

Working away in anonymity, a cadre of civil servants keeps the machinery of government working. There's actually a monument in Reykjavík, Iceland to these public servants. It shows someone in a business suit carrying a briefcase — or more specifically, the lower half of the person, with the upper half replaced by a block of basalt. According to a local [website](#), “the block of rock is a perfect metaphor for how everyday life crushes down on us, while at the same time depicting the narrative of the faceless official who is only a cog in the wheel, and never a person to most of us.”

Most bureaucrats are practically anonymous. A few, like Anthony Fauci, are household names. That's also been true of higher-level bureaucrats like cabinet officers.

People tend to overestimate the power of the lower-level bureaucrats who staff the civil service. The “unaccountable faceless bureaucrat” is often a target of complaint, blamed for an over-expansive regulatory state. Major decisions, such as significant regulations, are generally under the supervision of the White House and are always made by presidential appointees. The people making important policy decisions are rarely anonymous in any literal sense, given that they're prominently listed on government websites, usually with their photos. Their decisions, however, are assisted by, and later implemented by, squadrons of relatively unknown career government employees.

There's actually a downside to the visibility of many key policymakers, which is that it makes policy more personalized. The ideal behind the notion of the faceless bureaucrat is that decisions should be based on professional knowledge and established rules and policies, not on the individual characteristics of the decision makers. Impersonality can seem cold and off-putting. But personalized decision making also means being at the mercy of the personal qualities of the decision maker.

For similar reasons, in many countries, judicial decisions are issued in the name of the tribunal with no indication of the vote or signed opinions. The decisions are supposed to represent the views of “the court” as an institution rather than the personalized views of individual judges. We seem to have lost that idea in the U.S., at least in the federal courts.

That's part of what I think is a broader problem. We seem to have lost our sense of the value of institutions as opposed to individual decision makers. We seem to have lost track of the role of institutional practices and culture. We've also sometimes forgotten that there are benefits to impersonality, uniformity and continuity, traits of institutions more than of individuals.

So here's to the unnamed bureaucrat. If I ever get to Reykjavík, I'll leave flowers by the

monument.