

Shout Your Badge Number Down the Burn Chute:

Urban Legends, Capers, Practical Jokes, and Pranks

Part of any organization's esprit de corps is the corpus of "war stories" passed from one generation to another. Although an organization's senior management generally prefers that this lore be confined to morally uplifting stories of how the organization's members handled the key substantive challenges facing it, these stories also reflect the "personality" of the organization in how its members release tension through creative use of humor.

While I was involved with internal communication with CIA, I often tracked down oddball stories that make up this latter class of Agency lore. Some stories are Agency-specific urban legends—stories that have a moral to them, that are universally believed because they happened to a friend of a friend (FOAF; there's actually a scholarly journal called FOAFTales), but upon research have been established to be, at best, hopelessly garbled digressions from the truth. Some, which sound like urban legends because of their implausibility, turn out to be true (the "truth is stranger than fiction" category). Of the latter, some are official actions, and others are nonofficial practical jokes pulled on individuals or on the Agency as a whole.

The following, many of them told in first-person, are stories offered by dozens of Agency employees who requested anonymity. (I alerted everyone in my office to never let any of these people near my desk!) In cases in which it is possible, I have attempted to determine their veracity. Others do not permit such research, but are too hilarious not to include.

Welcome to the Agency

Rookies are often the targets of practical jokes. This Agency equivalent of good-natured fraternity hazing lets the new employee know that they have been accepted into the fold. One common story has the employee take his classified trash, inside a securely stapled “burn bag” to a chute, where the classified material is collected for destruction. The rookie is told that he is to shout the number of his badge—his unique identifier that Agency employees wear in all Agency buildings—down the burn chute so that a record can be kept of who made the decision to destroy the classified materials. Rare is the individual who admits to having actually complied with this instruction. (Similarly, I have yet to find a rookie willing to purchase Agency Prom tickets.) Others encourage rookies (known in the Agency as EODs for Entry on Duty) to shout their badge numbers into the toilet as they flush. Still others have EODs hold their badge before a nonexistent electronic reader supposedly hooked up next to the burn chute. Still others have rookies hold their badge toward any fixture on the ceiling (fire alarms, motion sensors, smoke detectors, etc., are fine) and yell “(badge number) reporting for duty!”

Some veterans of the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) were even more aggressive with this theme, telling the new guy that he had to clip his badge to the burn bag before he sent it down the chute so that the “guys at the bottom would know whom to contact if something had been improperly disposed of.” After the rookies figured out that we were pulling their leg with the “clipping the badge on the bag” routine, we admitted that, in fact, you only had to yell your badge number down the chute, which usually fooled them for another few days. I remember walking down the hall of the NPIC building, hearing a badge number being yelled, and maybe giving a wink to the “old hand” standing next to the new guy.

By the way, despite extensive efforts to track down the story,

I found no one who ever actually slid down a burn chute, notwithstanding elaborate legends of using rappelling equipment, burn bags as toboggans, etc.

A variation on this theme was practiced in the Directorate of Intelligence, in which an old hand was tasked with showing the EOD how to dispose of hundreds of sensitive documents and dissemination sheets. He proceeded to complain to the rookie about the amazingly absurd practices we go through: tear the first three pages of your control documents, write your badge number, employee number, date, and “destroyed” on the fourth sheet, then take the secretary’s ink pad and place your thumb print on the fifth sheet. A horrified secretary berated our prankster when she discovered a phalanx of EODs with shiny, blackened hands.

Speaking of badges, which have a photo of the individual on its front, the story goes that a KGB officer infiltrated the Agency to study its sociology. Back home from his mission, he was asked what he’d learned. “Well, commissar, they are very religious, much more so that we expected.” “How do you mean, comrade?” “Well, commissar, they all wear these icons around their necks. When they greet each other, they bow to each other, grab each other’s icon in reverence, and intone ‘Jesus Christ, is that *you*?!’”

NPIC officers sent EODs to the supply room to ask for a “cloud-eradicator pen” so that we could see all of the activity on the satellite image and not just what was in the cloud-free sections. Their confreres in the Printing Plant would ask new hires to obtain a “paper stretcher” and a bottle of half-tone dots. At the Pentagon, rookies are asked to go get an ID Ten Tango form (ID 10 T).

Senior officials are not immune to initiation rites. In 1977, the new director of an office arrived from his senior position in the private sector. He chose the unfortunate date of April 1 to have his first Headquarters staff meeting and informed his secretary that he would not arrive until 9:30 AM, giving us just enough time to set up his welcome. Awaiting on his desk was an “Eyes Only” envelope

with a memo to him entitled “Letter of Involuntary Separation” that went on to explain that for Agency culture, firing offenses included excessive tardiness—an indication of lack of motivation and not taking the job seriously in an environment that routinely assumes that employee work long hours. The final paragraph read something like “Good luck finding a new job, turkey.” My job was to forge the rather distinctive signature of the Director of Personnel. Our victim took it as a fun prank, but sadly for me, he realized after only being here for three weeks that I must have been involved. I never did learn to live my cover well.

Speaking of turkeys, Thanksgiving 1996 greeted new hires with a faked *What’s News at CIA* (the Agency’s internal newsletter) on the DCI’s annual turkey giveaway. One newbie checked with his branch chief, who assured him that the turkey came out of Employee Activity Association coffers so that there would be no conflict over improper use of funds. If the rookie could not use the turkey, he should still pick it up, and the branch chief’s wife would give it to a local charity. Other analysts chimed in with their support of the program, fondly remembering receiving “a good-size bird.” Others complained that this was a fairly new program, and that *they* had not been able to benefit in their first year. Encouraged by this apparent act of corporate benevolence, the rookie shared this message with fellow EODs. Although he could not use the turkey himself, he saw an opportunity of getting on the good side of the boss by donating it to the boss’s wife. The EODs thus set off to an unfamiliar part of the building, somewhere in the basement on the other side of the compound. Once in the general area, he sought out a uniformed security officer for directions to the room. The security officer pointed down a very long, barren hallway. At the end of this pilgrimage, the rookie found that GD39 is the address of the furthestmost burn chute. History does not record whether he yelled his badge number or something more appropriate, albeit heartfelt and colorful.

An I hope apocryphal variant of this story sends the rookie to the DCI's office, whereupon the rookie asks the Director's secretary "Where's the turkey?" and is admonished that the Director is very sensitive to being called that, being Greek and all . . .

Food Fights

A Directorate of Operations Division Chief had just completed his annual physical. A co-worker, posing as an Office of Medical Services doctor, called and told him he had a rare blood disease for which the only known cure was to coat his stomach with chocolate milk. For about six weeks, the Division Chief diligently drank his chocolate milk eight times a day and was often seen walking down the hall with a greenish tinge to his face, because the poor man couldn't stand milk, much less chocolate milk. It was only when he reported in to the medics for his post-treatment screening that he discovered he'd been had!

A noted analyst chocoholic was not shy about reminding people how many shopping days were left until her birthday. One year, colleagues gave her little refrigerator magnets shaped like Hershey miniatures. After they had held her memos in place for a few months, we replaced them one night with real Hershey miniatures with little magnets glued to them. The elusive smell of chocolate maddened her for a few weeks until we owned up.

One year, the Director of Central Intelligence decreed that there was to be no—repeat—no alcohol served at the annual holiday parties. There were some winks and nods, however, and various confederates on the seventh floor called each office to warn when the big wheels were en route to the parties. In one Directorate of Operations division, the punch bowl was hidden under the deputy chief's desk on the seat of his chair. Before the bowl could be moved back to the party table, the deputy backed into his chair and sat right in the punch bowl!

At the 1983 retirement luncheon of a colleague who had been a

black bag man, after we placed our orders, I had the waitress bring him a plate with a bottle of Aunt Jemima and a pack of Kleenex on it. He had to open the sealed envelope to find he had been served an appropriate dish: a syrup/tissues entrée. (The editor apologizes to our readers for this atrocious pun.)

On April Fool's Day, an analyst brought in Oreos with toothpaste for filling instead of the usual vanilla cream filling. A small group of more senior analysts ate most of the box that afternoon with only a comment that the Oreos tasted funny.

Wake Up Calls and Sophomoric Soporifics

My Career Training class was divided into two sections, each of which had an individual who would editorialize on the occasional less-than-fascinating presentation on accounting practices by falling asleep. Our class would run pools as to which individual would fall asleep first, and when. It was a major point of honor for our class's section to win the day's competition. And it kept the rest of us awake!

DCI Woolsey was scheduled to brief on the Hill, with a retinue from the Office of Congressional Affairs in tow. It was a slow news day, even for C-SPAN, which decided to run his hearings live. It was a small, cramped room with air conditioning that had seen better days, and by the start of the fourth hour of his testimony, sans breaks, one of his OCA handlers was heroically battling sleepiness. He tried desperately to keep his chin up, literally, but it, and his eyelids, kept sinking down. Unfortunately, the faithful retainer was sitting directly behind Woolsey, in the camera frame for the world to see. (OK, C-SPAN isn't high up in the Nielsen ratings, but it still presented a problem.) His buddies back at OCA Headquarters saw what was happening on their TV monitors, and decided to help him out. They sent a page to him that read "ZZZZZZZZZZ." When the page vibration went off, it shocked him awake, and he jumped up, to the applause of his viewing audience.

(Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell agrees on the perils of testifying before the Hill. In reviewing his forty years of service, he observed “Except for a few days testifying on the Hill, I wouldn’t trade a single day of it.”)

You Call this Art? Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder

After taking a data set and visualizing it (converting the data values to a color index and printing a picture), we learned that the employee art show was coming up. So we put the picture in a truly hideous pink frame, and we bet our branch chief that we would enter it into the show and if it got a ribbon, he’d have to take us all out to lunch. He took the bet, believing there was no way it would win. Keep in mind, we didn’t bet for first place, but for *any* ribbon.

The picture was proudly displayed in the art exhibit and at the end of the month we discovered that there were *no* awards—it was a showing and not a competition. Because this fact hurt our chances at our free lunch, we promptly went out to a local trophy shop and bought two ribbons: one for fourth place and one for honorable mention. We awarded the picture fourth place overall for the show and an honorable mention for creative media.

We never specified that the Fine Arts Commission had to award the picture a prize, just that it would win a ribbon. Our awarding it had no bearing on the bet (not that we pointed out to our branch chief this possible area of contention).

“Ambient Internal Waves in Spring” can still be viewed in the office of a National Reconnaissance Office analyst.

You Call This Art? The Sequel

Many Agency officers, after looking at the huge Washington Color School paintings that grace the hallways of the Headquarters Buildings, suggest that “my four-year-old could do better” or “you could fling paint at a canvas and do better.” Inspired by these exhortations, analysts in the Office of Scientific and Weapons

Research decided to test this theory. One day, they brought to the Front Office a medium-sized canvas, several buckets of paint, and several brushes, with a sign asking passers-by to flip a few dabs of paint randomly on the canvas as they proceeded to their meetings. After a few weeks, the canvas was covered in streaks of paint and ready for exhibit. The ringleaders found a spot for the “Disturbed Analyst” masterpiece in the Headquarters Atrium hallway, where it hung untouched for months. One day, the Fine Arts Commission decided that this unrecorded acquisition should nonetheless be treated like the other art, and had it roped and stanchioned. When the Atrium was renovated, it was carefully taken down, catalogued, and hung elsewhere. Eventually, word of the story behind the painting leaked. You can still visit it in the successor component’s front office.

Signs of the Times

Agency officers often figured that technological breakthroughs made by the US would eventually make it to the Soviet Union’s repertoire, either through parallel development or through outright theft of intellectual property. This assumption extended to intelligence collection methods. They reasoned that the Soviets would eventually develop an overhead satellite capability that would permit the USSR to take images of CIA Headquarters. During a period of heightened tensions during the Cold War, several analysts of matters-Soviet decided to test the capability of the opposition’s overhead systems by unfurling a bed sheet from the Headquarters roof that read “F*** COMMUNISM!”

Several employees were taken aback by the proliferation of signs on easels that greeted them at Headquarters entrances. One day, a team placed five small signs in front of the official signs that read:

All these signs

Of our times

Clutter up

Our egress lines
Burma Shave

Posted over several burn chute doors was the sign:

You Have Been Exposed
To Classified Material
Destroy Yourself Before
Leaving The Building

Word to the wise: be sure to check your whereabouts, even with signage. Several wags set up static surveillance sites to watch the fun after they switched the signs to the men's and women's rest rooms.

Some days after the completion of the Headquarters cafeteria's mezzanine, a sign appeared chastising those who had mistaken it for a platform-diving area.

After hearing numerous "who's that?" comments about senior officials at Agencywide gatherings, the Agency Information Staff (which handles internal communications) posted a set of 8 x 10 glossy photos of the Agency's senior managers in the first floor corridors. During the night, someone else placed a votive candle in front of the photos.

The Agency Portrait Gallery features large paintings of the former Directors of Central Intelligence. A DCI's portrait is painted only when the Director's term of service ends. Word in the hallways was that DCIs started to worry when they saw the official portraitist, armed with easel and palette, asking to get on the Director's calendar.

When former JFK speechwriter Ted Sorenson withdrew as a candidate for DCI during the Senate confirmation process, someone scrawled a stick figure sketch of Sorenson on an 8 x 10 sheet of paper and taped it at the end of the portrait gallery.

After a multimillion dollar satellite exploded in 1998, a "You break it, you buy it" sign appeared in the DS&T front office.

This Really Happened to the Gardener of the Cousin of My Branch Chief a Couple of Years Ago

Numerous posters to Agency computer bulletin boards, discussion groups, blogs, wikis, and listservs believe that all sorts of unfortunate fates will befall anyone who posts the complete name of any major American newspaper. Postings are thus replete with references to the *W***** P**** and *N** Y*** T******. Alas, it's all an urban (if not urbane) legend.

Sounds Like an Urban Legend, But This One's True

When the hallway connecting the Original and New Headquarters Buildings was complete, the General Services Administration team reported to the New Building Project Manager that the construction had trapped a bulldozer in the cafeteria courtyard. Possible solutions—including demolishing enough of the glass walls and hiring a crane to get it out—cost more than the value of the bulldozer. So after a suitable memorial service, the bulldozer was buried in the courtyard. Alas, there is no marker commemorating this event.

The Techies Strike Back

I once gave a colleague a parting gift from the old Office of Global Issues terrorism and narcotics shop—a particularly realistic time-bomb clock. SPOs responding to a malfunctioning alarm in his vault one night found it and called him about it. He reassured them that it was only a decoration. I gave out several other less-realistic devices later.

In a grab for his fifteen minutes of fame, a DO officer consented to be interviewed on national television news regarding his non-Agency activities. Our audio staff superimposed faked prompts to his answers, leading to hilarious results.

Back in the Jurassic age (before personal computers), we used Frieden calculators, an electro-mechanical contraption, for all of

our calculations. These devices worked with a series of gears and cranks, and were especially loud when dealing with large numbers. We discovered that one particular computation would set it off on a longish do-loop that generated an almost musical series of notes. The twelve of us in our branch each programmed our calculators for the same computation, then set them off to play as a sequential “round” to greet our long-suffering branch chief.

Never Leave Your Desk Unattended

Our office has one of the Agency’s legendary paramilitary officers, who comes to us replete with stories of machine gun battles on his front lawn, martial arts trophies galore, and lots of machismo. When he returned from leave, he discovered that his office had been redecorated with tasteful pink ribbon and lace curtains and doilies.

Vaseline is a wonderful product, which can be put to good use on a PC’s power button, file drawers, seat buttons, the handle of the refrigerator, etc. Just make sure that you also put a big dab of it on your victim’s top few tissues, the cleaning spray can’s button, and other cleaning items, too.

One major computer manufacturer ships computers using about three cubic feet of box space per cubic inch of material shipped. One night after installing about thirty new computers, we took the boxes and stacked them up in our boss’s office. From floor to ceiling, the entire office was filled, except for enough space to open the door and have it barely clear the first row of cardboard. Of course, we also superglued his pens and pencils to his desk tray, and used the megastapler to affix a ream of paper to his blotter, binders, and in-box. We included a few simple “gimme” pranks: leaving the 3-ring binders open on his shelf, awaiting him to pull out one of these time-delay jokes. Not satisfied with these warm-up gags, the team returned weeks later to hammer a set of in-boxes together, making a tower of in-boxes that required them to open the drop ceiling in the boss’s office.

Make sure to *always* lock your computer when you walk away for even a minute. One office took a screen shot of the boss's desktop, made that picture the computer's background, and moved all of his icons into a temporary folder. Upon returning, the branch chief discovered that he couldn't click on anything on his desktop.

Suitably chastened, he learned to lock his computer. However, his staff put a post-it note on the bottom of his mouse (this works only with an optical/laser mouse), making him think the mouse didn't work.

His staff later changed his screen to display black characters on a black background.

Another time, they put his PC in an endless loop of Jeopardy, which morphed into looking like it was erasing his C: drive, followed by a "Gotcha!" banner.

The boss was getting married at the end of the week (which is really what had inspired us anyway) and with the additional stress of our shenanigans, he decided to have his door combination changed to keep us out. So we got into the room on the other side of the wall one day, and, going through the ceiling, we filled his office with balloons, from the floor to about waist level. Needless to say, he was pretty pleased with us.

A particularly fastidious and meticulous DI analyst (renowned for washing his car keys in the dishwasher) made the error of leaving his watch on his desk. His officemates set it ahead one hour, making sure to also change the time on the office clocks. Panicking at the time, he ran off to pick up his child from his \$1/minute-late charging daycare center. Hearing the real time on his radio, he called his office from the Toll Road to explain what had happened, to be greeted with a chorus of "What time is it, John?" from his officemates. Not to let a good joke die, his officemates reset the office clocks fifteen minutes ahead, then watched their foil leave for lunch fifteen minutes early each day, a victim of conditioned

response. (We ended his car keys-dishwasher habit by freezing his keys in a block of ice in the refrigerator.)

One prankster team grabs badges left on colleagues' desks, photocopies them, and returns them to the desk, with the photos to be used later in Photoshop-assisted forgeries. Among their best work are desk photos of family members, with the names of colleagues superimposed over those of one's spouse, children, and the family dog. It sometimes takes months for the victim to notice. One variation included a sheep in the wedding photo. Upon removing the sheep photo, the victim found that the photo of another woman had been placed underneath the sheep photo.

Our practical jokers used another badge photo to create bumper stickers with "I (heart sign) Gary," which were distributed throughout the cubicles. Gary stormed in to the branch chief's office to complain. Closing the door to her office to counsel poor Gary, she discovered that the pranksters had superimposed Gary's face on her life size poster of Washington Bullets 7'7" center Manute Bol.

Despite frequent reminders by Security officers that one should always password-protect one's computer when leaving, some people never believe that it applies to them. If moles don't get them, pranksters will. Upon returning to their terminals, such scofflaws have found:

- On bootup, the sound card plays the *When Harry Met Sally* faked orgasm sound sample at high volume, to the delight of the rest of the cubicle dwellers.
- On bootup, the terminal displays the message "Just *what* do you think you're doing."
- The terminal had been used to send faked e-mails to a colleague he was socially interested in. The series of e-mail tennis had gotten increasingly amorous, and required some serious 'splainin' on his part. (Footnote: The couple dated twice. Nothing came of it.)

- The terminal had been used to send a faked e-mail to the boss indicating that “It’s time I came out of the closet, and I need your thought on how I do this.” Of course, the message was sent only after the foil returned to his desk and hit the “enter” key, thereby sending the message himself.
- The PC was giving the user (false) messages warning that it was erasing the C: drive.
- The S e-mail command had been reprogrammed from “Save” to “Send.”
- A large “GOTCHA” banner was scrolling across the screen.
- The display had been changed to black characters on a black background.
- The keyboard had been remapped, with everything shifted over one space to the right.
- The . and , had been swapped.

A nearsighted branch chief returned to his office to discover that some unidentifiable item had been placed on top of the clock on his office wall, out of his reach (and sight). His charges mumbled something about “motion detector,” satisfying the branch chief’s curiosity. The Twinkie stayed on his clock for months.

One of our victims couldn’t figure out why his computer was always breaking down whereas everyone else’s ran perfectly. Little did he know that we swiped parts from his computer to fix everyone else’s malfunctioning systems.

A branch chief was particularly proud of a “celestial sphere” sculpture he had hung in his office. The next day, he discovered that his branch members had cut fish out of the covers of the office’s serial publication, and had attached these goldfish to the inside of the sphere. In a classic misdirection operation, the miscreants created the cutouts in the deputy’s office, leaving the trash cuttings for the branch chief to discover.

An analyst irritated the rest of the branch by filling up the office's refrigerator with case upon case of his specialty no salt/caffeine colas, leaving no space for the rest of them. Our pranksters would grab a cola can at random and shake it, then put it back in the fridge. The explosion wouldn't necessarily go off that day, and could take months, but an eventual *Whoosh!* and shriek would indicate "Mission Accomplished!"

As a farewell gift to one of our colleagues who went on rotation to NSA, we snuck into his new office and hid an egg (which we had perforated) in the back of his conservafile; it would take perhaps three weeks for this to start smelling. We hid chicken bones further up the conservafile as a cover for the egg smell. Sure enough, this time bomb went off in three weeks, and I got an irate call from him, claiming that I had hidden the food there. My reply? "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

While we were serving as duty officers in the White House Situation Room, we noticed that one of the staff took particular pride in the finish on the conference room table. He'd spend uncounted hours carefully waxing and polishing every square inch of that table until it had a mirror finish. But every night, he'd look at the table and see little circular spots all over it. So he'd go back to polishing it again. He never did discover that we'd put a portable ping-pong net on it when he'd leave and play tournaments during quiet times.

Even if you're at your desk, pranksters can strike. One colleague carried two Kleenexes, would do a fake nose-blow into one and then throw a putatively used one into a cubicle, where the cube-dweller ducked beneath his desk.



Moving Experiences: Packouts, TDYs, and Office Moves

I was in the midst of an overseas packout, moving all of my household effects, when one of the local packers came and asked me to check the crate for the horse. They had constructed a huge wooden crate, complete with breathing holes, and were ready to encase our horse for shipment! After taking a minute to absorb all of this, I then realized that I had not seen the dog in quite awhile. He greeted my subsequent calls with a muffled woof. Yep, he'd already been packed! When uncrated, he lunged at the first local he saw!

At another post, it can never be said that the packers weren't thorough. When unpacking here in the States following a tour in Africa, I found that all of the kitchen trash had been packed, including a four-foot-long snake, pronounced DOA.

One colleague left his garment bag on a coat rack, which his local pranksters noticed. They filled it with steel rods purloined from cubicle partitions. Although he observed that it seemed a little heavier than normal, he was on a tight deadline, so he ran off without checking. It was checked for him, when the metal detector went off at the airport. Although he got through after some explaining, he was trapped into carrying the rods with him, because it was official government property which he had to protect.

The same individual left his gym bag in eyeshot of the pranksters, who swiped his socks and underwear, put them in the freezer, then replaced them just in time for him to walk to the gym.

He wasn't done, though. He brought his suitcase to his office, where it was promptly filled with paperclips.

No matter where you work, one individual is always the last to know the latest developments, be it in the world or just office gossip/politics. Taking advantage of this, one day I sent an officewide e-mail announcing a farewell party for our foil (who wasn't scheduled to go anywhere). I then watched a parade of colleagues stop by to wish our befuddled friend well in his next job, which he was hard pressed to identify to his curious interlocutors.

Back in the golden age of working in OHB, a pneumatic tube system was used to coordinate cables, share drafts, and at times send hardcopy background material, etc. It was also excellent for sending surprises to various offices. Cable Secretariat once received a sparrow.

One of the legendary clandestine Agency newsletters was a serial publication found at the coffee machine in the DI's Office of Russian and Eurasian Analysis, spoofing Tom Clancy's *The Hunt for Red October* as if it was covered by the *National Intelligence Daily* (see a later chapter for a copy. Of *The Hunt*, not of the *NID*!). As of this writing, Jack Ryan is still stuck in coordination hassles.

Not to be outdone, while waiting for what seemed an interminable period for several layers of the bureaucracy to bless their efforts, the Human Resources Oversight Council's Program Office (HROC-PO) announced that it had gone on strike as of June 10, 1997. Celebrating this diversion into unionization of Agency workers, HROC published twenty-six editions of *The Daily Striker* (motto: It's News to Us!) during the 462-day crisis.

Fraternization

Romances within offices and across Directorates are commonplace in the Agency. Although there is always the problem of potential sexual harassment suits by those who believe that co-worker fraternization creates a hostile environment, most co-workers welcome their colleagues' good fortune. It makes carpooling easier, and at least you can talk about work with your cleared spouse. Many of these romances lead to marriages and are celebrated each Valentine's Day in the Agency's newsletter's article "How we became tandem couples."

But these romances also leave the participants open to practical jokes, such as the following:

In the early 1970s, our branch chief was a divorced middle-aged man who had a close personal relationship with one of his female

analysts. They later were married. At the time of the story, however, they were just “good friends” who had a particular habit. Every day, the female analyst would come to work about 8 AM, go to the cafeteria, buy two cups of coffee and two cake doughnuts, and take them up to the branch chief’s office. She would go in about 8:15, close the door, and the two of them would stay in there for fifteen minutes or so, doing whatever they were doing, possibly only talking.

The female analyst was quite good and won a coveted overseas assignment for a year. On her last day in the office before she was due to depart, she followed her normal routine at the same time, bought two cups of coffee and two cake doughnuts, and went into the branch chief’s office with them, closing the door behind her. That’s when her branch mates set in motion their little practical joke. They had gotten a very good looking woman from another office to do the same thing. She came in about 8:20 carrying two cups of coffee and two cake doughnuts, opened the door to the branch chief’s office, and walked in.

Stopping then and looking slightly perplexed, she addressed the branch chief saying, “Oh! Did you mean next week?”

The first female analyst jumped up and stormed out of the office, followed by gales of laughter from everyone else who had gathered near the door. The branch chief was furious!

Danger: Fragile

We had obtained a large amount of Waterford crystal that was to serve as a gift for our local liaison colleagues. I asked my friend if the box it came in was adequately bubble-wrapped. Assured by him that it was, I dropped it on the floor, which evoked a loud tinkling sound from inside the box. The wide-eyed foil didn’t know that I had swapped the box with one filled with pre-broken glass.

Car Talk

Where would a Washington federal government agency be

without a discussion of parking problems? Be careful who knows where you park. A DI financial analyst bragged about the fantastic mileage that he was getting from his new Geo Metro. “Seventy mpg! Honest!” What he didn’t know was that his officemates were bringing in gas cans and fillin’ ’er up in the parking lot. (A variant of this was reported in the 1930s by humorist H. Allen Smith in his classic work on practical jokes in which the pranksters, after getting their foil used to seventy mpg, broke his spirit by siphoning the gas from his tank every day, giving him three mpg. The prank was pulled in the 1950s by DI analysts who could take no more bragging by a colleague who had just returned from a TDY in Germany where he had purchased a newfangled VW bug.) The pranksters also toyed with an individual who was on a diet, getting access to his tool belt and changing its size back and forth, so that he thought he was seesawing between major weight gains and losses.

A similar prank was pulled in the 1950s on a dapper fellow who was enamored of his Borsalino hat. The immaculate dresser in the DI’s shipbuilding branch proudly showed his Italian, \$30 (in a time when a standard Adams hat cost \$5) chapeau to all. His office, um, passed the hat to take up a collection, and bought the hat’s twin, but in the largest size possible, and even mimicked the initials the foil had stitched on the inside. When he wasn’t looking, they switched the hats. He put on the hat, which promptly fell over his ears. Puzzled, he examined the hat, the stitching, and, convinced that it was the real McCoy, scratched his head to see if anything had occurred upstairs to cause this sudden change.

A DI analyst was proud of his new VW Karmann Ghia, but not so proud of the record keeping of his car company’s credit service, which often lost his checks. He’d spend hours every month arguing with them over the phone that their dunning letters were inappropriate. One day, several of his burly officemates went out to the parking lot and lifted the car to another location some distance away. His secretary notified him that the Visitor Control Center

had called to ask to let in the repo team. Not knowing what else to do, she had approved their entrance. He ran out to his parking space, only to discover that the beloved car was missing. Crestfallen, he returned to his office, where he had a lengthy and spirited discussion with a befuddled credit service representative until his colleagues let him in on the gag.

Don't leave your keys unattended, or you'll find them frozen at the bottom of a cup of water in the office freezer. Same with wet socks hung out to dry, or your wallet (and for good measure, his colleagues canceled the credit cards they found in his wallet).

Overlooked Oversight

Although any federal agency's relationship with its oversight committees will be strained at times, humor often defuses the tension.

The Director of Congressional Affairs (OCA) for the Agency once called from his office to one of his charges, disguising his voice as a well-known Congressional staffer and reading the riot act to the OCA officer. Seven months later, it was time for payback. The Agency officer arranged with Rep. Benjamin Gilman, who was on the Oversight committee, to call the OCA Director during a party to read *him* the riot act. A series of "yessir," "of course, sir," "right away, sir" ensued before it dawned on him that he'd been had. (A similar prank was pulled following the tenure of DCI Judge William Webster, whose ex-staffers had thoughtfully brought him his tax returns to his Washington office. The courier then called the folks back home, falsely warning that the Judge was miffed that one of the forms was missing and that according to his calculations, there appeared to be hell to pay on several counts.)

After a long and tortuous Congressional Budget Justification process, the Office of Congressional Affairs challenged its hallway neighbors, the Chief Financial Officer's staff, to a hallway bowling tournament, using their long, shared corridor and large potato

chip plastic canisters as pins. The teams made up team shirts, an overhead projector kept score, a medicine ball and giant exercise ball from the gym were used for those particularly difficult 7-10 splits, and memorial photos were taken. (Editor's note: Alas, several of the worthies remain under cover, so the photo lies on the cutting room floor.)

OCA staffers did their best to clean up their offices for Family Day, when Agency officers bring in their close family members to see the Agency and the office spaces. One staffer, proudly opening his door, was showered with confetti from the shredders, and found mountains of beer cans, soda cans, and other detritus decorating his until-recently-pristine office. As payback, he put forty pounds of rice in their desk drawers, and emptied hole punches inside their umbrellas, which showered them when they opened their umbrellas when going home during the next rainstorm.

A similar Family Day prank was pulled on a rookie attorney with the Office of General Counsel. He was proud of his first office, and brought his wife and kids to show them the place. When he opened his door, a colleague was sitting in his chair and all of his stuff had been moved to a nearby broom closet.

After an especially tense Working Capital Fund meeting, a senior officer brought in Oriental Trading Company spring-loaded jumping frogs. He passed them around at the next staff meeting, had everyone set up several of them in front of their spaces on the table, then conducted a meeting to the entertainment of the staff, wondering whose ticking time bombs would go off first.

In testifying before the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board regarding the planning for the proposed Manned Orbiting Lab, an Air Force project, a senior analyst was pressed about whether he could confirm that we had four-inch resolution on our overhead reconnaissance, given that we were using normal film. He explained that we had overhead of a communist soldier, relieving himself, and he seemed to be well endowed. Case closed.

Words To Live By

My boss eventually accepted that my practical joking was part of the cost of having me on his team, and just gave me three rules of engagement:

- Don't be cruel.
- Don't do anything I have to hear about.
- Don't destroy government equipment.

Sounds like a workable code of ethics for pranksters, and for life in general.