

Rethinking Accountability

(Prepared Remarks for Baruch College Provost's Colloquium)

Professor Melvin Dubnick

Department of Public Administration

Baruch College/CUNY

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This presentation examines the author's work focusing on "rethinking accountability" in public administration. It critiques dominant paradigms, such as rational choice and bureaucratic politics, for their superficial understanding of public sector behavior and provides an overview to the widely cited "accountability framework" developed with Romzek in their 1987 study of the Challenger accident. The framework is based on the idea that public administrators and other decision makers are constantly faced with multiple, diverse and (often) conflicting expectations, and that various forms of accountability develop as a response to such situations. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of public administration, moving beyond simplistic explanations to address the complexities of expectations management and accountability in the public sector.

When John McGarraghy called last October to extend the invitation to present a Provost's Colloquium, I don't believe it took more than a fraction of a second to respond affirmatively. It was a propitious time to call, for I was in the midst of rewriting a manuscript reflecting the most recent manifestation of some work my colleague, Barbara Romzek, and I had been doing on accountability in the public sector.

It was an intellectually exciting time for Barbara and me, for we had just remounted that intellectual horse after a year or so off the saddle as we both took on administrative chores for our respective departments. So much for weak moments, however, for when Provost McGarraghy's staff contacted me about a title for my talk two months later, I found myself incapable of articulating a concise and pithy label for this talk. By then I had emerged from the depths of detail that characterized the research papers and was floating somewhere in the abstract stratosphere of theory building and reflection. Somewhat apologetically, I offered my

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title as the one noted on the invitation: "Rethinking Accountability."

Obviously, this was not a wise thing to do, for it immediately raised concerns among the Provost's staff about the possible lack of focus for my talk. I don't know what specifically bothered them, but over the next two days I received calls asking if I might want to elaborate a bit more on my subject through a sub-title. I declined politely, for this vague title accomplished two things: first, it allow me the flexibility to adapt my talk to the latest manifestation of this ongoing project; and second, the ambiguity of the title and the mystery of what public administration scholarship is all about might attract a larger audience than some narrowed topic would.

Whether you were attracted here this afternoon by mysterious titles, a sense of obligation, or some professor's assignment, I welcome you and hope that you won't regret the time spent listening to the rambling of a public administrationist.

Let me spend some additional time on this title, for it implies a great deal more about what I am intellectually engaged in than you might think. One of the benefits of a two-word title to anything is that it can be neatly broken into two parts, and in this case it reflects two themes running throughout what I do as a scholar.

The first, obviously, is "rethinking" -- a methodological act so simple that it usually needs no further elaboration. However, in my case it does, for the decision to "rethink" some topic or issue is a methodological choice as important to me as the choice of a data collection approach or operationalizing concepts or selecting a survey population. To "rethink" an issue, such as accountability, is a commitment to neither ignore nor assume existing perspectives on the subject. It is a commitment to avoiding reinventing the wheel, as some of my colleagues do when they turn their backs on the literature and instead rely on some rational choice or other assumption-laden model to gain insights into human behavior and institutions. It is also a commitment to a critical approach to existing research

and theories, regardless of how fruitful or dominant they might have been in the past or are at present.

There are a growing number of us -- although not yet enough -- who engage in this "rethinking" effort to study public administration. In a sense, we are a reactionary group, for we are convinced that the reductionism of the recent spate of rational-choice research to emerge among political scientists has been developed at a high cost. For those unfamiliar with the rational choice approach and its close relations (e.g., public choice), it is one which rarely acknowledges either the existence of behavior motivated by non-self-interest factors or the relevance of earlier research on public institutions and behavior. One need only look at the dearth of references to the traditional literature of public administration in Anthony Downs's classic, Inside Bureaucracy, to appreciate this point. There is no doubting the insight and value of Downs' work to the field, but such reductionism relies on -- and eventually promotes -- distorted assumptions about human behavior in general, and bureaucratic behavior in particular.

At the same time, we "rethinkers" are also revolutionaries, for we have little tolerance for the alternative regime of bureaucratic politics which dominated the study of public administration prior to the emergence of the public choice perspective. This is the paradigm most of my peers were weaned on -- a view that allowed for bureaucratic behavior motivated by something other than either laziness or pure self-interest; but the bureaucratic politics paradigm nevertheless stereotyped public administration behavior to reflect the conviction that government employees were nothing more than agents of special interests. Steeped in the pluralist literature that defined mainstream political science for so many years, this perspective relied on an American intellectual tradition dating back at least to the writings of James Madison in the Federalist Papers. A critical rethinking of that perspective, however, indicates that it is as superficial in its insights into bureaucratic behavior as the reductionist rational choice approaches which hardly acknowledge anything that has been written after the publication of Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations.

If there is a substantive conclusion that can be drawn from what I have termed the "rethinking" approach, it is that the fundamental problem with the contemporary study of public administration has been (and remains) the superficiality of the theory that underlies it. As I make this claim, let me stress that by "superficiality" I do not mean to degrade the value and insightfulness of either the rational choice/public choice school or those who have plowed the field of bureaucratic politics for so many years. Instead, I believe these schools -- the dominant paradigms in the study of American bureaucracy at different times over the past four decades -- have relied too much on superficial or surface-level factors in their attempts to understand American public administration. As paradigms, they reflect an inability or unwillingness on the part of many scholars to address the existence of dynamic factors in the field that reflect the richness and variability of human behavior in a public administration context.

Which brings me to another important dimension of this "rethinking" methodology -- the willingness to reconsider

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the "lost" contributions of the past. Put bluntly, a great many scholars schooled in the rational choice and bureaucratic politics approaches are either indifferent to or ignorant of much of the intellectual history of the field. The evidence to support this contention is anecdotal but significant. David Rosenbloom, the editor in chief of Public Administration Review, has commented both publicly and privately about the failure of many authors to consider or account for previous writings on a topic when they submit their manuscripts. And reports from colleagues who interview younger Ph.D. candidates for faculty positions are consistent in their complaints that many are unfamiliar with what is commonly regarded as the classic works in the field. The field of public administration seems to have developed an intellectual culture which assumes that it is enough to know what the "latest" or last findings were on some topic. In the process, a great many brilliant and valuable insights have been lost. One benefit of the so-called "rethinking" methodology is that its critical attitude is informed by an awareness of those classics.

And from that awareness of past works we can find other traditions in the study of public administration which might hold the key to revitalizing the field by offering some dynamic perspectives on our subject. These traditions did not die, nor did they lay dormant while bureaucratic politics and rational choice models were center stage. Rather, some of these traditions thrived outside the fields of political science and public administration in such areas as administrative science, organization theory, and management studies.

Consider, for example, the work of Chester I. Barnard, whose 1937 lectures on cooperative behavior in organizations were a major influence in shaping the work of Herbert Simon and others during the 1940s and 1950s. I regard Barnard as a pioneer in the use of this "rethinking" methodology. In explaining the motivation for focusing his lectures on a theory of cooperative behavior, Barnard noted that nothing in the existing literature of the time treated organization and administrative behavior in a way that corresponded to his experience as an executive. He complained, as I do now,

of the "superficiality" of understanding dominant in the field. "Some excellent work has been done in describing and analyzing the superficial characteristics of organizations," he noted. And such work is important, he argued, "but like descriptive geography with physics, chemistry, geology, and biology missing." (Function of the Executive, p. xxviii) Similarly, he complained as well about the "political" theory of organization behavior that was rooted in legalisms and concerns about the nature of authority and the role of the state. What he sought to offer was a generic theory of organization and executive behavior based on what he called "cooperative systems."

Barnard's work, as I've already mentioned, was very influential in the education of Nobel laureate Herbert Simon. Simon, a public administrationist by training despite his later association with psychology, economics and computer science, relied heavily on Barnard's theoretical insights for his classic work on administrative behavior. From that and related work emerged the administrative sciences, which in turn has

provided the theoretical foundations for the current reemergence of an institutionalist perspective in political science. Although a hopeful sign, this "rediscovered institutionalism" remains at the periphery of political science and has only begun to make an appearance in the field of public administration.

Where the current efforts at "rethinking" in the field of public administration might lead is anyone's guess. My own guess is that it will create a greater demand for theories addressing our need to go deeper than the superficial levels of today's dominant paradigms. It was that kind of rethinking which led Barbara Romzek and me to consider issues surrounding accountability in the public sector. And so I now turn to the second theme of my research -- accountability.

After working for several years on a concept or idea, it is sometimes difficult to remember when it first came to the surface as a topic. Such is the case with our work on "accountability," although Professor Romzek and I know that we began to rethink our views about public

administration after working with a number of midwestern city managers. We both came to the University of Kansas with rather negative and stereotypical views of public sector bureaucrats nurtured by both our educations and the popular culture. After three years of close contact with city managers and other public administrators, however, it became evident that both our attitudes and the assumptions they were based on were not satisfactory. Instead of the self-serving or lazy bureaucrat who was the captured servant of some special interest, we found these people to be driven by a complex of factors not addressed by the existing literature. Yes, there was self-interest involved in their behaviors and attitudes, but there was also quite a bit of what Steven Kelman calls "public spiritedness." (Making Public Policy, Chapter 10) Yes, there were signs of what some have termed "bureau-pathological" behavior, but there was also a dedication to professionalism and the law. Yes, there were indications of potential abuse of power, but there was also pervasive evidence of constant frustrations. The challenge was to try to make sense of all this, for none of the intellectual tools we had at our disposal

seemed to help us understand what we were seeing.

Focusing on a variety of cases featuring city managers, we began to articulate a picture that has become clearer to us over the years -- a picture of administrators facing multiple, diverse, and often contradictory expectations from a variety of legitimate sources. This was not a new discovery, and the literature on street-level bureaucracies (e.g., Lipsky, J. Q. Wilson) was addressing the issues raised by similar situations facing other actors. These authors noted that street-level actors responded to the dilemmas of multiple, diverse, and contradictory expectations through a variety of adaptive mechanisms that were often counterproductive from the perspective of the agency they worked for. As a result, the agency developed organizational and other countermeasures to reassert control over their line workers. Michael Lipsky used the term "accountability policy" to describe some of these countermeasures. (Street-Level Bureaucracy, Chapter 11)

We found two problems with these street-level bureaucracy

approaches. First, while noting that the dilemma of multiple and diverse expectations is inherent in the job of the street-level public administrator, these authors frequently failed to see the impact of similar dilemmas at higher levels in the organization. We were finding the situations no less tolerable for the city manager as it was for the cop on the beat. Second, while acknowledging the development of various adaptive strategies by these street-level public servants, the authors often failed to relate these to the broader institutional context within which public administrators operate.

To help us resolve our conceptual problems, we developed a rather simple framework that would help us think about different types of expectations. We highlighted two major characteristics of expectations: their source and their specificity. Given the wide range of expectation sources, we made a simple distinction between those generated from within and outside the agency being studied. Regarding specificity, we worked on the

assumption that individual expectations can be placed on a continuum ranging from high to low. At the high end are specific and detailed expectations, while at the low end are the vague and ambiguous demands placed on government bureaucrats at all levels. Using these two dimensions, we developed a reasonably comprehensive matrix that established four types of expectations: political (external, low specificity), legal (external, high specificity), bureaucratic (external, high specificity), and professional (internal, low specificity). At the simplest level, we contended that the dilemma facing most public administrators is their need to respond to or contend with simultaneous and equally legitimate expectations derived from each of these categories.

Our case studies led us to the next logical step in this theory-building process, for it was evident that a central dynamic in public administration is found in effort to manage or control these various expectations. The management of expectations became a major theme in our work, and expectations soon emerged as the core

concept for our theory of accountability. Relying on the work of Barnard, Lasswell and Kaplan, Parsons, and (more recently) Giddens, we established expectations as the central driving force behind public administrative behavior. We posit that the dilemma of multiple, diverse, and contradictory expectations is inherent to the public sector and is probably at the heart of the difference between public and private sector organizations and behaviors. It is the public administrator's job to contend with these expectations, and this is accomplished through a variety of individual and organizational mechanisms and strategies. These mechanisms and strategies do not operate in a vacuum, however; rather, they reflect the institutional context we have termed "accountability systems."

We do not use the term "institutions" lightly here. Instead, we adopt the institutionalist perspective of James March and Johan Olsen and others which regards institutions as the collection of rules, repertoires, routines, and similar means through which behavior is

shaped and informed. Our expectations matrix provided us with a typology of accountability system institutions, and we soon began discussing political, legal, bureaucratic, and professional accountability systems as the contextual basis for managing expectations. Put in brief form, our argument is relatively simple:

- First, it is the inherent condition of public administration that it constantly faces multiple, diverse and often contradictory expectations from a variety of sources having variable impacts on administrators and their agencies.

- Second, the ongoing effort to contend with the situations and dilemmas created by multiple, diverse, and contradictory expectations is manifest in various individual and organizational mechanisms and strategies.

- Third, these mechanisms and strategies, in turn, are shaped and directed by the institutional context of four major accountability systems, reflecting legal, political, bureaucratic, and professional institutions.

- Fourth, accountability systems have two roles to

play in public administration depending on who is able to use them to manage expectations of the bureaucracy. On the one hand, they can be used by external actors as a means for controlling the work of public administrators and their agencies; on the other hand, public administrators themselves can use them to help them contend with the dilemma posed by multiple, diverse, and contradictory expectations.

These were the basics for our working model of accountability systems. They provided us with an instrument we could use to try to make sense of the complex world of public administration, and we decided to use it as often as possible to see how it works. In this sense, we were subject to what Abraham Kaplan called the "law of the instrument" in social science research: "Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding." (The Conduct of Inquiry, p. 28) And pound away we did.

The tragedy of the Challenger accident provided us with our first major test of our model, not because of its

obvious visibility, but because there were many formal and informal attempts to try to explain what happened on the morning of January 21, 1986. Two major explanations eventually emerged from the Rogers Commission, one targeting the technical causes of the Challenger accident and the other faulting the organizational problems that set the stage for that disaster. Our explanation, published in early 1987, provided an alternative view that drew attention to the institutional problems that plagued NASA and the shuttle program. Our analysis contended that the evidence indicated a distortion of institutional accountability systems that led to an inappropriate decision to launch. The story is horribly simple:

In its "golden years," NASA was organized and managed in a way that gave considerable deference to the engineers and scientists in the major programs. The task of NASA's managers was to create a working context within which the professional technicians could do their job and help the agency achieve its touted goal of placing an American on the moon before the end of the 1960s. In our terms, NASA was

organized to give priority to professional accountability standards. The political, legal, and bureaucratic systems were in place and functioning, but the agency operated in a manner that buffered the technicians from outside interference. James Webb, the legendary administrator of NASA during the golden years, was a master at managing accountability systems.

By the middle 1980s, the golden years were a thing of the past, and NASA's management was faced with constant budgetary and political pressures that had to be handled through the development and massaging of bureaucratic and political institutions. The goal of the shuttle project was to develop a self-sustaining and commercially viable program in which private users would be able to purchase payload space on regularly scheduled missions. In this context, the role of the professional technicians was becoming secondary to the role of the bureaucratic manager. Furthermore, NASA's top administrators found themselves constantly engaged in "selling" the agency's program to the outside

world rather than buffering the professionals from external pressures.

Such was the situation when the decision to launch had to be made on the evening of January 20, and details provided by the Rogers Commission and media reports indicate that the doubts of the technicians were brushed aside by NASA's managers in light of both bureaucratic and political pressures. In hindsight, it was a time when deference should have been given to the professional accountability system that was once so strong in NASA.

Our analysis of the Challenger accident seemed to strike a chord in the field, for we received honors as well as accolades for our analysis. But we noticed that the hammer we were using -- our model of accountability systems -- needed to be replaced by one forged with stronger theory and conceptual metals. Writing a textbook based on the model helped us articulate some of the more ambiguous points of the model, especially the variety of sources for expectations that public administrators face.

Our more recent efforts have taken three directions. The first is the continued application of the model to relevant cases. The Rodney King incident in Los Angeles was the subject of a manuscript that is now under consideration by a journal. In that study, we found a case of the NASA situation turned on its head. Like James Webb, Daryl Gates was an effective manager of agency expectations, buffering his troops from outside pressures. In this instance, however, the protected behavior was hardly worthy of such protection. The Christopher Commission Report advocated steps to change that situation, including a call for Gates' resignation and changes in the institutional arrangements that promoted this and similar incidents.

Similarly. I have attempted to apply to framework to the recent events at CCNY that led to the tragic deaths of eleven people. I was recently invited to conduct a discussion of that incident for a training class for CUNY security officers on January 24 and found the framework to helpful in understanding what took place. However, as the sweeping conclusions of

the Mollen Report indicate, this is not a neatly wrapped situation where blame can be assigned to one individual or agency. A more detailed analysis is required.

A second direction for our research is empirical, for we are biting at the bit to move our applications away from tragedies and toward the day-to-day operations of government agencies. In this regard we are developing survey instruments based on the idea of getting an accountability "fix" on a group of agencies and their personnel. My colleague, Jerry Mitchell, has led the way on this with studies of accountability systems in public authorities.

His survey covers thousands of managers in public authorities throughout the nation, and what he has discovered thus far is that bureaucratic accountability demands take priority for most authority managers. This finding is contrary to the conventional wisdom that bondholders and fiduciary obligations constitute the tail that wags the public authority dog.

At this point we are concentrating on the problems of operationalizing our concepts and developing appropriate measures. But in the process we find ourselves working in a third direction -- toward a more detailed elaboration of a theory of accountability.

The challenge of empirically testing some of our ideas has, in short, taken us back to the rethinking stage. Taking a critical approach to our own work, we have reconsidered basic concepts and searched out their roots. A paper on the centrality of expectations in American public administration is one product of this effort, and it will soon be published in a research annual. On a broader scale of theory development, I have started to address issues related to the place of accountability systems in contexts other than the American political system. What is emerging is a view of accountability as a "modern" institution rather than a "democratic" or "capitalistic" institution.

There is no telling where any of these three paths -- case study applications, empirical studies, and theory

development -- will lead us. The bottom line for all this work, however, must be a better understanding and appreciation of American public administration. We do not intend to become apologists for the bureaucracy or the bureaucratic state, but our approach and framework do stand as alternatives to the superficiality of simple explanations and knee-jerk condemnations of public administrators. Like Dorothy on the road to Oz, we began our excursion in Kansas and we expect to pick up some friends and enemies along the way on each road. In the end, however, our commitment remains to a reaching better understanding of the public sector and what makes it tick.



Office of the Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs

Baruch College
The City University of New York
17 Lexington Avenue / Box 514
New York, New York 10010
212 387-1100

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Professor Melvin Dubnick
Department of Public Administration
Box 336

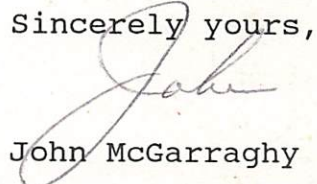
Dear Mel:

This is just a brief note to confirm the date of February 13th for the Provost's Colloquium at which you have graciously agreed to speak. As I told you when we talked, I am delighted that you are willing to make a presentation at that time.

Would you please contact Carmen Pedrogo in December to give her the title of your presentation and to go over the arrangements that you would like to have for the colloquium. You should tell her who you would like to introduce you at that event.

I know that the topic which we discussed will be of very great interest to the Baruch community.

Sincerely yours,



John McGarraghy

/dd

cc: Carmen Pedrogo