appellate brief, and other miscellaneous expenses); B-3163, Apr. 24, 1939 (requiring the Federal Housing Administration to bear the cost of legal services necessary for foreclosing a defaulted mortgage or regaining possession of property).

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## 9. Termination of Government Corporations

Unlike a private corporation, a government corporation cannot terminate its existence on its own authority.<sup>213</sup> The power to terminate a government corporation flows from the power to create one, a power clearly held by Congress. Congress may terminate a government corporation for any of a number of reasons. For example, many government corporations were created to address short-term or temporary issues or crises. Logically, once the issue or crisis is resolved, the need for the government corporation is eliminated and it can be terminated. For example, many corporations created to meet the wartime needs of World Wars I and II, and the social and economic crises of the Great Depression, were dissolved once those crises had passed.

Congress terminated all government corporations in order to bring them under its control upon the enactment of the Government Corporation Control Act (GCCA). GCCA required all government corporations then existing to institute dissolution or liquidation proceedings on or before June 30, 1948, subject to reincorporation by act of Congress for such purposes, powers and duties as might be authorized by law. Pub. L. No. 79-248, § 304(b), 59 Stat. 597, 602 (Dec. 6, 1945). *See Lebron v. National Railroad Passenger Corp.*, 513 U.S. 374, 390 (1995).

Sometimes Congress provides itself with a built-in opportunity to determine whether it wants to continue a program carried out by a government corporation. Congress may provide a termination date in the enabling legislation or charter of some government corporations that must be reauthorized if Congress wants them to continue in existence. In other situations, Congress may impose a deadline for a government corporation to fulfill its goals. For example, Congress directed the Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC), created to manage and resolve failed savings institutions and recover funds by managing and selling the institutions' assets, to terminate no later than December 31, 1995. 12 U.S.C. § 1441a(m).

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<sup>213</sup> See Ronald C. Moe, *Managing the Public Business: Federal Government Corporations*, S. Prt. No. 104-18, at 29 (1995) (Moe 1995).

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RTC did terminate by that date, having substantially completed its mission. GAO, *Financial Audit: Resolution Trust Corporation's 1995 Financial Statements*, GAO/AIMD-96-123 (Washington, D.C.: July 2, 1996), at 8–9.

Congress may take actions short of termination by converting a government corporation into a private institution. For example, Congress converted the National Consumer Cooperative Bank from a mixed-ownership government corporation to a federally chartered, private banking institution. Pub. L. No. 97-35, title III, subtitle C, §§ 390–396, 95 Stat. 357, 433–41 (Aug. 13, 1981). See [B-219801, Oct. 10, 1986](#). Other government corporations are created with the goal of privatization. For example, Congress directed the United States Enrichment Corporation (USEC) to operate as a for-profit government corporation and work towards privatization.<sup>214</sup> In 1996, Congress enacted legislation to privatize the USEC.<sup>215</sup>

Congress may also terminate a government corporation due to its dissatisfaction with the corporation's purpose and management. For example, Congress abolished the Synthetic Fuels Corporation in 1985 by rescinding its funding and giving it 120 days to wind up its affairs.<sup>216</sup> Pub. L. No. 99-190, 99 Stat. 1185, 1249–50 (Dec. 19, 1985). The Federal Asset Disposition Association met a similar fate. In the face of mounting criticism regarding its method of creation, its purpose, and management, Congress dissolved it as part of the Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement Act of 1989, Pub. L. No. 101-73, § 501(a), 103 Stat. 183, 383 (Aug. 9, 1989).<sup>217</sup>

In other cases, Congress has changed its view and gone back and forth on the form of a government corporation. For example, Congress replaced the Panama Canal Company, a government corporation, with the Panama Canal Commission, an appropriated fund agency, because it wanted to maintain greater oversight of the Canal during the remaining years of U.S. control. Pub. L. No. 96-70, §§ 1101, 1302, 93 Stat. 452, 456, 477 (Sept. 27,

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<sup>214</sup> Energy Policy Act of 1992, Pub. L. No. 102-486, title IX, § 901, 106 Stat. 2776, 2937–38 (Oct. 24, 1992), *repealed by* United States Enrichment Corporation Privatization Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, title III, § 3116(a)(1), 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-349 (Apr. 26, 1996).

<sup>215</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-134, §§ 3101–3117.

<sup>216</sup> For a more detailed discussion on this, see Moe 1995, at 19–22.

<sup>217</sup> For a more detailed discussion on this, see Moe 1995, at pages 22–26.

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1979). See B-280951, Dec. 3, 1998. Subsequently, Congress granted the Commission greater autonomy and converted it into a revolving-fund agency. Pub. L. No. 100-203, title V, subtitle E, pt. 2, § 5422(a), 101 Stat. 1330, 1330-271 (Dec. 22, 1987); B-280951, at 6. Finally, Congress expanded the Commission’s business-like powers to its final status as a wholly owned government corporation,<sup>218</sup> when the canal was transferred from U.S. control, “as an autonomous entity that [could] compete as a commercial enterprise in international transportation markets.” B-280951, at 8.

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## C. Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities

“Their birth is funded by the Government. The seed money for their creation came from the Government. They are managed by Government people who are paid Government salaries. They usually occupy Government facilities, perhaps on some cost-reimbursable arrangement, but on Government real estate, using Government facilities. They perform essentially a morale-building function for Government personnel, which the Government would otherwise have to appropriate funds for if it weren’t having it done in this manner. There is a very close identity between them and the Government people with whom they are working every day. They are providing service to Government people engaged in a Government mission. As I say, this is just off the top of my head.”

Testimony of Louis Spector, Commissioner of the Court of Claims, on nonappropriated fund instrumentalities.<sup>219</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

The term nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI) has a variety of meanings based on the particular context. In a report in 1977, GAO noted that there is no official definition or commonly understood opinion of what

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<sup>218</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-106, div. C, title XXXV, § 3522(a), 110 Stat. 186, 638 (Feb. 10, 1996), codified at 22 U.S.C. § 3611.

<sup>219</sup> *Jurisdiction of U.S. Courts, Nonappropriated Fund Activities: Hearings on S. 980 Before Subcommittee No. 4 of the House Committee on the Judiciary*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. 9 (1969), quoted in *McDonald’s Corp. v. United States*, 926 F.2d 1126, 1129–30 (Fed. Cir. 1991).

is or is not a nonappropriated fund activity.<sup>220</sup> At the outset, then, it is useful to be cognizant of the danger of relying merely on a NAFI label to determine what laws apply to an entity, its relationship with the United States government, how the entity was created, its source of funding, or what authorities it can exercise. These issues can only be addressed in the context of a particular entity. We start our discussion with the “oldest” of these NAFIs—morale, welfare, and recreation organizations attached to the military.

a. History of Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Organizations

The need to provide services and items to fulfill the morale, welfare, and recreational needs of officers and employees of armed forces originated long before the establishment of the United States government and far from our shores. Persons providing such support have existed since the times of the Roman Legions. “Caesar alludes to the itinerant merchants who followed the legions, selling items not considered necessities by quartermasters.”<sup>221</sup> From the time of the Roman Legions to the European armies and navies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,<sup>222</sup> these men, known as sutlers,<sup>223</sup> followed armies and met ships in port in order to supply the soldiers and sailors with provisions and contraband.<sup>224</sup> Due to the monopolistic prices charged by sutlers, sailors organized their own ship cooperatives called “slop chests.”<sup>225</sup>

The United States government, at times, has directly provided items and services to meet the morale, welfare, and recreational needs of its officers and employees of the armed forces while, at other times, it has relied upon

<sup>220</sup> GAO, *Magnitude of Nonappropriated Fund and Related Activities in the Executive Branch*, FPCD-77-28 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 25, 1977).

<sup>221</sup> Michael Francis Noone, *Legal Problems of Non-Appropriated Funds*, Mil. L. Rev. Bicentennial Issue, 357, 361 (1975). This article was originally published as appendix 1 of the Senate Judiciary Committee, *Hearings on S. 3163, Subcommittee on Improvements in Judicial Machinery*, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess. 201, 203–08 (1968). We will cite to pages in Noone’s Military Law Review article.

<sup>222</sup> Stephen Castlen, *Let the Good Times Role: Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Operations*, Army Lawyer 3, 6 (1996).

<sup>223</sup> The term “sutler” means a small vendor, derived from the word “soltelen” which means to befool or perform mean duties. Noone, at 361.

<sup>224</sup> *Id.*

<sup>225</sup> *Id.*

private sources, albeit under governmental control, to provide such goods and services. Beginning with the American Articles of War of 1775, sutlers, itinerant or camp-following merchants, were authorized to sell to the troops items not provided by the government such as “victuals, liquors, or other necessaries of life”<sup>226</sup> for the use of soldiers.<sup>227</sup> The American Articles of War of 1775 also regulated the sutlers’ conduct, hours, and quality of items sold.<sup>228</sup> For example, although sutlers were not a component part of the Army, they were subject to the orders and regulations of the Continental Army.<sup>229</sup> Sutlers were not permitted to sell liquor, victuals, or provide entertainment after nine at night, before the beating of the reveilles, or during Sunday religious services.<sup>230</sup> Commanding officers’ duties included monitoring sutlers to ensure that they supplied soldiers with good and wholesome provisions at a reasonable price.<sup>231</sup> The Articles also prohibited commanding officers from charging exorbitant prices for houses or stalls let out to sutlers or charging any duty upon sales or having any financial interest in sales.<sup>232</sup> The Articles further established a fund for fines collected from soldiers and officers for behaving indecently or irreverently during religious services.<sup>233</sup> The fund benefited sick soldiers of the troop or company to which the offenders belonged.<sup>234</sup> This is the first record we have of a United States government nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI).<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> *Winthrop’s Military Law and Precedents, American Articles of War of 1775, Article LXVI*, 953, 958 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1920 reprint) (*Winthrop*).

<sup>227</sup> Paul J. Kovar, *Legal Aspects of Nonappropriated Fund Activities*, 1 Mil. L. Rev. 95, 96 (1958).

<sup>228</sup> *Winthrop*, Art. XXXII, LXIV, LXV, and LXVI, at 956, 958.

<sup>229</sup> *Id.*, Art. XXXII, at 956.

<sup>230</sup> *Id.*, Art. LXIV, at 958.

<sup>231</sup> *Id.*, Art. LXV, at 958.

<sup>232</sup> *Id.*, Art LXVI, at 958.

<sup>233</sup> *Id.*, Art. II, at 953.

<sup>234</sup> *Id.*

<sup>235</sup> Castlen, at 6.



Sutlers were permitted to sell to the soldiers on credit and the paymaster could deduct the amount from the soldier's pay and pay the sutler directly.<sup>236</sup> In 1847, Congress abolished sutlers' rights to have such a lien on a soldier's pay. Act of March 3, 1847, ch. 61, § 11, 9 Stat. 184, 185. Congress reinstated and abolished the sutlers' right to have a lien on a soldier's pay several times throughout the next decades.<sup>237</sup> In 1862, Congress enacted a bill which provided for the appointment of sutlers in the Volunteer Service, set out their duties, and authorized sutlers to have a lien on part of a soldier's pay. Act of March 19, 1862, ch. 47, 12 Stat. 371. This act established guidelines for the activities and service of sutlers to the Army and their regulation by the War Department. The commanding officer of each brigade was required to have the commissioned officers of each regiment in the brigade select a sutler for their regiment, who would be the sole sutler for that regiment. *Id.*, 12 Stat. 372. The act listed specific articles that sutlers could sell to soldiers including food, toiletries, reading materials, tobacco, stationery, and other items which in the judgment of the inspectors general were for the good of the service. *Id.*, 12 Stat. 371. However, the sale of liquor was prohibited. *Id.*

The sutlers paid fees based upon the average number of soldiers in a unit for the privilege of doing business in that unit. Fines were imposed on sutlers for violation of regulations. All fees and fines were deposited into the "post fund" administered by a group of officers, known as the "Council of Administration," along with the post commander. Kovar, at 97. The post fund aided indigent widows or children of deceased soldiers or disabled soldiers discharged without pensions, bought books and periodicals for the post library, and supported the post school and band. *Id.* In 1835, company funds, subject to the control of the post commander, were authorized by Army regulations to derive income from rental of billiard tables, the sale of grease from the company mess, and savings from the economical use of food. Noone, at 363.

The sutler system was subject to many abuses; soldiers were cheated and charged usurious interest and military officials and the merchants were involved in fraud and corruption. GAO, *Appropriated Fund Support for Nonappropriated Fund and Related Activities in the Department of*

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<sup>236</sup> *Id.* at 6.

<sup>237</sup> *E.g.*, Act of June 12, 1858, ch. 156, § 5, 11 Stat. 332, 336 (repealed the legislation depriving sutlers of the right to have a lien on a soldier's pay); Act of December 24, 1861, ch. 4, § 3, 12 Stat. 331 (abolished the sutlers right to have a lien on a soldier's pay).

*Defense*, FPCD-77-58 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 31, 1977), at 4. In 1866, Congress responded to these abuses by abolishing the office of sutler effective July 1, 1867. Act of July 28, 1866, ch. 298, § 25, 14 Stat. 328, 336; *see* FPCD-77-58, at 4. With the abolishment of sutlers, Congress required the subsistence department of the Army to sell articles, designated by the inspectors general, at cost. 14 Stat. at 336. In 1867, Congress authorized the Commanding General of the Army to permit the establishment of trading posts on certain military posts. Resolution No. 33 of March 30, 1867, 15 Stat. 29. Where the commissary department was prepared to supply stores to soldiers, traders were not permitted to remain at such posts or sell any goods kept by the commissary department. *Id.*

In 1870, Congress repealed Resolution No. 33 and enacted legislation authorizing the establishment of post traders in certain locations to be under the protection and control of the military as camp followers and subject to the War Department's regulations.<sup>238</sup> Act of July 15, 1870, ch. 294, § 22, 16 Stat. 315, 319–20. The War Department established general policies regulating the post traders which were carried out by a council of administration for the post. Kovar, at 100 n.28. Unlike the sutlers before them, the post traders did not have the right to a lien on a soldier's pay. *Id.*

The Secretary of War did not appoint a post trader at all military posts. Kovar, at 101. At posts where there were no post traders, the Secretary authorized commanders to establish canteens to supply troops with articles for their entertainment and comfort at moderate prices. *Id.*, *citing* General Order No. 10, 1889. The following year, in 1890, the Secretary authorized all posts to establish canteens. Post commanders could make government buildings available to house canteens and its activities. An officer "in charge of canteen" managed the canteen assisted by a "canteen council" and its profits were distributed among the participating companies. *Id.*, *citing* General Order No. 51, May 18, 1890. A canteen was established either on credit or from funds of the companies benefiting from the canteen. To promote and expand canteens, the War Department prohibited company fund activities from selling any item sold by the canteen. *Id.*, *citing* Circular No. 1, Adjutant General's Office, Feb. 9, 1891. Canteens were authorized to use profits to purchase sporting equipment

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<sup>238</sup> This act authorized the establishment of post traders at certain posts on the frontier not in the vicinity of any city or town when, in the Secretary of War's judgment, such posts were necessary to accommodate emigrants, freighters, and other citizens. In 1876, Congress authorized the Secretary of War to appoint post traders at all military posts regardless of location. Act of July 24, 1876, 19 Stat. 100.

and any items that would contribute to the “rational enjoyment and contentment of the soldiers.” *Id.*, *citing* Circular No. 7, Adjutant General’s Office, June 10, 1890.

Canteens evolved into the post exchanges which performed essentially the same functions. Kovar, at 102; Noone, at 365. By 1893, the post exchange had taken over the services provided by the post trader and Congress prohibited the Secretary of War from making further appointments of post traders or from filling vacancies. Act of January 28, 1893, ch. 51, 27 Stat. 426. In 1895, the War Department established post exchanges at all military posts. Kovar, at 102, *citing* General Order Number 46, July 25, 1895. The post exchanges were to provide a reading and recreation room, a store, a restaurant, and other facilities to supply at reasonable prices, articles (not supplied by the government) for rational recreation and amusement. *Id.* Post exchanges were authorized to use government buildings and were managed by an “officer in charge” and a council who reported to the post commander. *Id.*

Although the Army regulated post exchanges and provided direct support through free government space and the use of military officers to manage their operations, the post exchanges were not considered to be an agency or instrumentality of the United States. Noone, at 365. The Judge Advocate General of the Army described the legal status of the post exchange in an 1893 opinion:

“Now the Post Exchange is not a United States institution or branch of the United States military establishment, but a trading store permitted to be kept at a military post for the convenience of the soldiers. It is set up and stocked, not by means of an appropriation of public moneys, but by means of the funds of companies, *etc.*; the officers ordering the purchases . . . [are] responsible for the payment, not the Government.”

Noone, at 365, *citing* 61 JAG Record Book, 1882–1895, 479 (1893).

Congress limited the aid that the Army could provide to the post exchanges in the Army’s Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1893 as follows:

“*And provided further,* That hereafter no money appropriated for the support of the Army shall be expended for post gardens or exchanges, but this proviso shall not be

construed to prohibit the use by post exchanges of public buildings or public transportation when, in the opinion of the Quartermaster-General, not required for other purposes.”

Act of July 16, 1892, ch. 195, 27 Stat. 174, 178 (emphasis in original).<sup>239</sup>

The post exchange and post and company funds continued to carry out morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) functions until after World War I. Kovar, at 102. After World War I, the War Department created and expanded organizations and functions to provide services such as motion pictures and library facilities, recreation centers and programs, child care centers, restaurants and other services for both service members and their family members. Castlen, at 9; Kovar, at 102–03. The War Department established a Morale Branch in 1941 to provide MWR services. Castlen, at 9. During World War II, the post exchanges were reorganized into a central organization known as the Army Exchange Service (currently in operation and now known as the Army and Air Force Exchange Service or AAFES) within the Morale Branch of the War Department. *Id.*

b. Defining the  
Nonappropriated Fund  
Instrumentality

“I am worried about the definition of ‘nonappropriated funds.’ Every time I think of one, you give me another one; then I think of another possibility.”

Rep. Wiggins, House of Representatives (1969).<sup>240</sup>

In 1975, Congress authorized GAO to audit the operations and accounts of nonappropriated fund activities authorized or operated by the head of an executive agency to sell goods or services to U.S. government personnel and their dependents.<sup>241</sup> In a 1977 report, GAO listed those activities, a brief description of each one, their assets, and gross revenues. GAO,

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<sup>239</sup> This law is now codified at 10 U.S.C. § 4779(b).

<sup>240</sup> *Nonappropriated Fund Activities: Hearings on S. 980 Before Subcommittee No. 4 of the House Committee on the Judiciary*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess. 18–19 (1969), quoted in *McDonald’s Corp. v. United States*, 926 F.2d 1126, 1130 (Fed. Cir. 1991) (statement made in discussion of amending the Tucker Act, 28 U.S.C. § 1491, to waive sovereign immunity for all nonappropriated fund instrumentalities, not only those administered by the Department of Defense).

<sup>241</sup> Pub. L. No. 93-604, § 301, 88 Stat. 1959, 1961–62 (Jan. 2, 1975), codified at 31 U.S.C. § 3525.

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*Magnitude of Nonappropriated Fund and Related Activities in the Executive Branch*, FPCD-77-28 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 25, 1977). The report noted that some agencies maintained that their programs were not nonappropriated fund activities, but rather, private associations not officially a part of the government. “Varying interpretations are understandable,” the report stated, “since there is no official definition or commonly understood opinion of what is or is not a nonappropriated fund activity.” *Id.* at i. GAO cited an earlier Office of Management and Budget (OMB) study which found that the lack of a governmentwide definition of NAFIs caused confusion and precluded a reliable review of all nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs). *Id.*, citing OMB, *Study of Procurement Payable for Nonappropriated Funds* (Aug. 1975).

As noted in the 1977 GAO report, defining the terms “nonappropriated funds,” “nonappropriated fund instrumentalities” (NAFIs), or “nonappropriated fund activities” poses challenges. Contributing to the confusion is that the terms have been used interchangeably and without necessarily recognizing the differences between appropriated and nonappropriated funds. The term “appropriated funds” refers to funds provided in a regular annual appropriation act or a law enacting a permanent, indefinite appropriation.<sup>242</sup> Both types of legislation authorize the obligation and expenditure of funds and designate the funds to be used. [63 Comp. Gen. 331, 335](#) (1984). See also GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 21. Permanent, indefinite appropriations include gift acceptance and use authority, revolving funds, working capital funds, and franchise funds. Nonappropriated funds would include funds that are *not* derived from an annual appropriation act or a law enacting a permanent, indefinite appropriation. As such, these funds are generally not subject to the same fiscal controls as appropriations.

In a broad sense, there are two types of NAFIs: morale, welfare, and recreational (MWR) entities (armed forces NAFIs with an historical basis) and all other NAFIs. While the armed forces NAFIs have common historical roots, there often is not much commonality among non-armed forces NAFIs. Historically, the armed forces NAFIs were organized to meet

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<sup>242</sup> There has been some controversy over what constitutes a continuing permanent, indefinite appropriation, a discussion of which is contained in Chapter 2, section B.1.

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MWR needs of military and their dependents.<sup>243</sup> DOD describes the importance of MWR programs as follows:

“MWR programs are vital to mission accomplishment and form an integral part of the non-pay compensation system. These programs provide a sense of community among patrons and provide support services commonly furnished by other employers, or other State and local governments to their employees and citizens. MWR programs encourage positive individual values, and aid in the recruitment and retention of personnel. They provide for the physical, cultural, and social needs and general well-being of Service members and their families, providing community support systems that make [DOD] bases temporary hometowns for a mobile military population.”

DOD Instruction 1015.10, *Programs for Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR)*, ¶ 4.2 (Nov. 3, 1995). *See also* 58 Comp. Gen. 94, 98 (1958) (noting that DOD “NAFIs exist to help foster the morale and welfare of military personnel and their dependents”).

DOD defines NAFIs as:

“Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentality (NAFI). A [DOD] organizational and fiscal entity that is supported, in whole or in part by [nonappropriated funds]. It acts in its own name to provide or assist the Secretaries of the Military Departments in providing programs for [DOD] personnel. It is not incorporated under the law of any State or the District of Columbia, but has the legal status of an instrumentality of the United States.”

Department of Defense Instruction 1015.15, *Procedures for Establishment, Management, and Control of Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities*

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<sup>243</sup> Serving the MWR needs of the armed forces members and their families with goods and merchandise purchased through NAFIs is not limitless. NAFIs provide items and services for personal consumption, not for business, profit-making motives. *See generally Covill v. United States*, 959 F.2d 58, 59 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992) (noting that a Coast Guard warrant officer received a punitive letter of reprimand because he purchased merchandise from an armed forces NAFI purportedly for personal use, but instead used the merchandise in his restaurant where he sold it at retail to the general public).

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*and Financial Management of Supporting Resources*, encl. 2, ¶ E2.1.12 (May 25, 2005). In discussing a suit brought by an employee of a military officers' club (a DOD NAFI), one court, using the phrase “nonappropriated fund activity” instead of NAFIs, said:

“A non-appropriated fund activity is one to which the government has initially provided funds to permit it to begin operation. The governmental loan is repaid out of the profits earned by the activity. Thus, the activity is created by the government with governmental funds for governmental personnel, and is administered by governmental employees for the use and benefit of the United States.”

*Bowen v. Culotta*, 294 F. Supp. 183, 185 (E.D. Va. 1968).

Although NAFIs are considered United States government instrumentalities, NAFIs are not federal agencies or government corporations. They also are not typical private or commercial enterprises. Like DOD, GAO has noted that a NAFI mainly operates with funds generated from its own activities:

“NAFIs encompass a wide range of activities and resist a general definition. They share common characteristics in that they are associated with governmental entities and, to some extent, are controlled by and operated for the benefit of those Governmental entities. However, the essence of a NAFI is that it is operated with the proceeds of its activities, rather than with appropriated funds.”

[64 Comp. Gen. 110, 110–11](#) (1984). *See also* [B-289605.2, July 5, 2002](#).

GAO has identified several characteristics of MWR NAFIs:

- The activity is established under the authority or sanction of a government agency with or without an initial advance of government funds.
- The activity is created and run by government officers or employees.
- The activity is operated for the benefit of government officers or employees and/or their dependents.

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- The operations of the activity are financed by the proceeds therefrom.

[B-167710-O.M., May 6, 1976](#), at 4. Although many NAFIs demonstrate these characteristics, GAO noted that they are not absolute and should be applied on a case-by-case basis. *Id.*

Other government entities funded with permanent, indefinite appropriations also may operate with the proceeds from their activities, including revolving funds and working capital funds, but those entities are not NAFIs unless Congress has established them as NAFIs. Unlike activities funded with permanent, indefinite appropriations, the common thread among armed forces NAFIs is that while they operate from the proceeds of their activities, the funds they collect are used for the collective benefit of the members of the armed forces, government officers or employees, and their dependents who generate them.

Congress has created some government entities and designated that they operate as nonappropriated fund instrumentalities or with nonappropriated funds. *See, e.g.*, 7 U.S.C. § 2279b (Graduate School of Department of Agriculture); 12 U.S.C. § 244 (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve); *see also* [B-217578, Oct. 16, 1986](#). These entities do not serve MWR needs of government employees. Unlike the armed forces NAFIs already discussed, these entities are statutory creations and any fiscal limitations are defined by their organic statutes. Armed forces NAFIs fulfilling MWR purposes have an historical basis and were not created by statute, although Congress, in some cases, has approved of or authorized such NAFI operations. *See, e.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 2488.

Further complicating the discussion of NAFIs is the use of the term NAFI by some federal courts. The Federal Circuit and the Court of Federal Claims have used the term in cases discussing their jurisdiction. *See, e.g.*, *AINS, Inc. v. United States*, 365 F.3d 1333, 1343 (Fed. Cir. 2004) (holding that the court had no jurisdiction to hear case against U.S. Mint because it was a NAFI). *See also* *O'Quin v. United States*, 72 Fed. Cl. 20, 23–24 (2006); *McCafferty v. United States*, 61 Fed. Cl. 615, 616 (2004). The Federal Circuit's definition of a NAFI for purposes of its jurisdiction has resulted in classifying entities that operate with permanent, indefinite appropriations as NAFIs. *See* *AINS*, 365 F.3d 1333; *Core Concepts of Florida, Inc. v. United States*, 327 F.3d 1331 (Fed. Cir. 2003). *See also* *Furash & Co. v. United States*, 252 F.3d 1336 (Fed. Cir. 2001) (holding that



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the court had no jurisdiction to hear claims against the Federal Housing Finance Board because it was a NAFI).<sup>244</sup>

Although a permanent, indefinite appropriation is not reenacted each year in the annual appropriations process, it is an appropriation nonetheless. Consequently, GAO does not view revolving funds (permanent, indefinite appropriations) as NAFIs. GAO does not question, nor has it the authority to question, a court's determination of its own subject matter jurisdiction. The Federal Circuit recognizes that the weight of its authorities is limited in scope to its jurisdiction determination: "The authorities cited by the GAO to support [its position on what constitutes an appropriation], however, are not applicable to the [court's] non-appropriated funds doctrine in the same sense that they are applicable to federal appropriations law." *Core Concepts*, 327 F.3d at 1338.

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## 2. Legal Status

### a. Authority for Creation

As noted above, for the most part armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) are rooted in history and regulated by the military departments to assist in meeting the moral, welfare, and recreation (MWR) needs of their personnel. Some of these NAFIs later received statutory recognition. *See, e.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 2488 (Secretary of Defense may authorize a NAFI to operate a military exchange and commissary store on a military base). *See also* [B-167710-O.M., May 6, 1976](#) (noting that military departments established NAFIs under the departments' general regulatory authority). The fact that NAFIs originated from historical practice and later received congressional recognition does not affect their status. Indeed, with regard to military post exchanges, the Supreme Court stated: "That the establishment and control of post exchanges have been in accordance with regulations rather than specific statutory directions does not alter their status, for authorized War Department regulations have the force of law." *Standard Oil Co. v. Johnson*, 316 U.S. 481, 484 (1942).

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<sup>244</sup> For a further discussion of these decisions, see Chapter 2, section B.1.

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b. Relationship to the United States Government

“It would not be an exaggeration to call their legal status bizarre. They are operations of the federal government, yet they are not.”<sup>245</sup>

Despite their peculiarities, nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) are now recognized as being federal instrumentalities, albeit “a special breed of federal instrumentality, which cannot be fully analogized to the typical federal agency supported by federal funds.” *Cosme Nieves v. Deshler*, 786 F.2d 445, 448 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1986), *cert. denied*, 479 U.S. 824 (1986).

In *Standard Oil Co. v. Johnson*, 316 U.S. 481 (1942), the State of California attempted to levy a tax upon military post exchanges. The California Motor Vehicle Fuel License Tax Act imposed a license tax on the privilege of distributing motor vehicle fuel. By its terms, the tax was inapplicable to fuel sold to the United States government. California insisted that Standard Oil levy the tax on sales it made to the U.S. Army Post Exchanges in California. In the suit to recover payment, Standard Oil (with the United States as *amicus curiae*) claimed the sales to the Post Exchanges were exempt under the Act. Standard Oil also argued that if the Act were construed to require payment on such sales, it would impose an unconstitutional burden upon instrumentalities or agencies of the United States. The California courts found for the state on both issues. *Standard Oil*, 316 U.S. at 482. The decision was appealed, however.

Upon appeal to the Supreme Court, the Court looked first to the legal status of the post exchange, examining the relationship between the United States and the post exchanges as demonstrated through the creation, regulation, and practices of the activity. *Id.* at 484. The Court recognized several factors: The post exchanges were established pursuant to regulations of the Secretary of War under authority granted by Congress originally in the Act of July 15, 1870, 16 Stat. 315, 319, and Act of March 1, 1875, 18 Stat. 337. *Id.* The commanding officer of an army post had virtually total authority to establish and manage the exchange. The supervisory councils for the exchanges consisted of the commanding officers of the post units and they served in that capacity without any compensation other than their regular pay. *Id.* The purpose of the post exchanges was to provide a convenient source of low priced goods for soldiers. *Id.* at 484–85. The government did not assume any of the financial obligations of the post exchanges, but

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<sup>245</sup> Michael Francis Noone, *Legal Problems of Non-Appropriated Funds*, Mil. L. Rev. Bicentennial Issue, 357, 359 (1975).

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government officers were responsible for the funds obtained. Profits were used only for the welfare, pleasure, and comfort of the troops. *Id.* at 485.

“From all this, we conclude that post exchanges as now operated are arms of the government deemed by it essential for the performance of governmental functions. They are integral parts of the War Department, share in fulfilling the duties entrusted to it, and partake of whatever immunities it may have under the Constitution and federal statutes.”

*Id.* Accordingly, the Supreme Court concluded, the state could not tax the fuel sold to the post exchanges. *Id.*

Lower federal courts have applied the *Standard Oil* analysis to determine whether NAFIs are immune from suit involving contract matters. In *Nimro v. Davis*, 204 F.2d 734 (D.C. Cir.), *cert. denied*, 346 U.S. 901 (1953), Nimro brought suit against the board members of a Naval Gun Factory Lunchroom Committee for “services rendered and expenses incurred.” *Nimro*, 204 F.2d at 734. The board, composed of naval officers and civilian employees, argued that it was an instrumentality of the Navy Department, and therefore was immune from suit to the same extent as the department itself. To counter this defense, Nimro maintained that he was suing the members of the board in their representative capacity as custodians of a private fund, not as government employees. *Id.* at 735.

Noting the several factors considered in *Standard Oil*, the court held that the Naval Gun Factory Lunchroom Committee, a NAFI, was a United States government instrumentality because it was made up of the department’s own personnel, acting officially under authority and direction of the Secretary in accordance with his instructions, to carry out a purpose declared by him to be an integral part of the department. *Id.* at 736. The court found the individuals comprising the Lunchroom Committee’s board to be acting for and on behalf of the United States, and not in any private capacity. As such, the suit comprised an action against the United States that could not be maintained without its consent.<sup>246</sup> *Id.* at 736.

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<sup>246</sup> In 1970, Congress waived sovereign immunity for contract claims arising against some NAFIs, including NAFIs closely affiliated with the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, Navy Exchanges, Marine Corps Exchanges, Coast Guard Exchanges, and Exchange Councils of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Pub. L. No. 91-350, 84 Stat. 449 (July 23, 1970), *codified at* 28 U.S.C. § 1491. *See also McDonald’s Corp. v. United States*, 926 F.2d 1126, 1132–33 (Fed. Cir. 1991).

In *Automatic Retailers of America, Inc. v. Ruppert*, 269 F. Supp. 588 (S.D. Iowa 1967), Automatic Retailers sued members of the Employees Welfare Committee of the Des Moines Post Office Employees Association to enforce a contract for vending machine services. *Automatic Retailers*, 269 F. Supp. at 590. One employee member moved to dismiss the case, arguing that the suit was in essence against the Employee Welfare Committee, an instrumentality of the United States that was immune from suit.

Applying the elements set forth in the *Standard Oil* decision, the court held that the Employee Welfare Committee constituted an integral part of the Postal Service and was an instrumentality of the United States for purposes of suit. *Automatic Retailers*, 269 F. Supp. at 591. The court further determined that, although Automatic Retailers had named committee members in their individual capacity, the suit sought to compel the Employees Welfare Committee, and thus the United States, to act. Since the United States had not consented to suit, the court dismissed the case. *Id.* at 592. See also *Employees Welfare Commission v. Daws*, 599 F.2d 1375, 1378–79 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979). The court found that the committee was established pursuant to regulatory authority, the Postal Service appointed employees to carry out the contractual and managerial duties of the committee, the Postal Service regulated and controlled vending stands and machines, and the primary objective of the committee was to further the interests of the Postal Service. *Automatic Retailers*, 269 F. Supp. at 591.

However, there are also times when the action of a NAFI or its employees will not be attributable to the government. There was a time when, under contract with base exchanges, telegraph offices were routinely operated on military bases by NAFI employees. In [50 Comp. Gen. 76 \(1970\)](#), the Nellis Air Force Base Exchange operated a telegraph office on the base under contract with Western Union. The contract between the exchange and Western Union stipulated that the exchange acted as the agent for Western Union. [50 Comp. Gen. at 77](#). Prospective government contract bidders telegraphed their bids within the required time frame for bid acceptance, but the bids were nevertheless delivered late to the contracting office by the telegraph office run by the base exchange. Under Army regulations, late bids are accepted if the delay is due to the government's mishandling of the bid but precludes consideration of late bids delayed by the telegraph company's error. *Id.* GAO held that where the base exchange acts as the agent for the telegraph company, as the contract stipulated in this case, the activity was not an instrumentality of the government and the exchange's actions were not attributable to the government. Accordingly, the bid here

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was deemed late due to mishandling by a telegraphy company's error and not considered in the procurement process. *Id.* at 80. *See also* [B-186794](#), Nov. 11, 1976.

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3. Sources of Funding:  
The Use of  
Appropriated Funds for  
Nonappropriated Fund  
Instrumentalities

“Although for some purposes nonappropriated fund activities are considered instrumentalities of the Government, they are generally self-supporting and do not receive appropriated funds from the Congress.”

[B-215398](#), Oct. 30, 1984.

a. Self-Supporting or  
Subsidized?

As the name suggests, a nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI) is “operated with the proceeds of its activities, rather than with appropriated funds.” [64 Comp. Gen. 110, 111 \(1984\)](#). That sounds simple enough, but the reality is not so simple. Part of the reason for this is that some people think the government should fund morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) using appropriated funds, while others find that suggestion outrageous. Some argue for direct government support for the MWR services provided by NAFIs because there is a legitimate business need to provide MWR support for members of the armed forces. Others, like private retailers in competition with NAFIs, argue that recreational expenses should be paid for by the government through traditional procurement from the private sector, not by making NAFIs compete with the private sector. Still others argue that the taxpayers should not pay for any employee recreational expenses, advocating that NAFIs should be self-supporting and their profits used for MWR expenses. The tension between these factions has led to a complicated mix of appropriated and nonappropriated funding for NAFIs.

b. General Rule:  
Appropriations Not  
Available for Morale,  
Welfare, and Recreation  
unless Authorized by  
Congress

The general rule, established in early decisions, is that expenses associated with employee morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) cannot be paid from appropriated funds unless specifically authorized by law. *See* [27 Comp. Gen. 679 \(1948\)](#) (Navy appropriations not available to hire full-time or part-time employees for recreational programs for civilian employees of Navy); [18 Comp. Gen. 147 \(1938\)](#) (river and harbor appropriation not available to provide recreational activities for workers). The rationale for the rule was that those types of expenditures would only have an indirect bearing on the purposes for which the appropriations were made. *27 Comp. Gen.* at 681.

In addition, several laws specifically prohibited the use of appropriated funds for certain MWR expenses. As early as 1892, Congress passed

legislation prohibiting the use of appropriated funds of the various armed forces for the exchanges; that legislation authorized the exchanges to use military buildings and transportation when not being used by the military. Act of July 16, 1892, ch. 195, 27 Stat. 174, 178, *codified at* 10 U.S.C. §§ 4779, 9779 (Army and Air Force, respectively). Congress has also specifically authorized the use of certain appropriated funds for MWR expenses. *See* 10 U.S.C. § 2241(a)(1) (authorizing the use of Operation and Maintenance (O&M) appropriations for MWR).<sup>247</sup> At the same time, however, Congress expressly prohibited the Department of Defense (DOD) from using appropriated funds for equipping, operating, or maintaining golf courses at DOD facilities or installations. Pub. L. No. 130-160, div. A, title III, § 312, 107 Stat. 1547, 1618 (Nov. 30, 1993), *codified at* 10 U.S.C. § 2491a(a).<sup>248</sup> In 1998, GAO interpreted this prohibition as precluding the use of appropriated funds to install or maintain pipelines for watering an Army golf course. [B-277905, Mar. 17, 1998](#).<sup>249</sup> DOD argued that other laws permitted DOD to participate in water conservation projects and federal agency cooperative efforts to resolve water resource issues in concert with conservation of endangered species. GAO concluded that those laws did not override the prohibition of section 2491a. *Id.*

In a 1949 report on nonappropriated funds, GAO reported on the improper use of appropriated funds to support activities such as restaurants, stores, golf courses, and theaters, and recommended changes in accounting, billing, reimbursements, and legislation. GAO reported that there was a “widespread and growing practice . . . of withholding from the Treasury and diverting to unauthorized purposes substantial sums of money coming into the hands of persons in the service of the United States in connection with the performance of their official duties.” [B-45101, Aug. 10, 1949](#), at 1. GAO had several concerns: (1) whether these activities were authorized to withhold revenues, donations, and contributions arising from such

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<sup>247</sup> Congress also has appropriated advances for the establishment of nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) which were to be repaid to the Treasury. *See* [B-156167, July 18, 1967](#) (advanced appropriations to Midshipmen’s Store Fund, a NAFI, to acquire a dairy farm). In some cases, Congress later repealed the requirement that a NAFI repay the Treasury the sums advanced. *Id.*

<sup>248</sup> Section 2491a(b) exempts from this prohibition golf courses at installations outside the United States or at remote and isolated locations as designated by the Secretary of Defense.

<sup>249</sup> [B-277905](#) refers to 10 U.S.C. § 2246(a) as the statutory prohibition. In 2004, section 2246 was renumbered to be section 2491a. Pub. L. No. 108-375, div. A, title VI, § 651(d), 118 Stat. 1811, 1972 (Oct. 28, 2004).

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activities; (2) the unreimbursed or “free” use of public property and funds in connection with revenue producing activities; and (3) GAO’s lack of specific authority to audit NAFIs. *Id.* at 5–7. While not questioning the validity of NAFL purposes to meet MWR needs, GAO questioned whether Congress had by law authorized these types of expenditures and whether they should not be self-supporting. *Id.* at 7–8.

The rule appears to be simple—an agency may not use appropriated funds to support MWR needs or nonappropriated fund instrumentalities providing those needs unless specifically authorized by law. However, like many things in law and life, it is not, in fact, that simple.

c. The Current Trend: Use of Appropriated Funds

We have used the necessary expense doctrine to address whether appropriations are legally available for certain morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) expenses of some agencies without nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs). The cases have increasingly recognized that, given isolated or remote working conditions, certain items or services contribute directly to an agency’s mission by enhancing employee morale and productivity. For example, in cases where employees are located at a remote site where MWR items and equipment would not otherwise be available and such expenses would be necessary for recruitment and retention of personnel, GAO has held that appropriated funds may be used to pay for MWR expenditures. *See, e.g.*, [54 Comp. Gen. 1075 \(1975\)](#) (purchase of television set for crew on Environmental Protection Agency ship gathering and evaluating water samples on multiday cruises); [B-144237, Nov. 7, 1960](#) (transportation of musical instruments, sports, and recreational equipment to isolated Weather Bureau installations in the Arctic); [B-61076, Feb. 25, 1947](#) (purchase of ping pong paddles and balls by Corps of Engineers to equip recreation room on a seagoing dredge justified by policy in War Department regulations and necessary expense for the recruitment and retention of employees).

The military’s use of appropriated funds for MWR expenses has differed from civilian agencies because, in the context of the necessary expense rule, it is easier for the military to justify MWR expenses due to the nature of its mission, the remoteness of many of its locations, and hardships imposed on military members and families.

In 1954, GAO considered whether the Department of the Air Force could use appropriated funds to pay for travel relating to the business of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES). [B-120139-O.M., Aug. 16, 1954](#). Since expenses for travel involving public business could be paid

from appropriated funds, GAO analyzed whether travel involving AAFES business qualified as public business. The Comptroller General noted that AAFES is a government instrumentality under the executive control of officers of the services, who receive pay and allowances from appropriated funds while assigned to the exchanges. Thus, travel involving command supervision of exchanges is public business and the use of appropriated funds is reasonable. Command supervision may include travel for the purposes of inspecting, auditing, or investigating exchange activities, attending exchange conferences, coordinating exchange matters, or attending exchange schools and may be paid from appropriated funds as travel in connection with public business. The Department of the Air Force, however, could not use appropriations to pay for AAFES's operational expenses. Travel for the purpose of purchasing exchange supplies for resale related more to operational expense and not to command supervision and could not be considered as travel on public business. *Id.*

A few years later, GAO considered whether the Department of the Army could use appropriated funds to pay for travel by a member of the Army in order to participate in a field artillery basketball tournament as a nonparticipating coach. [B-133763, Nov. 13, 1957](#). At issue was whether the travel was for public business. Army regulations provided that nonappropriated funds could be used to pay the expenses of military members participating in sports program activities. However, nonappropriated funds could not be used to pay expenses of official travel of military personnel when performing command supervision of the Army sports programs. Applicable travel regulations provided that travel conducted for public business (defined as relating to activities or functions of the service to which the traveler was attached) could be paid with appropriated funds. So, was the nonparticipating coach engaged in official government business or not? GAO held that while a tournament was recognized as part of athletic or recreational programs of the Army, it did not appear to be an activity or function of a field artillery battalion and would not constitute public business under the regulations. GAO advised the requestor to seek reimbursement from nonappropriated funds. *Id.*

In 1962, the Comptroller General was asked whether it was proper for the Air Force to use appropriated funds to pay for the modification, alteration, or repair of buildings or facilities used by a post exchange. [B-147516-O.M., Jan. 24, 1962](#). Both the Secretary of Defense's authority and Air Force regulations supported the use of appropriations to maintain MWR programs. *Id.*, *citing* DOD Directive 1330.2 (Aug. 31, 1956), *and* Air Force



Regulation 170-4A (July 1, 1958). GAO noted that Congress had authorized exchanges' use of public buildings and in the past had authorized the use of appropriated funds for construction, equipment and maintenance of buildings for exchange activities. B-147516-O.M., at 3. While current appropriations did not include specific authorization for such expenses, GAO deferred to the interpretation of the military departments that when Operation and Maintenance appropriations were available for repair and maintenance of facilities generally, reference to "facilities" would include those used for MWR activities. For these reasons, the Air Force could use appropriated funds to pay for the repair and alteration of NAFI facilities. *Id.*

In other cases, GAO addressed whether military departments could use appropriated funds for leasing and other property services on behalf of NAFIs. In B-154547-O.M., Oct. 20, 1964, GAO was asked whether the Department of Defense (DOD) could use appropriated funds to lease hotel facilities for a NAFI. The business of the NAFI was to provide quarters for transient and retired military personnel and their families. GAO answered, "yes," albeit with some hesitation. DOD cited its authority to conduct all affairs for the department, including welfare activities, in addition to the availability of Operation and Maintenance (O&M) appropriation for welfare and morale. GAO originally said "not good enough," noting that DOD had no specific authority to lease a building for a NAFI. Unless DOD could provide another interpretation of its authority to lease facilities for NAFIs, GAO would conclude that DOD could not do so. *Id.* Subsequently, GAO altered course, because DOD was authorized to lease buildings for military purposes and MWR use could reasonably be construed to constitute a military purpose. B-154547-O.M., July 7, 1965.

In 1975, GAO analyzed whether the Air Force could acquire land solely for recreational purposes.<sup>250</sup> GAO looked to the Air Force's authority to conduct welfare functions and the availability of DOD O&M appropriations for welfare and recreation in conjunction with the availability of appropriations to acquire land by lease or purchase. Deferring to DOD's discretion in interpreting the extent of its authority and responsibilities, GAO agreed that sponsoring recreational and social activities could be considered activities with a military purpose and the Air Force could acquire land interests for such activities.

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<sup>250</sup> Unnumbered case dated February 21, 1975, found in GAO Manuscript Volume 642, part B, appendix 10.

In 1977, GAO reported on NAFIs in DOD and concluded that, while NAFIs operated mainly with self-generated revenue, DOD was providing some appropriated fund support, including funding transportation which should have been funded by the NAFIs, for example, for transportation of merchandise for resale by NAFIs. GAO, *Unauthorized and Questionable Use of Appropriated Funds to Pay Transportation Costs of Non-Appropriated Fund Activities*, LCD-76-233 (Washington, D.C.: June 3, 1977). While GAO noted that annual DOD appropriation acts had generally provided funds for welfare and recreation, Congress had not specifically provided funds for transportation of merchandise for resale through NAFIs. *Id.* at 1. Thus, the use of appropriated funds for transportation of exchange goods was only permitted when the goods were carried on conveyances that are owned, leased, or chartered by the government, where the government was already obligated to pay for the space whether used or not. *Id.* GAO recommended that the Secretary of Defense: (1) direct the NAFIs to reimburse the paying appropriation for excess transportation costs; (2) institute procedures for properly charging NAFIs for transportation services; and (3) recover costs for improper appropriated fund support provided to NAFIs. *Id.* at ii–iii.

GAO also reported that the government spent over \$600 million each year to subsidize DOD NAFIs. GAO, *Appropriated Fund Support for Nonappropriated Fund and Related Activities in the Department of Defense*, FPCD-77-58 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 31, 1977). GAO reported that appropriated fund support was understated because of the failure to include certain costs, such as personnel costs, indirect costs, and other unrecognized costs. *Id.* at 19–25. In testimony on the findings of this report, GAO stated that the three major concerns with appropriated fund support were: (1) the use of military personnel to perform nonmilitary duties in NAFI activities; (2) the lack of a system for accurately reporting appropriated fund support; and (3) the lack of specific guidelines for providing appropriated fund support. GAO, *Appropriated Fund Support for Nonappropriated Fund and Related Activities of the Department of Defense: Testimony before the House Committee on Armed Services, Investigations Subcommittee* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 1977).

d. Other Issues in  
Appropriated Fund Support

Questions arise as to whether an agency may reimburse a nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI) with appropriated funds for goods or services that the NAFI provides. In [B-192859, Apr. 17, 1979](#), the Comptroller General considered whether the Army could reimburse a NAFI, a consolidated post housing fund that provided maid and custodian services, mowing and watering services, maintenance of roads, snow removal, and general

policing services for common use areas in post housing. Although the Army was responsible for providing those services, it did not. The NAFI decided to provide the services and pay for them by charging the housing residents. Later, the NAFI decided to bill the Army for those services and seek reimbursements from the Army for the residents. GAO concluded that the NAFI could be reimbursed for those services for which the Army was responsible. The decision noted that obtaining services from a NAFI is tantamount to obtaining them from a nongovernmental source and that regular purchase orders should be used. In B-192859, the documents prepared and actions taken by the Army and the NAFI did not create a binding contract and no binding obligation on the government was created. Accordingly, any voucher to pay the NAFI for goods and services could not be repaid. However, for those services for which the Army was responsible and had received a benefit, the NAFI could be reimbursed on a *quantum meruit* basis. For those services that were not the responsibility of the Army, the NAFI could not be reimbursed with appropriated funds. For further discussion regarding contracting with a NAFI for goods and services see section C.4.b. of this chapter.

A related issue affecting NAFIs is the proper disposal or deposit of receipts from the sale of NAFI property or resulting from NAFI operations. In [B-156167, July 18, 1967](#), the Navy asked whether the proceeds from a contemplated sale of the Naval Academy dairy farm could be credited to the Midshipmen's Store Fund. GAO noted that, by statute, federal agencies are required to deposit all proceeds from the disposition of excess property in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. Exceptions to this statute include property acquired with nonappropriated funds or appropriated funds that by law are reimbursable. The funds used to purchase the dairy farm were derived from the Midshipmen's Store Fund, a NAFI, or from an advance of appropriated funds that were by law reimbursable at the time of the advance. Consequently, any realized gain from the sale of the dairy farm could be credited to the Midshipmen's Store Fund. *Id.*

A different result is obtained when the proceeds of a transaction derive not from NAFI operations, but from official business of the government. The miscellaneous receipts statute (as discussed in Chapter 6, section E.2) requires government officials receiving money for the use of the United States to deposit the money in the Treasury. 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). In *Reeve Aleutian Airways, Inc. v. Rice*, 789 F. Supp. 417 (D.D.C. 1992), the Air Force awarded a contract to a commercial air carrier to provide passenger and cargo service to a remote base in the Aleutian Islands. *Id.* at 419–20. Fares purchased directly or reimbursed by the government for

its personnel, dependents, and contractor employees would provide the carrier's revenue. *Id.* at 421. In return for landing rights and ground support the contractor would pay a "concession fee" (*i.e.*, a rebate) for deposit to the base morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) fund, a NAFI. The court found that the fees for the use of property of the United States were "public monies" and there was no authority in this case to divert those funds to an MWR fund. *Id.* Accordingly, the miscellaneous receipts statute required that such fees be deposited in the Treasury. *Id.*

In *Scheduled Airlines Traffic Offices, Inc. (SATO) v. Department of Defense*, 87 F.3d 1356 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (SATO), the Defense Construction Supply Center, a DOD agency, awarded a commercial travel office contract requiring the contractor to offer both official (government business) and unofficial (personal travel for government employees and dependents) travel services. The contractor was required to pay the government concession fees on both official and unofficial travel. Concession fees for official travel were deposited to the Treasury and fees for unofficial travel were deposited to the local MWR fund, a NAFI. *SATO*, 87 F.3d at 1357–58. The travel agency, SATO, had bid unsuccessfully on similar contracts in the past, losing the bid to a company that agreed to pay larger concession fees for unofficial travel. Through informal channels, it learned that the agency made its award determinations "largely to maximize payments to the local Morale Funds." *Id.* at 1358. SATO filed suit seeking declaratory and injunctive relief to prohibit the award of the contract. *Id.* Among other things, SATO claimed that the miscellaneous receipts statute did not permit the deposit of the concession fees into MWR funds, but compelled their deposit into the Treasury. *Id.* The government argued that this contract was different from the one in *Reeve Aleutian*: The concession fees were derived solely from unofficial travel paid for by private funds and were not government funds. *Id.* at 1362.

The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit concluded that the fees were government funds. *Id.* at 1362–63. The travel agents paid them in consideration for government resources, such as the right to occupy agency space, utilize government services associated with the space, and serve as an exclusive on-site travel agent. *Id.* at 1362. Since the miscellaneous receipts statute requires the deposit into Treasury of "money for the government *from any source*," the government's argument about the private source of funds was rejected. *Id.* (emphasis in original). The *SATO* court noted that the concession fees were derived from procurements administered by a government agency in which the Morale Fund played no role. *Id.* at 1363. The court observed that "not only does

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the travel scheme at issue here divert to Morale Funds revenues that should be deposited in the Treasury, but it also creates incentives for government officials to reduce even those funds that are deposited in the Treasury.” *Id.* Depositing the fees into MWR funds violated the miscellaneous receipts statute. *Id.* The decision left open the question of whether unofficial travel concession fees could be retained by an MWR fund if a NAFI administers the contract.

e. Borrowing by  
Nonappropriated Fund  
Activities

GAO has determined that some nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) have the authority to borrow funds from commercial sources. In [B-148581-O.M., Dec. 18, 1970](#), GAO found that no federal law specifically prohibited the Army and Air Force Exchange Services (AAFES) (a military post exchange NAFI) from borrowing funds. GAO observed that the general laws governing borrowing by the United States, the use of appropriated funds and other financial transactions of the government have not been applied to NAFIs. Moreover, the United States is not a party to nor is it legally bound or obligated by the financial transactions of NAFIs, notwithstanding their status as federal instrumentalities immune from state taxation. GAO had previously noted that an Army regulation authorizes the borrowing of funds by post restaurants. [9 Comp. Gen. 411 \(1930\)](#). Then current DOD regulations granted AAFES implied authority to borrow funds from private sources and such authority was considered a normal practice for a business operation like AAFES. [B-148581-O.M., Dec. 18, 1970](#). However, GAO emphasized that such loans could not be on the credit of the United States.

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4. Transactions with  
Federal Agencies

Since they are so closely involved with the federal government, it is not surprising that nonappropriated fund instrumentalities and the agencies they are associated with want to enter into transactions for the provision of goods and services. This section addresses these practices and the legal authority for such transactions.

a. Economy Act and Intra-  
Agency Orders

As a general matter, the federal government is one entity (or “person”) for legal purposes. So, when agencies wish to obtain items or services from one another, they do not enter into contracts *per se*—a person cannot contract with himself. *See* Chapter 12, section B.1. One source of authority for agencies to obtain services from one another is by entering into reimbursable interagency agreements under the Economy Act. 31 U.S.C. § 1535. However, although nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) are instrumentalities of the United States government, the

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Economy Act does not apply to NAFIs. [58 Comp. Gen. 94 \(1978\)](#) (Army and NAFIs could not enter into intra-agency orders for services provided to Army).

The Comptroller General explained the rationale for this result in [58 Comp. Gen. 94](#) which involved the Army's use of intra-Army orders for obtaining goods and services from NAFIs. GAO emphasized that the Economy Act authority involves the transfer of moneys from one appropriation account to another for services provided. In the case of a NAFI, by definition, the transfer would not involve an appropriation account. (While an instrumentality of the government, NAFIs are not federal agencies and do not have appropriated fund accounts.) Recognizing their connection to the government, the Comptroller General noted that "they differ significantly from other Governmental activities, particularly with respect to budgetary and appropriation requirements." *Id.* at 97. It was those differences, rather than their status as government instrumentalities, which the Comptroller General found controlling. [58 Comp. Gen. at 97](#). The Comptroller General further noted that Congress has no direct control, through appropriations, over the accounts of the NAFI (and neither did GAO, through its account settlement authority). Thus, obtaining goods and services from a NAFI is "tantamount to obtaining them from non-Governmental, commercial sources." *Id.* at 98.

Similarly, when considering the use of interagency agreements between federal agencies and the Graduate School of the Department of Agriculture, the Comptroller General again determined that the Economy Act did not apply to this statutorily created NAFI. [64 Comp. Gen. 110, 113 \(1984\)](#) (decision concluded that the Government Employees Training Act, 5 U.S.C. § 4104, also did not constitute authority for agreements between federal agencies and NAFIs for the same reasons).

b. Contracting to Sell Goods and Services to Agencies

Noting that nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) exist primarily to help foster the morale, welfare, and recreation needs of government officers and employees, the Comptroller General, at times, has questioned whether it is appropriate for federal agencies to procure goods and services from the NAFI for the benefit of the federal agency. [58 Comp. Gen. 94, 98 \(1978\)](#). Despite this observation, GAO has recognized circumstances in which it may be appropriate for agencies to procure goods and services from NAFIs through the competitive procurement process and sole sourcing procurements.

With regard to participation in the competitive procurement process, the Comptroller General has stated that obtaining services from a NAFI is “tantamount to obtaining services from nongovernment commercial sources” and, therefore, NAFIs may compete to provide goods or services to agencies in the competitive procurement process. [68 Comp. Gen. 62, 66 \(1988\)](#) (Department of Agriculture Graduate School may compete in competitive procurement for operation and maintenance of a federal agency’s training laboratory); [64 Comp. Gen. 110, 111–12 \(1984\)](#) (Department of Agriculture Graduate School may be an appropriate recipient of sole source or competitive contract for training of federal employees); [B-215580, Dec. 31, 1984](#) (Army could not purchase child care services from a NAFI *via* intra-agency order, but could use a regular purchase order). The Comptroller General has also stated that “a NAFI may compete in, and be awarded a contract under a competitive procurement unless otherwise precluded by its charter from doing so.” [64 Comp. Gen. at 112](#). *See also* [B-289605.2, July 5, 2002](#); [B-274795, Jan. 6, 1997](#).

Sole-sourcing is another matter. There may be circumstances where an agency’s contract with a NAFI for goods or services might be proper, such as where it is impracticable for an agency to obtain goods or services from sources other than NAFIs, or where only a NAFI could provide the urgently required goods or services. [58 Comp. Gen. at 98](#). In such cases, a sole source contract would be proper with appropriate justifications. *Id.* *See also* [B-235742, Apr. 24, 1990](#) (proposed sole-source award to a NAFI for lunchroom monitoring services at Department of Defense dependent schools was proper). Whether a NAFI should provide goods or services will depend upon the factual circumstances. In [58 Comp. Gen. 94 \(1978\)](#), it was improper for a NAFI to provide mattresses to the Army, but GAO did not have enough information on the record to determine whether the provision of janitorial and dry-cleaning services was also inappropriate. [58 Comp. Gen. at 99](#). In circumstances where it is impracticable for an agency to obtain goods or services from sources other than NAFIs, or where only a NAFI could provide the urgently required goods or services, sole-source contracts may be proper. *Id.* at 98.

In another case, the Army wanted to purchase “health and comfort kits” (shampoo, razors, chewing gum, and shoe polish) for soldiers in Korea from the Army and Air Force Exchange Service on a sole-source basis. [B-190650, Sept. 2, 1980](#). GAO noted that the Army had not alleged that other sources were not capable of furnishing the items (nor could it make that statement since other sources were currently providing the items) and



held that the fact that a NAFI is able to perform a contract with greater ease or at less cost than any other concern does not justify a noncompetitive procurement. *Id.* See also 58 Comp. Gen. at 98–99 (noting that, where circumstances require services or goods to be supplied by a NAFI because of exigent circumstances or practicality, appropriate sole source justifications should be prepared); B-235742, Apr. 24, 1990 (finding that use of sole-source justification papers prepared by the Army for contract with a NAFI for lunch room monitoring services was proper).

Where NAFIs provided services to federal agencies under inter- or intra-agency orders later found to be improper, GAO has allowed the activities to be reimbursed on a *quantum meruit* or *quantum valebant* basis, if ratified by an authorized contracting official. 58 Comp. Gen. 94, 100 (1978); B-199533, Aug. 25, 1980; B-192859, Apr. 17, 1979.

c. Statutory Authority to Enter into Contracts with Federal Agencies

Congress provided statutory authority for certain nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) to enter into contracts and agreements with other federal agencies or instrumentalities.

As part of the 1997 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress authorized agencies and instrumentalities of the Department of Defense that support operation of the exchange system, or a morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) system to enter into contracts or other agreements with other federal agencies or instrumentalities. That statute specifically provides:

“An agency or instrumentality of the Department of Defense that supports the operation of the exchange system, or the operation of a morale, welfare, and recreation system, of the Department of Defense may enter into a contract or other agreement with another element of the Department of Defense or with another Federal department, agency, or instrumentality to provide or obtain goods and services beneficial to the efficient management and operation of the exchange system or that morale, welfare, and recreation system.”

Pub. L. No. 104-201, div. A, title III, § 341(a)(1), 110 Stat. 2422, 2488 (Sept. 23, 1996), *codified at* 10 U.S.C. § 2492.

The House Committee on National Security noted that exchanges and the MWR programs need to become more efficient, and determined that this



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could be achieved by permitting contracting between those activities and federal agencies. H.R. Rep. No. 104-563, at 278 (1996).

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## 5. Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentality Procurement

Obviously, the armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) have to procure goods and services for morale, welfare, and recreation programs. This section addresses the applicable procurement policies and procedures. It is important not to just categorize an entity as a NAFI and then think it obvious what laws apply to the entity. For example, Federal Prison Industries, Inc (FPI) has been described by the Federal Circuit as a NAFI for purposes of its jurisdiction, but FPI was created by statute as a wholly owned government corporation. As such, FPI is subject to the Competition in Contracting Act. [B-295737](#), [B-295737.2](#), [Apr. 19, 2005](#).

*41 U.S.C. § 5*—This law specifies that, subject to other authority or stated exceptions, “purchases and contracts for supplies or services for the government may be made or entered into only after advertising a sufficient time previously for proposals.” 41 U.S.C. § 5. NAFI contracts are made for the benefit of government officers or employees in their individual personal capacity, not in their official capacity. There is no case law, however, addressing whether 41 U.S.C. § 5 applies to NAFI contracting.

*Competition in Contracting Act*—The Competition in Contracting Act of 1984 (CICA)<sup>251</sup> made several changes to procurement provisions, including GAO’s bid protest authority (which we will discuss in section C.8.b(4) of this chapter). Its applicability depends on the definition of “federal agency” found in the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, ch. 288, 63 Stat. 377, 378 (June 30, 1949), codified at 40 U.S.C. § 102. Federal agency includes an executive branch agency. 40 U.S.C. § 102(5). An executive branch agency includes any executive department or independent establishment, including wholly owned government corporations. 40 U.S.C. § 102(4). However, it does not include NAFIs which, although recognized as government instrumentalities associated with and supervised by government entities, operate without appropriated funds and are not federal agencies. [B-270109](#), [Feb. 6, 1996](#); [B-228895](#), [Dec. 29, 1987](#).

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<sup>251</sup> Pub. L. No. 98-369, div. B, title VII, 98 Stat. 494, 1175 (July 18, 1984), *codified in scattered sections of titles 10, 31, and 41, United States Code*.

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*Armed Services Procurement Act of 1947*<sup>252</sup>—Although many NAFIs are related to the Department of Defense (DOD), the Armed Services Procurement Act and armed services and defense acquisition regulations do not apply to NAFIs because they operate with nonappropriated funds. 10 U.S.C. § 2303(a) (chapter applies to procurements for which payments are to be made from appropriated funds). *See also Ellsworth Bottling Company v. United States*, 408 F. Supp. 280, 285 (W.D. Okla. 1975); [58 Comp. Gen. 94, 98 \(1978\)](#).

The armed forces have some regulations applicable to armed forces NAFI procurements with nonappropriated funds. *See, e.g.*, Army Regulation 215-1, *Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Programs and Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities*, ch. 5 (Oct. 24, 2006); Army Regulation 215-4, *Nonappropriated Fund Contracting* (Mar. 11, 2005). However, there are circumstances in which appropriated funds are used for armed forces NAFI purchases. *See, e.g.*, Army Regulation 215-1, ch. 5. In those cases, defense acquisition regulations will apply.

*Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949*—NAFIs are not federal agencies for purposes of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 (Property Act). *See* [B-270109, Feb. 6, 1996](#). Also, the provisions of the Property Act would not apply to armed forces NAFIs since section 302 of the Act excludes DOD instrumentalities from the provisions of title III of that Act. 41 U.S.C. § 252(a). *See* [66 Comp. Gen. 231, 235 \(1987\)](#). *See also Ellsworth Bottling Co.*, 408 F. Supp. at 283–84. (Army and Air Force Exchange Service is not subject to the FPASA as it is part of the Departments of Army and Air Force).

*Federal Acquisition Regulation*—The Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), the governmentwide regulation which implements the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act, applies to federal agencies and acquisitions with appropriated funds. This would not include NAFI procurements with nonappropriated funds. 48 C.F.R. § 2.101(b). However, there are circumstances in which appropriated funds are used for NAFI purchases. *See, e.g.*, Army Regulation 215-1, ch. 5. If appropriated funds are used for a NAFI purchase, FAR and agency regulations would apply to the procurement. *See id.*; Army Regulation 215-4.

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<sup>252</sup> Pub. L. No. 80-413, 62 Stat. 21 (Feb. 19, 1948), *codified at* 10 U.S.C. §§ 2202, 2301–2314, 2381, 2383.

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## 6. Debts Due Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities

Despite their close association with the government, debts owed nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) are not debts owed the United States. Until 1966, this had a profound impact on the debt collection tools available to nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs). In *Kenny v. United States*, 62 Ct. Cl. 328 (1926), an Army officer was assigned to serve as superintendent of a post exchange. A post exchange civilian employee lost post exchange receipts in the amount of \$2,557.60. The superintendent was ultimately held responsible for payment of the amount not recovered and the amount was withheld from his pay. The court held that the receipts of a post exchange were not the property of the United States, the superintendent was not in arrears to the United States, and therefore, the loss could not be deducted from his statutory pay as an Army officer. *Id.*

Similarly, in [43 Comp. Gen. 431 \(1963\)](#), GAO held that a debt owed to the Officer's Mess, a NAFI, could not be set off against an enlisted member's final pay because it did not constitute a debt to the United States. The result was the same in [B-170400, Sept. 21, 1970, \*aff'd\*, B-170400, Feb. 2, 1971](#), where GAO held that a debt owed by a former employee of the Defense Supply Agency to the Officer's Mess and Post Restaurant, a NAFI, could not be set off against his final compensation or the amount to his credit in the Civil Service Retirement Fund.

Various federal laws, including the Federal Claims Collection Act of 1966,<sup>253</sup> as amended by the Debt Collection Act of 1982<sup>254</sup> and the Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996,<sup>255</sup> provide federal entities, including "instrumentalities" of the government, with methods to collect their debts, such as salary offset and administrative offset of monies otherwise payable to debtors. 31 U.S.C. § 3701(a)(4) (includes instrumentality in the definition of executive, judicial, or legislative agency). The Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996 amended the terms "claim" or "debt" to include "expenditures of nonappropriated funds." 31 U.S.C. § 3701(b)(1)(B). Also, Congress authorized the Department of Defense to collect debts owed by service members to its instrumentalities, including NAFIs, by deducting

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<sup>253</sup> Pub. L. No. 89-508, 80 Stat. 308 (July 19, 1966), *codified at* 31 U.S.C. §§ 3701–3733.

<sup>254</sup> Pub. L. No. 97-365, 96 Stat. 1749 (Oct. 25, 1982).

<sup>255</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-134, § 31001, 110 Stat. 1321, 1321-358 (Apr. 26, 1996).

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that amount from the member's pay in monthly installments. 37 U.S.C. § 1007(c).

Courts have held that for purposes of setoff under the Bankruptcy Code, where a debtor to a NAFI is owed a refund from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the refund may be set off against a debt owed to the NAFI. *In re Hanssen*, 203 B.R. 149 (Bankr. E.D. Ark. 1996).

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## 7. Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentality Property

While a nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI) is not a federal agency and in many cases is not supported by appropriated funds, its property is under government control. 40 Comp. Gen. 587 (1961). This case involved the commercial aircraft purchased by “military aero clubs” or “flying clubs,” NAFIs which provide flying instruction, practice, and recreation for active duty and retired military personnel, Department of Defense civilian personnel, their families, and other personnel designated by the Department of Defense. GAO held that the aero club, as a NAFI, owned and used equipment in its capacity as a government enterprise and may own and use property and equipment only in that capacity. *Id.* at 589. Thus, GAO concluded that commercial aircraft purchased by the aero club were to be regarded as government conveyances under government travel regulations and government travelers could be reimbursed for the expenses of their operation in the circumstances specified by those regulations. *Id.* at 590.

In other cases involving property, the courts have held that NAFI property is property of the United States for purposes of a statute prohibiting theft of anything of value from the United States or any department or agency thereof. *See United States v. Sanders*, 793 F.2d 107 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1986) (merchandise from the Army and Air Force Exchange Service is a “thing of value from the United States” under 18 U.S.C. § 641). *See also United States v. Towns*, 842 F.2d 740 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 487 U.S. 1240 (1988) (the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, as an instrumentality of the United States, is an agency or department of the United States for purposes of 18 U.S.C. § 641 and theft of its property causes property loss to the United States).

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## 8. Management of Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities

### a. Regulation and Oversight

For armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs), the Department of Defense (DOD) provides for their operations and carries out its oversight by regulation.<sup>256</sup> DOD's regulations cover everything from the creation of NAFIs, their purpose, funding, contracting, employment, audits, financial management, property management, to their dissolution.

Congress has also approved regulations of DOD's NAFIs, requiring specific departments and agencies to regulate such entities, and imposed specific requirements by statute. For example, in 1821 Congress approved the General Regulations for the Army which contained specific regulations regarding sutlers, the predecessors of Army MWR activities. Act of March 2, 1821, ch. 13, § 14, 3 Stat. 615, 616. Under 10 U.S.C. § 2783, the Secretary of Defense is required to establish regulations for DOD's NAFIs governing the purposes for which nonappropriated funds may be expended and the financial management of such funds to prevent, waste, loss, or unauthorized use. Section 2783 also establishes penalties for violations of the financial management regulations for civilian employees of DOD and members of the armed forces. Under 10 U.S.C. § 136(b), Congress established the position of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness who is to perform duties which include exchanges, commissaries, and NAFIs.

### b. Authority to Audit Nonappropriated Fund Activities

#### (1) GAO jurisdiction

In 1975, Congress gave GAO the authority to audit the operations and accounts of nonappropriated fund activities authorized or operated by the head of an executive agency to sell goods or services to government

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<sup>256</sup> See, e.g., Department of Defense Instruction 1015.08, *DoD Civilian Employee Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Activities (MWR) and Supporting Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities (NAFI)* (Dec. 3, 2005); Department of Defense Directive 1015.2, *Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation*, June 14, 1995; Department of Defense Financial Management Regulation 7000.14-R, vol. 13, *Nonappropriated Funds Policy and Procedures* (Aug. 1994); Army Regulation 215-1, *Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Programs and Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities*, (Oct. 24, 2006); Army Regulation 215-4, *Nonappropriated Fund Contracting* (Mar. 11, 2005).

personnel and their dependents.<sup>257</sup> Several questions came up regarding what types of activities were covered under this authority. [B-167710-O.M., May 6, 1976](#). GAO explained that the scope of the audit authority was not intended to apply to every nonappropriated fund activity since “the primary responsibility should rest with the operating agencies concerned.” *Id.* at 1. GAO pointed out that the statute listed the military and National Aeronautics and Safety Administration exchanges and similar entities as examples of the types of activities to be audited under this authority.<sup>258</sup> *Id.* Since GAO could not identify a workable definition of a nonappropriated fund activity, it relied on the case law and statutes dealing with nonappropriated fund operations to identify the applicable elements used for determining whether a particular activity should be audited.<sup>259</sup>

The Comptroller General may audit the accounting systems and internal controls of nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) as well as internal or independent audits or reviews of those funds. 31 U.S.C. § 3525(a)(1)–(3). To carry out this authority, records and property of NAFIs are to be made available to the Comptroller General. 31 U.S.C. § 3525(c). The Comptroller General is authorized to audit NAFIs which receive income from vending machines on federal property and has access to any records necessary to conduct such audits. 20 U.S.C. § 107b-3.

(2) Other auditors

GAO has concluded that the Secretary of Defense was authorized by statute and regulations to require Department of Defense (DOD) internal auditors to audit DOD nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs). [B-148581.14-O.M., Aug. 17, 1976](#). Military audit agencies or certified public

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<sup>257</sup> The General Accounting Office Act of 1974, Pub. L. No. 93-604, § 301, 88 Stat. 1959, 1961 (Jan. 2, 1975), *codified at* 31 U.S.C. § 3525.

<sup>258</sup> In the recodification of this provision in Pub. L. No. 97-258, 96 Stat. 963 (Sept. 13, 1982), the words “military or other . . . such as the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, Navy Exchanges, Marine Corps Exchanges, Coast Guard Exchanges, Exchange Councils of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, commissaries, clubs, and theaters” were omitted as surplus. *See* 31 U.S.C. § 3525, Revision Notes.

<sup>259</sup> These elements include whether: (1) the activity was established under the authority or sanction of a government agency with or without an initial advance of government funds; (2) the activity is created and run by government officers or employees and/or their dependents; (3) the activity is operated for the benefit of government officers or employees and/or their dependents; and (4) the operations of the activity are financed by the proceeds therefrom rather than by appropriations. [B-167710-O.M., May 6, 1976](#).

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accountants may audit military department NAFIs in accordance with DOD regulations and instructions. DOD Instruction 7600.6, *Audit of Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities and Related Activities* (Jan. 16, 2004); Army Regulation 215-1, *Military Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Programs and Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities*, ch. 18 (Oct. 24, 2006).

(3) Settlement of accounts

Under 31 U.S.C. § 3526 the Comptroller General adjusts and settles the accounts of the United States government and certifies balances in the accounts of accountable officers. Under the accounts settlement authority, the Comptroller General can take exception to an improper transaction, and hold the certifying or disbursing officer personally liable for the amount of money erroneously or improperly expended. [62 Comp. Gen. 40, 41 \(1982\)](#). GAO can exercise its account settlement authority over government agencies, departments, or independent establishments. While 31 U.S.C. § 3525 provides GAO with audit authority over nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs), it does not include accounts settlement authority over NAFIs. [B-187004, Aug. 12, 1976](#); [B-183034, Apr. 18, 1975](#).

(4) Bid protests

Prior to the enactment of the Competition in Contracting Act (CICA),<sup>260</sup> GAO's accounts settlement authority was the basis for its bid protest jurisdiction. [B-218441, Aug. 8, 1985](#). Stated slightly differently, GAO viewed its authority to consider protests of contract awards as an extension of its authority to settle appropriated funds accounts of the government. [B-185084, Nov. 28, 1975](#). The fact that an agency labeled funds as nonappropriated was not determinative of whether GAO would exercise jurisdiction over a bid protest. For example, in [B-188770, Feb. 24, 1978](#), GAO reviewed the protest of a procurement for the design and construction of a commissary which was to be paid from a trust revolving fund account in which commissary surcharges were deposited. Originally, GAO dismissed the protest because the agency asserted that these funds were nonappropriated. [B-188770, Apr. 14, 1977](#). Upon reconsideration, GAO determined that the commissary surcharge funds were appropriated funds because Congress had authorized the collection of the surcharge and

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<sup>260</sup> Pub. L. No. 98-369, div. B, title VII, 98 Stat. 494, 1175 (July 18, 1984). GAO's bid protest responsibilities under CICA are codified at 31 U.S.C. §§ 3551–3556.



its use for commissary construction. [57 Comp. Gen. 311 \(1978\)](#). GAO noted that this was consistent with its prior analysis that statutes authorizing the collection and credit of fees to a particular fund and making the fund available for specified expenditures constituted appropriations of funds.<sup>261</sup> *Id.* at 313. Since these were, in fact, appropriated funds, GAO did have accounts settlement authority for the funds and bid protest jurisdiction over the protest.<sup>262</sup> *Id.* at 315.

Since the enactment of CICA, GAO's jurisdiction over bid protests is no longer defined by its accounts settlement authority; rather, CICA established GAO bid protest jurisdiction over procurements by federal agencies as defined in the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949 (Property Act), Act of June 30, 1949, ch. 288, 63 Stat. 377, *codified at* 40 U.S.C. § 472. The definition of federal agency includes an executive branch agency.<sup>263</sup> 40 U.S.C. § 102(5). The definition of an executive branch agency includes any executive department or independent establishment in the executive branch of the government and wholly owned government corporations. 40 U.S.C. § 102(4). However, it does not include nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) which, although recognized as government instrumentalities associated with and supervised by government entities, operate without appropriated funds and are not, in that sense, federal agencies. [B-270109, Feb. 6, 1996](#). *See also* 4 C.F.R. § 21.5(g).

This does not mean that GAO will never consider a protest involving a procurement by a NAFL. GAO will review a NAFL procurement where the protester asserts that the NAFL is acting as a conduit for the federal agency in order for the agency to circumvent applicable procurement statutes and regulations. [B-270109, Feb. 6, 1996](#). For example, in [B-256560, July 5, 1994](#), GAO considered a protest concerning a procurement by an employees'

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<sup>261</sup> Legally, these funds were offsetting collections, a permanent, indefinite appropriation. See the discussion of various types of budget authority in Chapter 2, section A.2.

<sup>262</sup> In [B-188770](#), GAO expressly overruled prior bid protest decisions to the extent that these prior decisions held that commissary funds were nonappropriated and that GAO would not consider protests involving procurements financed with such funds.

<sup>263</sup> The Property Act defines a federal agency as an executive agency or an establishment in the legislative or judicial branch of the government (except the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Architect of the Capitol, including any activities under the Architect's direction). 40 U.S.C. § 102(5). This definition of a federal agency is adopted in CICA at 31 U.S.C. § 3551(3), and appears in GAO's bid protest regulations at 4 C.F.R. § 21.0(c).



association, which was a NAFI. The protester, a private-sector contractor, alleged that the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) was improperly diverting to the NAFI requirements for the procurement of vending machines used in its employee and visitor lounge areas in order to avoid applying procurement statutes and regulations, specifically, CICA's mandate for full and open competition. GAO determined that the vending machines in question were not part of BOP's requirements, and did not represent BOP's needs or objectives, and, therefore, BOP could not be said to be diverting a requirement to the employees' association. GAO concluded that the procurement was a legitimate NAFI procurement, properly intended to serve the needs of the employees' association and its members.

Further, the fact that an agency will receive some incidental benefit from a NAFI procurement does not convert it into an agency requirement. In B-256560, the protester argued that BOP was going to receive benefits from the vending machines being procured by the NAFI and, as such, the agency's appropriations would be improperly augmented. Notwithstanding the fact that the inmates may have had some limited access to buy items from the visitor lounge vending machines during prison visiting hours, the record showed, and GAO concluded, that these machines were not necessary to serve BOP's mission of inmate care. In other words, the vending machines in the visitor lounge primarily existed for the benefit of the employees' association and its members, and inmate use and benefit was only incidental. Access by the inmates did not convert the machines into an agency need or benefit.

GAO will make its own determination regarding its jurisdiction over a bid protest under CICA. In B-295737, B-295737.2, Apr. 19, 2005, *Federal Prison Industries, Inc. (FPI)*, citing *Core Concepts of Florida, Inc. v. United States*, 327 F.3d 1331 (Fed. Cir. 2003), argued that GAO lacked jurisdiction to hear a protest of an FPI solicitation for shirt fabric because FPI is a NAFI. GAO disagreed with the court's characterization of FPI as a NAFI. FPI by statute is a wholly owned government corporation. See 31 U.S.C. § 9101(3)(E) (includes FPI in a list of wholly owned government corporations). Noting that the Property Act clearly included wholly owned government corporations in its definition of a federal agency, 40 U.S.C. § 102(4), a definition which, as previously noted, was adopted in CICA, GAO concluded that it has jurisdiction under CICA to hear protests arising out of procurements by wholly owned government corporations, such as FPI.

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9. Sovereign Immunity As instrumentalities of the United States government, nonappropriated fund instrumentalities are subject to and entitled to various duties and privileges of the United States government. One of these is the principle of sovereign immunity: The United States, as sovereign, cannot be sued without its consent.
- a. Immunity from State and Local Taxation Under the doctrine of sovereign immunity, the federal government of the United States is immune from taxation by state and local governments, a principle recognized by the Supreme Court in *McCulloch v. Maryland*, 17 U.S.(4 Wheat.) 316 (1819). This constitutional immunity extends to federal instrumentalities, including nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs). *Standard Oil v. Johnson*, 316 U.S. 481, 485 (1942). This immunity prohibits a state taxing authority from imposing a markup on the purchases of NAFIs. *United States v. State Tax Commission of Mississippi*, 421 U.S. 599, 604–05 (1975). This is so even where that markup is not collected directly from the NAFI, but is collected by suppliers. *Id.* at 608–09.
- The United States may consent to state taxation of its instrumentalities. For example, Congress permits collection of state taxes on gasoline and other fuels sold through post exchanges and other retail sales agencies of the federal government on military installations when such fuels are not for the exclusive use of the United States. 4 U.S.C. § 104. Congress also permitted states to levy taxes within federal areas to the same extent as though the area were not a federal area, with certain exceptions not relevant here.<sup>264</sup> 4 U.S.C. §§ 105–107.
- b. Immunity from Suit In 1970, Congress amended the Tucker Act to waive immunity for claims arising from some armed forces and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) contracts. Pub. L. No. 91-350, 84 Stat. 449 (July 23, 1970), *codified at* 28 U.S.C. § 1491(a). Prior to 1970, the courts had consistently held that neither the NAFI, nor the agency supervising the NAFI, could be sued. *E.g.*, *Jaeger v. United States*, 394 F.2d 944 (D.C. Cir. 1968); *Kyer v. United States*, 369 F.2d 714 (Ct. Cl. 1966); *Keetz v. United States*, 168 Ct. Cl. 205

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<sup>264</sup> This also had the effect of removing any immunity previously enjoyed by private concessionaires located on military installations since they are not instrumentalities of the United States. Stephen Castlen, *Let the Good Times Role: Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Operations*, Army Lawyer 3, 11 n.69 (1996).

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(1964); *Pulaski Cab Co. v. United States*, 157 F. Supp. 955 (Ct. Cl. 1958); *Borden v. United States*, 116 F. Supp. 873 (Ct. Cl. 1953). The most famous of these decisions, the *Borden* case, involved a chief accountant employed by the American Army Exchange Service. He brought suit against the United States to recover salary withheld to recoup the loss of money stolen from a safe at the post exchange. Mr. Borden had contracted with the American Army Exchange Service to serve as a senior accountant. His contract stipulated that the employer could withhold salary for claims against him on account of fraud, breach of contract, or negligence. Army regulations regarding NAFIs stated that: “Exchange contracts are solely the obligation of the exchange. They are not government contracts and the distinction between exchange contracts and government contracts will be observed and clearly indicated at all times.” *Borden*, 116 F. Supp. at 877.

The Court of Claims held that, under the *Standard Oil* decision,<sup>265</sup> Mr. Borden could not sue the Exchange Service because it was part of the government and the government had not consented to a suit against the Exchange Service. *Id.* In addition, Mr. Borden was precluded from suing the government because Exchange contracts were not contracts of the United States and the United States was not liable on such contracts. *Id.*

The dilemma for Mr. Borden was not lost on the Court of Claims. The court put its concerns this way:

“The Army officers are given complete supervision of these Post Exchanges. They handle the money. They have control of the funds. The funds are used to make the Army more effective. In other words the officers run the show. The Exchanges are established and maintained for the benefit of Army personnel. That is their major, in fact their sole purpose. Even the civilian employees are subject to the Articles of War. For the Army to contend and to provide by regulation that it is not liable since it did not act in its official capacity would be like a man charged with extra-marital activity pleading that whatever he may have done was done in his individual capacity and not in his capacity as a husband.

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<sup>265</sup> *Standard Oil v. Johnson*, 316 U.S. 481 (1942).

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“We think it is proper that this situation should be called to the attention of the Congress. It seems fair that either the Post Exchanges or the Government should be subject to suit and liable for any breach of contract that had been duly signed by the Army Exchange Service.”

*Borden*, 116 F. Supp. at 877–78.

Some nonmilitary NAFIs have benefited from this same paradox. For example, several courts have held that Post Office employee welfare committees constitute integral parts of the Postal Service and were instrumentalities of the United States immune from suit without the United States’ consent. *Employees Welfare Committee v. Daws*, 599 F.2d 1375 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1979); *Automatic Retailers v. Ruppert*, 269 F. Supp. 588 (S.D. Ia. 1967).

In response to these decisions, Congress, amended the Tucker Act (28 U.S.C. § 1491) in 1970 to waive sovereign immunity for claims arising from some armed forces and NASA NAFL contracts. The amendment to the Tucker Act provided that express or implied contracts with these specified NAFIs are considered express or implied contracts with the United States. Pub. L. No. 91-350, *codified at* 28 U.S.C. § 1491(a). Section 1491(a) now reads as follows:

“The United States Court of Federal Claims shall have jurisdiction to render judgment upon any claim against the United States founded either upon the Constitution or any Act of Congress or any regulation of an executive department, or upon any express or implied contract with the United States, or for liquidated or unliquidated damages in cases not sounding in tort. For the purpose of this paragraph, an express or implied contract with the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, Navy Exchanges, Marine Corps Exchanges, Coast Guard Exchanges, or Exchange Councils of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration shall be considered an express or implied contract with the United States.”

The purpose of the amendment was to afford contractors a federal forum in which to sue the specified NAFIs by “doing away with the inequitable ‘loophole’ in the Tucker Act.” *United States v. Hopkins*, 427 U.S. 123, 126 (1976) (holding that an employment contract may qualify as an expressed

or implied contract of the United States for purposes of Tucker Act jurisdiction). *See also* H.R. Rep. No. 91-933, at 2 (1970). That waiver of sovereign immunity only applied to the NAFIs specifically designated in the amendment to the Tucker Act. *See Sodexo Marriott Management, Inc. v. United States*, 61 Fed. Cl. 229, 232–33 (2004) (MWR activity at Marine Corps installation); *Research Triangle Institute v. Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System*, 962 F. Supp. 61 (M.D.N.C. 1997) (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System); *McDonald's Corp. v. United States*, 926 F.2d 1126, 1132–33 (Fed. Cir. 1991) (Navy Resale and Service Support Office). *See also Wolverine Supply, Inc. v. United States*, 17 Cl. Ct. 190 (1989) (applying the same standard for determining immunity from suit under the Tucker Act to suits under the Contract Disputes Act, 41 U.S.C. §§ 601–613).

According to the Federal Circuit, as originally proposed, the amendment would have applied to all NAFIs. *Denkler v. United States*, 782 F.2d 1003, 1007 (Fed. Cir. 1986), *citing* H.R. Rep. No. 91-933, at 6–7. It was changed to cover the armed forces and NASA NAFIs named in the amendment because some government agencies protested that certain activities that operated incidentally to them, like bowling leagues or baseball teams, should not be covered by the amendment. *Id.* The court said that Congress decided to include only those activities which it believed would have sufficient assets to pay costs resulting from the expanded jurisdiction. *Id.* Subsequently, the Court of Claims and the Federal Circuit have addressed their jurisdiction under the Tucker Act amended on a number of occasions. For additional discussion see section C.1.b of this chapter and subsequent case law.

c. Payment of Judgments

If a party overcomes the jurisdictional barriers to suing a nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI) and prevails in the action, who pays the judgment? One of the most commonly cited principles regarding NAFIs is that the United States “assumes none of the financial obligations” of NAFIs. *Standard Oil Co. v. Johnson*, 316 U.S. 481, 485 (1942). The same is true of judgments against NAFIs.

NAFIs generally pay tort judgments entered against them from their own funds. They may not use appropriated funds and have no access to the permanent, indefinite appropriation known as the Judgment Fund, 31 U.S.C. § 1304. *See* [B-204703](#), [Sept. 29, 1981](#). *See also Mignogna v. Sair Aviation, Inc.*, 937 F.2d 37, 42–43 (2<sup>nd</sup> Cir. 1991).

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When a judgment arises out of an express or implied contract made by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, the Navy Exchanges, the Marine Corps Exchanges, the Coast Guard Exchanges, or the Exchange Councils of NASA, the Judgment Fund pays the judgment. 31 U.S.C. § 1304(c)(1). The Exchange making the contract is required to reimburse the Fund for the amount paid. 31 U.S.C. § 1304(c)(2).

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10. Status of  
Nonappropriated Fund  
Instrumentality  
Employees

Employees of armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs) are neither employees of federal agencies nor employees of the United States government. Pub. L. No. 82-397, ch. 444, § 1, 66 Stat. 138 (June 19, 1952).<sup>266</sup> Public Law 82-397 provides that armed forces NAFL employees “shall not be held and considered as employees of the United States for the purpose of any laws administered by the Civil Service Commission.” *Id.* Rather, they are employees of the instrumentality. *United States v. Hopkins*, 427 U.S. 123, 127 (1976). Congress never intended that armed forces NAFL employees receive the same level of protection as other federal employees. *McAuliffe v. Rice*, 966 F.2d 979, 980 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992). *See also* [B-289605.2, July 5, 2002](#) (Armed forces NAFL employees are not covered by civil service laws). Congress enacted Public Law 82-397 in response to the Department of Defense’s desire for flexibility by exempting armed forces NAFL employees from civil service type protections. *See McAuliffe*, 966 F.2d at 980. Where Congress has made NAFL employees subject to laws applicable to other federal employees, it has done so by expressly including them within the coverage of specific statutes. *See Perez v. Army and Air Force Exchange Service*, 680 F.2d 779, 787 (D.C. Cir. 1982).

a. Applicability of Civil  
Service Laws

Armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFL) employees are generally not deemed to be employees of the United States except as specifically provided by statute. 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c). Section 2105(c) provides:

“An employee paid from nonappropriated funds of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, Army and Air Force Motion Picture Service, Navy Ship’s Stores Ashore, Navy exchanges, Marine Corps exchanges, Coast Guard

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<sup>266</sup> Public Law 82-397 is codified at 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c) and incorporated within the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978.

exchanges, and other instrumentalities of the United States under the jurisdiction of the armed forces conducted for the comfort, pleasure, contentment, and mental and physical improvement of personnel of the armed forces is deemed not an employee for the purpose of—

“(1) laws administered by the Office of Personnel Management, except—

(A) section 7204;

(B) as otherwise specifically provided in this title;

(C) the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938;

(D) for the purpose of entering into an interchange agreement to provide for the noncompetitive movement of employees between such instrumentalities and the competitive service; or

(E) subchapter V of chapter 63, which shall be applied so as to construe references to benefit programs to refer to applicable programs for employees paid from nonappropriated funds; or

“(2) subchapter I of chapter 81, chapter 84 (except to the extent specifically provided therein), and section 7902 of this title.”

The final sentence of 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c) states that it does not affect the status of the specified NAFIs as federal instrumentalities.

(1) Civil Service Reform Act of 1978

The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978<sup>267</sup> and the Supreme Court in *United States v. Fausto*, 484 U.S. 439 (1988), streamlined and simplified the remedies available to federal employees for adverse employment actions. *McAuliffe v. Rice*, 966 F.2d 979, 981 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1992). The Civil Service

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<sup>267</sup> Pub. L. No. 95-454, 92 Stat. 1111 (Oct. 13, 1978).

Reform Act of 1978 created a comprehensive framework providing substantive and procedural rights and remedies for federal employees for performance actions, removals, or other adverse actions.<sup>268</sup> In *Fausto*, the Supreme Court held that the Civil Service Reform Act was the exclusive substantive and procedural framework for federal employee actions, and precluded judicial review of an employee's action under other laws. To conclude otherwise, said the Court, would allow such claims to undermine the goals of unitary decision making and consistency intended by the Act. *Fausto*, 484 U.S. at 449–51. Thus, the Supreme Court held that the Civil Service Reform Act precluded an employee who otherwise did not qualify for review under the Act from bringing a claim under the Back Pay Act. *Id.* at 454–55.

Congress deliberately exempted armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentality (NAFI) employees from federal civil service rules. This enabled the armed forces to carry out the missions of NAFIs with the maximum possible personnel flexibility. *McAuliffe*, 966 F.2d at 981. With a few exceptions, armed forces NAFI employees are not covered by laws which apply to employees within the general federal service, including the Civil Service Reform Act. *McAuliffe*, 966 F.2d at 980–81; *Perez v. Army & Air Force Exchange Service*, 680 F.2d 779, 785–87 (1982). See 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c). Thus, the remedies available to NAFI employees are established by regulation of the agency administering the NAFI. See *McAuliffe*, 966 F.2d at 981; *Castella v. Long*, 701 F. Supp. 578 (N.D. Tex. 1988). Accordingly, NAFI employees are not entitled to appeal adverse actions to the Merit Systems Protection Board. *Perez*, 680 F.2d at 787; *Taylor v. Department of the Navy*, 1 M.S.P.R. 591 (1980). In the *McAuliffe* case, a former civilian employee of an Air Force NAFI sought review of the decision to terminate her employment under the Administrative Procedure Act, 5 U.S.C. § 701–706. The court held that the exclusivity of the Civil Service Reform Act precluded judicial review under the Administrative Procedure Act.<sup>269</sup> *McAuliffe*, 966 F.2d at 981.

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<sup>268</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Civil Service Reform Act, see *Fausto*, 484 U.S. at 443–47.

<sup>269</sup> But compare *Helsabeck v. United States*, 821 F. Supp. 404 (E.D.N.C. 1993), in which the district court held that the Civil Service Reform Act did not preclude judicial review of a claim for nonmonetary damages against the government by an employee for the Cherry Point Marine Air Station food service for procedures used to discharge him. While the court permitted the plaintiff to amend his complaint with respect to nonmonetary claims, it did not specify what the nature of the review would be. There is no subsequent history of the case to determine what, if anything, the plaintiff did as a result, so we are unable to infer what effect this would have on NAFI employee rights.



Since they are not covered by the Civil Service Reform Act, armed forces NAFI employees have attempted to challenge actions taken against them through other statutory and constitutional rights. These include invoking Tucker Act jurisdiction, 28 U.S.C. § 1491, for certain NAFI contracts, and seeking damages for constitutional deprivations by a government official, as established in *Bivens v. Six Unknown Named Agents of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics*, 403 U.S. 388 (1971).

As we previously discussed, the Tucker Act waives sovereign immunity for claims arising from contracts of certain post exchanges described in 28 U.S.C. § 1491(a). The Supreme Court has recognized that Tucker Act jurisdiction may be premised on an employment contract, as well as on one for goods or other services. *Army & Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) v. Sheehan*, 456 U.S. 728, 735 (1982). Relying on this theory, Army and Air Force Exchange Service employees sued their employers alleging that they were employed by contract. *Id.* at 735; *Moore v. United States*, 21 Cl. Ct. 537 (1990); *Orona v. United States*, 4 Cl. Ct. 81 (1983). However, the courts found that the specific employees in those cases, in fact, were not serving under employment contracts but had been appointed to their positions. *Sheehan*, 456 U.S. at 736–38. Consequently, the courts lacked jurisdiction over their claims. *Id.* at 741; *Moore*, 21 Cl. Ct. at 539–40; *Orona*, 4 Cl. Ct. at 84. Where an employee holds his employment through appointment, claims for entitlements to pay and allowances derive from applicable statutes and regulations not from a claimed contract of employment. B-280764, May 4, 2000 (*citing AAFES*, 456 U.S. at 735).

Feeling confused? This next case is not going to make you feel a whole lot better. In *Castella v. Long*, 701 F. Supp. 578 (N.D. Tex.), *aff'd*, 862 F.2d 872 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988), *cert. denied*, 493 U.S. 936 (1989), a former Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) employee sued for damages after he was fired for making false claims for travel expense reimbursements. *Id.* at 580–81. The court recognized that AAFES employees were not federal employees with rights under the Civil Service System. Instead, AAFES employees fall under the Army and Air Force regulations. *Id.* at 581. Based on sovereign immunity, the court dismissed those claims which sought relief from the NAFI, the government, and the individuals who acted in their *official capacities* to fire the claimant. *Id.* at 582. The court then dismissed those claims against the individuals acting in their *personal*

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*capacities*,<sup>270</sup> based on *Bush v. Lucas*, 462 U.S. 367 (1983). See *Castella*, 701 F. Supp. at 583–84.

*Bush* held that *Bivens*-type constitutional damage claims could not be brought for alleged constitutional violations associated with a claimant’s employment in the federal government. The reason for this was that Congress had established “an elaborate remedial system” which was intended to address employment-related claims by federal employees. *Bivens*-type actions would unduly disrupt that statutory scheme. *Bush*, 462 U.S. at 388.

The *Castella* court realized that *Bush* involved federal employees subject to the Civil Service System, not armed forces NAFI employees. *Castella*, 701 F. Supp. at 583. (As we noted earlier, Congress intentionally exempted armed forces NAFI employees from that system.) Nevertheless, it noted that some other courts (including its own circuit court) had applied (or endorsed applying) *Bush* to armed forces NAFI employee claims. The courts rationalized their position with the explanation that while the Army and Air Force regulations were not approved by Congress, they were, nevertheless, “an elaborate remedial system” that should not be augmented by *Bivens*-style constitutional claims. *Castella*, 701 F. Supp. at 584.

Strange as it may seem, by treating NAFI employees *the same* as federal employees under *Bush*, the courts may actually have reinforced the congressional intention that armed forces NAFI employees be treated *differently* than federal employees, since absent a *Bivens*-type claim, the NAFI employees are left more to the regulatory mercy of the agencies than are federal employees under the statutory civil service rules.

The *Castella* court also held that the NAFI employee could not use the Privacy Act challenging the correctness of the records that supported the decision to remove him, to attack the removal decision. *Castella*, 701 F. Supp. 585. The court explained that the purpose of the Privacy Act was to allow for the correction of factual or historical errors. It was not intended to permit a plaintiff to reopen consideration of unfavorable

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<sup>270</sup> In the *Bivens* case, the Supreme Court held that an individual citizen was entitled to sue for damages for alleged constitutional deprivations by a government official. *Bivens*, 403 U.S. at 396–97. The *Bivens* remedy, it should be noted, runs against the offending official in his private capacity, not against the government.

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federal agency decisions. The court found that the plaintiff was really alleging only a wrongful personnel decision. *Id.* at 584–85.

(2) Other employment related laws

The following list of laws typically associated with federal employment discusses their applicability to armed forces nonappropriated fund instrumentalities (NAFIs).

*Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989*<sup>271</sup>—Employees of armed forces NAFIs are not protected by the Whistleblower Protection Act because they are excluded from the definition of employee for purposes of title 5, United States Code. *Clark v. Merit Protection Systems Board*, 361 F.3d 647, 650–52 (Fed. Cir. 2004) (adopting the analysis of *Clark v. Army & Air Force Exchange Service*, 57 M.S.P.R. 43, 46 (1993)). However, pursuant to 10 U.S.C. § 1587, armed forces NAFI employees are protected from reprisal for whistleblowing under procedures adopted by the Secretary of Defense.

*Classification and Pay Rates and Systems*—As stated in 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c), armed forces NAFI employees are federal employees for purposes of: 5 U.S.C. § 7204, which prohibits discrimination because of race, color, creed, sex, or marital status against individuals in the classification of employees, administration of pay rates and systems of employees; appointments to positions above GS-15 under 5 U.S.C. § 3324; and the systematic agency review of operations under 5 U.S.C. § 305.

*Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938*—NAFI employees under the jurisdiction of the armed forces fall within the coverage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA). 29 U.S.C. § 203(e)(2)(A)(iv). Unlike federal employees in the competitive or excepted service, armed forces NAFI employees are under another personnel system pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c). Since such employees are not covered by the laws which apply to federal employees, procedural protections for removals or other adverse actions affecting those employees are established by regulation of the agency supervising the armed forces NAFI. *American Federation of Government Employees, Local 1799 and Department of Army, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland*, 22 FLRA 574, 576 (1986). An FLSA claim may be brought against an armed forces NAFI, to the extent of nonappropriated funds, since the government has waived immunity with regard to wage

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<sup>271</sup> Pub. L. No. 101-12, 103 Stat. 16 (Apr. 10, 1989), *codified at* 5 U.S.C. §§ 1201–1222.

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claims under the FLSA. *El-Sheikh v. United States*, 177 F.3d 1321, 1323–24 (Fed. Cir. 1999); *Cosme Nieves v. Deshler*, 786 F.2d 445, 450 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 479 U.S. 824 (1986) (an FLSA claim does not come within the limited exceptions of the Tucker Act); *Morales v. Senior Petty Officers’ Mess*, 366 F. Supp. 1305 (D.P.R. 1973).

*Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993*<sup>272</sup>—Armed forces NAFI employees are federal employees for purposes of Title II of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c)(1)(E). Title II of the Family Medical Leave Act grants federal employees, including armed forces NAFI employees, rights to leave from work in enumerated circumstances, but no private right of action to enforce the leave rights. *Mann v. Haigh*, 120 F.3d 34, 37 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1997). In the *Mann* decision, since the plaintiff was not a federal employee covered by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, and he was not entitled to a judicial review under the Administrative Procedure Act, his right to appeal his termination was limited to procedural safeguards provided by the NAFI. *Id.* at 37–38.

*Civil Service Retirement Act*<sup>273</sup>—The Civil Service Retirement Act entitles certain government employees to deferred retirement annuities. Typically, in order to be eligible for a retirement annuity under the Civil Service Retirement Act, an individual must complete at least 5 years of “creditable” civilian service and must complete at least 1 year of “covered” civilian service in the final 2 years of employment. 5 U.S.C. §§ 8333(a), (b); *Dupo v. OPM*, 69 F.3d 1125, 1128 (Fed. Cir. 1995). Although most service in the federal government is creditable, service with an armed forces NAFI is not, as a general rule, creditable service for purposes of the Civil Service Retirement Act. Armed forces NAFI employees are excluded from the definition of an employee for purposes of laws administered by the Office of Personnel Management which includes the Civil Service Retirement Act. 5 U.S.C. § 2105(c). *See also Dupo*, 69 F.3d at 1128. However, Congress has provided that in limited circumstances, service with an armed forces NAFI may be creditable for purposes of the Civil Service Retirement Act. The Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities Employees’ Retirement Credit Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-638, 100 Stat. 3535 (Nov. 10, 1986), codified at 5 U.S.C. § 8332(b)(16), provides that the following service is creditable:

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<sup>272</sup> Pub. L. No. 103-3, 107 Stat. 6 (Feb. 5, 1993), *codified at* 28 U.S.C. §§ 2601–2654.

<sup>273</sup> Pub. L. No. 95-454, 92 Stat. 1111 (Oct. 13, 1978), *codified as amended in scattered sections of* title 5, United States Code.

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“[S]ervice performed by any individual as an employee described in section 2105(c) of this title after June 18, 1952, and before January 1, 1966, if (A) such service involved conducting an arts and crafts, drama, music, library, service club, youth activities, sports or recreation program (including any outdoor recreation program) for personnel of the armed forces, and (B) such individual is an employee subject to this subchapter on the day before the date of the enactment of The Nonappropriated Fund Instrumentalities Employees’ Retirement Credit Act of 1986.”

Therefore, armed forces NAFI employees are entitled to civil service retirement credit for that service only if they meet the following criteria: (1) the service to be credited was performed for an armed forces NAFI between June 18, 1952, and January 1, 1966; (2) the service performed during that period involved conducting certain activities as listed in 5 U.S.C. § 8332(b)(16); and (3) the individual was an employee subject to the Civil Service Retirement Act on November 9, 1986. *Dupo*, 69 F.3d at 1128. In the *Dupo* case, the Federal Circuit found that Mr. Dupo was employed by a Navy Exchange for the time periods required for creditable service. *Id.* at 1128–29. However, he had not conducted the activities listed in section 8332(b)(16). The *Dupo* court held that for purposes of section 8332(b)(16), “conducting” means “to lead from a position of command” or “to direct the performance of” and employees who were administrative or support workers, such as Mr. Dupo, generally did not satisfy this requirement. *Id.* at 1129. Furthermore, Mr. Dupo had been separated from service prior to November 9, 1986 and did not meet the third requirement. *Id.* Thus, he was not entitled to a civil service retirement annuity.

*Relocation Expenses*—Sections 5724 and 5724a of title 5, United States Code, authorize an agency to pay transferred employees travel and transportation expenses, various allowances, and relocation expenses. However, these expenses are allowable only for “an individual employed in or under an agency.” 5 U.S.C. § 5721(2). Thus, an individual is entitled to these expenses if the agency from which he transfers and the agency to which he transfers are within this coverage. NAFIs are not considered federal agencies for the purpose of receipt and disbursement of funds, including payments to their employees. B-215398, Oct. 30, 1984. Employees of a NAFI are not employed by an agency within the meaning of section 5721(1) and are not entitled to relocation expenses under sections 5724 and 5724a when they transfer to a federal agency. In 1996,

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however, Congress authorized the Department of Defense to pay for travel, transportation, and relocation expenses for employees of the department and Coast Guard NAFIs to the same extent authorized for transferred employees.<sup>274</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-201, div. A, title XVI, § 1605(a)(1), 110 Stat. 2422, 2736 (Sept. 23, 1996), *codified at* 5 U.S.C. § 5736.

*Dual Compensation Laws*—The dual compensation laws were intended to preclude “double dipping”—in other words, to protect the taxpayer from paying the same individual two salaries. One way this has been manifested is in a provision which dictated that the retired pay of a regular retired officer be reduced if he held a position with the United States government or if his retired pay together with his civilian pay exceeded level V of the Executive Schedule. 5 U.S.C. §§ 5531, 5532, 5533.<sup>275</sup> In this context, “position” is defined as—

“a civilian office or position (including a temporary, part-time, or intermittent position), appointive or elective, in the legislative, executive, or judicial branch of the Government of the United States (*including* a Government corporation and a *nonappropriated fund instrumentality under the jurisdiction of the armed forces*) or in the government of the District of Columbia.”

5 U.S.C. § 5531(2) (emphasis added).

Thus, for example, the retired pay of regular retired officers of the armed forces who are employed with armed forces NAFIs is subject to reduction in order to avert dual compensation.

There are NAFIs outside the Department of Defense that employ retired officers of the armed forces, and the courts have considered the applicability of the dual compensation laws to them. In *Denkler v.*

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<sup>274</sup> The General Services Administration Board of Contract Appeals concluded that an employee transferring from an armed forces NAFI to a civilian agency was entitled to relocation expenses under the 1996 law. *See In the Matter of Emma Jane Medina*, GSBCA No. 16,136, 04-1 B.C.A. ¶ 32,423 (2003); *In the Matter of Kenneth A. Hack*, GSBCA No. 15,758, 02-2 B.C.A. ¶ 31,926 (2002).

<sup>275</sup> Section 5532 was repealed, effective October 1, 1999. Pub. L. No. 106-65, div. A, title VI, § 656(a)(1), 113 Stat. 512, 664 (Oct. 5, 1999). We mention this provision nevertheless because the cases which apply it also apply other dual compensation provisions. Both those cases and the other dual compensation statutory provisions remain valid.

*United States*, 782 F.2d 1003 (Fed. Cir. 1986), the Federal Circuit considered whether the phrase “including . . . a nonappropriated fund instrumentality under the jurisdiction of the armed forces” was intended to include other NAFIs such as the Federal Reserve Board, a statutorily designated NAFL. The Federal Circuit concluded that although there did not appear to be a reason for Congress to limit the purpose of the dual compensation laws, Congress had limited the provision to retired military officers employed by NAFIs of the armed forces and the court would not legislate in its stead. *Id.* at 1008. Thus, in the *Denkler* case, the salary of employees of Federal Reserve Board was not subject to pay reduction under dual compensation principles. *Id.*

GAO followed the *Denkler* decision in [67 Comp. Gen. 436 \(1988\)](#) in a case involving three retired military officers who were employed by the Federal Reserve System (FRS), holding that the FRS was a NAFL not under the jurisdiction of the armed forces and therefore not subject to the dual compensation pay reduction. *Id.* at 440. In that decision, GAO also analyzed the laws governing the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, an organization within the Department of Energy, to determine whether this entity was a NAFL. Because its funds came from user fees which were deposited in the Treasury for use in paying the Office’s expenses, GAO concluded that it was not a NAFL. *Id.* at 441. Thus, the *Denkler* decision was not applicable, and employees of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management were subject to the dual compensation provisions. *Id.* See also B-236979, Apr. 19, 1990 (since the Panama Canal Commission collects funds, deposits them into a revolving fund in the Treasury, and withdraws from the fund pursuant to appropriation acts, the Commission is not a NAFL and its employees are subject to dual compensation reductions).

*Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and Age Discrimination in Employment Act*—Employees and applicants for employment in the military departments and executive agencies as defined by title 5 of the United States Code are entitled to maintain actions under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-16(a). The Act defines executive agency employees to include “employees and applicants for employment who are paid from nonappropriated funds.” *Id.*; see [B-234746-O.M., Mar. 10, 1989](#). Such persons also are entitled to maintain actions under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act. 29 U.S.C. § 633a. The proper defendant to be sued under these statutes is the head of the department, agency, or unit, which in the case of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) is the Secretary of Defense or the Secretary of the Air

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Force and the Secretary of the Army jointly. *Honeycutt v. Long*, 861 F.2d 1346, 1349 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988) (AAFES is not an executive department, agency, or unit; it is an instrumentality of the United States operating under the Department of Defense).

*Employment for Purposes of Immigration Laws*—Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, an employee of the United States, upon the completion of 15 years of service, is eligible for classification as a special immigrant entitled to special consideration with his application for admission to the United States. 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27). Public Law 82-397, 66 Stat. 138 (June 19, 1952), now codified at 5 U.S.C. § 2105, includes employees of armed services NAFIs in the definition of United States employee. The Office of Legal Counsel has concluded that armed forces NAFI employees are to be considered employees of the United States for the purposes of applying 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(27). 1 Op. Off. Legal Counsel 258 (1977). The Office of Legal Counsel determined that as a general rule, armed forces NAFI employees should be regarded as employees of the United States unless a federal statute provides otherwise. *Id.* In the case of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Office of Legal Counsel concluded that neither the language or history of the Act suggested that employee of the United States was intended to have a restricted meaning. Further, since Congress's primary intention was to facilitate the immigration of persons serving the government abroad and NAFI employees were not excluded, they were eligible for classification as special immigrants under the Act. There is no GAO case law addressing the application of immigration laws to NAFI employees.

*Criminal Statutes*—Some NAFI employees, when charged with bribery under a federal statute, have offered as a defense that they are not federal employees. See *Harlow v. United States*, 301 F.2d 361 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 371 U.S. 814, *reh'g denied*, 371 U.S. 906 (1962). Mr. Harlow and his co-conspirators were employed by the European Exchange System, which was established to operate various facilities, including military Post Exchanges. They were responsible for contracting for the Exchanges. They established various Swiss bank accounts, solicited bribes from vendors seeking to do business with the Exchanges, and deposited the bribes into those accounts. In appealing their convictions for corruption, the defendants argued that, as NAFI employees, they were not federal employees and could not be charged under a federal statute making it a crime for any employee or person acting for or on behalf of the United States to solicit or receive bribes. Although the court agreed that they were not federal employees, it declined to dismiss those charges because the



defendants could be included under the term “person acting for or on behalf of the United States.” The court reasoned that NAFIs are instrumentalities of the United States government and the employees, acting on behalf of the Exchanges in making contracting decisions, were acting on behalf of the United States. *Id.* at 370–71.

*Tort Claims*—The Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA), 28 U.S.C. §§ 1346(b), 2671–2680, waived most of the government’s sovereign immunity from torts. While the FTCA does not specifically refer to NAFIs, courts in certain instances have interpreted the FTCA’s coverage to include some NAFIs that the courts consider to be federal instrumentalities. *See, e.g., Brucker v. United States*, 338 F.2d 427, 430 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1964) (military flying club); *United States v. Hainline*, 315 F.2d 153, 156 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 375 U.S. 895 (1963) (military flying club); *United States v. Holcombe*, 277 F.2d 143, 144 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1960) (Naval Officers’ Mess). However, an equestrian club on an Army base was not covered under the FTCA. *Scott v. United States*, 226 F. Supp. 864 (M.D. Ga. 1963), *aff’d*, 337 F.2d 471 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1964), *cert. denied*, 380 U.S. 933 (1965). The court concluded that the club differed from other activities such as post exchanges because the club was not an integral part of the Army and not subject to the requisite degree of control and supervision by the Army. *Id.* at 868–69.

Injuries to military service members when they are involved in NAFI activities, such as social or flying clubs, are considered to be in connection with their military service, which bars recovery under the FTCA. *Pringle v. United States*, 44 F. Supp. 2d 1168 (D. Kan. 1999), *aff’d*, 208 F.3d 1220 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2000); *Eckles v. United States*, 471 F. Supp. 108, 110–11 (M.D. Pa. 1979) (and cases cited therein).

The federal courts have found that injuries to employees of armed forces NAFIs arising in the course of employment are covered under the Longshoremen’s and Harbor Workers’ Compensation Act (33 U.S.C. ch. 18; *see* 5 U.S.C. §§ 8171, 8173), and not the Federal Employees Compensation Act (5 U.S.C. § 8101) or the FTCA. *Traywick v. Juhola*, 922 F.2d 786 (11<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1991); *Vilanova v. United States*, 851 F.2d 1 (1<sup>st</sup> Cir. 1988), *cert. denied*, 488 U.S. 1016 (1989); *Calder v. Crall*, 726 F.2d 598 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 857 (1984).

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## D. Trust Funds

On June 27, 1829, an English chemist and mineralogist, James Smithson, died in Genoa, Italy. In 1835, in Pisa, Italy, James Smithson’s nephew died without heirs. Smithson’s will had stipulated that, if his nephew died

without heirs, his estate should go, in trust, “to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

The President expressed doubts about the legality of accepting the gift and sought statutory authority to do so. In Congress, the decision to accept Mr. Smithson’s gift was not open and shut. Senator John C. Calhoun led a determined minority that opposed accepting the gift. Senator Calhoun argued that the gift abridged states’ rights and was beneath the dignity of the government to accept. Federalism and dignity aside, money was then, and still is, a useful commodity. Accordingly, by Act of July 1, 1836, ch. 252, 5 Stat. 64, Congress authorized the acceptance of the Smithson bequest. Shortly thereafter, President Andrew Jackson appointed Mr. Richard Rush to pursue the claim of the United States in the Court of Chancery of England. Two years later, the Chancery Court awarded Smithson’s estate to the United States.

Mr. Rush sold Mr. Smithson’s properties, converting the proceeds into gold sovereigns. On July 17, 1838, he sailed for home, taking with him 11 boxes containing 104,960 sovereigns, 8 shillings, and 7 pence, as well as Mr. Smithson’s mineral collection, library, scientific notes, and personal effects. Arriving in New York after a 6-week voyage, Mr. Rush transferred the gold coins to the Treasury to be melted down.

Eight years passed before the Congress resolved what should be done with Smithson’s bequest. Suggestions included a national university, a public library, common schools, and an astronomical observatory. Congress settled the matter by Act of August 10, 1846, ch. 178, 9 Stat. 102, creating the Smithsonian Institution and leaving it up to the new Institution’s Board of Regents to decide on the specific activities to undertake for the faithful execution of the Smithson trust. Congress directed that the principal of the Smithson bequest, “being the sum of \$541,379.63,” be lent to the United States Treasury and invested in public debt securities. 20 U.S.C. § 54. Congress provided an appropriation of the interest from the securities for the perpetual maintenance and support of the Smithsonian Institution. *Id.*

The legislative history surrounding acceptance of the Smithson Bequest and the founding of the Smithsonian Institution suggests that this may well have been one of the earliest instances of the United States accepting the

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role and responsibilities of “trustee” for private funds.<sup>276</sup> Today the United States has many different “trust funds.”

As a general proposition, the United States holds funds or property “in trust” in three different situations. Like the Smithsonian bequest, the federal government may hold funds in trust that are donated to (and accepted by) the United States.<sup>277</sup> Second, the United States may have a trust obligation with respect to property of others that it controls and manages. Third, the United States holds dedicated receipts appropriated to statutorily designated trust funds. In this last form of “trust funds” the funds are owned by the federal government and are not “trusts” in the common, legal sense of the word; rather, they are accounting mechanisms within the context of the federal budget.

These days, it is clear that the federal government may hold funds “in trust” for any number of reasons and for any number of groups. Equally clear is that further generalizations are fraught with danger. In particular, care needs to be exercised with respect to the scope of the government’s legal obligations to trust beneficiaries.

Usually, the creation, terms, and conditions of a trust depend solely upon the statute creating or authorizing the trust. However, from a fiscal law perspective, there can be other factors in the equation. The source of the funds held in trust is one of those factors. As the discussion below shows, sometimes the source of the funds determines whether the United States has a trust obligation with respect to the funds it holds. It can also be significant where statutory restrictions on the use of appropriated funds are at issue.

Another factor is the “common law.” The decisions of the accounting officers of the government, as well as those of the courts, frequently refer to or use common law trust concepts to analyze or resolve issues concerning property of others that the government holds or possesses. In

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<sup>276</sup> See *National Intelligencer, Smithsonian Legacy*, May 2, 1836, available at [www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Smithson-to-Smithsonian/natinte3.html](http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Smithson-to-Smithsonian/natinte3.html) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007) (congressional debates focused on whether sovereign governments can accept funds in trust).

<sup>277</sup> These privately owned trust funds are not included in budget totals and are referred to as deposit funds. See generally *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2008* (Feb. 5, 2007), at 342, 359, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

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this way, common law trust concepts inform the decision makers' judgment as they give meaning to the governing statutes. However, sometimes it is the common law alone which creates and controls the government's obligations with respect to property it holds "in trust." *See, e.g., United States v. Mitchell*, 463 U.S. 206, 225 (1983); *White Mountain Apache Tribe v. United States*, 249 F.3d 1364, 1377–79 (Fed. Cir. 2001). As the court observed in *Cobell v. Norton*, 240 F.3d 1081, 1101 (D.C. Cir. 2001), "[t]he general 'contours' of the government's obligations may be defined by statute, but the interstices must be filled in through reference to general trust law." That is, once a statutory obligation is identified, courts may look to the common law trust principles to particularize that obligation. *Cobell v. Norton*, 392 F.3d 461, 473 (D.C. Cir. 2004).<sup>278</sup>

One further word of caution: As suggested earlier, there is no one model of a federal trust fund. In certain situations the federal government may act and may have the legal obligation to act as a fiduciary with respect to funds or property it holds for the benefit of specified groups or individuals. In dollar terms, the amounts held in these "true" trusts are relatively minor. There are, however, a relatively small number of statutorily designated "trust fund" accounts. While these accounts are designated trust funds for bookkeeping and accounting purposes, they are not trusts in the sense that Congress may not redefine eligibility of beneficiaries, alter benefit amounts, or redirect receipts to other programs or purposes. *Cf.* OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20.12(d) (July 2, 2007). It is these statutorily designated trust accounts that contain the overwhelming amount of federal trust fund dollars. The use of the term "trust" in connection with these funds, however, implies greater rights in the "beneficiaries" and obligations in the "trustee," *vis-à-vis* the trust *corpus*, than the law actually recognizes.

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## 1. Federal Funds and Trust Funds

The federal government holds funds in over 1,000 accounts. GAO, *Compendium of Budget Accounts: Fiscal Year 2001*, GAO/AIMD-00-143 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 2000). At the highest level of generality, these

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<sup>278</sup> That same court, however, cautioned the district court below against abstracting common law trust duties from any federal statutory basis or simply copying a list of common law trust duties from the *Restatement of Trusts* and imposing them on federal trustees. *Cobell*, 392 F.3d at 471.

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accounts are divided into two<sup>279</sup> major groups: federal funds and trust funds. OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20.12(b) (July 2, 2007). Within each of these two groups there are several types of accounts.

a. Federal Funds

Federal funds include general fund expenditure and receipt accounts, special fund expenditure and receipt accounts, and intragovernmental, management, and public enterprise revolving fund accounts. OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20.12(c) (July 2, 2007). Of these accounts only the general fund receipt accounts are typically used to account for collections that are not earmarked by law for a specific purpose. See, e.g., GAO, *Federal Trust and Other Earmarked Funds: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, GAO-01-199SP (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2001), at 9–10.

Public enterprise revolving funds and special funds are financed by earmarked receipts. A public enterprise revolving fund is credited with receipts generated by a cycle of businesslike operations with the public “in which the agency charges for the sale of products or services and uses the proceeds to finance its spending.” GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 4. The Postal Fund is an example of such a fund. 39 U.S.C. § 2003. Its receipts come primarily from mail and service revenues and are available, through a permanent, indefinite appropriation, for authorized activities and functions of the Postal Service without further appropriation action. 39 U.S.C. § 2003(a).

Special fund accounts are established to record receipts collected from a specific source and earmarked by law for a specific purpose or program. OMB Cir. No. A-11, §§ 20.3, 20.12. As a general proposition, special funds operate like statutorily designated trust fund accounts with little substantive difference other than that the authorizing legislation does not

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<sup>279</sup> Compare 1 TFM 2-1520, which breaks down the accounts into three classifications: general funds, trust funds, and special funds.

designate them as trust funds.<sup>280</sup> GAO-01-199SP, at 10. The Nuclear Waste Fund, 42 U.S.C. § 10222(c), is an example. It receives mainly two kinds of receipts: fees collected from civilian nuclear power operators and interest income from investments in United States securities. 42 U.S.C. §§ 10222(a), (e). The amounts in this fund are only available for radioactive waste disposal activities including the development, construction, and operation of authorized facilities for the disposal of high-level nuclear waste. 42 U.S.C. § 10222(d).

b. Trust Funds

The trust fund group is comprised of trust fund expenditure accounts, trust fund receipt accounts, and trust revolving fund accounts.<sup>281</sup> OMB Cir. No. A-11, *Preparation, Submission, and Execution of the Budget*, § 20.12(b) (July 2, 2007). The distinguishing characteristic of these accounts is that they represent accounts, designated by law as trust funds, for receipts earmarked for specific purposes and sometimes, but not always, for the expenditure of these receipts. *Id.* Trust fund expenditure accounts record appropriated amounts of trust fund receipts used to finance specific purposes or programs under a trust agreement or statute. Trust fund receipt accounts capture collections generated by the terms of the trust agreement or statute. 1 TFM 2-1520. These include nonrevolving accounts finance programs such as the Social Security and Medicare programs.<sup>282</sup>

The other type of trust account, trust revolving fund accounts, cover the permanent appropriation and expenditure of collections used to carry out a cycle of businesslike operations in accordance with a statute that designates the fund as a trust fund. One example is the Commissary Funds, Federal Prisons, 31 U.S.C. § 1321(a)(22), which uses profits earned on sales of goods and articles not regularly provided to inmates by the federal

<sup>280</sup> The fact that other general authority would provide for the moneys in the fund to be accounted for and disbursed as trust funds does not affect their classification where Congress has specifically provided for deposit of the funds in a special deposit account. 16 *Comp. Gen.* 940 (1937).

<sup>281</sup> See GAO, *Federal Trust and Other Earmarked Funds*, GAO-01-199SP (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2001), for a discussion of the composition of trusts and other earmarked funds, including their treatment in the federal budget process.

<sup>282</sup> The Social Security and Medicare programs are each funded out of two trust funds—Social Security from the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund and the Federal Disability Trust Fund, and Medicare from the Federal Hospital Insurance Trust Fund and the Federal Supplementary Medical Insurance Trust Fund. 42 U.S.C. §§ 401(h), 1395i, 1395t.

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prisons for recreational and general welfare items. This category also includes a number of small trusts created to account for the expenditure of funds in accordance with a trust agreement where the government may act as a fiduciary. *See* 31 U.S.C. §§ 1321(b), 1323(c).

Over the last 50 years, trust fund receipts have grown both as a share of total federal receipts and as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Today, annual trust fund receipts make up about half of all federal receipts and about 10 percent of GDP. GAO-01-199SP, at 31. In fiscal year 1999, GAO identified 130 federal trust funds. *Id.* at 12.

- c. Congressional Prerogatives Generally accepted governmental definitions do not constrain Congress in its designation of an account as a trust fund or special fund account.<sup>283</sup> Congress may and does approach the matter on a case-by-case basis. As a result, it is possible to find trust funds that share features of special funds and *vice versa*. For example, Congress designated the Environmental Protection Agency’s Hazardous Substance Superfund as a trust fund, 26 U.S.C. § 9507, while it established the Department of Energy’s similar Nuclear Waste Fund as a special fund on the books of the Treasury. 42 U.S.C. § 10222(c).

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2. The Government as Trustee: Creation of a Trust In governmental parlance, the term “trust funds” covers a lot of territory. Of course, it is applied in the classical sense to nongovernmental funds entrusted to the government. But it is also applied to certain governmental funds held by the government that have been designated as trust funds by statute. In addition, it is applied to funds that are donated to the government for specified purposes. Each of these uses of the term is discussed below.

- a. Property of Others Controlled by the United States At common law, a trust is “a fiduciary relationship with respect to property.” Under it, the person holding title to the property has “equitable duties” to manage the property for the benefit of another person. This fiduciary relationship arises as a result of an expressed intention to create it. *Restatement (Third) of Trusts*, § 2 (2003). Clearly, the United States can act as a trustee. *E.g.*, Memorandum for the Assistant Attorney General,

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<sup>283</sup> “When I use a word . . . it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” Spoken by Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* 213 (1871) (reprinted Holt Rinehart, and Winston, 1961).

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Civil Division, *Fiduciary Obligations Regarding Bureau of Prisons Commissary Fund*, OLC Opinion, May 22, 1995, *citing* 2 Scott & Fratcher, *The Law of Trusts* § 95 (4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1987) (“as sovereign, the United States has the capacity to act as a common law trustee”). Equally clear is that the terms on which the United States agrees to act as trustee vary widely. Thus, the initial questions are when does a trust arise and what are the conditions under which the government, as trustee, operates. The discussion that follows examines these issues.

Two Supreme Court decisions involving claimed breaches by the United States of trust obligations owed to Quinault Reservation Indian allottees address when an actionable trust may arise. In *United States v. Mitchell*, 445 U.S. 535, *reh’g denied*, 446 U.S. 992 (1980) (*Mitchell I*), Indian allottees sued the United States for damages for mismanagement of forest resources. The Indian allottees argued that the General Allotment Act imposed on the United States a fiduciary obligation to manage the forest resources for their benefit.<sup>284</sup> The Indian allottees claimed that the breach of the fiduciary obligation created by the General Allotment Act entitled them to money damages for a breach of trust. The General Allotment Act required the United States to “hold the land . . . in trust for the sole use and benefit” of the allottees. *Mitchell I*, 445 U.S. at 541 (quoting the General Allotment Act, *codified as amended at* 25 U.S.C. § 348). The Supreme Court rejected the Indian allottee’s argument, reasoning that Congress used the trust language of the General Allotment Act for the limited purpose of preventing alienation of allotted lands and immunizing the lands from state taxation. The act created only a “limited trust relationship” for those purposes, and did not “unambiguously provide that the United States has undertaken full fiduciary responsibilities as to the management of allotted lands.” *Id.* at 542. Absent such responsibilities, the United States was not answerable for damages. *Id.* “Any right of the [allottees] to recover money damages for Government mismanagement of timber resources must be found in some source other than the [General Allotment Act].” *Id.* at 546.

Fortunately for the Indian allottees, another source of authority was available to support their claim, and *Mitchell I* was not the last word on the matter. In *United States v. Mitchell*, 463 U.S. 206 (1983) (*Mitchell II*), the Supreme Court found that a trust duty did arise under several other statutes and regulations which, unlike the General Allotment Act, did

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<sup>284</sup> Under the General Allotment Act, the federal government had allotted all of the Reservation’s land in trust to individual Indians, or “allottees.”



expressly authorize or direct the Secretary of Interior to manage forests on Indian lands. *Id.* at 224. The Court explained that “a fiduciary relationship necessarily arises when the Government assumes such elaborate control over forests and property belonging to Indians. All of the necessary elements of a common-law trust are present: a trustee (the United States), a beneficiary (the Indian Allottees), and a trust corpus (Indian timber, lands, and funds).” *Id.* at 225.

Quoting from the Court of Claims decision in *Navajo Tribe of Indians v. United States*, 224 Ct. Cl. 171, 183 (1980), the Supreme Court emphasized that “where the Federal Government takes on or has control or supervision over tribal monies or properties, the fiduciary relationship normally exists.” *Mitchell II*, 463 U.S. at 225. This remains true even if “nothing is said expressly in the authorizing or underlying statute . . . about a trust fund, or a trust or fiduciary connection.” *Id.* Of course, where Congress has provided otherwise with respect to such moneys or property, those directions will control. *Id.* In other words, to recover for a breach of trust, the beneficiaries must be able to establish a trust responsibility that mandates monetary relief by statute, treaty, or the government’s assumption of management and control over the funds or assets.

Ten years after *Mitchell II*, the Supreme Court decided two companion cases brought by Indian tribes alleging breach of trust obligations by the United States. In *White Mountain Apache Tribe*, 537 U.S. 465, the Tribe sought compensation from the United States for breach of a fiduciary duty to maintain land and improvements at Fort Apache Military Reservation in Arizona held in trust for the Tribe but occupied by the federal government. Dating to 1870, Fort Apache was established on territory that later became the Tribe’s reservation. In 1923 and again in 1960 Congress provided by statute that the fort would be “held by the United States in trust for the White Mountain Apache Tribe, subject to the right of the Secretary of the Interior to use any part of the land and improvements for administrative or school purposes for as long as they are needed for that purpose.” Pub. L. No. 86-392, 74 Stat. 8 (Mar. 18, 1960). Exercising that right, the Department of the Interior had allowed the historic buildings to fall into such disrepair that some were condemned and others demolished. Citing the terms of the 1960 statute, the Tribe brought suit against the United States in the Court of Federal Claims for money damages to restore the properties.

Affirming *Mitchell I* and *II*, the Supreme Court ruled for the White Mountain Apache Tribe, finding that the federal government had breached

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its duty as trustee to preserve the trust *corpus*. Like the statutes at issue in *Mitchell II*, the court found:

“The 1960 Act goes beyond a bare trust and permits a fair inference that the Government is subject to duties as a trustee and liable in damages for breach. . . . [T]he statute [invests] the United States with discretionary authority to make direct use of portions of the trust corpus . . . [A]n obligation to preserve the property improvements was incumbent on the United States as trustee. This is so because elementary trust law, after all, confirms the commonsense assumption that a fiduciary actually administering trust property may not allow it to fall into ruin on his watch. ‘One of the fundamental common-law duties of a trustee is to preserve and maintain trust assets.’”

*Id.* at 474–75 (citations omitted).

In the companion case to *White Mountain Apache Tribe*, the Supreme Court found that the Indian Mineral Leasing Act of 1938 (IMLA), 25 U.S.C. § 396a, does not assign managerial control to the Secretary of Interior over coal leasing on Navajo land and, as in *Mitchell I*, imposing fiduciary duties on the government would be out of line with one of IMLA’s principal purposes. *United States v. Navajo Nation*, 537 U.S. 488, 508 (2003). IMLA requires Secretarial approval before coal mining leases negotiated between Tribes and third parties become effective. *Id.* at 507. IMLA also authorizes the Secretary generally to promulgate regulations governing mining operations, 25 U.S.C. § 396d. *Id.* The Navajo Nation sought money damages from the United States, alleging a breach of trust in connection with the Secretary of Interior’s approval of a coal lease amendment negotiated by the Tribe and a third party. Unlike the elaborate provisions at issue in *Mitchell II*, the Court found the IMLA and its regulations, like the Allotment Act in *Mitchell I*, do not give the federal government full responsibility to manage Indian resources for the benefit of the Indians. Nor does IMLA establish even a limited trust relationship. Rather, IMLA aims to enhance tribal self-determination by giving Tribes, not the government, the lead role in negotiating mining leases on tribal lands with third parties. *Navajo Nation*, 537 U.S. at 507–08.

Consistent with *Mitchell II*, one court recently observed: “The federal government has substantial trust responsibilities toward Native Americans. This is undeniable.” *Cobell v. Norton*, 240 F.3d 1081 (D.C. Cir. 2001). In

fact, the Supreme Court has recognized a general trust relationship with Indian tribes since 1831.<sup>285</sup> *United States v. White Mountain Apache Tribe*, 537 U.S. 465, 476 (2003), *citing Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. (5 Pet.) 1, 17 (1831) (characterizing the relationship between Indian tribes and the United States as “a ward to his guardian”). In recent years, Indian claimants have sought to compel the government to properly account for the funds it holds for them. For its part, the government has had to acknowledge that it does not know how many accounts it is responsible for, is uncertain of the balances in them, and lacks the records necessary to determine that information.<sup>286</sup> *See, e.g., GAO, Financial Management: BIA’s Tribal Trust Fund Account Reconciliation Results*, GAO/AIMD-96-63 (Washington, D.C.: May 3, 1996). *See generally GAO, Indian Issues: BLM’s Program for Issuing Individual Indian Allotments on Public Lands Is No Longer Viable*, GAO-07-23R (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 20, 2006).

The claimants in *Cobell* brought a class action for injunctive relief and damages in response to the government’s alleged mismanagement of individual Indian trust accounts. *Cobell v. Babbitt*, 30 F. Supp. 2d 24 (D.D.C. 1998). (The district court bifurcated the proceedings and placed the reconciliation of the accounts and the claims for damages on hold pending completion of the court’s investigation regarding the claims of inadequate accounting.) Finding that the government had breached its fiduciary duties, the trial court remanded the matter to the government with orders to promptly discharge its fiduciary duties in accord with the court’s delineation of them. The court also retained jurisdiction over the matter and directed the government to file quarterly reports. *Cobell v. Babbitt*, 91 F. Supp. 2d 1, 56–57 (D.D.C. 1999). *See also Cobell*, 240 F.3d

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<sup>285</sup> Congress’s power under the Indian Commerce Clause, U.S. Const. art. I, § 8, cl. 3, however, is not limited by this general trust relationship with Indians. *Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians v. United States*, 367 F.3d 650, 665–67 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2004), *cert. denied*, 543 U.S. 1051 (2005). In that case, the court rejected the Tribe’s argument that a gubernatorial concurrence provision in the Indian Gaming Regulations Act, 25 U.S.C. § 2719(b)(1)(A), violated the federal government’s trust responsibility to Indians and rejected the Tribes argument that all Indian legislation enacted pursuant to the Indian Commerce Clause, which confers “plenary power to legislate in the field of Indian affairs” to Congress, must be rationally related to furthering that trust relationship. *Id.*

<sup>286</sup> Beginning in fiscal year 2000 the federal budget no longer included funds that are owned by Indian tribes but are held and managed in a fiduciary capacity by the government on behalf of the tribes. These Indian tribal funds were included in the budget totals beginning with the adoption of the unified budget in 1969 through fiscal year 1999 under the generic title “tribal trust funds.” *See GAO, Federal Trust and Other Earmarked Funds: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, GAO-01-199SP (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2001), at 8.

at 1092–94 (discussing the procedural history of the *Cobell* litigation). The government appealed. Citing *Mitchell II*, the Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia agreed that the government owes common law fiduciary obligations to the Indians. *Id.* at 1098. The court noted that those obligations have been reaffirmed in a number of statutory provisions which specify how those duties are to be carried out. *Id.* at 1100–02. Those obligations include, the circuit court held, a “duty to account” which can be compelled by the courts if unreasonably delayed or withheld. *Id.* at 1102–04. The circuit court agreed it had been delayed, and affirmed and remanded the matter to the district court. *Id.* at 1110.

Following years of appeals and some reversals of high-profile contempt citations against cabinet secretaries, the District of Columbia circuit, in reassigning the case to a different federal district court judge below, expressed its frustration that “five years later, no remedy is in sight, th[e] case continues to consume vast amounts of judicial resources, and growing hostility between the parties distracts from the serious issues in the case.” *Cobell v. Kempthorne*, 455 F.3d 317, 335 (D.C. Cir. 2006), *cert. denied*, \_\_\_ U.S. \_\_\_, 127 S. Ct. 1876 (2007). On April 20, 2007, the district court ordered a hearing on the government’s accounting project to determine, among other things, whether the government has cured the breaches of its fiduciary duty. *Cobell v. Kempthorne*, Civ. A. No. 96-1285 (JR) (D.D.C. Apr. 20, 2007). While the *Cobell* litigation continues, a similar Indian trust case brought by over 4,000 individuals is winding its way through the court of federal claims. *See Wolfchild v. United States*, 72 Fed. Cl. 511 (2006).<sup>287</sup>

In *Fors v. United States*, 14 Cl. Ct. 709 (1988), the Claims Court rejected claimant’s argument that the Marine Corps had a fiduciary duty to invest<sup>288</sup> the accumulated back pay of a deceased Marine Corps pilot either as a result of the Missing Persons Act or the common law. The court pointed out that essential to the holding in *Mitchell II* was the Supreme Court’s finding that the statutes and regulations at issue established fiduciary

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<sup>287</sup> For more information on the Indian trust litigation, see Ross O. Swimmer, *Separating Fact from Fiction: The Department of the Interior and the Cobell Litigation*, 33-SPG Hum. Rts. 7 (2006); Jamin B. Raskin, *Professor Richard J. Pierce’s Reign of Error in the Administrative Law Review*, 57 Admin. L. Rev. 229 (2005).

<sup>288</sup> For more on a trustee’s “duty to invest,” see section D.5 of this chapter.

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obligations of the United States in the management of Indian resources.<sup>289</sup> For the period at issue in *Fors*, there was no statutory or regulatory basis to charge the government with the fiduciary duties of a common law trustee. *Id.* at 718–19. To the contrary, the applicable statutes and regulations limited the Marine Corps authority to pay interest only until 90 days after a determination of death. *Id.*

Likewise, in *Franklin Savings Corp. v. United States*, 56 Fed. Cl. 720 (2003), the Claims Court rejected the argument of a failed savings and loans institution that the government’s seizure of the savings and loans under the Financial Institutions Reform, Recovery, and Enforcement Act of 1989 (FIRREA), 12 U.S.C. § 1464(d)(2)(F), imposed *Mitchell II*-type fiduciary duties on the government. Unlike the timber management statutes at issue in *Mitchell II*, the claims court found that FIRREA, the banking statute relied on by the failed savings and loans, did not provide a substantive source of law which imposes fiduciary duties on the government. *Id.* at 752. “[N]othing in FIRREA demonstrates congressional intent to create a fiduciary duty whereby government must assure profits when seizing [a savings and loans]. . . . [I]mposing an enforceable trust relationship on the government in this case is simply antithetical to the regulatory purpose and congressional intent of FIRREA and the banking statutes in general.” *Id.* at 753.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) “personal funds of patients” trust fund (discussed in Chapter 9, section B.3.c) contains moneys of patients who, as a matter of convenience, deposit money with VA for safekeeping and use during their stay at VA hospitals. *See* 38 U.S.C. § 5504. The money is patient money, not government money, and the Comptroller General has treated such funds as held in trust by the United States. 68 *Comp. Gen.* 600 (1989).

The Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) has applied a *Mitchell II* analysis with respect to moneys contained in inmates’ Prisoners’ Trust Fund accounts. Memorandum for the Assistant Attorney General, Civil Division, *Fiduciary*

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<sup>289</sup> *See also Hohri v. United States*, 782 F.2d 227, 243–44 (D.C. Cir. 1986), *vacated and remanded on jurisdictional grounds*, 482 U.S. 64 (1987) (neither narrow regulatory obligations or alleged contractual commitments impose fiduciary obligations on the United States with respect to Japanese-American internees during World War II); *Han v. United States*, 45 F.3d 333 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1995) (United States has no general fiduciary obligation to bring suit against the State of Hawaii for alleged breach of trust obligations owed by the state to native Hawaiians).

*Obligations Regarding Bureau of Prisons Commissary Fund*, OLC Opinion, May 22, 1995. In the 1930s, the Department of Justice established Prisoners' Trust Funds at each federal prison for inmates to deposit money earned or sent to them while in prison. Inmates could use amounts in their accounts to purchase articles from prison commissaries. In the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934, ch. 756, 48 Stat. 1224 (June 26, 1934), Congress classified the Prisoners' Trust Fund (and the related Commissary Fund discussed below) as a "trust fund." See 31 U.S.C. §§ 1321(a)(21), (a)(22).

OLC found three reasons to conclude that 31 U.S.C. § 1321 and the rules set forth in the Justice Department circular establishing the funds impose fiduciary obligations on the Bureau of Prisons with respect to amounts held in the Prisoners' Trust Funds. First, the money in the Prisoners' Trust Fund account is the inmate's property even though the Bureau of Prisons has assumed control over the property. Second, the circular establishing the funds requires the Bureau of the Prisons to act in the best interest of the prisoners in managing their funds, and third, the Bureau has always viewed its relationship to the Prisoners' Trust Funds as a fiduciary one.<sup>290</sup>

The Thrift Savings Fund established by the Federal Employees' Retirement System Act of 1986, 5 U.S.C. §§ 8401–8479, is also a trust in the classic sense of the term. The act provides federal employees a capital accumulation plan similar to those found in the private sector. Employees and the employing agencies contribute to the Thrift Savings Fund. Earnings on investments supplement amounts contributed to the fund. 5 U.S.C. §§ 8432(a), (c), and 8437(b). All sums contributed to the Thrift Savings Fund by or on behalf of an employee as well as earnings on those contributions are held in trust for the employee. 5 U.S.C. § 8437(g). The Thrift Savings Fund is managed in accordance with the investment policies established by the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board. 5 U.S.C. § 8472. The members of the Board are specifically designated fiduciaries.

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<sup>290</sup> There can be no doubt that the government has fiduciary obligations with respect to the Prisoners' Trust Fund and VA Patient Funds mentioned above. Yet, we wonder: Do those funds really constitute "trusts" or are they "bailments"? Cf. B-153479, Apr. 15, 1964 (funds in the Prisoners' Trust Fund at issue regarded as held in bailment not trust). As OLC observed, fiduciary relationship can arise in many different contexts. This is important because, as OLC also observed quoting *Restatement (Second) of Trusts* § 2, comment b, (1959), at 7, "[t]he duties of a trustee are more intensive than the duties of some other fiduciaries." May 22, 1995, OLC Opinion, at n.5. For one thing, no one has held—so far—that the government has a duty to invest those funds and make them productive. See section D.5 of this chapter.

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5 U.S.C. §§ 8477(a), (b). Any fiduciary who breaches the responsibilities, duties, and obligations set out in the authorizing statute is personally liable to the Thrift Savings Fund for any losses and profits realized as a result of a breach of trust.<sup>291</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 8477(e).

Claimants have sought to use trust concepts to recoup funds in the Treasury. In *Stitzel-Weller Distillery v. Wickard*, 118 F.2d 19 (D.C. Cir. 1941), distillers sought to recover contributions paid into the Treasury pursuant to marketing agreements authorized by the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Previously, in *United States v. Butler*, 297 U.S. 1 (1936), the Supreme Court had declared related provisions of the act unconstitutional. Then, given the constitutional defects of the authorizing legislation, the Comptroller General concluded that the moneys could no longer be applied to the agreed upon purposes and had to be deposited into the general fund of the Treasury. [15 Comp. Gen. 681 \(1936\)](#). In response, the distillers claimed that their contributions were impressed with a trust by virtue of section 20 of the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934. That act recognized the existence of trust funds “analogous” to those specified in it and provided a permanent appropriation for payment of amounts held in such trust accounts. 31 U.S.C. § 1321(b). The claimants also argued that the contributions should be returned to them based on the general equitable doctrine that upon the failure of a trust, the trustee must return the trust *corpus* to the creator of the trust, in this case, the contributors. The court in *Stitzel-Weller* rejected the notion that the marketing agreement either explicitly or by analogy to other funds classified as trusts by the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934, created a trust for the benefit of the contributors. Since there was no trust, there was no appropriation nor other authority to return the funds from the Treasury to the contributing distilleries. *Stitzel-Weller*, 118 F.2d at 21–23 (citing [15 Comp. Gen. 681](#)).

Similarly, in *United States v. \$57,480.05 United States Currency and Other Coins*, 722 F.2d 1457 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1984), a claimant sought recovery of \$57,480.05 forfeited and paid into the Treasury. In dismissing the case for

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<sup>291</sup> Given the nature of these accounts, GAO recommended removal of the fund from the federal budget. [B-227344, May 29, 1987](#). And, it was done. See *Analytical Perspectives, Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2001* (Feb. 2000), at 377. Beginning in fiscal year 2000, the federal budget also excludes funds owned by Indian tribes but held in trust by the government. As the notes to the federal budget explains, “the transactions of these funds are not transactions of the Government itself.” *Id.* The Budget notes refer to these (and the Thrift Savings Fund moneys) as “deposit Funds.” *Id.*

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lack of jurisdiction over the *res*, the court pointed out that a judgment for the claimant “would require an impermissible payment of public funds not appropriated by Congress.” *Id.* at 1459. The court rejected the claimant’s suggested solution of “[e]nforcing a constructive trust on the government,” noting that such a trust “would violate sovereign immunity in the absence of statutes or regulations clearly establishing fiduciary obligations.” *Id.*

The two preceding cases involved unsuccessful attempts to recover funds in the Treasury by impressing them with an implicit common law trust. However, other cases have held the government liable for funds received in trust for others. For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, section E.2.h, and Chapter 9, section B.3.c, the government receives moneys to reimburse injured or overcharged consumers or residents that the government holds in trust to disburse to the injured parties. *Emery v. United States*, 186 F.2d 900 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 341 U.S. 925 (1951); [60 Comp. Gen. 15 \(1980\)](#). Since these moneys are not received for the use of the United States, they are not for deposit in the Treasury of the United States, nor is an appropriation needed for the Treasurer to disburse such funds. *Cf. Varney v. United States*, 147 F.2d 238 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir.), *cert. denied*, 325 U.S. 882, *reh’g denied*, 326 U.S. 805 (1945) (moneys received by War Food Administrator were “trust funds” retained and disbursed by market agents appointed by Administrator without deposit into the Treasury of the United States).

Simply because a government official has custody of nongovernment funds does not mean that they are held in a trust capacity. In [B-164419-O.M., May 20, 1969](#), GAO distinguished between funds of a foreign government held by the United States incident to a cooperative agreement (trust funds), and funds of a private contractor held by a government official for safekeeping as a favor to the contractor. The latter situation was a mere bailment for the benefit of the contractor. Although the United States may have an obligation to exercise ordinary care with respect to bailed funds in



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its custody<sup>292</sup> (55 Comp. Gen. 356 (1975); 23 Comp. Gen. 907 (1944)), the government official with custody of the funds is not an accountable officer with respect to those funds. *See also* GAO, *White House: Travel Office Operations*, GAO/GGD-94-132 (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 1994), at 85 (government would be “morally or legally” liable for loss of funds collected by White House staff from press corps members to pay for press corps members’ travel expenses as they accompany the President on trips; therefore, those funds shall be deposited in a Treasury account for safekeeping).

b. Trust Funds Designated by Statute

Earmarking alone does not create a trust fund since earmarked receipts can finance other types of accounts such as special funds. For example, Congress created the Vaccine Injury Compensation Trust Fund to compensate victims of vaccine-related injury or death. 26 U.S.C. § 9510. The Fund is financed by a tax on certain vaccines. *Id.* On the other hand, the North Pacific Fishery Observer Fund covers the cost of observers stationed on fishing vessels to collect information for fish management and conservation. Congress finances the program by assessing fees on fishing vessels and fish processors. 16 U.S.C. § 1862(d). Since Congress did not by statute designate the Observer Fund as a trust fund, Treasury classified it as a special fund.

The fact that money is held in a trust account does not necessarily create fiduciary obligations where they do not otherwise exist. *See* B-274855, Jan. 23, 1997. Most federal trust funds are trust funds simply because Congress says so, or, euphemistically, because the law designates them as such. Typically, the enabling legislation will earmark receipts or other money generated by a program for deposit in a fund designated by the

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<sup>292</sup> A bailment is a “species” of trust. 8 C.J.S. *Bailments* § 1 (2005). A bailment arises when the owner delivers personal property to another for some particular purpose upon an express or implied contract to redeliver the property when the purpose of the bailment has been fulfilled. 53 Comp. Gen. 607, 609 (1974). Unlike a trust where title to the trust *corpus* passes to the trustee, in a bailment, title to the bailed property does not transfer. 8 C.J.S. *Bailments* § 32. The level of care required of a bailee depends on whether the bailment is for the benefit of the bailee, the bailor, or for their mutual benefit. *Id.* § 58. Though not treated as fiduciaries for all purposes, bailees have long been included within “the more general class of fiduciaries” since they hold a thing in trust for another. *E.g.*, *In re Holman*, 42 B.R. 848, 851 (1984). *See also* *United States v. Kehoe*, 365 F. Supp. 920, 922 (S.D. Tex. 1973) (“It was this failure of the common law to provide any criminal remedy for these breaches of trust . . . on the part of . . . bailees, trustees, and other persons occupying fiduciary positions that led to the enactment of the present Penal Code provision dealing with embezzlement.”) quoting 21 Tex. Jur. 2d, *Embezzlement and Conversion* § 2, at 579–80 (1961) (emphasis added).

program legislation as a trust fund. See the Trust Fund Code, 26 U.S.C. §§ 9500–9510, for a listing of trust funds. These trust funds serve as accounting devices to distinguish the funds earmarked for deposit to the trust funds from general funds. The scope of the trustee’s duties with respect to a trust fund will necessarily depend on the substantive law creating those duties. See, e.g., *United States v. Mitchell*, 463 U.S. 206, 224 (1983) (*Mitchell II*) (statutes and regulations “establish a fiduciary relationship and define the contours of the United States’ fiduciary responsibilities.”)

The fact that Congress has designated a fund which finances a social service, public works, or revenue sharing program as a trust fund does not mean that the administering agency has a full range of fiduciary obligations. A leading case on this matter (not involving Indian lands or property) is *National Ass’n of Counties v. Baker*, 842 F.2d 369 (D.C. Cir. 1988), *rev’g*, 669 F. Supp. 518 (D.D.C. 1987), *cert. denied*, 488 U.S. 1005 (1989). In that case a number of local governments sued the Secretary of the Treasury seeking an order requiring the Treasury to release \$180 million of Revenue Sharing Trust Fund moneys sequestered pursuant to Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, Pub. L. No. 99-177, 99 Stat. 1037 (Dec. 12, 1985). The district court issued an order requiring the Secretary to disburse the funds, and the Secretary appealed.

The Secretary argued that the district court lacked subject matter jurisdiction because the local governments were in effect asserting a money damage claim that only may be brought in the Claims Court. *National Ass’n of Counties*, 842 F.2d at 372. To sustain this argument the Secretary had to establish that substantive law mandated compensation for damages. The Secretary argued that because the Revenue Sharing Act created a trust fund with the Secretary as trustee, the statute was similar to the statutes found by the Supreme Court in *Mitchell II* to create a fiduciary duty in the United States, the breach of which mandated compensation.

The court of appeals rejected the Secretary’s reliance on *Mitchell II*. The court concluded instead that the Revenue Sharing Act created only a limited trust relationship similar to the General Allotment Act trust in *United States v. Mitchell*, 445 U.S. 535, *reh’g denied*, 446 U.S. 992 (1980) (*Mitchell I*). *National Ass’n of Counties*, 842 F.2d at 375. Congress created the Revenue Sharing Trust Fund for budgetary reasons, not to subject the Secretary to actions for mismanagement of the trust. *Id.* at 376. “Indeed, there is no indication in the Revenue Sharing Act or its legislative history that the Secretary owes any common law fiduciary obligations to Trust

Fund recipients.” *Id.* The Court rejected an implied right of action in favor of trust recipients based on a generalized common law trust theory because the substantive statute at issue did not make the United States expressly liable for mismanagement of the trust.

Applying the analysis used in *Mitchell I and II* and in *National Ass’n of Counties*, the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) has construed the Bureau of Prison’s obligations for the Commissary Trust Fund, classified as a trust fund under 31 U.S.C. § 1321, to not include common law fiduciary duties. Memorandum for the Assistant Attorney General, Civil Division, *Fiduciary Obligations Regarding Bureau of Prisons Commissary Fund*, May 22, 1995. OLC discerned no indication in the legislative history of the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934, the source statute for 31 U.S.C. § 1321, that Congress intended to subject the United States to suit for breach of fiduciary obligations in the management of the Commissary Fund. Unlike the Prisoners’ Trust Fund accounts discussed earlier in this part, the moneys in the Commissary Fund were not the personal funds of the inmates, but resulted from a continuous cycle of business operations. The Bureau of Prisons retained the authority to decide whether and how much of any profits were to be disbursed through the welfare fund for the benefit of the inmate population. *See Washington v. Reno*, 35 F.3d 1093 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1994) (district court did not abuse discretion in preliminarily enjoining Bureau of Prisons from alleged misappropriation of Commissary funds for purchase of telephone system to support prison security).

c. Accepting Donated Funds

As noted earlier in this publication, a number of departments and agencies have specific statutory authority to accept gifts. *See* Chapter 6, section E.3.a. The level of detail addressed by these statutory authorities varies. *Compare, e.g.*, 22 U.S.C. § 2697 (acceptance of unconditional and conditional gifts by the Secretary of State) *with* 31 U.S.C. § 3113 (acceptance of gifts to reduce the public debt). Section 19 of the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934, 31 U.S.C. § 1323(c), provides general guidance concerning accounting for gifts and donations. Pursuant to this statute, donations or gifts are treated as trust funds and must be deposited in the Treasury as such. Like the statutory trust funds catalogued at 31 U.S.C. § 1321(a) and the analogous trust funds established pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 1321(b), Congress has provided a permanent appropriation for donated funds. 31 U.S.C. § 1323(c) (“Donations . . . shall be deposited in the Treasury as trust funds and are appropriated for disbursement under the terms of the trusts.”).

Before a government officer may accept a donation that would require the management of a trust, the officer must have the authority to bind the government to act as a trustee, with the attendant responsibilities and cost.<sup>293</sup> This was the issue in [11 Comp. Gen. 355 \(1932\)](#). The Secretary of the Navy asked whether he was authorized to accept a bequest to the United States Naval Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, to be invested in a memorial fund. The proceeds of the trust were to be used for the maintenance and comfort of sailors in that hospital. The Comptroller General concluded that the President's gift acceptance authority was limited to hospitals for merchant seamen, not naval hospitals. Observing that if the testamentary gift was accepted, the United States would "become, in effect, a trustee for charitable uses," the Comptroller General ruled "that such an obligation could not legally be assumed by an officer on behalf of the United States without express statutory authority therefor." *Id.* at 356. To drive home the point, the Comptroller General further noted that without such authority, there would be no basis to use any appropriations to cover the necessary expenses of administering such a trust fund. *Id.*

A similar issue was touched on in [27 Comp. Gen. 641 \(1948\)](#). In that decision, the issue was whether the Department of State created a trust fund for the education of Persian students in the United States as part of a settlement of claims of the United States against the Persian government. The answer to that question seems to have been that the President acting through the State Department had the authority to agree to the creation of trust. However, the decision ultimately turned not on the scope of the President's authority, but on "precisely what the terms of the agreement were." *Id.* at 645. The Comptroller General concluded that the agreement reached did not include the use of the funds for the benefit of the Persian students. Accordingly, the Secretary could not later, without additional consideration, modify the agreement to create a trust obligation on the part of the United States. *Id.* at 646.

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<sup>293</sup> *Cf.* 4 First Comp. Dec. 457, 458 (1883), *citing United States v. Morris*, 23 U.S. (10 Wheat.) 246, 303 (1825) ("The Government cannot, without its authorized express consent, be forced to occupy the position of a trustee.").

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### 3. Application of Fiscal Laws

#### a. Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934

Prior to 1934, government officials held a number of trust fund accounts outside the Treasury. The Comptroller General had directed the deposit of the funds to the accounts of Treasury officials in order to ensure that a proper accounting and audit was made of all disbursements. The Comptroller General permitted the withdrawal of trust funds, after deposit in the Treasury, without an express appropriation from Congress. Congress objected to the Comptroller General's approval of withdrawals of trust fund moneys without an appropriation as a violation of the constitutional prohibition that "no moneys shall be drawn from the Treasury but in consequence of an appropriation made by law." H.R. Rep. No. 73-1414, at 12 (1934). Ironically the solution was to provide a permanent appropriation for trust funds as part of legislation designed to repeal permanent appropriations in general. *Id.* Accordingly, in section 20 of the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934, ch. 756, 48 Stat. 1233 (June 26, 1934), codified at 31 U.S.C. § 1321(a), Congress listed all funds of a trust nature that Congress wanted to maintain on the books of the government and provided a permanent appropriation for these funds. *See also* S. Rep. No. 73-1195, at 1–3 (1934); H.R. Conf. Rep. No. 73-2039, at 6–9 (1934). *See* [16 Comp. Gen. 147 \(1936\)](#) for a comprehensive discussion of the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act.

Section 20 of this act also provides prospective guidance. Any amounts received by the United States as trustee which are analogous to the funds listed in subsection (a) are for deposit in a trust account of the Treasury. Amounts "accruing to these funds" are permanently appropriated for expenditure in accordance with the terms of the trust. 31 U.S.C. § 1321(b). *See also* 31 U.S.C. § 1323(c).

#### b. Available Uses of Trust Funds

##### (1) Using donated funds

Funds held in trust are available only for trust purposes. Where an agency is authorized to accept a donation of funds for specified purposes, the funds may only be used for purposes necessary to carry out the trust. [17 Comp. Gen. 732 \(1938\)](#). For the accepting agency to do otherwise would be a clear breach of the terms of the agreement governing the gift. *See* [47 Comp. Gen. 314 \(1967\)](#). (Of course, an agency's authority to agree to any particular use of donated funds is limited by the terms of its statutory authority to accept donations. [11 Comp. Gen. 355 \(1932\)](#).)

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Appropriated funds are subject to many use restrictions. *See generally* Chapter 6. Depending on the terms of the donation, some of those restrictions may not apply to donations accepted by authorized officers of the United States. In several cases GAO has held that—

“where the Congress authorizes Federal officers to accept private gifts or bequests for a specific purpose, . . . authority must of necessity be reposed in the custodians of the trust fund to make expenditures for administration in such a manner as to carry out the purposes of the trust . . . without reference to general regulatory and prohibitory statutes applicable to public funds.”

[16 Comp. Gen. 650, 655 \(1937\)](#). *See* [36 Comp. Gen. 771 \(1957\)](#); [B-195492, Mar. 18, 1980](#); [B-170938, Oct. 30, 1972](#); [B-131278, Sept. 9, 1957](#); [B-135255-O.M., Mar. 21, 1958](#). In [23 Comp. Gen. 726 \(1944\)](#), the Comptroller General was asked what the National Park Trust Fund Board could do with the principal of gifts received in trust for the benefit of the National Park Service where the donor had not prescribed a particular purpose for the gift. The Board’s statutory authority was silent on this point. *See* Pub. L. No. 74-201, § 2, 49 Stat. 477 (July 10, 1935), *codified at* 16 U.S.C. §§ 19e–19m. The statute did direct the Secretary of Treasury to invest donations for the account of the Board consistent with the laws applicable to a trust company in the District of Columbia and to credit the income from such investments to the National Park Trust Fund. Since the Board’s statute did not authorize use of the principal of a gift, the Board could not invade the principal. However, to give “some effect to the action of the respective donors” in making a gift, the Board could use investment income for the presumed purpose of the gift—the general benefit of the National Park Service, its activities, or its services.

Another decision, [B-274855, Jan. 23, 1997](#), discussed the range of permissible uses of donated funds available to the now defunct United States Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR). Congress created ACIR to give continuing attention to intergovernmental problems.<sup>294</sup> To finance its activities, Congress authorized ACIR to solicit and receive contributions from, among others, state governments. In 1995,

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<sup>294</sup> Pub. L. No. 86-380, 73 Stat. 703 (Sept. 24, 1959).

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Congress terminated ACIR effective September 30, 1996.<sup>295</sup> Two months prior to termination, Congress directed the National Gambling Impact Study Commission to contract with ACIR for research and authorized ACIR to continue in existence solely to perform the contract.<sup>296</sup>

The question was whether prior unconditional state contributions were available to cover ACIR's salaries and expenses until the National Gambling Commission awarded ACIR a contract. The states contributed funds to support ACIR's authorized activities. The Comptroller General viewed the funds as unrestricted gifts. As unrestricted gifts, they were available for ACIR activities authorized by Congress at the time of obligation and expenditure regardless of the activities contemplated by ACIR and the states at the time the gifts were made. The Comptroller General further concluded that after ACIR completed its authorized study, any unused contributions were for deposit in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. *Cf. 15 Comp. Gen. 681 (1936)* (moneys received that could no longer be applied to agreed upon purposes due to constitutional defects of authorizing legislation are for deposit as miscellaneous receipts).

Like direct appropriations, moneys donated in trust are available for expenses reasonably related to the purpose of the trust. That is the message of *23 Comp. Gen. 726 and B-274855, Jan. 23, 1997*. In *55 Comp. Gen. 1059 (1976)*, for example, GAO held that the Forest Service could not transfer funds donated to establish and operate a research facility to a private foundation to invest and use for a purpose other than establishing and operating a research facility.

GAO also has considered whether donated funds could be used for expenses that the Comptroller General traditionally has viewed as personal. In *47 Comp. Gen. 314 (1967)*, GAO concluded that the purchase of seasonal greeting cards remained unallowable regardless of the fact that the Interior Department would pay for the cards from a trust fund for donations to the National Park Service. Donated funds, as a general matter, are no more available for personal expenditures than appropriated funds, unless, of course, the personal expense would serve the purpose of the donation and would otherwise fall within the agency's gift acceptance authority.

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<sup>295</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-52, 109 Stat. 468, 480 (Nov. 19, 1995).

<sup>296</sup> Pub. L. No. 104-169, 110 Stat. 1482, 1487 (Aug. 3, 1996).

In [B-195492, Mar. 18, 1980](#), Senator Proxmire questioned Interior's use of amounts held in its Cooperating Association Fund. The Secretary of the Interior maintains this discretionary fund under authority of 16 U.S.C. § 6, which permits the Department of Interior to accept lands, rights-of-way, buildings or other property, and money which may be donated "for the purposes of the national park and monument system." Interior was using these funds for contest entry fees, receptions for very important guests, gifts, and refreshments. While GAO reiterated that donated funds are not available for personal expenses, GAO noted that the strictures on the use of donated funds do not necessarily mirror those applicable to the use of appropriated funds. With respect to the "'entertainment,' 'gifts,' and other so called 'personal' items," GAO pointed out that the restrictions on the use of general agency appropriations for these purposes derived not from the idea that these could never be "official" expenses but that "such purposes are so subject to abuse as to require specific Congressional authorization before general agency appropriations may be so used." Since those expenses are not prohibited, where agencies can justify the use of donated funds as incident to the terms of the donation for what would otherwise be viewed as an improper personal use of general agency appropriations, we would not object. On the other hand, GAO noted that the availability of donated funds for travel and subsistence expenses is subject to the same rules as govern the use of appropriated funds because of statutory language that precluded the use of "funds appropriated for any purpose" for travel expenses of the kind at issue there.

(2) Property of others

General use restrictions have less applicability to the property of others being held in trust. In [B-33020, Apr. 1, 1943](#), GAO did not object to use of Osage Indian Trust Funds to cover the cost of telegrams sent to members of Congress concerning pending legislation affecting the tribe that would have been prohibited by legislation concerning the use of appropriated funds to influence Congress. GAO did not object to these expenditures since Congress had appropriated the funds to be used for the benefit of the tribe and authorized the tribe to organize for its common welfare and to negotiate with federal, state, and local governments.

A slightly different twist on these concepts occurred in [20 Comp. Gen. 581 \(1941\)](#). In that decision, the Library of Congress Trust Board held, as trustee, legal title to some improved real estate that the Federal Works Administrator wanted to lease. Standing in the way of the transaction was the longstanding rule of the accounting officers of the government that,



absent statutory authority, the payment of rent by one agency to another for premises under the control of another is unauthorized. Since the United States did not in its own right hold legal title to, or have the beneficial right to the use of, the property, there was no objection to the payment of rent to the Library of Congress Trust Board in its capacity as trustee.

Similarly, the authority of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC), when acting as a trustee for terminated pension plans, is not constrained by laws applicable to contracting by federal agencies or the expenditure of public funds. [B-223146, Oct. 7, 1986](#). One issue addressed by the decision was PBGC's authority to modify the fee provision of an existing contract with outside litigation counsel to include a contingent fee arrangement. Since PBGC was authorized by law to serve as a trustee for terminated pension plans, possessing all the rights and duties to act as a private trustee similarly situated, GAO could find no legal or public policy considerations which precluded PBGC's modifications of its contracts with outside counsel. (We can assume that we would have held otherwise if public funds were at issue. *See* Chapter 6, section C). Also, since any recoveries resulting from the litigation accrued to the terminated pension plan, the use by PBGC (in its capacity as trustee) of a portion of the recoveries to pay its contingent fee obligation would not violate the deposit requirements of the miscellaneous receipts statute.

(3) Statutory trust funds

Like donated funds held in trust, where Congress designates a trust account to receive dedicated tax receipts, the *corpus* of the trust is only available for trust purposes. The rationale for this axiom differs from cases where the government holds donated funds accepted in trust. As noted earlier, in the latter case, the limitation on the use of funds derives in the first instance from the agreement with the donor. While an agency's statutory authority to accept a gift is relevant in prescribing the range of uses to which an agency may agree, it is the donor's action in making a

restricted gift, that is, one for designated purposes, that controls the particular use.<sup>297</sup>

Where the *corpus* of the trust account consists of dedicated tax receipts, the rationale for the rule is a function of Congress's constitutional prerogative to allocate resources for the general welfare. In other words, the limitation on the use of the funds for other than trust purposes derives from the terms of the statute creating the trust account and 31 U.S.C. § 1301(a), limiting the use of appropriated funds only to purposes for which appropriated. One consequence of this distinction concerning the source of the limitation on use manifests itself when Congress decides to modify the authorized uses of the trust funds. In the case of trust funds designed to serve as accounting mechanisms for dedicated tax receipts, Congress as the creator of the trust can change or modify the permissible uses of the trust funds. *Cf.* [36 Comp. Gen. 712 \(1957\)](#). For an example of Congress changing the uses of a statutory trust fund filled with tax revenues, see the legislative history recounted in [B-281779, Feb. 12, 1999](#).

As the prior discussion suggests, when resolving issues involving the application of statutory restrictions to this type of trust fund the Comptroller General will treat them more like a direct appropriation. In [B-191761, Sept. 22, 1978](#), an agency of the Department of Agriculture wanted to dip into a user fee trust fund to provide a uniform allowance to its employees. Section 5901 of title 5, United States Code, requires that before an agency may use appropriated funds for uniforms, it must have specific statutory authority to do so. GAO resolved the issue on the basis of authority in Agriculture's appropriation act, which provided that "funds available to the Department" may be used for employee uniforms. Arguably, if donated funds were involved, the Department would have had a greater ability to use the funds for trust purposes unfettered by general regulatory statutes applicable to appropriated funds.

The essential point is that, if viewed like any other appropriation, amounts in a trust fund account may only be used for the purposes for which they were appropriated. As suggested above, depending on the source of funds,

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<sup>297</sup> An argument has been made that funds held in trust and expended pursuant to the permanent appropriation of moneys "accruing to these trust funds" contained in the Permanent Appropriation Repeal Act of 1934, 31 U.S.C. § 1321(b), are appropriated funds subject to the laws governing the obligation and expenditure of any other appropriated funds. *See Soboleski v. Commissioner*, 88 T.C. 1024, 1034 (1987), *aff'd*, 842 F.2d 1292 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988).

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this may translate to mean no more than the authorized purposes of the trust.

c. Intergovernmental Claims

Another consequence of the distinction is seen in decisions involving intergovernmental claims. As a general proposition, a federal agency or establishment that damages public property, real or personal, under the control of another federal agency or establishment may not pay a claim for that damage. Put another way, federal agencies may not assert damage claims against one another. *E.g.*, [60 Comp. Gen. 710, 714 \(1981\)](#).

Claims involving property or funds held by the government in a trust capacity are an exception to this rule. In [41 Comp. Gen. 235 \(1961\)](#), GAO found that the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) could present a claim against the Air Force for damage to the San Carlos Irrigation Project caused by the crash of a Civil Air Patrol plane. Although the San Carlos Irrigation Project was an instrumentality of the United States, the project benefited the Pima Indians and was funded from moneys held in trust by the government for the Pima. The question was whether the BIA claim against the Air Force for damage to the project would constitute a claim by one government agency against another. The decision held that it would not. As BIA was acting in a trust capacity on behalf of the Pima, if the general rule were applied, the expense of repairing the damage would be borne not by the government but by the Pima. Thus, the claim was not that of one agency against another.

Applying similar reasoning, the Comptroller General found Navy appropriations available to pay a claim for damage to property of the Ryukyu Electric Power Corporation. [B-159559, Aug. 12, 1968](#). The corporation, while an instrumentality of the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands, was not an instrumentality of the United States government. Further, while funds available to the Civil Administration were government funds, they were in the nature of a trust account held for the sole benefit of the Ryukyu people. Another case applying the trust reasoning is [B-35478, July 24, 1943](#) (since timberland was held in trust for counties, Bonneville Power Administration should pay for timber destroyed).

The trust exception of cases like [41 Comp. Gen. 235](#) and [B-159559, Aug. 12, 1968](#), has its limits and does not apply where the trust fund is more in the nature of an accounting or bookkeeping device. An illustrative case is [65 Comp. Gen. 464 \(1986\)](#). A Navy plane had crashed into and destroyed a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) instrument landing system.

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Although the FAA used funds from the Airport and Airway Trust Fund to repair its facility, the Comptroller General viewed this trust fund as little more than an earmarked appropriation, not involving the same kind of trust relationship as in the San Carlos and Ryukyu cases. Accordingly, the general rule controlled, and Navy appropriations were not available to reimburse the FAA.

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#### 4. Concepts of Amount and Time

Concepts of amount and time which are so important to general appropriations law (*see* Chapters 5 and 6) also come into play with trust funds. With respect to “amount,” this would include concerns that trust funds are being used to augment regular appropriations. In [B-107662, Apr. 23, 1952](#), GAO reviewed a Commerce procedure for charging trust funds with the cost of employees assigned full time to activities funded by regular appropriations, but assigned intermittently for short periods to activities financed by trust funds. GAO had no objection to the Commerce procedure, but cautioned that the proper records needed to be kept to ensure that trust funds did not augment general fund appropriations. *See also* [B-138841, Sept. 18, 1959](#) (payment of regular weather bureau employees from Department of Commerce trust fund for intermittent services performed on trust fund projects).

As with other types of accounts, errors can and do occur that effect the amount properly credited to trust fund balances. When they do, the obvious solution is to correct them. GAO generally recognizes that an act of Congress is not necessary to correct clerical or administrative errors when dealing with the nontrust fund accounts of the government. [41 Comp. Gen. 16, 19 \(1961\)](#). Where the evidence of an error is unreliable or inconclusive, the Comptroller General has objected to administrative adjustment of account balances. [B-2369400, Oct. 17, 1989](#). This is particularly true where (as in the immediately preceding decision) the adjustment would result in additional budget authority being available to an agency.

In [B-275490, Dec. 5, 1996](#), GAO concluded that Treasury could credit to the Highway Trust Fund \$1.59 billion mistakenly not credited to that account. Each month, Treasury transferred from the general fund of the Treasury amounts appropriated to the Trust Fund based on Treasury estimates of the specified excise taxes for the month. The Treasury then adjusted the amounts originally credited to the fund to the extent the estimates differed from actual receipts. Due to a change in reporting format and a resulting transcription error, Treasury substantially understated the adjustments to

the income credited to the trust fund. The Department of Transportation and Treasury discovered the error when the year-end statement was prepared. GAO agreed with Treasury that, as trustee of the Fund, Treasury should adjust the fiscal year 1994 and 1995 Trust Fund income statements to credit the Fund with the excise taxes originally not included in the Highway Trust Fund income statements just as if Treasury had credited such amounts upon receipt of the reports from the IRS. The Comptroller General made the following observation:

“Apart from whatever responsibilities the Secretary may have to accurately state the accounts of the United States, the Secretary in his capacity as trustee of the [Highway Trust] Fund has the duty to accurately account for the amounts in the Fund consistent with the terms of the appropriation made thereto and the applicable administrative procedures adopted to effectuate his statutory responsibilities.”

*Id.* See also [67 Comp. Gen. 342 \(1988\)](#) (Bureau of Indian Affairs has duty to make prompt corrective payments to trust account beneficiary before collecting from an erroneous payee; to avoid overdraft of an Individual Trust Account, BIA could use funds from its Operation of Indian Programs appropriations to correct the erroneous payment from the Individual Trust Account); [65 Comp. Gen. 533 \(1986\)](#) (funds returned to Individual Indian Money Account, which were earlier improperly recovered, should be repaid from appropriations currently available for the activity involved); [41 Comp. Gen. 16 \(1961\)](#) (incorrect allocation of federal highway funds to states was an act in excess of statutory authority and consequently must be corrected through appropriate adjustments). In addition see the discussion of restoration in Chapter 9, section H.2.

The Comptroller General has recognized that the miscellaneous receipts statute does not apply to trust funds. [60 Comp. Gen. 15, 26 \(1980\)](#); [27 Comp. Gen. 641 \(1948\)](#). See discussion in Chapter 6, section E.2.h. The miscellaneous receipts statute directs that all moneys received for the use of the United States must be deposited in the general fund of the Treasury. 31 U.S.C. § 3302(b). The very terms of the statute call into question its application to moneys the government receives in trust. As a practical matter, in most instances, it is clear when the United States has received funds for its use. Occasionally a question does arise whether the funds are for credit to the general fund of the Treasury as a miscellaneous receipt or to a trust account. In [25 Comp. Gen. 637 \(1946\)](#), GAO concluded that

payments made in conjunction with making movies in national parks were payments made in consideration of the privilege to film in the park and, hence, were properly accounted for as miscellaneous receipts, not donations to the National Park Trust Fund. On the other hand, in [B-195492, Mar. 18, 1980](#), GAO found no elements of an exchange and accordingly held that payments by nonprofit associations operating in national parks of one-half of 1 percent of their gross sales were properly treated as contributions to the Cooperating Associations Trust Fund, not as miscellaneous receipts.

In [60 Comp. Gen. 15 \(1980\)](#) the Comptroller General expanded on the concept of “received in trust.” The Department of Energy had received \$25 million under the terms of a consent order settling disputes between Energy and the Getty Oil Company concerning compliance with oil price and allocation regulations. The order provided that Getty would deposit \$25 million into a bank escrow account. The order did not specify how the money was to be distributed. Energy announced that the money would be distributed to state governments in proportion to the oil company’s sales in that state and directed that the states use the money to defray the heating oil costs of low-income persons. GAO found that, to the extent the money would be returned as restitution to victims of Getty’s alleged violation of oil and price allocation regulations, Energy was acting as a trustee and the funds need not be deposited to the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. However, to the extent that Energy sought to distribute funds to a class of individuals other than to those overcharged, those funds were not held in trust and must be deposited in the Treasury as miscellaneous receipts. (This opinion was the first of several to address this matter. *See* [63 Comp. Gen. 189 \(1984\)](#); [62 Comp. Gen. 379 \(1983\)](#); [B-210176, Oct. 4, 1984](#); [B-200170, Apr. 1, 1981.](#))

For other cases treating amounts received as trust funds exempt from the miscellaneous receipts statute, see [51 Comp. Gen. 506 \(1972\)](#) (National Zoo receipts are for deposit to the credit of the Smithsonian Institution, not as miscellaneous receipts, even though activities in question were supported mostly by appropriated funds because the Zoo operates under a trust charter); [B-192035, Aug. 25, 1978](#) (income derived from local currency trust fund operations not for deposit as miscellaneous receipts since Agency for International Development is *merely a trustee of host country funds*); [B-166059, July 10, 1969](#) (recovery for damage to property purchased with trust funds credited to trust fund account); [B-4906, Oct. 11, 1951](#) (recoveries for lost or damaged property financed from Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund are creditable to the trust fund).

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One decision applying “time” concepts to a statutory trust fund reached a predictable result. In [B-171277, Apr. 2, 1971](#), amounts in the trust fund, which consisted of fees received from commercial testing labs for testing agricultural products, were available until expended. The “available until expended” language made the trust fund a no-year appropriation and thus available for multiyear contracts. So long as the fund contained amounts sufficient to cover all obligations under the contract, there would be no Antideficiency Act concerns. See Chapter 5 for a general discussion of no-year funds and multiyear contracts.

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## 5. Duty to Invest

Under the common law, it is the trustee’s duty to make the trust *corpus* productive. *Restatement (Third) of Trusts*, § 181 (1992). Obviously the issue is of more than passing importance to the trust beneficiaries. For amounts held in trust by the United States, the trustee’s duty to make the trust *corpus* productive, and the trustee’s corresponding liability to the beneficiary for failure to do so, are limited by the concept of sovereign immunity. As a general rule, the United States is not liable for interest unless it has consented to the payment of interest. *Library of Congress v. Shaw*, 478 U.S. 310, 314–17 (1986); *United States v. Alcea Band of Tillamooks*, 341 U.S. 48, 49 (1951). The Supreme Court has insisted that any such consent be express and clear, stating that “there can be no consent by implication or by use of ambiguous language. Nor can an intent on the part of the framers of a statute . . . to permit the recovery of interest suffice where the intent is not translated into affirmative statutory . . . terms.” *United States v. N.Y. Rayon Importing Co.*, 329 U.S. 654, 659 (1947). See [B-272979, Aug. 23, 1996](#). See also [65 Comp. Gen. 533, 539–40](#) (1986) (no difference whether interest is characterized as “damages, loss, earned increment, just compensation, discount, offset, penalty or any other term”); [B-241592.3, Dec. 13, 1991](#) (no authority to pay interest on funds held by Customs on behalf of the Virgin Islands, absent an agreement or statute).

Various arguments have been made that 31 U.S.C. § 9702 provides the requisite authority to pay interest on trust funds. Section 9702 provides that “[e]xcept as required by a treaty of the United States, amounts held in trust by the United States Government (including annual interest earned on the amounts)—(1) shall be invested in Government obligations; and (2) shall earn interest at an annual rate of at least 5 percent.” This statute was intended to end the practice of investing United States trust funds in state obligations. Despite its seemingly straightforward language, this statute applies only where a statute, treaty, or contract requires trust funds



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to be invested. It is not an independent authorization for the payment of interest. [B-241592.3, Dec. 13, 1991.](#)

A comprehensive discussion of 31 U.S.C. § 9702 is contained in *United States v. Mescalero Apache Tribe*, 518 F.2d 1309, 1324 (Ct. Cl. 1975), *cert. denied*, 425 U.S. 911 (1976) and the cases cited therein. In *Mescalero*, the Court of Claims explained the purpose of the Act of September 11, 1841, ch. 25, § 2, 5 Stat. 465, now codified at 31 U.S.C. § 9702. Congress wanted to prohibit the investment of United States trust funds, otherwise required by treaty or statute to be invested, in state bonds and to require instead their investment in safer United States securities. The court held that the 1841 act did not require the payment by the United States of interest on any fund that was not expressly required to be invested by a contract, treaty, or a statute. The lesson of *Mescalero* and subsequent cases is that one must examine the statute or other legal source for the fund to determine whether any requirement to invest the trust fund exists. *Alcea Band of Tillamooks*, 341 U.S. 48 (interest on amount of compensation awarded for taking of original Indian title by United States in 1855 not allowed where jurisdictional act contained no provision authorizing award of interest); [B-226801-O.M., May 4, 1988](#) (section 9702 did not require the Veteran's Administration to invest the Post-Vietnam Era Veterans Education Account, listed as a trust fund at 31 U.S.C. § 1321(a)(82)).

An example of a specific requirement for investment and the payment of interest is found at 25 U.S.C. § 161a. It requires that all funds held in trust by the United States to the credit of Indian tribes or individual Indians be invested by the Secretary of the Treasury, with interest at rates determined by the Secretary of the Treasury. GAO has considered the payment of interest on government held Indian funds numerous times. *E.g.*, [52 Comp. Gen. 248 \(1972\)](#); [8 Comp. Gen. 625 \(1929\)](#); [B-272979, Aug. 23, 1996](#); [B-243029, Mar. 25, 1991](#); [B-108439, Dec. 28, 1973](#); [B-126459, Feb. 20, 1956](#). The obligation to invest under section 161a does not arise prior to the date that Congress has specified for deposit of funds to the trust. [B-108439, Apr. 13, 1978.](#)

In 2001, the Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel held that section 604(c) of the Water Resources Development Act of 1999, Pub. L. No. 106-53, 113 Stat. 269, 389-90 (Aug. 17, 1999), required the Treasury to invest the trust fund for two South Dakota Indian tribes in "available obligations" bearing the highest rate of interest, even when those obligations do not have the highest yields. Memorandum Opinion for the General Counsel, Department of the Treasury, *Investment of Federal Trust*



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*Funds for Cheyenne River and Lower Brule Sioux*, OLC Opinion, Jan. 19, 2001. Recognizing that this statute is unique among federal trust funds, this opinion supports the general rule that the extent of a trustee's duties and powers is determined by the trust instrument and the specific rules of the applicable law. *See also Chippewa Cree Tribe of Rocky Boy's Reservation v. United States*, 73 Fed. Cl. 154 (2006).

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## 6. Liability for Loss of Trust Funds

Where the government acts in the capacity of a trustee with respect to a fund it holds, the government must see to the proper application of the trust funds like a private trustee. *Julia A. L. Burnell v. United States*, 44 Ct. Cl. 535 (1909). In the cited case, the Treasury paid the wrong party through a mistake of law. The Claims Court held that the government remained responsible to the rightful owner of the securities. *Id.*

The decisions of the Comptroller General are to the same effect. For example, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) holds "personal funds of patients" for safekeeping and use during their stay at VA hospitals. The government is accountable to the patients for these funds like a private trustee would be.<sup>298</sup> [68 Comp. Gen. 600, 603 \(1989\)](#). Accordingly, where an erroneous payment is made, the government is chargeable with any loss resulting from the breach of trust. In this case, VA was advised to make the trust fund whole by charging the deficiency to the VA's operating appropriation as a necessary expense of administering the trust. *Id.* To the same effect is [67 Comp. Gen. 342 \(1988\)](#) (use of Bureau of Indian Affairs operating appropriation to adjust deficiency in Bureau trust fund). *See also* [B-288284.2, Mar. 7, 2003](#).

The liability of an accountable officer for loss of funds in a trust account is no different than any other loss of government funds. Although the funds are not strictly speaking public funds, they are nevertheless funds for which the government is accountable. The absence of a beneficial interest in the funds does not alter the liability equation; by accepting custody of them, the United States assumes a trust responsibility for their care and safekeeping. [B-200108](#), [B-198558, Jan. 23, 1981](#). If a trustee commits a breach of trust, the trustee is chargeable with any loss resulting from that breach. [B-248715, Jan. 13, 1993](#). *See generally United States v. Mitchell*, 463 U.S. 206, 226 (1983); *White Mountain Apache Tribe v. United States*,

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<sup>298</sup> *Cf.* [B-153479, Apr. 15, 1964](#) (prisoners' trust funds).

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249 F.3d 1364 (Fed. Cir. 2001), *aff'd*, 537 U.S. 465 (2003). *See also Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Flathead Reservation, Montana v. United States*, 175 Ct. Cl. 451, 455–56 (1966) (misuse of trust funds is a breach of trust, not Fifth Amendment taking). The responsibility of the accountable officer has been described as follows: “the same relationship between an accountable officer and the United States is required with respect to trust funds of a private character obtained and held for some particular purpose sanctioned by law as is required with respect to public funds.” 6 *Comp. Gen.* 515, 517 (1927) (funds in retirement account of embezzling employee used to satisfy loss of private trust funds). *See also Osborn v. United States*, 91 U.S. 474 (1876) (court can summarily compel restitution of funds improperly withdrawn from registry account by former officers). The rules that apply for the relief of an accountable officer for the loss of appropriated funds also apply for the relief of an accountable officer for the loss of trust funds. [B-288163, June 4, 2002](#). *See* Chapter 9, section B.3.c.

Other situations involving accountability for funds held in trust or trust-like circumstances include—

- VA patient funds: [68 Comp. Gen. 600 \(1989\)](#); [B-226911, Oct. 19, 1987](#); [B-221447, Apr. 2, 1986](#); [B-215477, Nov. 5, 1984](#); [B-208888, Sept. 28, 1984](#).
- Erroneous payment to Individual Indian Money Account: [65 Comp. Gen. 533 \(1986\)](#).
- Registry accounts of courts of the United States: [B-288163, June 4, 2002](#); [64 Comp. Gen. 535 \(1985\)](#); [63 Comp. Gen. 489, 490 n.1 \(1984\)](#); [B-200108, B-198558, Jan. 23, 1981](#).
- United States Naval Academy laundry fund: [17 Comp. Gen. 786 \(1938\)](#).
- Prisoners’ money held in Brig Officer’s Safekeeping Fund: [B-248715, Jan. 13, 1993](#).
- Mutilated and worn currency sent by private bank to Treasury for redemption: [B-239955, June 18, 1991](#).
- Overseas Consular Service Trust Fund holding private funds to pay for funeral expenses: [B-238955, Apr. 3, 1991](#).

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- Foreign currencies accepted in connection with accommodation exchanges: [B-190205, Nov. 14, 1977](#).
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## 7. Claims

### a. Setoff and Levy against Trust Funds

In [38 Comp. Gen. 23 \(1958\)](#), GAO held that a delinquent taxpayer's postal savings deposits are property subject to Internal Revenue Service (IRS) levy and the fact that the postmaster held the deposits as a trust fund does not protect them from IRS levy. Similarly, in [B-165138, Mar. 12, 1969](#), we advised the Bureau of Prisons that prisoners' funds it held as "trust funds" under 31 U.S.C. § 1321, are property subject to tax lien and levy under sections 6321 and 6331, respectively, of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954 (IRC). The literal language of section 6334(c) of the IRC compelled this result. That section provides that no property rights would be exempt from levy unless specifically exempted in section 6334(a). *See also* [63 Comp. Gen. 498 \(1984\)](#) (honoring a levy against a judgment award did not give rise to a breach of trust); [34 Comp. Gen. 152 \(1954\)](#) (government may take setoff against funds held by it in trust to recoup a debt owed to the government as sovereign).

Contrast the preceding decisions (involving the collection of taxes from trust funds held by the government) with [48 Comp. Gen. 249 \(1968\)](#) (reversing [B-72968, Apr. 21, 1948](#)), where the Comptroller General held that the Bureau of Prisons could not set off prisoners' trust funds to satisfy claims of the United States arising from an inmate's destruction of government property. In reversing his earlier decision, the Comptroller General pointed out that he had not known at the time of his 1948 decision that the terms of the trust expressly required the prisoner's consent prior to a withdrawal of funds. Accordingly, given the new information, the Comptroller General held that absent a change in the terms of the trust agreement, the Bureau could not use prisoner trust funds to satisfy a writ of execution issued pursuant to a court judgment against the inmate. *Id. Cf.* [65 Comp. Gen. 533 \(1986\)](#) (United States will absorb the loss for moneys erroneously paid from an Individual Indian Money account and forego collection from the erroneous payee—another Indian—in light of the moral obligations of the United States in dealing with the Indians).

### b. Unclaimed Moneys

At the end of each fiscal year, money which has been in any of the trust accounts identified in or established pursuant to 31 U.S.C. § 1321 for more than a year and which represents money belonging to individuals whose

location is unknown is transferred to a Treasury trust fund receipt account entitled “Unclaimed Moneys of Individuals Whose Whereabouts are Unknown.” 31 U.S.C. § 1322(a). Section 1322(b)(1) establishes a permanent, indefinite appropriation to pay claims from the Unclaimed Moneys account. Instructions to implement 31 U.S.C. § 1322 are contained in the *Treasury Financial Manual*, 1 TFM. 6-3000.

Under 31 U.S.C. § 3702(b), a claim against the government ordinarily cannot be considered unless the claim is received within 6 years of the date it accrues. The Comptroller General has held, however, that the 6-year statute of limitations in 31 U.S.C. § 3702(b) does not bar claims to recover moneys held in trust. See [B-201669, Nov. 26, 1985](#) and decisions cited therein. Since the trustee holds property for the beneficiary’s benefit, unless there is a breach of some duty owed by the trustee to a beneficiary, such as a repudiation of the trust, there is no claim or cause of action that would trigger the running of the statute. *Id.* See Bogert, *Trusts & Trustees*, 951 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. 1995). In keeping with the general rule, GAO has deemed the statute inapplicable to claims of beneficiaries payable from money held in trust. See [70 Comp. Gen. 612 \(1991\)](#); [66 Comp. Gen. 40 \(1986\)](#); [55 Comp. Gen. 1234 \(1976\)](#); [B-201669, Nov. 26, 1985](#). See also [B-155963, Mar. 19, 1965](#) (special deposit account for the proceeds of withheld foreign checks); [B-139963, July 6, 1959](#) (soldiers’ deposit savings accounts); [B-103575, Aug. 27, 1951](#) (unclaimed moneys of individuals whose whereabouts are unknown).

The agency that received and transferred the funds to the Treasury handles any claims relating to those funds. If a claim is determined to be valid, the agency may certify a payment voucher to Treasury. If the money was transferred to the trust account, payment is made directly from that account. See GAO, *Unclaimed Money: Proposals for Transferring Unclaimed Funds to States*, GAO/AFMD-89-44 (Washington, D.C.: May 9, 1989), at 10.

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## 8. Federal Trust Funds and the Budget

As suggested earlier, certain federal trust funds (those with the largest amount of federal trust fund dollars) are bookkeeping devices to capture receipts earmarked for certain programs or purposes.<sup>299</sup> They do not hold cash separate from the Treasury—all moneys received by the Treasury are commingled and used to pay government obligations as they come due. In effect, Treasury borrows the earmarked receipts in exchange for interest-bearing, nonmarketable Treasury securities. As a result, a trust fund balance reflects federal debt, that is, debt held by a government account.<sup>300</sup> To the extent that the receipts credited to a trust fund (*i.e.*, fees, employee contributions, tax receipts, and interest earned on Treasury securities) exceed expenditures charged to the fund, the trust fund balance grows. The converse, of course, is also true—to the extent that expenditures exceed receipts, the balance decreases.

The Social Security trust funds are the largest federal trust funds both in terms of annual spending and account balance. They are also the largest single item in the federal budget. See GAO, *Fiscal Stewardship: A Critical Challenge Facing Our Nation*, GAO-07-362SP (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2007), at 6. See also GAO, *Social Security Reform: Answers to Key Questions*, GAO-05-193SP (Washington, D.C.: May 2005); *Social Security Financing: Implications of Government Stock Investing for the Trust Fund, the Federal Budget, and the Economy*, GAO/AIMD/HEHS-98-74 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 22, 1998), at 29. See also Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Social Security's Treatment Under the Federal Budget: A Summary*, No. 95-206 (Mar. 20, 2002). Congress created the Social Security program in 1935 in response to the economic deprivations of the Depression. Originally created as a benefit system for

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<sup>299</sup> In B-274855, Jan. 23, 1997, for example, GAO noted that:

“Donations are accounted for as trust funds and must be deposited in the Treasury as such under 31 U.S.C. § 1323(c), to be disbursed in accordance with the terms of the trust and the scope of the agency’s statutory authority. Although contributions to [the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations] have been maintained separately from direct appropriations and held in a ‘trust fund account’ to carry out authorized purposes, they are not ‘held in trust’ as those words are commonly used to describe a fiduciary relationship to keep money for the benefit of another.”

<sup>300</sup> Debt held by the government, about \$8.5 trillion at the beginning of fiscal year 2007, primarily reflects debt owned by federal trust funds, such as the Social Security trust funds. GAO, *Bureau of the Public Debt’s Fiscal Years 2006 and 2005 Schedule of Federal Debt*, GAO-07-127 (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 7, 2006), at 3–4.

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retired workers, over time, Congress has expanded Social Security to insure disabled workers and the families of retired, disabled, and deceased workers. GAO, *Social Security: Different Approaches for Addressing Program Solvency*, GAO/HEHS-98-33 (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 1998), at 4.

Social Security consists of two separate trust funds, the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund, which covers retirement and survivor benefits, and the Federal Disability Insurance Trust Fund, which provides benefits to disabled workers and their families.<sup>301</sup> Congress has provided a permanent indefinite appropriation from the general fund of the Treasury to the Social Security trust funds of an amount determined by applying the applicable employment tax rate to wages reported to the Secretary of Treasury or his delegate. 42 U.S.C. § 401(a)(3). As a check on the amount credited to these trust funds, the Commissioner of Social Security is to certify the amount of wages (or self-employment income) reported to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). *Id.* See B-261522, Sept. 29, 1995 (Social Security Administration may use wage data collected by IRS in certifying to Treasury the amount of wages reported by employers and the amount of funds appropriated to the Social Security trust funds).

A Board of Trustees holds the Social Security trust funds. 42 U.S.C. § 401(c). The Board of Trustees is composed of the Secretary of the Treasury as Managing Trustee, the Commissioner of Social Security, the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, all *ex officio*, and two members of the public nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. *Id.* In addition to holding the fund, it is the duty of the Board of Trustees to report to the Congress on the operation and status of the Funds and to review and recommend improvements in the administrative procedures and policies followed in managing the Funds. *Id.* A “person serving on the Board of Trustees” does not have a fiduciary duty *vis-à-vis* the trust funds and “shall not be personally liable for actions taken [as a member of the Board of Trustees] with respect to the Trust Funds.” *Id.*

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<sup>301</sup> See generally GAO-05-193SP; GAO, *Disability Insurance: SSA Should Strengthen Its Efforts to Detect and Prevent Overpayments*, GAO-04-929 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 10, 2004); *Social Security Reform: Analysis of a Trust Fund Exhaustion Scenario*, GAO-03-907 (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2003).

There are a number of large trust funds that finance public works, notably transportation, programs. A prominent example is the Federal Aid Highway Program which distributes billions of dollars of federal funding annually to the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico for highway construction, repair, and related activities. To finance the highway program, Congress established the Highway Trust Fund account in the Treasury, 26 U.S.C. § 9503(a), designating the Secretary of Treasury as trustee, 26 U.S.C. § 9602(a).<sup>302</sup> Congress has provided the fund with a permanent, indefinite appropriation of amounts received in the Treasury from certain gasoline, diesel fuel, and other excise taxes paid by highway users. 26 U.S.C. § 9503(b). In fiscal year 1997, these earmarked revenues brought in \$23.9 billion to the fund.<sup>303</sup> In 2006, the amount was \$38.5 billion.<sup>304</sup> The Secretary of the Treasury is responsible for holding the Highway Trust Fund, reporting annually to Congress on the financial condition and operation of the fund, and investing any amounts in the fund not needed to meet current needs in interest-bearing Treasury securities. 26 U.S.C. § 9602. *See* [B-275490, Dec. 5, 1996](#) (Treasury, as trustee, could credit Highway Trust Fund income statements with \$1.59 billion in excise taxes mistakenly not credited to the Fund as the result of accounting and reporting errors).<sup>305</sup>

Chapter 98 of title 26, United State Code, contains a number of other trust funds established to finance social insurance, public works or environmental programs. For example, the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund finances the payment of benefits to eligible miners under the Black

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<sup>302</sup> The Highway Trust Fund actually contains two accounts. The oldest and most well-known of the two accounts is the highway account. The other, more recent account is the Mass Transit Account, 26 U.S.C. § 9503(e).

<sup>303</sup> Department of Transportation, *Highway Trust Fund Primer* (Nov. 1998), at 1, available at [www.fhwa.dot.gov/aap/PRIMER98.PDF](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/aap/PRIMER98.PDF) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

<sup>304</sup> *Budget of the United States Government for Fiscal Year 2006, Appendix* (Feb. 7, 2005), at 807, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2006](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2006) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007).

<sup>305</sup> For more information on the history and operation of the Highway Trust Fund, see GAO, *Highway Trust Fund: Overview of Highway Trust Fund Estimates*, GAO-06-572T (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2006); *Federal-Aid Highways: Trends, Effect on State Spending, and Options for Future Program Design*, GAO-04-802 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 31, 2004); *Highway Financing: Factors Affecting Highway Trust Fund Revenues*, GAO-02-667T (Washington, D.C.: May 9, 2002); and *Highway Trust Fund: Overview of Highway Trust Fund Financing*, GAO-02-435T (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 11, 2002). *See also* Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), *The Federal Excise Tax on Gasoline and the Highway Trust Fund: A Short History*, No. RL30304 (Apr. 4, 2006).



Lung Benefits Act. 26 U.S.C. § 9501. Another social insurance fund is the Vaccine Injury Compensation Trust Fund, 26 U.S.C. § 9510. In addition to the Highway Trust Fund, other public works trust funds include the Airport and Airway Trust Fund, 26 U.S.C. § 9502, the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, 26 U.S.C. § 9505, and the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, 26 U.S.C. § 9506. Examples of trust funds designed to finance environmental remediation programs are the Hazardous Substance Superfund, 26 U.S.C. § 9507, and the Leaking Underground Storage Tank Trust Fund, 26 U.S.C. § 9508.

There has been an ongoing debate over whether the trust funds, particularly Social Security and the large infrastructure trust funds such as the Federal Highway Trust Fund and the Airport and Airways Development Trust Fund should be included in the budget. In other words, whether they should be “off budget,” which are “those budgetary accounts (either federal or trust funds) designated by law as excluded from budget totals.” GAO, *A Glossary of Terms Used in the Federal Budget Process*, GAO-05-734SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2005), at 72.<sup>306</sup> Since fiscal year 1969 the President has submitted a unified budget that covers both trust and nontrust fund activities. The unified budget merges trust and nontrust outlays and receipts into a consolidated budget surplus or deficit. As a result, the growing positive trust fund balances, particularly in the Social Security trust funds, “[mask] the basic imbalance in the government’s financial affairs.” GAO, *The Budget Treatment of Trust Funds*, GAO/T-AFMD-90-3 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 18, 1989), at 5. In other words, the trust fund surpluses disguise the severity of the deficit (or the amount of surplus) on the nontrust fund side of the government’s ledgers.

Related to the on- or off-budget issue are allegations of misuse of the major trust funds such as the Highway and the Airport and Airway trust funds. Proponents of this view charge that, while the trust funds have a steady dedicated stream of tax receipts, budgeting actions have restricted fund outlays to create trust fund surpluses for budgetary reasons, namely, to

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<sup>306</sup> A better sense of what it means to be “off budget” can be gleaned from the statutory provision prescribing the budgetary treatment of the Postal Service Fund. 39 U.S.C. § 2009a. Section 2009a directs that the receipts and disbursements of the Postal Service Fund shall be excluded from the budget totals, exempt from any statutory budget limitations, and exempt from sequestration orders under the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985. For additional discussion, see the CRS reports *Social Security and the Federal Budget: What Does Social Security’s Being “Off Budget” Mean?*, No. 98-422 (Aug. 29, 2001) and *Appropriations for FY 2000: Department of Transportation and Related Agencies*, No. RL30208 (Feb. 4, 2000).



lower the deficit. GAO, *Budget Issues: Trust Funds and their Relationship to the Federal Budget*, GAO/AFMD 88-55 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 30, 1988), at 4. This practice, proponents argue, breaks the implied agreement underlying the original enactment of the “trust fund”—full use of dedicated tax receipts for the trust fund program. Opponents of off-budget designations argue that changing the label or category does not make an activity less federal, does not change total federal revenues or spending, and contributes to a more confusing picture of the federal government’s total taxes and spending. This simply highlights the tension that Congress faces between the collection and expenditure of earmarked revenues, whether trust funds or special funds, and the tradeoffs Congress must make with respect to spending priorities in general. GAO, *Budget Issues: Trust Funds in the Budget*, GAO/T-AIMD-99-110 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 9, 1999), at 1.

A number of different approaches have been offered. One proposed approach is to take the fund “off budget.” See, e.g., H.R. 798, 106<sup>th</sup> Cong., § 7 (1999) (a bill to provide funding and off-budget treatment for the protection and enhancement of natural and cultural resources); H.R. 4, 105<sup>th</sup> Cong., § 2 (1997) (a bill proposing to provide off-budget treatment for the Highway, Airport and Airway, Inland Waterways and Harbor Maintenance Trust Funds). GAO has suggested that Congress could address the matter in the context of the unified budget by separately displaying trust funds, federal funds, and government sponsored enterprises in the budget. GAO/T-AFMD-90-3. In the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Pub. L. No. 105-178, 112 Stat. 107 (June 9, 1998) (TEA-21), Congress took yet a different approach with respect to the highway and mass transit programs. In TEA-21 Congress established outlay caps that apply separately to the highway and mass transit programs for fiscal years 1999 through 2003. In addition to carving out outlay caps for these programs separate from the dollar caps applicable to discretionary spending in general, Congress also specified annual guaranteed minimum spending levels tied, in the case of highways, to Highway Trust Fund receipts. For a discussion of the implications of this approach, see GAO, *Cap Structure and Guaranteed Funding*, GAO/T-AIMD-99-210 (Washington, D.C.: July 21, 1999).

In addition to transparency of trust fund balances through the budget process, another issue that has arisen is whether and to what extent the long-term actuarial costs of the largest social insurance trust funds (Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid) should be reported on the balance sheet of the consolidated financial statements of the United States government as

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liability of the government. See FASAB, *Preliminary Views—Accounting for Social Insurance, Revised* (Oct. 23, 2006), available at [www.fasab.gov/pdffiles/social\\_insurance92006.pdf](http://www.fasab.gov/pdffiles/social_insurance92006.pdf) (last visited Nov. 28, 2007). While these trust funds presently show a surplus (thus, the investment of excess receipts in Treasury securities), the long-term cost of these programs is expected to reach nearly \$40 trillion—over and above the anticipated future tax receipts. See GAO-07-362SP; GAO, *The Nation's Long-Term Fiscal Outlook: September 2006 Update*, GAO-06-1077R (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2006). As of fiscal year 2006, the consolidated financial statements included a Statement of Social Insurance that reports the long-term actuarial costs of these programs, but the balance sheet reports as a liability only the amounts that are “due and payable” at fiscal year end under the programs. See FASAB, *Preliminary Views, supra*.