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Chapter 1: Historical Underpinnings of Public Administration

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Section I: Government ≠ Business

Chapter 1: Historical Underpinnings of Public Administration

In the late 19th century, a scientific feud of epic proportions commenced between Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison over electrical systems. Patents, bragging rights, and legacies were all on the line as the intellectual battle raged between Tesla's alternating-current (AC) versus Edison's direct-current (DC) electrical systems. Even today, any diehard science geek holds an opinion on whether Tesla or Edison was the real Father of Invention. In much the same way, the field of public administration has a complicated and conflicted genealogy.

The "Edison" of the public sphere, to continue with the illustration above, is arguably Woodrow Wilson. Wilson is largely considered to be the father of public administration, primarily as a result of his essay on the topic published in 1887. By contrast, the "Tesla" of public administration is none other than Alexander Hamilton. As a co-author of the *Federalist* papers, Hamilton made a case for the structure and function of public administration, even as the Constitution was under deliberation.

Although the focus of this book is on the ethical utilization of funds in the public sphere, it is important that we delve into the history of public administration first, because the structure of

government determines how public budgets will be treated, and forerunners like Hamilton and Wilson espoused different approaches to the bureaucracy. This introductory chapter will cover the history of the American public sector and functions of government.

Development of public administration

James Madison, co-author of the *Federalist* papers alongside Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, introduced the term “public administration” in at least two of his own essays. In *Federalist 10*, Madison used the phrase with regard to prevailing distrust of the operation of governments, and in *Federalist 48*, he mentions the term again in the context of balancing government power through the use of checks and restraints.

Hamilton expounded on the discussion of administration in several of his contributions to the *Federalist* papers. Notably, he shared that he held “... a conviction of the utility and necessity of local administrations for local purposes.”¹ In other essays, he commented on the administration of power,² the structure of the federal administration,³ and the powers of administrative taxation.⁴ Perhaps even more fitting, given the subject matter of this text, was Hamilton’s role as Secretary of the Treasury under George Washington. Hamilton understood the structure of the administration in terms of managing people and processes, and he also had a strong grasp on managing resources necessary to keep the government running efficiently and with checks and balances on power.

Deserved or not, President Woodrow Wilson is widely credited with exerting influence over the development of public administration as a discipline and practice. In his famous 1887 essay,

Wilson defined public administration as the implementation of public policy, or “government in action.”⁵ This landmark paper addressed the discipline and practice of public administration and served as a precursor to formal study of the field.

Wilson purported that geographic isolation, agrarian self-sufficiency, the absence of threats to national security, and limited demands for public services allowed the United States to get by without a need for public service organization or administration. An influx of immigrants seeking respite from government overreach, coupled with the country’s buffered geography and largely rural population meant that Americans had little need for social services or enlarged government. In fact, the vast majority of the federal payroll prior to the Civil War were simply postal workers.

Freedom means freedom from servitude to systems too, and popular sovereignty made it harder to organize administration in the newfoundland than for a monarchy, such as those present in Europe with which the founders were intimately familiar. Early Americans embraced public opinion, and inviting public scrutiny necessarily makes organizing rule-making more laborious than decisions made behind closed doors. In Europe at the time, a sovereign leader’s opinions were only his or her own, and there was no populace to contend with, as far as solicited feedback was concerned. Before the transition to a constitutional government could be fully implemented, however, the citizens of the United States needed to want some kind of change. They looked at familiar models in France and Germany and acknowledged that they were not in search of mirroring political principles that resulted in ecclesiastical oversight and a disenfranchised middle class. One deal-breaker to adopting the European model was the relative absence of self-

government at the local level. European local governments were not fully self-government; instead, the bureaucrat served an appointed minister of the monarchy rather than the will of the public.

Federalism and the Complexity of Administration

Federalism is a key aspect to the American political structure, in that authority is divided between the national government and states. Federalism stands in stark contrast to unitary and confederal systems of government. First, imagine a unicyclist pedaling a single-wheel contraption; this individual represents a unitary system, led by a single leader. A totalitarian regime run by a dictator would fall under this model because authority is heavily concentrated and centralized.

Next, picture a bicycle race such as the Tour de France: teams of cyclists ride along the same path toward the same overall goal, but each team is in the race for their own benefit. Every rider wants the prize, and the race is not designed to encourage cooperation between teams. The Articles of Confederation framework adopted by the Continental Congress fits this illustration, since the original states held autonomy for most aspects of government, with little collaboration across state lines.

Lastly, consider a tandem bicycle with two riders pedaling in sync. The person in front navigates the route but relies on the rear rider for assistance powering the bicycle. The person in back contributes muscle and helps balance the bicycle, but must rely on the front rider to guide the way. There exists a give and take – a balance of authority, if you will – between the two tandem

riders. This cooperative exchange of power represents a federal system: the national government is the front rider with steering authority, while the states are the rear rider helping to keep the bicycle balanced and moving forward.

Wilson defined public administration as an “eminently practical science,” born out of a sense of state. Wilson’s milestone essay called for the “running of the Constitution” and encouraged the development of public administration for the Constitution’s survival. Wilson responded to concerns about public administration by dividing government into two spheres: 1) Politics – choices regarding what the government should do are determined by majority electorates; and 2) Administration – dictates of the populace should be carried out through efficient procedures, relatively free from political meddling. Most modern scholars reject the possibility of drawing a hard line between politics and administration – as if the two can be completely severed – which became known as the politics-administration dichotomy. This concept will be described in more detail later in this chapter.

Written at a time when government was under scrutiny for corruption, Wilson’s essay contended that public administration could be separated from politics. A reform movement was underway to combat rampant cronyism at the state and local levels during the time of Wilson’s writing, and since Wilson wanted to expand the capacity of government in terms of its scope and capabilities, he realized the necessity of separating politics from administration in the readers’ eyes: “If to keep his office a man must achieve open and honest success, and if at the same time he feels himself entrusted with large freedom of discretion, the greater his power the less likely is he to abuse it, the more is he nerved and sobered and elevated by it.”⁶

There is not a single form of government that once appeared simple that is not now complex, argued Wilson. In addition to organizational structure, public administration required some measure of formal accounting. Administrators, Wilson explained, are to implement policies but not have decision-making authority like policy makers. Critics of Wilson's perspective argued that administrators are capable of value judgments that boil down to political choices, yet Wilson asserted that administrators simply discern choices using discretion, which he viewed as distinct from political decision-making. "The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study."⁷ Under Wilson's model, administrative functions involved minor, incremental decisions within the big, policy picture painted by Congress. He rationalized that the former, simple functions of government had given way to complexities.

Case in Point: You Decide

You are the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) for a state agency. Due to budget constraints, the state legislature has not authorized pay increases for the past two fiscal years. Several department chairs within your agency have voiced concern about not being able to hire quality staff because of the low base salaries offered by the agency. In addition, longstanding pay inequities exist throughout the agency, with certain departments standing out as hot spots, as they lose personnel to parallel moves (but higher-paying positions) in other agencies. The attrition rate within these offices is becoming a serious human resources problem.

As the legislative session concluded recently, you learned that the state has allocated a three percent raise for personnel, and each CFO must decide how to allocate the funds within their own agencies. How do you propose addressing the recruitment and retention needs within your agency in a way that best suits the agency, as a whole, and also boosts employee morale?

Wilson's essay crafted the environment for the bureaucratic development of the United States: "The principles on which to base a science of administration for America must be principles which have democratic policy very much at heart."⁸ Administration was not a new concept in Europe, which included several countries with established, complex frameworks of public administration, as noted above. Wilson's concept was popularized in the United States in the early 1900s—an era when the merit system and civil service were in their infancy. Contrary to some opinions at the time, Wilson sought input for his public administration model from overseas, reasoning that the United States could borrow what was good and proven and negating what was not.

Richard J. Stillman demonstrated, in his own essay, how public administration has evolved over more than a century since Wilson's writing. Stillman began his explanation with a statement that the study of public administration necessarily involves an antistatist political outlook.⁹ In short, statism is a school of thought that upholds the core organizations within a state, while antistatism is contrary to central government and advocates its limitation. The U.S. Constitution is rife with limitations on government, which serves as evidence of the founders' antistatist leanings. Even Hamilton, who was an avid proponent of a strong central government, recognized the role of

states in thwarting tyranny.¹⁰

The history of public administration has seen significant changes with each new generation. Author Leonard White, whose first textbook on public administration hit the shelves in 1926, is credited with developing “a logical sequence of steps for practicing ‘good’ administration”¹¹ that steered the field for two decades until the Cold War. An acronym for this sequential model is POSDCORB:¹² Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting and Budgeting. In Wilsonian fashion, POSDCORB provided a framework for public administrators to conduct the work of government in a methodical, apolitical manner.

<Figure 1.1 here>

In response to the burgeoning civil service and growing interest in scientific and applied research, Robert Dahl’s influential text in 1947 infused a scientific, analytical approach into the public administration field. Dahl imbued a scientific perspective into addressing what he considered to be three intermingled problems of values, behavior, and culture.¹³ The Reassertion of Democratic Idealism movement – with its politics-forward approach to administration – paralleled the rebellious 1960s and 70s generation in its “cry for relevancy”¹⁴ and fragmented subfields of public administration. The intellectual underpinning of this period of public administration development held that politics were superior to – and separate from – the day-to-day work of the administration.

The end of the Cold War and the call of President Ronald Reagan to rid ourselves of big

government prompted the next phase of public administrative thought, known as the Refounding Movement. As with earlier schools of thought, the Refounding Movement was not a single, universally accepted doctrine; rather, several influential clusters gained traction within the movement. Decades later, the definition and practice of public administration remains far from solidified, and each new generation will likely bring even more variant ideas than those that have gone before.

Weberian Bureaucracy

Max Weber, a noted German sociologist, developed the most comprehensive and classical definition of bureaucracy. According to Weber, bureaucracy is the normal way that legal rational authority appears in institutional form; it holds a central role in forming modern societies. For him, bureaucracy was indispensable to maintaining civilization. Weber identified the need for civil societies to accomplish certain tasks, such as building roads, etc., and identified a moneyed economy as an important ingredient. However, his three most important attributes in his concept of bureaucracy were division of labor, hierarchal order, and impersonal rules.

Criticized are his “ideal type” formulations that do not always apply to every society because they may not represent reality. The Weberian model views bureaucracy as highly efficient, but because human beings are not machines, a purely rational approach would be unattainable in the long term. Weber may have sought to “... turn a civil service into a reliable institution of state control ...”¹⁵ by underscoring the formal aspects of bureaucracy (such as specialization, hierarchy, division of labor). However, overemphasis of rigid structure runs the risk of undervaluing the bureaucracy’s informal dimensions (including human behavior, relationships,

leadership, communication, etc.) in level of importance to performance and efficiency.

Critics of the public sector often note two main problems with bureaucracy: inefficiency and arbitrariness. Inefficiency pertains to administrative systems that operate at less than optimal capacity. Arbitrariness refers to officials acting outside of their jurisdiction, or wielding their authority in a way that offends societal views of justice.

According to Weber, bureaucracy serves as an institutional framework to apply generic rules to specific situations, which ultimately holds government officials accountable to their choices and makes the actions of government just and predictable. Weber contributed much to the understanding of bureaucracy as a social phenomenon. His ideal bureaucracy would legitimately, efficiently, and rationally organize people and work to get things done by the elected leader in a democracy. Bureaucracy, he noted, provides for the role of the individual whose work is interspersed between leader and electorate within a democratic system.

Case in Point: You Decide

Justice means, first, that the government upholds an obligation to treat people equally on the basis of clear rules known in advance. If Chloe and Caleb are driving their respective vehicles 60 miles per hour in a 30-mile-per-hour zone and a law enforcement officer gives a ticket to Caleb, we might assume that the police also should give a ticket to Chloe. After all, traffic citations can supplement a municipality's revenue, so more tickets issued means more fines collected.

Second, a sense of justice compels the government to take into account the special needs

and circumstances of individuals: If Chloe is speeding because she is on her way to the hospital to give birth to a child, while Caleb is speeding just for the thrill of it, then we may share the opinion that the police should ticket Caleb but not Chloe. Justice in the first sense means fairness; in the second it means responsiveness.

Fairness and responsiveness often are in conflict. In the two scenarios mentioned above between Caleb and Chloe, what do you believe is the appropriate response for law enforcement? To what degree should police officers have discretion in such matters? Would you support a “speed trap” set up to catch more drivers breaking the law – however minor – in order to increase fine revenue for the police department?

Wilson argued that the checks and balances inherent in the American constitutional system are reflective of society’s desire to reduce subjectivity and clarify official rule. Taking time to be responsive and conduct activities like congressional oversight and judicial review, inviting participation by interest groups, as well as abiding by formal agency procedures necessarily means that the bureaucracy will sacrifice some of the efficiency that Weber held in such high regard. True, constraints such as these may reduce the efficiency of an agency, but also its arbitrariness.

It is difficult for the government to be both fair and responsive if an inordinate number of rules are imposed to impede bureaucratic discretion under the guise of ensuring fairness. Like the example of Chloe and Caleb above, government officials will have less ability to be responsive – taking into account the particular circumstances of special cases – if their primary goal is fairness

across the board.

Americans fear bureaucracy's use of discretion to guide decisions and actions, and insist on rules, particularly concerning street-level bureaucracies such as law enforcement agencies, public schools, medical institutions, and prisons. Nationally publicized scandals concerning bureaucratic overreach have only served to solidify some of these fears.

Evolution of American Public Administration

Nicholas Henry¹⁶ described how the field of public administration has evolved and gained ground as a scholarly topic in its own right, particularly as new techniques of public administration are discovered and applied. Considering that most academic public administration programs are still housed within departments of political science, the intellectual and institutional influence of political science on the field of public administration remains prevalent.

Paradigm 1: The Politics-Administration Dichotomy, 1900-1926. Public administration arose out of the need to distinguish between policies of the state and the implementation of such policies. The separation of powers – as evidenced by the legislative (Congress), executive (President and bureaucracy), and judicial (courts system) branches of government in the United States – illustrate the distinction. The public service movement of the early 1900s focused on training for professionally prepared citizens to serve as expert specialists in governmental positions.

Paradigm 2: The Principles of Administration, 1927-mid-1900s. As public administrators

became in greater demand for their managerial skills, the focus of the field centered on practical expertise and highly honed skills. The practice of public administration faced backlash as the field progressed toward the mid-20th century, as proponents of scientific analysis went head-to-head with those who sought a more practitioner-oriented approach. Arguments arose as to whether politics and administration could ever be separated or function in unison.

Paradigm 3: Public Administration as Political Science, 1950-1970. Within this phase, governmental bureaucracy was identified as the locus of public administration, but the focus was blurred. There was disagreement concerning whether the focus should be on the mechanics of administration or the philosophical implications. Public administration came to be understood as an arm of political science during this phase.

Paradigm 4: Public Administration as Administrative Science, 1956-1970. This phase roughly coincided with the previous phase, with an emphasis on finding identity within the field of public administration. Organizational theory and social psychology influenced this phase, which also gave rise to the concept of organizational development as it applied to the public sector.

Paradigm 5: Public Administration as Scholarship, 1970-present. The growth of governmental institutes and policy centers have lent credence to public administration in more recent decades, yet there remains a shroud of suspicion among many in academia regarding doctoral programs, in particular, that emphasize practical application over purely theoretical approaches to learning. This shift toward a practitioner focus is evident in competencies identified by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), which include experiential

learning goals.¹⁷

As public administration has evolved as a discipline, in its own right, so have perspectives on the appropriate role of government. Whether one views the government as an active participant in daily societal life or a hands-off entity that needs to keep its distance will influence how that individual perceives the fiscal responsibilities of the public sector. With this distinction in mind, the next chapter will consider key differences between the public and private sectors.

¹ Hamilton, A. *Federalist* 32.

² Ibid, *Federalist* 27.

³ Ibid, *Federalist* 45.

⁴ Ibid, *Federalist* 35.

⁵ Stillman, R., Ed. (2005). *Public administration: Concepts and cases*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. p. 7.

⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁹ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰ *Harvard Law Review*. Defending Federalism: Realizing Publius's Vision. (Dec. 2008). 122(2): 745-766.

¹¹ Ibid, 20.

¹² Gulick, L. (1970). Science, Values, and Public Administration. In *The Administrative Process and Democratic Theory*, ed. Gawthrop, L. C. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

¹³ Dahl, R. (1947). *The Science of Public Administration*.

¹⁴ Ibid, 23.

¹⁵ Gale, S. A., & Hummel, R. P. (2003). A Debt Unpaid – Reinterpreting Max Weber on Bureaucracy. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 25(3), 410.

¹⁶ Henry, N. (1975). Paradigms of Public Administration. *Public Administration Review*. 35(4): 378-386.

¹⁷ NASPAA. *Official Standards & Policies*. Retrieved from: accreditation.naspaa.org/resources/official-standards-policies.