

the sum of the parts: that most of the blessings each of us enjoys derive from our good fortune in being born of nurturing parents into a productive society that has several hundred years of effective democratic government—government that has been vigorously responsive to social and human needs. They are oblivious to the corruption, denial of human rights and violence (whether sparked by ethnicity or greed) that we can observe wherever government is undemocratic, incompetent, or weak.

I have no magic formula to counter the cynicism that our society expresses today about its own democratic institutions. I can only repeat a forecast that Vic Thompson and I made in our introduction to the new edition of *Public Administration*, issued a couple of years ago:

“The pendulum has swung before, and it will swing again. The attractions of libertarianism, which views each human being as ensconced in a shell of isolation, will fade in the face of the world’s great social problems of population, of environment, of energy, of peace. We will learn again that we must live with each other, all jostled together on this little planet; and we will learn that government plays an essential and honorable role in the endeavor.

“No lesson needs so much to be taught today as the lesson that democracy requires politics, and that human society requires social programs and effective administration of these programs. Government cannot be managed successfully by cynics. It must be managed by people who believe in its purposes and possibilities and whose beliefs are supported by

solid, realistic knowledge and understanding.”

This gathering, the American Society for Public Administration, was formed to foster the effective government and public management our society needs. In the present climate of opinion, its function is more important than ever before. I am proud to have been present at its founding, and to have played a small part in its early history.

That is why I am so moved by this mark of esteem from the members of ASPA, and by this new tie with Dwight Waldo, who knew from the outset that public policy and public management had to hold continual conversation with each other.

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Oklahoma City

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The April 19 attack on federal employees and their children at the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City was a shocking crime that destroyed, ruined, and damaged many lives. It belatedly sensitized many people to the stupidity of bureaucrat-bashing. President Bill Clinton declared that the bombing was an attack on the United States itself. Soon thereafter, former President George Bush pointedly reminded the National Rifle Association that federal employees are a representation of all Americans: They are our neighbors, friends, and relatives.

One would think that these statements and the horror of the bombing would give mainstream, ostensibly decent people pause to reconsider their mindless and dangerous belittling of public employees. Unfortunately, some still

have not gotten the point. For instance, post-Oklahoma City, a domestic automobile company continued to run an ad featuring a federal accountant who could neither perform basic arithmetic nor avoid a ridiculously large overpayment. A magazine ad for vodka depicts Washington, DC, as “absolutely” tied up in red tape. America’s public servants and their supporters can send such companies a clear economic message by avoiding their products.

A much larger part of the same problem is far more difficult to tackle. Years of verbal sniping at public employees by politicians and the media have fostered a “culture of blame” that leads a frightening number of citizens to scapegoat public employees for their personal disappointments. This culture of blame is not merely a matter of low ratings for government

in the ubiquitous public opinion polls. It represents a shift in popular attitudes that pervades political discussion and shapes the image of government and those who serve in it. It is a volatile context in which simple political rhetoric and innocent but harsh words stated on TV and radio feed irrationality. It is a structure built on a foundation of myths, stereotypes, and half-truths. Whether “inside the beltway” or beyond, the public service becomes synonymous with ineptness, incompetence, and self-interest.

There is nothing inevitable about this view of government. A more positive outlook on the public service existed earlier in our history as well as in the 1960s. Government was viewed as a means for improving the economy, society, and world. Suspicion and distrust emerged in the 1970s, fueled by presidents’ and other politicians’ specious claims that “but for” bureaucracy they could solve all our problems. A cultural line was crossed: distrust turned to blame and individuals began attributing their personal economic and family difficulties to government. The endless anti-Washing-

ton, anti-government rhetoric of the Carter and Reagan administrations strengthened the view that government is the preeminent problem rather than a collective endeavor to promote the public interest. The Clinton administration's quest for a government that "works better and costs less" fosters the same mood. Promoters of the National Performance Review have not been content to explain the merits of their proposed reforms. They have belabored *ad nauseam* examples of administrative ineptitude ranging from ashtrays and steam traps to complex systems for personnel and accountability. How is one to think well of federal employees when told incessantly that there are at least 272,000 of them who are either merely superfluous or, worse, an efficiency-clogging drain on the nation's economy? Special interest groups, like advertisers, also attack the public service to sell their points. Harry and Louise raised the specter of anonymous bureaucrats making critical deci-

sions about our personal health care. Indeed, public service bashing is "good" politics. Don't directly cut program, highly paid pollsters and campaign strategists tell the newly elected Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, attack the bureaucracies that implement them instead. People will fight for the program they like, but few will buck the prevailing antibureaucracy mood to defend the public servants who implement them. Meanwhile, pollsters report confidence and trust in government are at an all time low.

Unfortunately, members of the public administration community have inadvertently contributed to the culture of blame. Scholars of Nobel stature (and less) construct theories on assumptions that the typical bureaucrat is a self-interested, budget maximizing actor whose basic mode of operation is to rip-off the public and its elected and politically appointed leaders by misleading and

shirking. Their admittedly over simplified theoretical models are too often communicated to the general public by pundits and journalists who treat them as descriptively accurate. Administrative reformers pay lip service to the idea that public administrators are good people trapped in bad systems, but they sell their ideas by promising huge personnel cut-backs. On occasion, ordinary public servants also voice criticism of the public service when their frustrations might better be directed to legislators and political executives.

As *PAR's* editors and friends of public administrators, we wish we could offer prescriptions to abate the destructiveness of the culture of blame. Oklahoma City makes the danger and cost crystal clear. We must find ways to ensure that public servants are not targeted for either harm or derision in the popular culture.

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