

THE PUBLIC SERVICE PUZZLER

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THE LIMITATION GAME

An ethical conundrum: war has come home — formations of enemy fighter-bombers strafe civilian targets within earshot of the small government office where you and your team of codebreakers are huddled, wide-eyed around a single crisp rectangle: a telegram. A telegram that could change *everything*.

The first time you received this telegram — intercepted it, translated it, ran it through the computer and painstakingly decoded it — you thought nothing of it; in fairness, its contents could not be more quotidian: a few short sentences about the day’s forecasted weather shuttled from a lone enemy radar tech to the fleet of warships that is his charge. But today you’ve discovered something incredible: that lonesome radar tech is a *character*. I mean, he has *personality*. He’s somewhere in enemy territory right now putting his own spin on the assignment (of telling hundreds of warships where to go) and what that means, for him, is writing his favorite catchphrase into *every single message he sends*. Is he trying to get his colleagues excited and raise morale? Probably. Is that annoying workplace behavior? Yes. Is it also an extremely unsound cryptographical practice? Oh, absolutely.

Because what you and your team realize, standing around that corny telegram, is that if a message always contains a particular line of text (like a catchphrase), then you don’t have to tell the computer to check every possible solution to a code — just solutions containing that particular line of text — and suddenly cracking the enemy’s secret code is trivial. And you’ve done it! So back to that ethical conundrum: you have cracked the enemy code. You know where the next attack will be — and it just so happens to be on a convoy of ships carrying civilians across the ocean. A convoy carrying your coworker’s family.

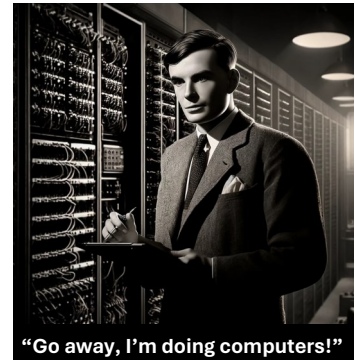
“You’re going to notify them, right?” he asks. “Now that we’ve cracked the code we can warn them that they’re in danger!” But a colleague reminds the group that if the enemy realizes their cryptography has been solved, they’ll simply switch to a new system. Every time your side acts on the decrypted information, it increases the chances the enemy will switch systems; if you can be smart about when and where you warn people of incoming attacks, you may be able to spy on the enemy codes for years without them knowing — you might be able to end the war early and save millions of lives.

“Yeah, okay, but we can save my family’s lives right now, today?” insists your colleague, reasonably. So, back to that ethical conundrum: what do you do?

Answer: be grateful you aren’t Alan Turing, the brilliant public servant who, with World War 2 on the line, had to make these kinds of decisions. Thankfully, the ethical quandaries we face as New York City public servants have significantly lower stakes (and can often be solved by the Attorney of the Day Hotline). But Turing taught us a valuable lesson: sometimes, as a public servant, you need to solve a puzzle before you get a chance to do ethics. So, in this month’s Public Service Puzzler — let’s practice!



“We’re crossing the Rubicon — of ethics!”



“Go away, I’m doing computers!”

The conundrum: you are an amazing and ethical New York City public servant (in real life, of course, but also in this puzzle). Unfortunately, you have been charged with getting two of the City’s most questionable public servants — a supervisor and a subordinate — along with

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an Impermissible \$50 Gift across the Hudson River to the COIB offices at 2 Lafayette Street for a mandatory training. And for reasons you don't understand but are sure has something to do with congestion pricing, you have to take a canoe. A canoe with only one additional seat, so you're going to have to ferry them one at a time.



A supervisor.

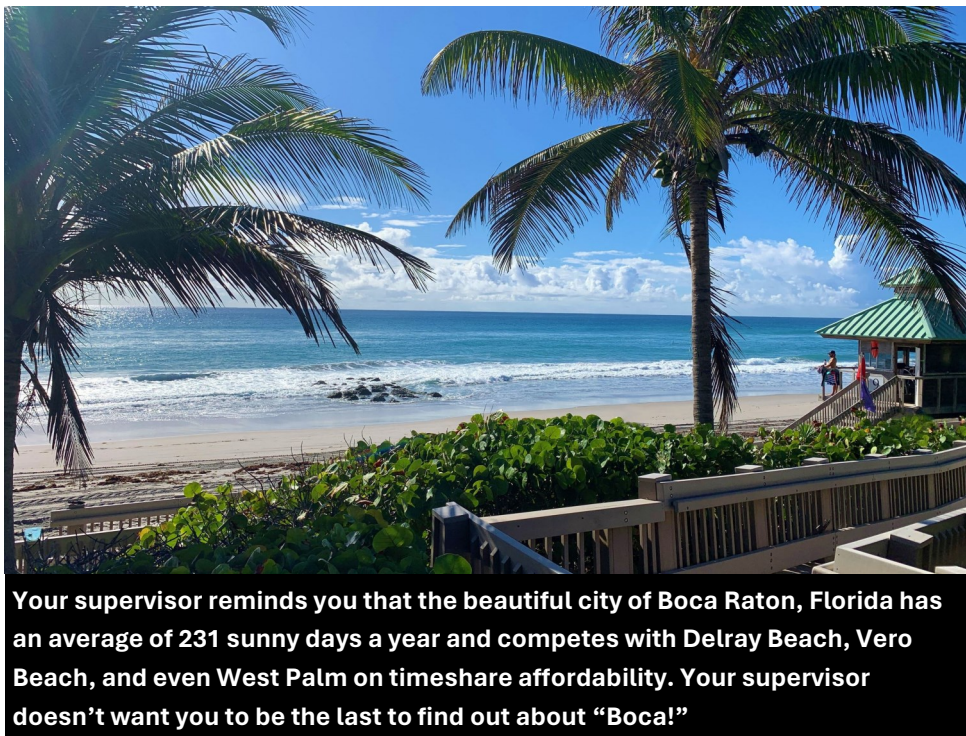


A subordinate.



Self-explanatory.

The problem? If left unattended with his subordinate, the supervisor will immediately try to create an impermissible financial relationship with her by pitching her an investment in his timeshare condominium in Boca Raton, Florida. And if the subordinate is left unattended with the Impermissible \$50 Gift, she will use her relatively low salary as an excuse to take it — yet another violation of Chapter 68. The Impermissible \$50 Gift doesn't take any action on its own because, as an inanimate object, it lacks sentience and thus free will.



Your supervisor reminds you that the beautiful city of Boca Raton, Florida has an average of 231 sunny days a year and competes with Delray Beach, Vero Beach, and even West Palm on timeshare affordability. Your supervisor doesn't want you to be the last to find out about "Boca!"

So: is there a way to get all three safely across the Hudson in your one-seater canoe without violating the City's ethics law? I don't know — I was educated in the State of Florida — but maybe you do? And maybe you'll email that winning solution to Contest@coib.nyc.gov and become a big winner like [Eujean Park](#): a Deputy General Counsel at the Department of Small Business Services, sure, but now also an immortal member of the Public Service Puzzler's Winner's Circle! That could be you next month — send your answer today!