CHALLENGES TO AMERICAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: COMPLEXITY, BUREAUCRATIZATION, AND THE CULTURE OF DISTRUST

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ABSTRACT

In the United States, the development of public administration has depended on its different historic challenges. There have been periods characterized by much contemplation of "why things don't work," when one hears more about the problems of the field than about solutions. In contrast, solutions become the center of discussions during periods of optimism. Public Administration in the United States has seemingly entered an era of reform over the past decade. Such an era is characterized by a major change in attitute, particuarly towards two challenges, those of complexity and bureaucratization. The treatment of these challenges has gone

from pessimistic views of the mid-1970s to the current more proactive approaches. Public administration in the United States has always had to contend with its low level of legitimacy, but every so often the level of distrust would decrease enough for the nation's leaders to carry out needed reforms. Such a time is approaching as public administrators in the United States prepare to take on the challenges of complexity and bureaucratization. To do so effectivelly, however, requires a greater level degree of trust than is now forthcoming from the public. Until the cultural challenge is confronted, all other efforts are likely to fail. Looking at how the other challenges have been transformed can help us underestand what it takes to transform a challenge from an obstacle into a target for change. Less optimistically, it may be necessary to wait until the culture evolves on its own.

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INTRODUCTION

In historical terms, the task of discussing the "challenges" facing American public administration is itself a challenge with significant implications and burdens if accomplished too successfully. Not surprisingly, it is a task undertaken by many over the past century, for the "challenges" of government administration have been -- and remain -- the salient and defining factors in the development of American bureaucracies.

In lieu of statist or strong colonial traditions, American public administration emerges somewhat pragmatically. describes the creation of public administrative institutions in the United States as a "chinking in" process, a reflection of American "statelessness" and the consequent lack of a coherent theory to legitimize or direct the creation of administrative institutions. Thus, for students of the field the key to "making sense" of American public administration has been found in uncovering the

various challenges facing each generation of government administrators.

In several cases, the implications of this "uncovering challenges" approach have proven as significant as the effort itself. Those who succeed in capturing the attention of the field by effectively articulating those challenges do more than merely describe the situation facing public administration. considerable degree they help define those challenges, and thus have had a hand in reshaping the very agenda of the field. In fact, one can argue that the major contributions to the field over the past century have been generated more by those who conceptualized the challenges rather than those who developed possible solutions.

Initially, the challenges were perceived as institutional. We can begin (as most do) with Woodrow Wilson. Wilson's essay "The Study of Administration"(2) is most notable for its call for Americans to turn their attention to the "business side" of government: "[...] we have reached a time when administration study and creation are imperatively necessary to the well-being of our governments saddled with the habits of a long period of constitution-making." Frank J. Goodnow (1900) redefined the challenge in more normative terms, positing the need to establish harmonious institutional relationships where administration would reflect state will rather than the political will of those empowered to execute the law. For both men, the challenge was to create distinct institutions reflecting the unique functions of administrative tasks in government. (3)

For Federick Taylor, the challenges facing American public (and private) administration were technical in nature and had to do with applying scientific methods and principles to the design and operations of public organizations. Leonard White, Luther Gulick, and others saw public administration as a managerial challenge,

No student of American public administration has ever denied that all too obvious fact that the world is a complex place. However, it is just as obvious that complexity has not been the common operating assumption of modern government administration. Whatever success has been achieved in modern public administration -- or, for that matter, in modern society -- owes much to the human capacity to organize, simplify, and reduce perceived reality to manageable size and forms. Put bluntly, our typical approach to complexity has been indifference, intentional ignorance, or illusion. (15)

To appreciate the nature of the complexity challenge, we need to understand its relationship to modernity. Modernity is more than a label applied to historical periods⁽¹⁶⁾ or a cultural movement. In sociological terms, modernity is an approach to reality involving the ability to conceptually reconfigure social time and space relationships. Anthony Giddens describes this as a twofold process: first, the "disembedding of social systems" from their location in time and space; and second, "the reflexive ordering and reordering of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups." Thus, the "modern" approach to dealing with complexity was to conceptually avoid, ignore, or reconfigure it into simpler, more manageable forms.

Practitioners of American public administration have been no less "modern" than any other group of professionals in accepting this approach and its associated tactics. With few exceptions, the intellectual and practical history of American public administration can be described as a continuous search for simplifying models and operating principles that cover-up or ignore the complex reality being confronted on a daily basis. (19) Only through such purposeful distortions of reality have we been able to make the complex world somewhat manageable. We have paid a heavy price for this

"manageability", for through these means we have also "bureaucratized" our social and political worlds⁽²⁰⁾ and thus made the real world more like the distorting models we have used to create the illusion of simplicity (see discussion below). In other words, until recently the challenges of complexity were less important than the challenges of bureaucratization that emerged from our efforts to deal with complexity!

The publication of Pressman and Wildavsky's *Implementation* in 1973 threw a scholarly spotlight on the issue of complexity in American public administration. Although phrased in terms of program implementation studies, the concern for complexity quickly turned into an intellectual "growth industry" within less than a decade. (21) More direct attention to complexity was offered in 1975 by a Berkeley colleague of Pressman and Wildavsky, Todd R. La Porte. His edited volume on *Organized Social Complexity* provided the first substantial studies of the challenges complexity posed for the public sector.

The picture of complexity offered by contributors to the La Porte volume provides a classic example of a pre-reformist perspective of a public administration challenge. While preoccupied with elaborating a conceptualization of complexity and describing its impact on public sector endeavors, many of the authors also addressed the issue of what might be done to meet the challenges posed by this powerful force. As with those who studied program and policy implementation, the prescriptions were few and the prognosis for any real change was negative. (23)

The pessimism accompanying this early work on the complexity challenge to American public administration had its roots in the way complexity was defined. In his introductory essay, La Porte provided a generic function for the concept of complexity, viewing it as a product of three structural factors: the

number of component parts of a system; the degree to which those components varied (i.e., differentiation); and the level of interdependence in the relations among the components. (24)

This structural definition of complexity had three important limits. First, it posited a view of complexity that stressed simplicity as its opposite. As we will see, complexity ca be perceived in less structural terms that emphasizes its relationship to both chaos and order.

Second, this definition tended to associate the complexity of a system with its size. Thus, a system was assumed to be complex if it involved a large number of interacting and highly differentiated parts. It did not allow for the possibility that such large systems might be simple or that small systems might be complex. Third and relatedly, this explication of complexity lacked a means for capturing the dynamical complexities that emerge even within small systems.

As a structural problem, the challenge of complexity seemed resistant to solutions. It supported views that stressed the dismal, "swamp"-like nature of public sector work. Thus, a complex environment of multiple, diverse, and often conflicting expectations the jobs of public managers difficult, if not impossible. More ominous was Perrow's conclusion that tightly-coupled complex systems were more accident prone, a finding based on incidents such as Three-Mile Island but tragically confirmed by the *Challenger* disaster. The possibility of effectively dealing with these structural complexities -- through traditional structural reform and procedural simplifications -- remains questionable. Even where such reforms are attempted, the result is typically an increase in the structural complexity of government and bureaucratization (see below).

A good deal more attention has been paid to the concept of complexity in the years since La Porte's groundbreaking volume was published. The attention has not come from students of public administration, however, but from a cast of diverse scholars who are consciously establishing a new "science of complexity." (32) Reflecting an emerging sense that efforts to avoid dealing directly with complexity are generating more problems than solutions, these scholars have launched a major challenge to the dominant paradigm in the very sciences which created and nurtured This new field of simplifying and reductionist mind-sets. complexity studies has engaged some of the best and brightest from the worlds of physics, biology, and the social and anthropological sciences. Many of the scientists who spent decades searching for the assumed underlying simplicity of the world -- whether the physicists' ultimate particle(33) or economists' primum mobile⁽³⁴⁾ -- are now engaged in attempting to confront Their objective is nothing less than complexity head on. reorganizing the way we approach and deal with reality. (35)

What these scholars have added to our understanding of complexity is the idea that the dynamics of complexity are as important as its structural features. Thus, it is not the component parts of a system alone that define the level of complexity, but also how they relate among themselves. (36) This perspective means that complexity is more than merely the opposite of simplicity. It is also a type of relationship among components that exists in a range between total orderliness (absolutely fixed relations) and chaos (completely random relations). (37)

Second, while size may be a factor in creating complexity, a more significant variable is the extent to which relationships within a system are non-linear. Thus, a large system involving linear relationships can be regarded as relatively simple, while a small system characterized by non-linearity can be extremely complex.

The transformation of perceiving complexity as a dynamical problem has had a significant impact on how the challenge of complexity is approached in public administration. A more optimistic view was able to emerge and the emphasis on structure was replaced with an emphasis on process. That transformation did not result directly from a reading of the new literature on complexity, but came instead through exposure to the popular management literature of the 1980's.

American public administrators have always looked to the private sector for management models and fresh ideas. Change through management has always been more attractive than structural change which often was shaped by political considerations. And it was during the early 1980's that the popular management literature began to offer prescriptions for dealing with the growing complexities of the constantly changing global corporate marketplace. Underlying the new management approaches, including total quality management, was the idea of constant monitoring and continuous adaptation to dynamically complex environments. (40)

Abstractly, at least, the efforts to deal managerially with the challenge of complexity have the potential of transforming American public administration. Other things being equal, it is possible that a new public management philosophy -- adapted from the TQM and related literature⁽⁴¹⁾ -- might emerge in the field. There is certainly evidence that these new management approaches are attracting attention and being applied in a variety of governmental context. (42) Regardless of the degree to which these efforts succeed, the fact that the challenge of complexity is being confronted at all indicates a major shift in American public administration that will have implications for decades to come.

THE BUREAUCRATIZATION CHALLENGE

The bureaucratization challenge is the more recognizable of the two examined here. As noted previously, this challenge can be traced to efforts made to deal with the growing complexity of American public administration.

As a distinctively "modern" tools, bureaucracies have been relied upon to contend with the uncertainties of a complex world. In very general terms, they accomplish three closely related tasks. First, they are used as means for reducing the uncertainty associated with operating in complex environments. Second, they accomplish this feat, in part, through their capacity to impose some form of order -- real or artificial -- in the face of relative chaos. Third, through appropriate designs, they are also used to constrain and guide the very power their orderliness unleashes.

These are still highly desirable functions which bureaucratic forms perform quite well. The continued strength of the bureaucratic form over the decades has been its usefulness as source of solutions to administrative problems. Critics may point out all the logical fallacies and contradictions in the bureaucratic model, but practitioners are bound to be more interested in what works. Thus, what has sustained the bureaucratic approach to dealing with complexity is the very same thing that favored its original emergence as the dominant organizational tool of the modern era. "The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization," observed Max Weber, "has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization." (43) That superiority in dealing with large, complex problems is found in the bureaucratic organization's ability to provide a stabilized and simplified environment through which administrative tasks could

be carried out. The significant productive capacities of bureaucratic organizations come from their abilities to reshape and/or control the problematic situation.

However, it is the consequences of using this tool — the phenomena we term "bureaucratization" — that have grown increasingly bothersome on a number of levels. From at least the 1960's onward, the literature of American public administration has bemoaned the spread of bureaucratization, especially as it impacted upon individuals, (44) social relations, (45) values and culture, (46) and the constitutional structures of government. (47) Thus, the articulation of the bureaucratization challenge was fully developed by the early 1980's.

The nature of the challenge as then perceived, however, did not foster actions to confront the problems generated by bureaucratization. Calls for more humane organization⁽⁴⁸⁾ were regarded as little more than the ranting of academic radicals. The challenge was to survive bureaucratization rather than to change it.

This situation had changed by the early 1990's as a "debureaucratization movement" began to evolve from three distinct political strands that generated what can loosely be designated as "theories" of bureaucratic reform. In order of their emergence o the intellectual scene, they include: the *minimal-state theory*, which is closely associated with the administrative strategies used by the Reagan Administration; the *deregulating government* approach, which has found favor among certain academics and leaders in the public administration community, including members of the Volcker and Winter commissions; and the *reinventing government* perspective, which has received considerable attention in the media and has attracted an important following among many public sector professionals and politicians.

The label "minimal statism" is applied to a group of similar schools of thought that have their roots in the work of Frederick A. Hayek and Milton Friedman and draw intellectual sustenance from the writings of William A. Niskanen, (49) Gordon Tullock, (50) Nobel laureate James M. Buchanan, and other members of the respected "public choice" school. (52)

Robert Nozick, a leading advocate of the minimal-state perspective, calls for a government with limited functions: "protecting all citizens against violence, theft, and fraud, and [...] the enforcement of contracts." (53) To the extent that an administrative theory emerges from this more general outlook (I shall call its adherents "Minimalists"), it is clearly antibureaucratic and focuses on the need for adopting the practices of modern private sector corporate management to public sector endeavors. This "managerialism" involved empowering agency heads by forcing them to contend with a competitive, rather than merely administrative, environment.

In a competitive situation, they had to meet prevailing expectations outside their control. They had to keep on their toes. They could not afford to relax; otherwise somebody else might steal a march on them. They could never feel completely secure. They had to keep running just to stay in the same place. To advance, they had to be better and do better. They had to keep up with improvements and, more importantly, they had to try to be first with improvements. They had every incentive to police themselves, improve their own functioning and adjust to changing conditions. (54)

During the Reagan Administration, this perspective was implemented through a variety of tools seeking "diminished expectations of government; an atmosphere of budgetary constraint and centralized control of decision making; a leaner and more responsive political establishment; and [a] focus on a small number of central objectives deemed to be of overriding national

importance." ⁽⁵⁵⁾ In tandem with these objectives, Reagan Administration officials used management techniques and policies aimed at minimizing the size and role of career administrators in the federal service. ⁽⁵⁶⁾ "President Reagan's essentially negative view of government intervention," conclude Ingraham and Rosenbloom, "included an equally negative view of the public service." ⁽⁵⁷⁾

In contrast to the Minimalist position are the views reflected in James Q. Wilson's call for "deregulating" government. (58) Contrary to the conventional view that the governmental problem is rooted in insufficient control and oversight, the idea underlying this approach is that the real problem is too many controls and constraints. Addressing the need for better performance among federal agencies, the 1989 report of the National Commission on the Public Service (the Volcker Commission) argues that:

Once presidential choices are made [...], the decisions should be implemented in the federal departments and agencies, where the President's own appointees and government's top career managers must have both authority and responsibility. The jobs will be done well or poorly depending on their competence, morale, and commitment, not on the rules and reporting requirements imposed by the White House staff, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Office of Personnel Management (OPM). (59)

Deregulating government agencies from overintrusive White House control is only one dimension of the problem adherents to this approach seek to redress. They have been equally critical of congressional micromanagement and judicial interference. Wilson observes that, among all advanced nations, the United States seems to have among the most "rule-bound" bureaucracies. This he attributes to the American character and public mores, as well as to the distinctive institutional context within which our government agencies must operate. While none advocates a

complete relaxation of all constraints, adherents to this view (I will use the term "Deregulators") regard the elimination of some and loosening of others as critical to improving government performance.

The third "theory" in this emerging movement -- reinventing government -- lacks the academic underpinnings of the others, and in fact tends to cite authors from other approaches approvingly. While drawing its theoretical rationalizations from the advocates of minimal statism and deregulating government, the "Reinventors" take their true inspiration from the observed experience of practitioners. From such a composite theory and practice, a journalist (David Osborne) and a former city manager (Ted Gaebler) have coauthored the bible of this approach, *Reinventing Government*. (63)

The popularity of this book and similar works⁽⁶⁴⁾ was one of the most visible signs that this practitioner-based movement was widespread and had gained momentum in recent years. It would be an understatement to suggest that the book was well received in all the right places. Given their use of dozens of case studies drawn from state and local governments, it is not surprising the work found a receptive audience among practitioners of those levels. As Jonathan Walters reports, it is apparent that "lots of state and local officials are getting plenty done, [and] that 'reinvention,' by whatever name is going on all over the country."⁽⁶⁵⁾ Arguments and ideas posited by Osborne and Gaebler had the enthusiastic endorsement of Governor Bill Clinton, and Osborne has played a central advisory role in Vice President Gore's National Performance Review (NPR) effort.

In many respects, these three approaches to government reform would seem better described as ideological alternatives than as the basis for a single political movement. The minimal-state position is clearly anti-government by birth and commitment. (66) The reinventing literature and its advocates, in contrast, show no reluctance touting the virtues of greater reliance on government once it is reconfigured into "reinvented" forms. The Deregulators tend to be more centrist, advocating the effective government where it can be most appropriately used.

Their differences are just as evident in the strategies each would employ to promote administrative reform. Placed aside each other, they offer three distinct strategic options: push, release, and pull. The Minimalists regard a forceful "push" into the abyss of budget and personnel cuts as the only effective means for bringing about the kind of changes that are needed in government. For theoretical justification of this strategy, they cite the works of Niskanen and others who focus on the self-interested behavior of bureaucrats. As budget minimizers, bureaucrats thrive in times of plenty. But in the face of significant cuts they would be forced to develop new and creative means of maintaining whatever resources they now have. The result, according to this logic, will be a "leaner and meaner" government. And for proof, the Minimalists point with pride the major advances in administrative innovations made by practitioners at all levels of government under the fiscal stress of the 1970's and 1980's.

The Deregulators take a strategic approach that calls for releasing administrators from the multiple constraints that have increasingly bound them. Greater "flexibility" is the Deregulators' call to arms in public personnel management. Let administrators do what they can do best, is the underlying theme. In this regard, Wilson anticipates the question of what should happen if the bureaucracy, operating free of arbitrary binds, does not deliver. The answer: perhaps such failure is a signal that government should not be involved in this particular area! (67)

In one sense, the advocates of reinventing government tend to be more traditional in their strategic view. For them, reform is accomplished by example through political means. Their "pull" orientation provides the rationale for energizing a political effective reform movement. To focus that energy, they offer a call for revolutionizing how we think about government. For Osborne and Gaebler, this takes the form of advocating a radical change in the way we look at how things get done. When looking at the innovative actions of the public officials, they see "nothing less than a shift in the basic model of governance used in America."

This shift is under way all around us, but because we are not looking for it -- because we assume that all governments have to be big, centralized, and bureaucratic -- we seldom see it. We are blind to the new realities because they do not fit our preconceptions.

What we need most if this revolution is to succeed [...] is a new framework for understanding government, a new way of thinking about government.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Thus, what the reinventing government approach lacks in theoretical originality is made up for with a firm belief in their ability to institute a comprehensive administrative reform agenda for America through rethinking government and taking advantage of a ripe political situation. This approach is now being tested at the federal level as Gore and his staff attempt to implement the NPR.

In spite of these ideological and strategic differences, the common theme uniting the three movements is the urge to debureaucratize government administration. Each has redefined the challenge of bureaucratization in a way that promotes an active agenda to deal with the problem. Whether or not the debureaucratization movement succeeds in the long run, the transformation of the bureaucratization challenge -- like that of the

complexity challenge -- will have significant consequences for years to come.

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF SUCCESS

The fact that American public administration is now in a position to confront two of its major challenges -- complexity and bureaucratization -- is an important development for the field. Given the low morale plaguing the U.S. public service over the past two decades, the stimulus of reform in both areas was urgently needed. But in assessing the prospects for significant positive change, we cannot ignore the one major challenge that dominates the entire scene -- the political culture of distrust that pervades American views of public administration.

The lack of public trust in American government is well documented, and there are no indications that conditions are improving in this regard. The roots of this growing distrust are deeply embedded in our republican system, ⁽⁶⁹⁾ but today it is the reach of its spreading branches that make this cultural phenomenon a major challenge. American public administration has always had to contend with its statelessness and low level of legitimacy, but every so often the level of distrust would decrease enough for the nation's political and administrative leaders to carry out needed reforms. Such a time is approaching as America public administrators prepare to take on the challenges of complexity and bureaucratization. To do so effectively, however, requires a greater level degree of trust than is now forthcoming from the American public.

This cultural challenge is recognized by those who have served on recent commissions to study the need for administrative reform at the national, state and local levels. Both the Volcker and Winter Commissions make strong statements noting that little of what must be accomplished to revitalize America's lethargic public service can be done when levels of public trust remain so low. Such statements are more than verbiage. They reflect an awareness that the cultural challenge is the crucial one. Until it is confronted, all other efforts are likely to fail.

At the moment, however, the cultural challenge has not been transformed as has the issues of complexity and bureaucratization. The lessons of how these other challenges have been transformed can be mined further to help us understand what it takes to convert a challenge from an obstacle to a target for change. Less optimistically, it may be necessary to wait until the culture evolves on its own into a form that will facilitate the kinds of reforms now contemplated by the leaders of the American public administrative community.

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