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# Premises of Public Administration: Past and Emerging

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WHEN the first textbooks in public administration appeared in the United States a little more than thirty years ago (Leonard D. White's *Introduction to the Study of Public Administration* (Macmillan Co., 1926), and W. F. Willoughby's *Principles of Public Administration* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1927)), they were based upon premises and concepts about the executive branch and its administrative agencies which had been at least a half century in the making. The civil service reform movement beginning in the late 1860's and culminating in the Pendleton Act of 1883, Woodrow Wilson's essay on "Public Administration" in 1887, Goodnow's *Politics and Administration* in 1900 (MacMillan Co.), the work of the New York Bureau of Municipal Research and its counterparts throughout the country, the scientific management movement in industry, the reorganization movement (including the Taft Commission studies of 1910-12, the Illinois and New York reports of 1915), the city manager movement beginning in 1910, the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, the Classification Act of 1923, the New York state governmental reorganizations un-

NOTE: This paper served as a basis for discussion at one session of a conference on Education and Training for Administrative Careers in Local and State Government sponsored by the Fels Institute of Local and State Government, University of Pennsylvania, June 12-14, 1957. The papers and discussion summaries of the Conference and of the administrators' workshops preceding the Conference will be published.

der Governor Smith—all these, as well as other events and writings, helped to provide the raw materials for the syntheses attempted in the pioneer textbooks in public administration. These texts, in turn, not only provided the first effective teaching instruments for the new field of study; they also codified the premises, the concepts, and the data for the new public administration.

## The Textbooks' Codification

THE main elements of this codification of 1926-27 may be very briefly summarized:

1. The politics-administration dichotomy was assumed both as a self-evident truth and as a desirable goal; administration was perceived as a self-contained world of its own, with its own separate values, rules, and methods.
2. Organization theory was stated in "scientific management" terms; that is, it was seen largely as a problem in organization technology—the necessities of hierarchy, the uses of staff agencies, a limited span of control, subdivision of work by such "scientific" principles as purpose, process, place, or clientele.
3. The executive budget was emphasized as an instrument of rationality, of coordination, planning, and control.
4. Personnel management was stressed as an additional element of rationality (jobs were to be described "scientifically," employees were to be selected, paid, advanced by "scientific" methods).
5. A "neutral" or "impartial" career service was

required to insure competence, expertise, rationality.

6. A body of administrative law was needed to prescribe standards of due process in administrative conduct.

In these pioneer texts the responsibility of administrative agencies to popular control was a value taken-for-granted; the responsiveness of administrators and bureaucrats was not seen as a problem because everyone then understood that politics and policy were separate from administration, which was concerned exclusively with the execution of assignments handed down from the realm of politics.

The events of the 1930's—depression, New Deal, the rise of Big Government—served at first to confirm the premises of the texts. The expansion of government, especially the great growth in the size, complexity, and discretionary power of administrative agencies, was regarded as making all the more relevant and urgent the tools of rationality which public administration offered to the practitioners in the new and expanded agencies of the executive branch. Many of the teachers and the students of public administration themselves became practitioners.

The *Report* of the President's Committee on Administrative Management and its literary companion-piece, the Gulick and Urwick *Papers on the Science of Administration* (Institute of Public Administration, Columbia University), both appearing in 1937, represent the high noon of orthodoxy in public administration theory in the United States. In the Gulick and Urwick *Papers* were brought together eleven essays constituting the classic statements then available in the United States and Europe, in business and public administration, of the elements believed to be embodied in *the science* of administration. (It is perhaps worth noting that of the ten authors only Gulick wrote as a political scientist.) The *Report* of the President's Committee, for its part, set forth in eloquent language the prescriptions of public administration made orthodox by the texts of 1926-27. The significant and impressive managerial changes in the executive branch of the national government which were made as a

result of the *Report* strengthened the prestige of public administration as a body of precepts.

### Post-War Dissent

**B**UT the high noon of orthodoxy had a brief hour of prominence. World War II interrupted the further development of public administration research and literature, and at the close of the war the resumption took the form of dissent and heterodoxy. Prewar orthodoxy, it is true, was reasserted in the *Reports* of the two Hoover Commissions, in most of the textbooks, and in the rash of post-war administrative surveys at state and local government levels. There was, however, a strong ferment of dissent in the monographic literature, in the journals, and elsewhere. The dissent took three main lines:

1. The assault upon the politics-administration dichotomy.

This keystone of pre-war orthodox public administration had always been viewed with some skepticism by a considerable number of political scientists (particularly by those mainly concerned with political theory or with the political process); to them, all administrative agencies and their staffs seemed to be involved in politics. This view was now to recruit strong support from within the public administration fraternity itself. The first textbook to appear after the war—Fritz Morstein Marx (editor), *The Elements of Public Administration* (Prentice-Hall, 1946), with 14 political scientists among its contributors—brought a new, if still mild, emphasis upon the involvement of administrators and administrative agencies in policy formation, in the use of discretionary power, and in the general political process. In 1949 Paul H. Appleby's influential monograph, *Policy and Administration* (University of Alabama Press), boldly and persuasively described administration as "the eighth political process." In 1950 the second post-war text—Herbert A. Simon, Donald W. Smithburg, and Victor A. Thompson, *Public Administration* (Alfred A. Knopf)—presented a systematic exposition of public administration as a political and group process. In 1952 the first casebook in public administration—significantly titled *Public Administration and Policy Development*, Harold

Stein (editor), (Harcourt, Brace and Co.)—emphasized in each of its case studies the political role of the administrator; and, in the introductory essay, Harold Stein wrote incisively of “public administration as politics.” These several illustrations serve to reveal the stages by which public administration as politics, as involved deeply in policy and values, was firmly established in the literature of public administration within a few years after the war. Even the most orthodox texts yielded some ground on the doctrine that politics and administration were separable.

2. The assault upon the claims to science and to universal principles of administration.

The premises which pre-war public administration had borrowed primarily from scientific management were of course necessarily subjected to criticism by all those who were asserting that administration was a political process. These critics were soon joined by the students of the history and development of administrative theory. When, for example, Dwight Waldo published in 1948 his important study, *The Administrative State: A Study of the Political Theory of American Public Administration* (The Ronald Press), he demonstrated how value-loaded, how culture-bound, how political—in short, how “unscientific”—were the premises, the “principles,” the logic, of orthodox public administration.

To these powerful critical voices there was soon added a third group: the prophets of a new science of administration. The outstanding representative of this school of thought has been Herbert Simon whose *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations* (Macmillan Co., 1947) not only attacked the orthodox “principles” of public administration as being merely “proverbs” but also presented a new administrative science based upon the argument of logical-positivism that facts must be separated from values. For Simon, the orthodox politics-administration dichotomy was to be replaced by the new fact-value dichotomy.

These critics have successfully made their point. The claims to scientific principles and to their universal applicability have been

placed on the defensive although they have not entirely disappeared from the literature of public administration. But the claims of a new science of administration have not been widely accepted.

3. “Sociological” studies of bureaucracy.

Another stream of ideas and knowledge contributing to the post-war growth of dissent from orthodoxy has been the “sociological” study of the public bureaucracies as representing in themselves a form of political power. The primary impact of these studies has been upon the orthodox doctrines of the neutral career service. Philip Selznick’s *TVA and the Grass Roots* (University of California Press, 1948), for example, revealed a career bureaucracy deeply involved in the political process, demonstrating that the creation and maintenance of a career bureaucracy is more a problem in values and politics than a problem of administrative science.

### Emerging Reformulations

THE post-war decade of dissent and heterodoxy has not yet revealed the clear outlines of an emerging new body of comprehensive doctrine. But perhaps we can anticipate some of the major components of the reformulation now in process. The premises around which the new consensus—perhaps to become a new orthodoxy—would seem to be forming, may be stated somewhat as follows:

1. Public administration doctrine and practice is inescapably culture-bound. It is also bound to more specific values: to varying conceptions of the general public interest, to particular interest-group values, to the values of a specific administrative organization or bureaucracy at a specific time.

2. Public administration is one of the major political processes. The exercise of discretionary power, the making of value choices, is a characteristic and increasing function of administrators and bureaucrats; they are thus importantly engaged in politics.

3. Organization theory in public administration is a problem in political strategy; a choice of organization structure is a choice of which interest or which value will have preferred access or greater emphasis. Organization is, therefore, as Robert A. Dahl and

Charles E. Lindblom suggest in *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (Harper & Bros., 1953), a determinant in bargaining.

4. Management techniques and processes have their costs as well as their benefits. Each new version has a high obsolescence rate, its initial contributions to rationality declining as it becomes the vested interest of its own specialist guardians and/or other groups with preferred access.

5. Public administration is ultimately a problem in political theory: the fundamental problem in a democracy is responsibility to popular control; the responsibility and responsiveness of the administrative agencies and the bureaucracies to the elected officials (the chief executives, the legislators) is of central importance in a government based increasingly on the exercise of discretionary power by the agencies of administration.

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### Why Young Men of Quality Should Enter Public Service

I am all for young (and also old) men of quality going into public life and government service \* \* \* Why? Not because I am persuaded that they are under any duty to sacrifice their lives for Jimmy Hoffa's children, but because there is no better or fuller life for a man of spirit. The old Greek conception of happiness is relevant here: "The exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence, in a life affording them scope."

. . . [O]utside of aesthetics and teaching—religion belongs to both—the requirement of "scope" is hard to come by in this age outside of public life.

Surely vital powers are exercised in the whole vast task of feeding, clothing, housing us, as I am sure Mr. McElroy was aware in making soap and being handsomely paid for it. But I am equally sure that he now feels a zest, a sense that the only limitation upon the exercise of all his vital powers is his own capacity, that he never felt before. . . .

Today, more than ever before the prize of the general is not a bigger tent, but command. The managers of industry and finance have the bigger tents, but command rests with government. Command, or, if one prefers, supreme leadership, demands and gives scope for the exercise of every vital power a man has in the direction of excellence.

How then, does one present to young boys a life of public service? Not, I am sure, as an evangelist appealing to the young squires to turn their backs on the world and dedicate themselves to a sort of secular order for ministering to the peasants. . . . Rather, I think, one educates them to know the world in which they live; to understand that government will go on whether they take part in it or not; that command is too important to be entrusted to the ignorant, even though they may be well-meaning and dedicated, and to an understanding of the good life, of happiness as the Greeks saw it. . . .

In addition, they might learn, as an authority on the process of revolution has pointed out, that "Brave men are not uncommon in any system, but there is a tendency in most systems to make courage and a disciplined openness of mind to the significant facts mutually exclusive. This is the immediate cause of the downfall of every ruling class that ever falls \* \* \* ."

—Letter from Dean G. Acheson, former Secretary of State, reprinted in the "Washington" column of James Reston in the *New York Times*, February 2, 1958.