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The False Promises of Accountability

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It is always interesting to speculate how future generations will look upon and judge our age. The field of public administration is particularly good at characterizing and judging the past and in doing so we usually highlight some particular movement or theme that dominated a certain period in our history. We tend to focus our assessments of the past in terms of various kinds of reform movements, and thus we make movements like the Civil Service Reform and other Progressive Era reforms central to our discussions of the past. More recently we have applied the labels of New Public Management and Reinventing Government to designate the main thrust of what is taken place in public administration over the past quarter-century.

If I were asked to provide a label that would best characterize what's been taking place not only in our field but also in the general realm of what we now call 'governance', I would quickly respond with one word: accountability. To some extent this would be a reflection of my own obsession with this concept over the past three decades, but I think I'd be able to make a pretty powerful case for the argument that this particular term has become a pervasive presence in almost every discussion of contemporary governance. All you need to do is listen to a daily news broadcast or Google the term to realize just how central this one particular word it is in our discussions about politics, government and administration. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that at least in a nominal way, we have entered the "age of accountability".

It might be assumed that for someone like me who's been so involved in the study of accountability all this attention to my subject would be welcomed news. But in fact quite the opposite is true. For what passes as accountability in most discussions today is merely meaningless rhetorical babble for the most part, and in those instances where a serious attempt is made to try to use so-called accountability to achieve some positive objective, one can only point to failures – or much worse. That's where I want to focus our attention today.

But first let me talk briefly about the use of accountability in today's political rhetoric. In my research I have found it useful to make a distinction between accountability-the-word and accountability-the-concept.

As any student of language will tell you, words do more than merely represent things. They are themselves meaningful signs that generate a response from a reader or from an audience. Some words are, of course, more potent than others in this respect. My colleague Dominic Bearfield, for instance, has been examining the powerful negative responses generated by the word "patronage" not only in our political culture but also within the academic community. Terms like that have been demonized over time. In a similar way, accountability has taken on a much more positive aura. Along with the synonyms with which it is generally associated – words like responsibility, fidelity, answerability – it has become a symbol of good behavior or, especially when applied to those in government and politics. In a recent paper I've even made the case for accountability having taken on "iconic" status, where the very presence of the word in legislation or a political document generates a favorable response to the item and its

author. But in many cases, once you get passed the surface you find that there's no there there --there's nothing behind the icon but meaningless rhetoric.

If that was the most significant problem to emerge from our embrace of accountability, I would not be so concerned. But something more serious has happened to the idea of accountability, for it developed into something of an assumed universal solution for some of the most intractable problems of modern governance. Are you seeking to make government more open and democratic? Make public officials more accountable. Do you want to end corruption and assure an ethical government? What's required is more accountability. Do you want justice from the abuses you suffered under previous regimes? Then you need more accountability.

And most relevant to the people gathered at this meeting, do you want get more and better performance from government agencies and contractors? What you need, my friend is a good dose of the elixir we call accountability.

These are just four among the many promises of accountability, and their widespread acceptance and application does not seem to stand up under careful scrutiny. The fact that we have turned accountability into a promiscuous instrument indicates that we have lost sight of the important contribution accountability has made to modern governance. The historical roots and traditional role of accountability was not a more democratic or just or ethical or efficient government. Rather, it emerged in the late Middle Ages as the moral foundation for secular rule, and eventually the rule of law that has made the modern state in all its forms -- from democracy to totalitarianism -- possible. Commitment to the rule of law is the one true promise that accountability was designed to keep. The others, I would argue, are the false promises of accountability that need to be reconsidered.

What do I mean when I label these the false promises of accountability? Put simply, there is little evidence to support the assumption implied in each promise that accountability is relevant to any of these objectives. I've been spending good deal of my time examining each of these relationships, and quite frankly I am coming to the conclusion that accountability is not only unable to fulfill those promises but is also generating new problems by shifting the focus and resources of governance away from it's policy and programmatic objectives and toward the unproductive demands of poorly designed and ill informed accountability schemes.

What is worse than these distortions and distractions for governance -- and what we are seeing with much too great frequency -- are the dysfunctional behaviors generated by the mechanisms put in place to try to achieve these false promises of accountability. Given the scope and reach of these promises, I will only mention two associated with the promise of performance. For those of us old enough to recall the weekly body count reports published each week by the Pentagon, the moral outrage many of us felt at the time still lingers. And I would argue that the images we all saw from the Abu Ghraib prison are merely the evidence of the amoral and immoral behaviors and choices produce by management approaches designed under the illusion that accountability can somehow improve performance. Yes, these are extreme cases -- or at least that is what we keep telling ourselves. But I believe they are also indicative of the fundamental flaws and failures inherent in our commitment to the false promises of accountability. It is time to admit that old Pogo was right -- we have met the enemy and they is us. It is time to reconsider those basic assumptions that drive the age of accountability-- to at least put them to the test both empirically and morally. As an association devoted to the advancement of the art and science of governance, it is the least we can do.