

The Unconscious Bias

Written by Nick Sanders

Tuesday, 15 September 2020 00:00



No, this is not going to be a political polemic, unless you choose to see it that way. No mention of political parties shall be made, nor shall there be made mention of any shades of the spectrum of political beliefs. However, we will discuss a noticeable bias—a prejudice if you will—against the West Coast.

There is no question that, in the rather arcane world that is government contracting, the center of gravity is Washington, D.C. The National Capital Region—i.e., the District of Columbia and surrounding environs—is home to hundreds of defense contractors, ranging from General Dynamics to Lockheed Martin to Northrop Grumman, and including lots and lots of smaller names. Even companies that aren't headquartered in the area have large offices there. "The Washington Office" is a familiar phrase for many government contractors, evoking images of "government relations" experts and martini-fed power lunches with Congressional staffers.

The top-ranked government contracting law firms all have offices in the Region, as does nearly every top-ranked government contracts consulting firm. There's a reason many of those firms are called "Beltway Bandits."

You can't throw a rock in Arlington or Tyson's Corner without hitting somebody who is involved in some aspect of government contracting.

Why is that? Well, obviously it's because that's where the seat of the Federal government is. That's where Congress is. That's where most Cabinet-level agencies are found. That's where the Pentagon is. The coalescence of government contracting power in the National Capital Region is extraordinary.

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There is no question that Washington, D.C., and its surrounding counties is the center of gravity. However, those within that sphere of influence seem to forget there's a whole country outside The Beltway. Whether they are aware of it or not, they are biased against those outside The Beltway—especially those of us on the West Coast.

Now, government contracting on the West Coast today is but a shadow of it once was. In the sixties and seventies, Los Angeles was the center of gravity for government contractors, home to corporate headquarters for Northrop, Lockheed, Hughes Aircraft, TRW, and others. The Los Angeles Air Force Base was huge. And it wasn't just Los Angeles: before there was Silicon Valley there was the Lockheed Missiles and Space Company, located in Sunnyvale, CA. Aerojet was located in Sacramento. Down in San Diego, there was General Dynamics' Convair Division (home of the Atlas-Centaur rocket) and Ryan Aeronautical (later Teledyne Ryan, and home of early unmanned aerial vehicles that subsequently evolved into the Global Hawk). Looking further north, Seattle was famously the home of The Boeing Aircraft Company.

Those were the days. But now most of the leadership has moved east. Hughes Aircraft was split up. TRW was acquired. Northrop and Lockheed moved to within spitting distance of the Pentagon. Even Boeing moved to Chicago. The addition of innovators such as SpaceX has not significantly reversed the trend. The West Coast just isn't the same, with respect to government contracting.

But West Coast government contracting is not dead.

Headquarters may have moved, but the programs and the people who work them didn't. Thousands and thousands of government contractor employees still work in Los Angeles and San Diego and Sunnyvale and Seattle. And with them are thousands of government employees, from contracting officers to program managers to auditors. It's surely not the same, but it ain't over either.

But you wouldn't know that from the way certain organizations are acting.

Recently, I've participated—or tried to participate—in several association meetings and prominent

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training seminars. Many of them—perhaps most of them—act as if nobody from the West Coast will want to participate. Many have starting times that are ridiculously early for those who set their clocks on Pacific Time.

Let me provide you with some recent examples:

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The recent American Conference Institute's Advance Forum on DCAA & DCMA Costs, Pricing, Compliance and Audits started at 9 AM Eastern. As speaker, I had to be ready (and online) by NLT 5:30 AM Pacific Time.

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The upcoming National Defense Industrial Association's October Procurement Committee Meeting starts at 9 AM Eastern.

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A recent all-day national educational seminar started at 7 AM Central.

And those are just a few examples of the curious phenomenon where people putting on those meetings and seminars seem completely unaware that anybody from the West Coast might want to participate.

In fairness, perhaps there just *aren't* that many potential participants from the West Coast. It's certainly possible that if the meeting time was moved, then it might not impact overall attendance. For example, starting at 11 AM Eastern instead of 9 AM Eastern might inconvenience some local members without noticeably attracting West Coast folks. That's certainly a possibility.

Another possibility is that the times were set before COVID-19 made in-person participation unlikely. It may be that the times were set and it was too much trouble to change them just

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because the meeting or seminar went virtual. That's certainly another possibility.

But we know this to be true. The most certain way of ensuring that the National Capital Region maintains its center of gravity, the most certain way of continuing to erode the government contracting expertise on the West Coast, is to continue to make it inconvenient to join in continuing professional education and networking opportunities that are seemingly taken for granted by those in Washington, D.C.

There is no longer any valid reason for starting at 9 AM Eastern, assuming there ever was. It's time to make a change. (*Pun intended.*)

As we move towards a virtual training environment where people might conceivably log-in from anywhere, does it still make sense to maintain this biased attitude that believes nobody outside of The Beltway matters?

We think not.