

WITH CLOSE TO A HUNDRED undergraduates looking on, federal recruiter Jesse Tampio took the stage recently at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, and set about busting the “myths” of government work. “People say that the government is this huge bureaucracy,” said Tampio, 31, a State Department lawyer and volunteer pitchman. “But it’s a useful skill to learn how to navigate it.” The hour-long PowerPoint presentation also addressed Uncle Sam’s reputation for poor pay and cronyism, while selling the upsides of federal service—like proximity to power. One slide featured a photo of federal workers hobnobbing at a chili cook-off. As Tampio said: “You’re on the inside rather than on the outside yelling in.”

The session is part of the government’s push for talent, an intensifying effort to recruit a new generation of civil servants amid the biggest hiring crisis in U.S. government history. More federal employees are expected to retire in 2008 than in any previous year, and 2009 could be even worse, according to the Office of Personnel Management. By 2012, more than 50 percent of the current work force, including 90 percent of senior management and a third of all scientists and economists, will be gone—leaving a quarter-million jobs in their wake.

As the retirement wave hits, many agencies are flashing unprecedented signing bonuses and scholarships to attract new talent. The Department of Defense is doling out bonuses of \$5,000 or more to would-be intelligence analysts, while the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is courting young scientists with funding for second or third degrees. But despite these enticements, the United States is struggling to woo a generation of young people who see a more productive and lucrative future for themselves in the private sector. “Kennedy’s message is no longer the right one,” says Max Stier, president of the non-profit Partnership for Public Service, which organized the Bates event with government cooperation. “It’s not about what you can do for *government*. We need to

convey what government can do for *you*.”

OPM’s military-style recruiting campaign includes job fairs at more than 600 universities and prime-time national advertising. The first-ever commercials for civil-service work feature young Feds waxing grandly about their jobs before a voice-over exclaims: “Wow! That’s impressive. Who do you work for?” If the OPM’s efforts fail—since 2006, the government has made more than 100,000 hires to keep pace with retirements—private contractors are poised to pick up the slack. But the repercussions could go beyond privatization if the government fails to replenish its ranks. “When it

from the Kennedy School this spring. The firm offers nearly twice the salary and a full year of school reimbursement money. By law, the government’s best counteroffer is loan forgiveness (a maximum of \$10,000 annually for up to six years) and a salary of about \$50,000 for any job taken by a master’s degree recipient without government experience. “The fact is you can earn two or three times as much in a consulting job, and that’s not even counting the higher investment-banking jobs,” says Ellwood.

There’s also an aura of incompetence around government work. The days of desks’ disappearing into the distance may be over, but there are still 35-page job listings, 14-page applications and dreary job titles. Matt Volner was a “building management specialist” at the General Services Administration from October 2006 to October 2007. “I couldn’t tell you what that means,” says Volner, 24, a 2006 Cornell graduate, who has since quit government work to become an actor in New York. “The whole year was a Kafkaesque nightmare in which my job was to find out what my job was.”

The roots of the government’s image issues run deep. President Ronald Reagan framed the federal worker as a handy scapegoat for society’s ills in 1981 with the words “Government is not the solution”; since then, almost every presidential hopeful has run on some version of “Washington is broken.” When an interest group wants to torpedo a government initiative, it simply invokes the “bureaucrat” as an emblem of ineptitude. “We saw a slight change during the ‘West Wing’ era,” says Pat McGinnis, president of the Washington-based non-

profit Council for Excellence in Government. “But otherwise it’s just been nonstop portrayals of the bungling bureaucrat. It takes a toll.”

Back at Bates, a more positive message seems to be getting through. “I want to be part of the change sweeping the government,” says Becky Rubenstein, a senior psych major who wants to work in public health. Maybe all hope is not lost for Uncle Sam: after Rubenstein spent a summer as an intern at a Boston nonprofit that struggled with funding, government chili might sound good. ■

C'mon and Be A Bureaucrat

Uncle Sam wants you, but he's having trouble besting contractors for talent.



WHEN'S LUNCH? This is the stereotype the government is fighting

comes to problems like climate change and disaster relief, if government is not involved, it will not happen,” says David Ellwood, dean of Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, who adds that “it’s absolutely vital to get spectacular people into government.”

At the center of the government’s talent troubles is a salary gap. “Why would you want to work for government when you can earn more and get more done working for a government contractor?” asks John Cassidy, 29, who plans to take a job in the federal-projects branch of the consulting firm Deloitte & Touche after graduating