

ONE TIME RIGHTS

2600 WORDS

COUGH TWICE AND WAVE

By JAMES J. COLLINS

The color of the air over New York City is not an act of nature. Rather it is the output of a City agency that is tasked with maintaining the color and texture that residents expect.

Few people realize that the sky for each of the five Boroughs is manufactured, using local labor, to its own copyrighted color scheme. The Borough of Manhattan, which is known to most of the world as 'The Big Apple', has selected black and dark brown as its overhead color combination and this hue is refreshed, daily, by the buses, cars and taxis that ply the streets. The casual observer might think that this is a natural occurrence - don't you believe it. A little known department in the city administration is tasked with maintaining and administrating this colorful design, and they do a bang up job. Known to the insiders at city hall as the Department of Color (DOC), this over worked, understaffed, group goes to extraordinary means to keep the air in New York to the standards that everyone has learned to expect. DOC has significant influence over most of the other departments but they exercise this power in a surreptitious manner. So successful is DOC that its leaders can, and do, give training courses to the CIA on how to keep a low profile and still get a job done.

Making the buses give off that foul odor and the dense black smoke is handled indirectly, using different agencies. The maintenance groups for the buses, unfortunately, believe that their job is to keep the buses running efficiently. DOC has to work around this deplorable attitude and has two dedicated

employees permanently assigned to this task. The way that they operate is a textbook example of convoluted puppeteering. When the maintenance group begins to catch up with their backlog and starts to reduce emissions, the DOC team gets in contact with the union heads for the buses and points out that they are being taken advantage of because of the special treatment given to another city union. With all the unions in New York, this is fairly simple task to accomplish. This results in a sick out, a slowdown, or, in the best of times, a strike. The first two cause the backlog of bus repairs to go up correcting the condition, but a strike is a master stroke. Hundreds, nay thousands, of cars clog the streets and since they can't park, they drive around all day belching gray smoke. This really improves the color level.

Control of traffic is actually an art. If an intersection is kept clear, traffic flows smoothly, and emission from the vehicles is kept to a minimum. This is obviously unacceptable to DOC, so they get the budget committee to release the funds needed to hire the new traffic control personnel that have been requested for the last four years. The way this modifies the air quality is convoluted. DOC influences the City Council to require the traffic department to put all the traffic trainees at key intersections, if they are to get the funds. These new recruits really foul up traffic. Stopped buses grind out that desired black choking smoke which crawls from car to car seeking an open window, so that it can seep in and mug the driver causing him to pass out with his motor running. Sometimes his car lurches forward looking for breathable air and collides with the car in front. This is the best of all possible worlds. Everybody stops, nobody shuts off their engines (you might never be able to restart in the gloom at street level) and the air, for blocks around, starts to solidify.

Taxis are a key card played by DOC. The department uses lobbying tactics to keep the number of authorized cabs down to a minimum. At the same time, DOC floats rumors that the number of medallions will be unfrozen momentarily. This keeps the taxi owners in a continued state of consternation. Money is not invested in new cabs because the value of the franchise is always

threatened. Rather than invest in new cabs the owners continue to squeeze another year out of the old jalopies. Some of these cars have fifteen million miles on them and the engines can double as charcoal braziers. DOC loves this.

But the finest smoke generators of all are Gypsy cabs. These parasites are not put on the street until they are acquired from a junk yard or taken off one of the parkways where they have been abandoned because the driver fell through the floor boards. Oil is the main ingredient of these smoke buckets while gasoline is only used to ignite the oil soaked gunk that fills their engines. Pungent gray and yellow smoke continually pours out of these clunkers often from the windows. When it is really bad, out of town visitors who have been picked up at the airport are forced to pay ransom to get the driver (who conveniently forgets all his English including "Fire!") to let them out of the cab before they expire from the fumes. These colorful, portable chimneys, circle downtown on a continual basis dodging the fire trucks that are stalking them trying to pin them in a corner, so they can put out the fire and rescue the inhabitants. Behind it all is DOC which tries to keep the number of Gypsy cabs as numerous as fleas on a mongrel dog so you can wake up in the morning and see the distinctive sky color that New Yorkers associate with home.

The importance of the air color in Manhattan can't be underestimated. The motley mass crawls up the concrete canyons eating holes in the granite walls as it tries to escape. Tiring, it rests at different levels turning the interior of the building dark as night and then resumes its crawl leaving a ring around the building and bunches of pigeons gasping for air on the ledges. As it clears the tops of the sky scrapers, it passes over them, and relieved, starts on a gradual decline as, on padded feet, it silently advances on the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn.

Each of these Boroughs has its own designated color and uses, as raw material, the processed air it receives from the island of Manhattan.

The Bronx always had pale brown and yellow as its home colors. These were easily maintained by the incinerators that were

part and parcel of the apartment complexes that lined the thoroughfares in this borough. Mixing this output with the Manhattan sludge guaranteed the uniformity of the color scheme. Unfortunately, when the population of the Bronx started to decline, due to the crime problems, the output of the incinerators was not sufficient to add any color to the sky. This really worried DOC. Several executive meetings were held trying to come up with a solution. For six months no solution could be found and complaints were starting to jam the switchboard. Children would wake up screaming, terrified of the blue sky that started to peek through the overcast. They thought some catastrophe was about to destroy the world. No amount of explanation would suffice. They knew what color the sky should be; didn't they live all their lives in the Bronx.

Finally, after a lot of wild ideas were put on the table and demolished one by one, a middle level manager, whose name has since been forgotten, came up with a scheme that all believed would work. They would burn the Bronx down one building at a time figuring that they would be retired out of city government before they ran out of buildings. "Brilliant!" shouted the director (who had six years to go to retirement.) "Outline a plan and submit it to me within a week. I'll meet with the mayor and get approval to initiate it at once."

One week to the day, the plan was ready, and the mayor loved it. Everything would be back to normal, complaints would stop, the children could get some sleep and most important the mayor could get re-elected. DOC worked all its staff overtime and got phase one of the plan in place by the following Friday. It was the height of simplicity. Six junk yards in high crime locales were approached and told that old sinks and bathtubs were wanted and they would pay premium if they could be delivered the following day. That's all the incentive they needed. Local thieves and drug addicts descended on semi abandoned buildings and literally tore the fixtures out of the walls. Two elderly gentlemen, three blocks apart, were a little put out because they were in the bathtubs at the time. Pulling the fixtures out of the walls is not neat, and

the resultant flood of water from the broken pipes quickly drove out the remaining tenants. Now all they had to do was to get somebody to torch the buildings.

Astute lobbying forced the insurance companies to cover the buildings for fire insurance (underwritten by the federal government). Now, if the building, which generated no income, should burn down, by an act of God, the owner would collect the insurance money. God, it was alleged, was very busy that year. However, the arson squad suspects He had a lot of help. The rest is history.

A couple of problems occurred that were not anticipated. Buildings were burning not at a rate of one a day, but at ten to twelve a day. This could complicate the plan (they might not get to retire before the Bronx disappeared). A very innovative solution was put in place to handle this. Winos were encouraged to take up residence in the burned out buildings and each was given several cans of Sterno for cooking. Almost every building was set on fire up to three additional times. DOC succeeded again. It's hard to imagine what the Bronx would be like today if the city government didn't have such dedicated, hardworking bureaucrats in its employ.

Queens and Brooklyn, which are joined together for miles, are intertwined so closely that it's hard to separate the color nuances. Suffice it to say that the ships that line the waterfront are put there for a reason; thanks to the dedicated personnel from DOC. When the air color drops below minimum acceptable standards, any one of three DOC monitors who are strategically placed in skyscrapers on the east side of Manhattan overlooking the Brooklyn/ Queens waterfront, initiate a response. Heavy diesel fumes, the output equivalent to a thousand buses can be called up in fifteen minutes from any of a number of ocean tankers or liners. In addition, these two Boroughs have been laced and ringed by strategically placed parkways. One would think that the placement was random, but that is really a tribute to the long term planning, of years past, initiated by the now retired personnel from DOC.

Air quality is monitored at numerous places throughout the Boroughs, and a certain number of automobile accidents have been statistically programmed into the computer - calculated to enhance the air color in the remote sections of Queens and Brooklyn. However, things never go as planned so DOC has a number of large trailer trucks under contract, which continually circle these roads and keep in radio contact with DOC central. These drivers are known to the department as the Kamikazes. They have specific orders to jack knife their rigs at main junctures, mainly during rush hours, to get the maximum effect from their efforts. Astute observers may have noticed that there is often a report of an overturned truck on a major highway during rush hour. Now you can give credit where it belongs. One legendary member of the Kamikazes was known as "Crusher" because of his innovative way of tying up traffic. He was the first to crash a fifteen foot high truck into a thirteen foot high overpass. This tactic is still employed by DOC but infrequently, and only under emergency conditions.

The final tools in the arsenal for these two Boroughs are the airplanes. Strategically placed airports allow DOC to route continuous flights of behemoths over all boroughs, but especially Queens and Brooklyn. These aircraft are programmed to pass over all areas of concern, liberally adding kerosene fumes with their unique odor and coloration to the skyline.

Recently DOC has infiltrated agents into the helicopter news organizations and by changing a few key phrases they have learned how to divert sixty thousand cars down any corridor to modify the air quality. As technology changes, you can be confident that the hard working civil servants at DOC will do their best to guarantee that the air color will stay at the level you have become accustomed to.

Finally this report examines Staten Island, the forgotten Borough. Because of its unusual location in the middle of the harbor, far removed from Manhattan, it doesn't benefit from all the effort DOC expends on the air manufactured in the city proper. Rather than ignore this Borough, DOC has entered into an

interstate agreement with their counterparts in New Jersey, (N.J.DOC) the world recognized experts in air coloration. What traveller of the Jersey roads can forget the Pulaski Sky Way as it passed over Secaucus or the venomous green mist that pounds on your car doors trying to get in as you drive through Elizabeth. These dedicated civil servants work day and night to service the public but ask for no accolades rather preferring to maintain a very low profile. These are the experts that have the responsibility to control the air over Staten Island, and they do an enviable job. They take their pleasure from watching out of state cars drive, at high speed, into a patch of pre-colored New Jersey air and come to a gradual stop. The driver thinks that his car is malfunctioning, not understanding that this air really has substance and texture.

Several spectaculars have been seen in this Borough which have not been matched by the people from DOC. Everyone remembers that day in July when the ominous orange cloud touched down in that Staten Island town and all the house colors changed within one hour. Commuters jammed the phone booths asking their loved ones to stand outside their residences so they could identify their houses and help find their way home. Then there were three major conflagrations when N.J.DOC burned the tankers in the narrow channel between New Jersey and Staten Island. The plumes of smoke could be seen half way up the Connecticut coast. These astounding shows have not been equaled on this side of the Hudson, and with the present budget restraints may not be seen for another generation. But never fear, the people from DOC went to Madison Avenue and MIT to get the new ideas for the future so that the sky around New York will continue to have those magnificent sun sets at noon, and you can continue to go out in the morning and degrease the windows of your car.

Remember, if you see a thirty year old clunker going by, leaving a smoke screen that would be the envy of a destroyer, look up at the sky overhead, it may be trying to clear. That driver is probably a DOC operative, on overtime, sent in to touch up your neighborhood. Just cough twice and wave. Let him know you

recognize what he is doing to you and your descendants.

THE END