Interview: James Q. Wilson discusses his book, "Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It".

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ALEX CHADWICK, host:

Back now with DAY TO DAY. I'm Alex Chadwick.

Whose government is it anyway? President Bush won re-election last fall. He has solid Republican majorities in Congress, and still some government workers don't do what they're told. At the Social Security Administration, there are protests about supporting the administration's push for changes in the program. Other government workers, civil servants these are, come right out and say that the administration ignores inconvenient truths in environmental policy.

James Q. Wilson is professor emeritus at UCLA and Ronald Reagan professor of public policy at Pepperdine University and someone who understands how things work so well that he wrote a book called "Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It." When he came to the DAY TO DAY studios at NPR West to explain the difference between the government and any particular administration, we began here: Who do civil servants think they work for?

Professor JAMES Q. WILSON (UCLA; Pepperdine University; Author, "Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It"): They work for the agency of which they're a part. They do not work for the American people. They do not work for the United States government broadly defined. They work for the organization of which they're a part. You work for NPR. I once worked for Harvard and then for UCLA, and your first loyalty, in most cases, means your loyalty to those employers.

CHADWICK: So if the president says, `It is my policy that there's going to be a crisis in the Social Security Administration by such-and-such a date,' how do the people in the Social Security Administration react to that?

Prof. WILSON: In general, what's striking about the American administrative system is that when the president makes a decision, such as the Social Security system is in crisis, most people in the administration, when asked to do so, will do analyses and generate numbers that will try to illuminate that question. In this government, most administrators try reasonably well to do what the administration wants, but they may grumble about it, and we see grumbling now coming, for example, out of former CIA officers who think we were wrong about Iraq. But though they grumble now publicly, and may have grumbled internally, most people in and out of the Social Security Administration, most people in the government, tend on the whole to try to work for the president, whoever the president may be.

CHADWICK: But there are, specifically in the Social Security Administration, several people fairly high up in the administration, but still civil servants...

Prof. WILSON: Yes.

CHADWICK: ...who are saying, `Well, these crisis figures are not correct' or `We don't believe that we should be telling the American people that there's a crisis at hand because we don't think that the numbers support that.'

Prof. WILSON: Well, there are such people, no doubt. There are people in every agency that will have these qualified reactions to a presidential initiative. The difficulty with the Social Security projections is that nobody knows what a true one is. We're trying to guess what the state of the economy, the average worker's salary, the number of people in the United States will be 50 years from now, and no one has the faintest idea what these numbers are. And so you can have an optimistic or a pessimistic projection of the future. My judgment is that the Social Security system in this century will run out of money. When it will run out of money is a matter on which I

would be unwilling to make a prediction.

CHADWICK: But it's the phenomenon of these people within the Social Security Administration saying, `I see my responsibility as being to some neutral data set rather than to the policy of the government that's just been elected.'

Prof. WILSON: I think the reason people in the Social Security Administration or in any other government agency will hold back from or dissent mildly from a presidential directive is that they know they're responsible to Congress as much as to the president. And if there is a congressional hearing, as surely there will be on Social Security reform or any other governmental initiative, people in the administration will be called forward to testify. We've seen this in the Pentagon. Secretary Rumsfeld wants X. Certain high-level generals or admirals don't want X; they prefer Y. And they will let Congress know they prefer Y, and then they have to walk the fine line of testifying in public in which they are obliged to act as if they favor X, while winking broadly so that everyone knows they favor Y. The same thing will happen in the Social Security Administration.

CHADWICK: You cited the EPA--sometime in the last couple of years, there was an EPA study on the likelihood of global warming becoming a significant problem. It said, yes, this is going to be a problem, and the president's response was, `Well, that's some bureaucrat's opinion, and who knows what the truth is?' But are those bureaucrats representing a neutral data set, that they're, after all, working for the EPA? What is correct there?

Prof. WILSON: We don't know what's correct. There is not a neutral data set about the future of Social Security, and there is not a neutral data set about global warming. So that the EPA may feel that global warming is out of control and the president may feel that it's not, and in 40 or 50 years, my grandchildren will learn who was right.

CHADWICK: Is it proper for the administration to say to the EPA, `Look, we don't want to hear anything more about global warming, and that's it'?

Prof. WILSON: The EPA works for the president of the United States, and the president has every right to ask people to sing from the same page in the songbook in his administration, but every president also must realize that it's very difficult to enforce that rule.

CHADWICK: When did the word `bureaucrat' become sort of an unpleasant thing to attach to someone?

Prof. WILSON: I'm not certain when that happened. A bureaucrat, strictly speaking, is someone who works for a bureau--that is to say, an appointed member of a government agency or a private firm. Private firms have bureaucrats as well. It became a cuss word at some point; I suppose when the government got large enough so that people were spending some time worrying about what to cuss it out for. But I don't know when it happened. It's certainly been a cuss word throughout my experience as a political scientist. I go back about 40 years on this; that the word `bureaucrat' was always a term, in my lifetime, that was a criticism. `Administrator' was the favorable term, the term that was deferential. When I taught a course at Harvard on these matters, I, for a while, called it public administration, then I called it a course on bureaucracy; not because I was trying to denigrate them--on the contrary, I have a great deal of respect for people in government--because the students would attend a course which was about bureaucracy; they wouldn't attend a course that was about public administration.

CHADWICK: Professor Wilson, thank you.

Prof. WILSON: You're welcome.

CHADWICK: James Q. Wilson is the author of "Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It."

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