

Remarks in honor of Janet Norwood

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I am deeply honored to have been asked by Bernie to talk about Janet's legendary accomplishments in the federal statistical system. There are many here from the federal statistical community who knew Janet well and could undoubtedly add much more to my remarks. I hope to convey to those of you who do not know about Janet's statistical career a sense of her contributions. I will start with a story and intersperse stories in my remarks. Janet loved to tell stories – and she told them with brio – about experiences that she believed were relevant to current situations.

I first encountered Janet at a conference of the Association of Public Data Users in the late 1970s. At the time, I had been working in federal statistics and research for a little over 10 years – not that much less time compared with Janet's 15 or so years, but I still felt pretty wet behind the ears. Janet, in contrast, having joined BLS as a part-time junior economist in 1963, had risen rapidly through the ranks to become deputy commissioner in 1975 at a time when women in top management levels in federal agencies were a rarity. At the APDU conference, she gave a remarkably informative talk about BLS programs with no fluff, filler, or platitudes. I quickly concluded that Janet must be an exceptionally able leader – an assessment that was amply confirmed as I followed her career and had the opportunity to work with her.

Janet went on to serve as commissioner of BLS for 12 years, from 1979 through her retirement in 1991. She was the first woman commissioner and only the second to rise through the ranks. She was justifiably proud of being appointed and reappointed for three 4-year terms by two Presidents representing both political parties – Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Actually, I believe that President Reagan's people must have

recognized that it would be very foolish not to reappoint her – she obviously not only had excellent management and technical skills, but also demonstrated unmistakable integrity and dedication to quality statistics, produced by professional statisticians and provided to all without fear or favor. In that regard, she took full advantage of the fact that she reported directly to the Secretary of Labor – often speaking of the need to “educate” each new secretary about the importance of BLS programs and of affording BLS an appropriate measure of independence so there could be no doubt about its objectivity and nonpartisanship. She also took full advantage of the opportunity to appear before the congressional Joint Economic Committee each month to present the latest employment and unemployment figures. By all accounts, her testimony was crisp, precise, authoritative, and totally nonpolitical in content and tone. She could handle all manner of questions – tough or inane – with a straight face.

Representative Dick Armey once tried to show off his economic expertise by touting a study that purported to establish the deleterious effects of raising the minimum wage on job formation. He asked Janet if BLS staff could “do econometrics,” evidently expecting that this was above their heads. Janet responded very evenly that, yes, BLS staff could “do econometrics” and would indeed be happy to conduct additional analyses for Rep. Armey, and, oh, by the way, the causation asserted in the study cited by Armey was actually correlation. Armey did not again venture to question BLS capabilities.

Janet achieved a great deal in her tenure as BLS commissioner – starting a continuous Consumer Expenditure Survey, setting up a cognitive research laboratory to improve survey questionnaires, nurturing

federal-state collaborative statistical programs, rescuing the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience, and dropping the popular but statistically unsound Family Budgets Program. Her greatest challenge was to implement a major change in the treatment of housing in the Consumer Price Index. This is too long and involved a story to tell, but, essentially, the change reduced the inflation rate, which was welcomed by some stakeholders but very much opposed by others. And opposition continued even in the face of BLS's extensive research, testing, and production of experimental series to familiarize users with what was coming. Yet the change was long overdue. Janet often told the story that she was asked to accompany the Labor secretary to a cabinet meeting at the White House to justify going forward with the change, and that she had her resignation in her pocket if the Cabinet overruled her on a matter she firmly believed was the sole province of competent statistical agency staff.

While serving as commissioner, Janet was very active professionally. She was president of ASA, vice president of ISI, and a board member of the AEA and received many well-deserved awards and honors. She was, I believe it is fair to say, the dean of the federal statistical system – a giant of that realm. As commissioner of the second largest statistical agency, she outshone heads of smaller agencies, and the directors of the largest agency, the Census Bureau, then appointed at the pleasure of the President, did not hold a candle to her expertise, stature, and longevity.

Janet retired from federal service in 1991 but continued to be as active as ever on behalf of the statistical system. She wanted to write a book about her ideas for making the system more effective, and she did – “Organizing to Count – Change in the Federal Statistical System,” published by the Urban Institute Press in 1995. She proposed combining BLS, Census, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the statistical policy function of OMB into an independent Central Statistical Board. If such an idea had come about, I have no doubt she would have been the outstanding first head of the new agency.

Until Janet retired and became a member of the Committee on National Statistics at the National Academy of Sciences in 1992, I had viewed her from afar as this towering and even formidable presence. I soon got

to know her as an engaging person who was a wonderful mentor to me and other CNSTAT staff – always complimenting our work. She first served on a CNSTAT panel to modernize the census, which I assisted, and when she was asked to chair a congressionally mandated panel on the brand-new Bureau of Transportation Statistics, she welcomed me as study director, saying she valued that I threw myself wholeheartedly into these studies.

We had a great time working together, and we worked together again on a politically sensitive panel to monitor and evaluate the 2000 census. At the time, the Clinton Administration favored statistical adjustment for undercount of minorities and others in the census, and the Republican Congress did not favor such adjustment. The CNSTAT panel was requested by the Census Bureau as a neutral observer, and it fulfilled that role very well under Janet's superb leadership. I saw Janet's political skills in evidence when the Congressman in charge of overseeing the census asked her to visit and tried to get her to commit herself about the adjustment issue in a way that could be used to undercut the credibility of the panel and the National Academies. Janet handled him with ease, graciously exchanging pleasantries about grandchildren, and discussing the panel's scope of work in ways that appeared responsive to his questions without actually saying a word that could be misinterpreted.

Janet chaired and served on other CNSTAT studies and studies in other parts of the National Academies. She also served on many boards and advisory committees related to federal statistics. At age 85, she agreed to co-chair a CNSTAT panel on reengineering the 2020 census and served for two years before moving with Bernie to Texas for her later years.

I hope I have conveyed the depth and breadth of Janet's contributions to federal statistics. She stood tall and spoke forthrightly in support of impartial, high-quality information that could be trusted by everyone. While publicly the grand dame, one on one, she was a caring woman who mentored many individuals throughout the statistical system. I was one such, and I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to have worked closely with Janet Norwood and gotten to know her sterling professional and personal qualities so well. I miss her.