

CHAPTER 2

THE PROFESSION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Promise, Problems, and Prospects

JAMES S. BOWMAN AND JONATHAN P. WEST

George Washington envisioned the ideal that people of character and competence—the hallmarks of professionalism—would fill the ranks of his administration. Rather than mere employees, the Constitution (article 2, section 2) refers to officers of government. Imbued with an obligation of civic duty, the job of serving the nation’s citizens was understood to be more than simply the application of business economics. The federal service would be what Ben Franklin called “posts of honor,” the foundation of democracy.

As might be expected, the nature of public service would undergo considerable change over the years. Indeed U.S. history is one of competing administrative doctrines: the guardian model (a politically neutral, merit-based, career bureaucracy) versus the politico model (a politically sensitive, patronage-based, noncareer bureaucracy). Since the management of human capital reflects societal norms and clashing values, the result has been shifting preferences for professional expertise and political appointment over time (Dionne 1998).

This chapter examines these changes with a focus on the last generation. The promise of the profession is traced from the 1883 Pendleton Act through the middle of the past century. Its problems are then discussed, with particular attention to the last several decades. Finally, prospects are outlined in the context of the Obama administration.

PROMISE

With the emergence of political parties, Washington’s ideal would come under pressure as partisans sought to repay their supporters with the rewards of victory. The plundering and pillaging of office—favoritism, cronyism, intimidation, corruption—during the ensuing spoils system prevailed for much of the nineteenth century. Set in motion during Andrew Jackson’s presidency, this pattern of arrogance, greed, and opportunism engulfed integrity, competence, and prudence. Degradation of public service, rather than the celebration of good government and politics, was characteristic of the era as the carnival-like system encouraged mediocre governance and damaged democratic institutions. It became increasingly evident, however, that a large, growing, industrializing nation could not be effectively managed in such a predatory, scandal-ridden manner (Van Riper 1958).

To protect the legitimacy of the state from private interests, and to cleanse the public service from partisan interference, English merit principles (entrance examinations, career tenure, political

neutrality) were adopted in the Pendleton Act. Reformers believed that the moral and economic virtue of responsible and efficient government meant that it should be shielded from unscrupulous politicians and operated in a professional, disinterested, businesslike fashion. Most states and many localities, placing policy above party, eventually established their own centralized merit systems to reduce corruption and enhance productivity. Such developments were a reaffirmation of Alexander Hamilton's belief that government should be judged by the quality of its administration. Public office could, once again, be a public trust; the civil service would belong to the people it served, not to the administration temporarily in power. It was seldom necessary to explain, much less defend, doing the public's business on the basis of merit.

With the demise of the spoils system, administrators began to see themselves as depending upon no party or personage and serving without fear or favor. They did not see every business that they came in contact with as a potential employer and did not feel that job security relied on currying favor with their superiors. Indeed, before midcentury, the public service would be staffed by its share of the most able members of society. "Government work," wrote Patricia Ingraham (2007, 71), "was as much about defining government as in carrying out its tasks." Cloaked in the mantle of stewardship and instilled with a sense of duty, it was a noble calling, as illustrated by the "greatest generation" of World War II.

Echoing Plato and Weber, a professional ethos—a principled framework for action—developed that privileged the public good over private interest. Although it is difficult to prescribe in detail what flows from such an ethic, it does include "the sum of ideals which define . . . the public service"—integrity, political independence, anonymity, and impartiality—at its core (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 1996, 14). Through the presence of exemplary public servants, merit-system legislation, professional associations and publications, and widely understood administrative norms, the distinctive character of the civil service was genuine. Like the public interest, "its genius lies not in its clarity, but in its . . . moral intrusion upon the internal and external discourse of ruler and ruled alike" (Bailey 1965, 106).

The professional, politically neutral civil service, one permanently staffed on the basis of competence and devoted to the public interest, became the central organizing principle in government. As a formative principle, a premise that cannot be derived from something else, it summarized the essential nature of political and administrative life. While it would be imprudent to romanticize the ethos, there was a profession of public administration, a spirit of stewardship, and an *esprit de corps*; an ethic of public service was seen "as a necessary condition of good government" (Crewson 1995, ii).

This legitimating myth, a unifying belief system, empowered the nation to modernize, win world wars, deal with the Great Depression, and amass an extraordinary record of policy achievement (see, especially, Light 2002; Rouban 2003; McDonough 2006). Professional qualifications secured delivery of services and checked political influence. Public service was a sentinel to which its members could point with pride, was regarded by citizens with respect, and was viewed by other nations as worthy of emulation. The quality of life in contemporary history was substantially improved due in large part to professionalism, which ensured "higher standards of competence, expanding research frontiers, [and] quicker application of new knowledge" (Caiden 2008, 11).

Through understanding the inevitable strains between bureaucracy and democracy, leaders such as Frederick Mosher (1968), John Macy (1971), and Hugh Hecló (2002) saw the tension between the administrative need for continuity and the political demand for change as cooperative and creative because both bureaucrats and politicians shared the responsibilities of office and a sense of public service. As Hecló put it, "The spirit [public administration] does not split the difference between idealism and realism, but unites them into one realm" (691).

While not unproblematic, as an “ideal type” this public service ethos was animated by loyalty, integrity, respect for bureaucratic expertise and democratic processes, and the pursuit of the common good (Dillman 1998). There may never have been a golden age of public administration in the form of a pure concern for civic duty, but as with all ideal types, there was an essential truth: a norm of a unified career service that functioned as an inspirational guide for official behavior. Public employees in these institutions may not have been saints, but neither were they sheer opportunists. What gives institutions “direction and worth,” wrote Mark Blitz, “is always something of an aspiration,” and what defines administrative practice “is not automatic or self-perpetuating but requires effort and risk” (2005, 4). Indeed, the civil service could be understood only by appreciating the profound sense of responsibility that became associated with it—a critical factor that many of its leaders did so much to honor (see, e.g., Cooper and Wright 1992).

However fundamental—and fragile—a professional ethos in government may be, the public service nonetheless has been historically an undervalued and much-maligned idea. In fact, Gerald Caiden (2008, 5) argued that “public administration has had to struggle for recognition, never quite succeeding to claim its rightful place in the sun. . . . No matter how essential its role in contemporary society, its enemies have never been . . . relaxed in their attacks and criticisms. . . . Indeed, the more successful public administration becomes, the more resentful and uncompromising its critics become.”¹ During the past one hundred years, for example, there have been no less than twelve major reform efforts (Kellough and Selden 2003), averaging one about every eight years.

Most reforms prior to the contemporary civil service reform movement occurred in the context of legislative and executive conflicts over controlling bureaucracy, spoils and merit, and budgets and employees (Lee, Cayer, and Lan 2006, 38). However, few questioned the need for the merit system or argued for a different type of workforce. To do so without careful consideration of evidence and consequences would be foolhardy and counterproductive. Yet reform in government, driven by cyclic, shifting values—neutral competence, representativeness, executive leadership (Kaufman 1956, 2008)—had been under way for some time during the latter part of the last millennium.

PROBLEMS

New public management (NPM) and reinvented entrepreneurial government came into full flower in the 1990s (Lane 2000). Challenging the traditional ethics, it boldly asserted that twenty-first-century issues could not be met with twentieth-century administration. McDonough held that in the orthodox approach, “the public good is about . . . implementing the democratic principles that protect the interests of every citizen. Charged with realizing this ideal . . . public servants are expected to be accountable, demonstrate bureaucratic behavior [honesty, integrity, impartiality, and objectivity], believe in the public interest, be motivated by the intrinsic rewards of their work rather than profit, and be loyal to their departments, professions, and communities” (2006, 631).

The new strategy, in contrast, defined the public good as receipt of services provided with maximum efficiency, claimed that performance can be achieved only by relying on the private sector and its management techniques, most notably competition and customer service (Pollitt 1993).

Having run against “Washington,” presidents after Lyndon Johnson sought to shrink, decentralize, and privatize government, eroding the idea that public servants provide value to citizens. Instead of seeing the state as a benefit to society, they saw it as an impediment; rather than viewing the civil service system as serving the people, they viewed it as serving itself (see, e.g., Howard 1994).

Given its size and cost, it was an easy target, a convenient scapegoat for political failures. “By vilifying the administrative state in general and public servants in particular,” according to

Lawrence Terry, reformers sought “to create a sense of crisis to achieve wide ranging restructuring of the public sector” (2005, 429). Government agencies were expected to emulate commercial styles of management, leading to deinstitutionalization and marketization of public organizations, privatization of large portions of civil service, and the commodification of its services. This would transform much of the structure, culture, and personnel of the central bureaucracy, potentially producing a more politically compliant workforce. Merit-system procedures for recruiting, rewarding, and disciplining employees were altered. Performance was defined as being responsive to political goals rather than responsible to the common good, thereby undermining the capacity for effective governance.

Based on public choice and market theories, NPM assumed as self-evidently true that the private and public sectors are essentially alike in purpose, people, and process; thus, the public service should be subject to the same set of economic incentives and disincentives as business (Dillman 1998). Officials were seen as utility maximizers, and therefore their actions were governed by self-interest, not a generalized concern for the commonweal. Public duty was no longer seen as necessarily the most important reason for being a civil servant. Rather than serving the nation, working for the country was just a job.

Devoid of larger public purpose, the approach accorded no special role for either the civil service or the national interest. As Robert Durant (2007, 183) pointed out, “unlike Progressives and New Dealers who saw government as the solution to market failures, [NPM] reformers see markets as the solution to government failures” (a view that would be overtaken by the events of the Great American Bailout of 2009). Institutions of government should be shaped in ways that maximize performance and hence serve as solely instrumental; diminished was its fundamental constitutive role, as part of the organic law of the land, to help clarify duties of government and preserve the rights of the people. Instead, the public service ethos was taken for granted, ignored, or treated with disdain, as rules and restraints were removed with little concern for consequence. Lip service was paid to the common good and public duty while reforms that undermined their basis were promoted. Values of impartiality, integrity, objective merit, and accountability may be important in civil service, but NPM did little to protect them; doing the public’s business was frequently based on glib aphorisms, symbolic actions, and political expediency.

Many interests would benefit from this transformation, but there were also losers. Among them was the public interest, as standards of probity in politics and administration no longer enjoyed the protection of administrative tradition. One British critic argued, for instance, that reforms provide “the form of private sector business management, whilst hollowing-out the substance of the public sector ethos and ethics” (Massey 1995, 30). With the loss of the ability to see management as a single, comprehensive function came the disaggregation of government, which meant that agencies sought to establish their own missions, select their favorite citizens (“customers”), follow their own rules, and define their own standards of success (Moe and Gilmour 1995). As concepts of the civil service ethos and public duty were jeopardized, radical change accelerated and illegal and unethical behavior increased (see, e.g., Buzenberg and Kaplan 2008). The capacity to achieve traditionally accepted values such as improved living standards, social equity, and public goods (e.g., environmental quality and health care) was eroded.

Reforms—devoted to a different way of conducting the business of government—taken to their logical conclusion, alter government in largely predictable ways that the Pendleton Act sought to prevent. Notably, rules for hiring, managing, and terminating personnel were changed, with departments authorized to create less formalized, uniform management methods. Civil service professionals went from being vital to protecting the citizenry from graft to having virtually no role in shielding the public from political abuse; changes had little to do with improving the effec-

tiveness of government and everything to do with the ability of political leadership to implement ideological agendas (Anonymous 2007, 5).

The September 11, 2001, disaster, for example, transformed civil service reform issues from a micropolitical to a macropolitical environment, where rhetoric can be particularly influential (Brook and King 2007; the next several paragraphs are adapted from Bowman 2009). Like the assassination of a president that led to civil service change in 1883, the tragedy emboldened reformists. The terrorist attacks offered an opportunity to use national security as a justification to achieve political aims in reforming the public service. The emphasis was placed on agency mission, not management of the bureaucracy. Thus, the departments of Homeland Security and Defense, as well as the Transportation Security Agency, were authorized to create new human resource management systems, which were seen as blueprints for dismantling the government-wide merit system. Unlike the reforms of yesteryear, the programs were enacted in a response to national security arguments, not because of the need to improve personnel administration by rooting out corruption.

Although a comprehensive assessment of contemporary reform does not exist, two former senior government executives (Underhill and Oman 2007) find that there is little relationship between the difficulties that the civil service faces and the goals of change. Either most of the common criticisms of the bureaucracy were not addressed, or the changes have, at best, marginal significance. For instance, the growing number of political appointees, as well as the impending wave of retirements, are largely overlooked, and new classification, pay, and disciplinary policies, if even well executed, are unlikely to effect genuine change.

Political movements in general, and NPM in particular, tend to exaggerate the evils they seek to conquer, with the result that change often makes things worse. This may not be surprising, because the underlying purpose of new policies was not better management (Moffit 2001; Perry 2008), but rather the perceived need for personnel flexibility in the war on terror. In light of the counterproductive consequences of reform (Bowman and West 2007), the challenge today is to eschew reckless change by revitalizing the public service ethos, the ideal of stewardship, and the fiduciary responsibility in the spirit of public administration.

PROSPECTS

The public service, in short, has been the object of one of the most determined and sustained efforts to reform government in many years. The concept of a public servant has been consistently debased, and “the changes have undermined the public service and ideal of public service which inspired that ethos” (O’Toole 2006b, 203). “Reforms such as reinventing government and new public management,” Patricia Ingraham pointed out, “placed their faith in oversimplified and discredited management nostrums” (2007, 82). By grounding efforts in economics, the value base of change was one-dimensional, with the outcome that the ability of officials to shape government was limited, except to emphasize efficiency.

Much has been lost in recent years in terms of values and ethics in public service. Although it may not “simply be too late to maintain that the civil service . . . exists for public purposes” (O’Toole 2006a, 45), NPM has shifted governmental administration toward managerialism, entrepreneurship, and efficiency and away from promotion of the “general welfare” (as stated in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution). If the traditional notion of public service still enjoys any currency, it is attributable to the cultural lag between changing circumstances and their impact on civil service and its members. Yet “it is by believing in the public service ethos,” wrote Barry O’Toole, “that it will be saved” (1998, 99).

Such a revitalization may occur in the wake of the 2008–2009 financial crisis which has shaken the nation into rethinking “the magic of the market,” the idea that “business is good and government is bad,” and the efficacy and benevolence of the once-vaunted, now disgraced, private sector (Martinez 2009). As Sylvia Horton argued, the displacement of the old public service ethos with “accountability to the market is not a substitute for political accountability and a strong administrative system that can act as the guardian of the constitution” (2008, 29). If the NPM-contrived management crisis provoked change, then the very real current economic calamity produces the urgency and opportunity to provide resources and act responsibly. There may be a growing recognition of the value of a professional career corps as the keystone of the state in service to the public interest.

If so, then the time is propitious to rebuild the public service. More than any other presidential candidates since John F. Kennedy, Barack Obama and John McCain put a focus on service to the country and sacrifice for the common good, an appeal like Kennedy’s that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than scoring political points by running against Washington and federal bureaucrats, Obama in particular sought to rebrand government, to “make it cool again.” He saw this as critically important not only to the American people, but also to the well-being of free markets (Newell 2008).

The country’s problems today are so daunting that pretense and pride must give way to recognition that government will be central to their solution. The bipartisan hostility to the very idea of using the state to serve the greater good (Reagan’s “government is the problem”; Clinton’s “the era of big government is over”) has run amok. As Melvin Dubnick observed, “Such a commitment to an unframed and untested set of beliefs is unwise at best, for these promises have proven dangerously powerful when put in action and can generate costly consequences, not merely in terms of time and other wasted resources, but in the distortions and perverse behavior they produce” (2007, 3).

Contempt for government, especially evident during the George W. Bush administration, deeply corrupted the discipline of self-government and the notion of public service. It appeared that the Bush administration saw little point in governing well because of their belief that the public sector contributed little to society. Ruled by instinct and ideology, the administration treated citizens as consumers, seeded the bureaucracy with political ideologues, hived off public services to contractors, thinned the ranks of contract monitors, and emasculated regulatory agencies.

Rather than, in the words of the Constitution, taking “care that the laws be faithfully executed” (article 1, section 3), the consequence has been “one of the most destructive in our public life,” according to political scientist Thomas Mann (Buzenberg and Kaplan 2008). As systematically chronicled by a nonpartisan good-government organization (the Center for Public Integrity), it is an extraordinary, self-defeating record of underfunded programs co-opted by political appointees, with lax oversight, limited accountability, and leadership based on ideology, not competence. To take one example among many, government auditors report that the Department of the Interior has been so enfeebled that it is unable to perform many of its core missions, with the result that its personnel and the public are at risk (Carlstrom 2009)—as the 2010 Gulf oil spill amply demonstrated. “We are constantly bombarded with stories of government breakdowns, from the failure to keep contaminated peanuts off the market to the Securities and Exchange Commission’s bungling of the Bernie Madoff case to Hurricane Katrina,” opined Max Stier (2009a) of the Partnership for Public Service.

With Republican and Democratic administrations approving massive subsidies to the private sector, the era of demonizing government and glorifying the market may have ended. “The axis of the field of public administration,” wrote James D. Carroll, “should shift from a preoccupation

with service delivery, ‘customer satisfaction’ and immediate gratification, to reinvestment to meet evolving needs in public action for which public administrators are responsible” (2009, 21).

The 2008 election was a repudiation of the shortsighted, antigovernment philosophy that celebrated self-interest, denigrated the public interest, and claimed that it was possible to govern successfully while relentlessly disparaging government. Gone was the “you’re on your own” ethos that had come to define the relationship between government and citizens. Instead, the election can be plausibly interpreted as a rediscovery of the belief that the greater good should come first, that the economy should serve society and not the other way around. It revealed the socially constructed nature of the status quo, showed that the old social constructs passing as reality were not immutable, and promised emancipatory change.

After years of being defiled and defunded, an emasculated government has been presented with an historic opportunity full of peril and possibility to prove itself—ironically by rescuing the business sector. The key is to enhance governmental capacity and honor its constitutional role in democracy, something not easily achieved. In so doing, the profession is responsible for focusing on process and structure to fulfill the constitutional obligations of public administration. This will involve strengthening the organizational, analytical, and managerial capacities of the organs of government and encouraging investment-oriented initiatives (e.g., infrastructure, research, children’s health) relative to consumption-oriented entitlement and transfer-payment programs (e.g., farm subsidies).

Smart policies and more funding may be necessary, but success depends upon the president’s ability to lead government. The president has an opportunity to reverse the long-standing erosion of federal service by reenergizing government (Light 2008). Donald Klingner cautioned, “The current U.S. economic crisis is not like the Great Depression in at least one crucial respect. Seventy-five years ago, the experts who led us out of the dark were public servants like Harold Ickes, David Lilienthal, Frances Perkins, Luther Gulick, and Louis Brownlow. Today, the players occupying center stage are the Wall Street financiers and bankers whose corporate lobbyists pushed federal policy-makers to approve, in the name of free markets, the deregulation that caused this problem to begin with” (2009, 16). The fact remains that the Obama administration has an opportunity to reverse the long decline of federal service by reenergizing government.

Having an engaged workforce will not ensure success, but not having one will produce failure; personnel *is* policy, as ultimate success depends on the ability to act effectively. Indeed, the drive is not merely to improve government operations, but to devote as much energy to policy execution as to policy development, as evidenced by the following:

- the proactive 2008 presidential transition process,
- appointments made at twice the rate of those in earlier administrations,
- establishment of a chief performance officer position,
- giving the director of the Office of Personnel Management a seat at Cabinet meetings,
- early executive orders on governmental transparency and professional standards,
- in-sourcing of previously contracted-out jobs,
- commitments to hire six hundred thousand new public servants in the next four years, and
- presidential visits to agencies (Stier 2009b; 2008).

To foster more competent, professional government involves reducing the number of political appointees, flattening the federal hierarchy, restaffing hollowed-out agencies, emphasizing to top agency leadership that a quality workforce is a priority, reforming the lengthy hiring process, seeking pay comparability with the private sector, supporting enactment of a ROTC-like program

for civil service or the proposed National Service Academy, or both, and investing in workforce training and development (Light 2008).

In other words, recruitment and retention initiatives like these will increase the number of those doing government work who, unlike contractors, will have absorbed the culture of public service and taken the oath to uphold the constitution. Bilmes and Gould (2009) have offered a detailed outline of what this new civil service would look like and how to pay for it. Federal chief human capital officers and the Government Performance Coalition also have provided “roadmaps to reform” that identify ways to elevate the federal workforce and strengthen organizational capacity (Kamensky 2008). Such initiatives may help shape the administration’s plans to overhaul the civil service. One conceptual framework within which such initiatives might reside is supplied by Denhardt and Denhardt’s (2007) “new” public service, which describes “the role of government as brokering interests among citizens and other groups so as to create shared values.”

Encouraging signs exist that public employment will, once again, be seen as an employer of choice. Widespread unemployment, baby boomer retirements, presidential appreciation of public service, the economic stimulus package, in-sourcing of programs, and disillusionment with business all combine to furnish an opportunity to bolster the civil service. Whereas graduates and would-be graduates in medicine, engineering, and law once sought fortunes in banking and finance, government and public service occupations were the most popular of forty-six career fields among college students in early 2008. A year later, career counselors at two hundred colleges and universities found that 90 percent of students were interested in federal jobs or internships (Davidson 2009; also see Light 2003; Rosenberg 2009; Goldin and Katz 2008). Indeed, a position in today’s cerebral White House would become the ultimate status symbol among job seekers.

A leading nonprofit group sees such indicators as a reflection of “a new generation . . . choosing to use their tech savvy and advanced degrees to bring about change” (Partnership for Public Service 2009). Another survey found that among newly hired public employees, nearly half of those under thirty years of age and four-fifths of those over thirty expect to make government their career (Yoder 2008). Moreover, according to the Federal Human Capital Survey, more than 90 percent of personnel report that they believe that their work is important (U.S. Office of Personnel Management 2008).

Buttressed by far more job applications than received by previous administrations (Woodrow Wilson School Task Force 2009), as well as a substantial increase in applicants to the Presidential Management Fellows program (Vogel 2009), public service may once again become less of a contractual relationship focused on personal gain and more of a covenantal commitment to country. This suggests a change in the claim that neither the politico nor the guardian administrative doctrine holds public favor (Dionne 1998). With the governing assumptions of the last three decades largely discredited,² a restoration of the idea that the function of government is to maintain the conditions in society so that morality is possible could be taking place.

An appreciation that public administrators are “the *only* officials that pay attention to governmental activities all the time” and as such hold a special duty to protect and serve the public interest (Goodsell 2006, 63; emphasis in original) may be growing. As E.J. Dionne suggested, extreme individualism is an infantile approach to governance, “one that must be supplanted by a more adult sense of personal and collective responsibility” (2009, A17). Perhaps it is *not* surprising, then, that eight of ten Americans say they would encourage a young person to work for the federal government (Adams and Infeld 2009).

There are, in summary, many reasons to suspect that the state of public administration in the future may be quite different from that in the initial decade of the new century. It is important to note, however, that facts and documentation can be remarkably insignificant when assessing trends

in government and confronting national identity, narratives, and myths. Politics often only requires beliefs, not evidence. As the 2009–10 health-care debates demonstrated, unless deeply ingrained distrust of government can be overcome—if change does not supersede national myth—reform may be stymied. (Malloy 2009). In the end, public administration is an ethical activity because public office is a public trust and because of the nature of the civil servant who “must be prepared to apply a moral measure in the public interest to every act or decision” (Macy 1971, 249). The Founders understood the need not only for an educated citizenry, but also for public-spirited officials. The challenge of 1789 remains today: to produce the conditions for responsible government by effectively managing the professional civil service.

NOTES

1. Nobel Prize winner and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman argued that a “good-as-bad” political philosophy mandates that government must be prevented from solving problems even if it can because “the more good a proposed government program would do, the more fiercely it must be opposed” (2007). “Even when they (these ideologues) failed on the job . . . , they could claim that very failure as vindication of their anti-government ideology, a demonstration that the public sector can’t do anything right” (Krugman 2008).

2. As Krugman (2007) pointed out, however, it would be a mistake to overemphasize this development. For instance, despite the near collapse of the nation’s financial system, reflexive antigovernment forces are so powerful that efforts to regulate the banking industry are generally limited to revising existing institutions responsible for the crisis. Narrowly avoiding a depression, paradoxically, reduced the political pressure for a fundamental restructuring of the economy.

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