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February 12, 1979 Vol. 11 No. 6

For Lack of Valor's Better Part, G.S.A.'s Hard-Charging Jay Solomon Is Shown the Door

By Garry Clifford

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As a federal bureaucrat with the dicey job of rattling skeletons in his own closet,

General Services Administration chief Jay Solomon seemed doomed almost from the beginning. He had been in office barely a month in 1977 when the first accusations of fraud and mismanagement surfaced. The dimensions of the scandal floored him. "I was appalled every day," he says.

He did what he could—investigating every charge, restoring "whistle-blowers" to their jobs, extending an open-door policy to the press—and putting considerable faith in his stock at the White House. "I know the President very well," he said, coming out of a reassuring visit to the White House one day last summer. "I knew he would give me a mandate."

Alas, the wisdom of Solomon and political savvy now seem two quite different things. This week, as the Senate Subcommittee on Federal Procurement Practices resumes its hearings on GSA, the White House is looking for Solomon's replacement. He may have succeeded in exposing graft, White House aides say, but he did little to make the \$5-billion-a-year agency run more efficiently. He insisted on firing a friend of Tip O'Neill, powerful Speaker of the House; that earned him no points whatsoever. He lost favor generally by excessive coziness with the press and by demanding too much of the President's time and attention for his problems. "Jay needed a lot of hand-holding," complains one of Carter's men. "He would have been over to see the President every day if we had let him."

Solomon, 57, was an indubitable Washington neophyte when he arrived

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from Chattanooga in April 1977. Back in 1952 he had accompanied Estes Kefauver to the Democratic Convention, where he met his wife, Rosalind, now a professional photographer. He and their two children, Joel, 24, and Linda, 22, were volunteers in the Carter campaign. But Solomon's real interests are in art, architecture and business. After graduation from Vanderbilt ('42) he started with a small chain of Southern theaters owned by his father. Solomon switched to shopping centers, and by the time he came to Washington, Arlen Realty, of which he was vice-president, owned or operated nearly 200 of them.

When Carter offered him GSA, Solomon says, "All they told me was that the agency was the landlord of the government. It operated 10,000 buildings. It had 37,000 employees. I had never supervised more than 200 or 300 employees. But what the heck, I enjoy buildings."

Some of Solomon's early concerns now seem trivial. He wrote new policies on the agency's treatment of historic government buildings. He ordered that one half of one percent of the total cost for new federal construction be earmarked for landscaping—and he personally directed the placement of shrubs around GSA's headquarters. "You can't fault Solomon's intentions," says one source on Capitol Hill. "He came here thinking he would plant a few flowers and he ended up stepping into a minefield."

Solomon would agree. As for indiscretions with the press, he says hotly: "If leaking stories means answering questions when asked, I've done that." Coming to Washington entailed a "great financial sacrifice," he adds, citing the sale of all his company stock to avoid conflict of interest. Leaving (by April or sooner) will be a similarly ambivalent experience. "Washington is more exciting, more involved," he says, plainly afflicted with Potomac fever. "Life in Chattanooga is different. But we're prepared to go. I've got a home there and a desk and a dog that's been farmed out." Solomon admits he was "hurt" when he heard of his imminent dismissal from a reporter. "I thought they would talk to me first," he says, adding, "I don't want to sound like I'm disappointed with the President. I intend to support him in 1980." The White House was not so gracious. An aide summed up the whole unhappy experience: "When we asked Jay to come here, we didn't realize we were getting a junior G-man."

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