

# Farewell from the Catbird Seat

This issue brings to a close an 11 year editorial partnership that began with the *Policy Studies Journal* (1985-1990) and has continued at *PAR* since 1991. We are grateful to the Policy Studies Organization (PSO) and ASPA, as well as to several institutions, including our present ones—School of Public Affairs, American University and Rutgers University, Newark—for giving us the opportunity to try to advance knowledge through these journals. In addition, we received assistance and encouragement from individuals who are far too numerous to name individually—section editors, authors, readers, reviewers, colleagues, PSO, and ASPA staff. We would specifically like to thank the PSO for presenting us with the Thomas Dye Award this year for our editorial work and ASPA's previous president, Ed Jennings, and its National Council for their expressions of gratitude for whatever we may have accomplished at *PAR*.

We were fortunate to edit *PAR* at a time when there has been great interest in reforming and "reinventing" public administration. In the past year or so, we have been frequently asked how the field looks from the "catbird seat," as Red Barber used to say. Here are some reflections based on reading and reviewing almost 1,400 manuscripts and working very closely on the minority of them that were published.

First, in terms of production of knowledge, public administration seems quite healthy. There is a broad commitment on the part of highly talented academics, practitioners, and "pracademics" to build knowledge in public administration. During our tenure, *PAR* received approximately 230 reviewable manuscripts per year. Our requests for manuscript reviews—generally three per submission—were rarely refused, and very few individuals invited to serve on our editorial board declined. Despite some hand wringing on the part of those who wish the field were advancing more rapidly, we think public administration has a very strong and growing knowledge base. Much of what we know concerns what does not work, even though perhaps it should. But that is the nature of problems. They exist because solutions are unknown or impossible. Knowing what does not work can be a step toward finding what does. It seems more than coincidental that there are now available so many compendia of public administrative knowledge, whether called "Handbooks" or "Encyclopedias." The field has a great deal to offer.

Second, although a considerable amount of what we do know is underutilized, a lot of it is also used. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's *Reinventing Government* paid scant attention to public administration's academic base, often relying on journalistic treatments of anecdotal evidence. Nevertheless, there was a solid literature on the central practices they extolled in 1992, and it is even larger now. MPAs and city managers with formal training in public administration have been putting academic and other research to practice for years. The National Performance Review (NPR), which deliberately sought to design reform from within the federal government, has also been at least partly informed by federal employees with MPAs and research-based key executive training. Many reviewers of reform-oriented pieces wrote "déjà vu."

Reinvention is more like application than creation. There is no doubt that practice and reform could benefit from even greater use of what has been researched and is known. Especially frustrating is the hubris of authors, lacking both government experience and investment in the available literature, who think that public administrative problems exist because they have not been noticed or because public employees are inherently inept slackers. We regret that the most we could do to such people was to reject their work and tell them where to read!

Third, it is clear that what attracts many authors and readers to public administration is its applied focus. The field gains a great deal of its energy through its concern with practice. Many authors and reviewers want to go well beyond understanding administrative phenomena—they want to improve practice. Academics, as well as practitioners, often seek to explain what works or frustrates and why. In this sense, the common comparison of public administration to political science may be off the mark. Whether viewed as a science, craft, profession, or art, public administration is intensely concerned with design.

Fourth, there have been two major areas of general weakness in the work submitted to *PAR* since mid-1990—history and law. A remarkable number of manuscripts reflected a seriously inadequate historical grounding. We published a number of history pieces precisely to counter this tendency and to indicate how rich public administrative history can be. Assuming we are correct that many scholars and practitioners of public administration have a simplistic understanding of administrative development and the field's intellectual history, we are in danger of losing all ownership of our past. In that regard, more attention needs to be given to recalling that history and comprehending the implications of shifting cultural and social conditions for the public administrative endeavor.

Despite its obvious centrality to public administrative practice, law is also widely ignored and misunderstood. It seems to be considered an "add on" or mysterious "black box" in much academic work. Administrative practice is infused with law, yet a frightening number of manuscripts we received failed even to mention the legal frameworks that are pertinent to their topics. Relationships with customers, clients, other public employees, contractors, prisoners, inmates in public mental health and other facilities, and the

general public are all controlled by statutory, administrative, regulatory, and constitutional law. Is it really meaningful to talk about "deregulating" government without discussing how one would change the federal and state Administrative Procedure Acts, which are the basic regulatory regime for structuring administrative rule-making, adjudication, dealing with information, privacy protections, enforcement, and general transparency?

Fifth, although we published several "big questions" pieces, it seems to us that the underlying issue for much of public administration is one of values. Dwight Waldo made this crystal clear in his 1948 classic book, *The Administrative State*. Subsequently, James Q. Wilson and Herbert Kaufman were among two of the field's most highly regarded scholars who made the same point in different ways. As Wilson noted, public administration involves a plethora of values that are sometimes in competition and contradiction with one another. Due process and efficiency may not go hand in hand. Advocates of administrative reform would do well to remember that there are normative values underlying their proposals and that unless they have solved the centuries old problem of maximizing all pertinent values simultaneously, their reforms will come at some cost to other concerns. Presumably it is very late in the bloody 20th century to read "results-oriented" government as merely making the trains run on time. Democratic governance requires great attention to means as well as to ends. The private sector, where bottom-line thinking is presumed dominant, is regulated by statutes like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and environmental law precisely because, overall, its procedures were deemed anti-social or otherwise inappropriate.

Closely related to the values issue is one's view of human nature. The Constitution's framers had a somewhat Hobbesian view: Life in the state of nature was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. The separation of powers and checks and balances were among the elements of constitutional design intended to take human nature into account. Many contemporary reformers, Vice President Al Gore among them, have a more Rousseauian vision: people are born free (in the state of nature), yet everywhere they are seen in chains. In the NPR's world, most people want to do the right thing (a claim sometimes followed by the curious modifier, "as long as it makes sense"). Federal employees are good people trapped in bad systems. They should be deregulated and empowered. Inspectors general and auditors are burdens; entrepreneurs are liberators. If one agrees with the framers, then we need procedural, investigatory, and other checks—even checkers checking checkers. If one sides with contemporary reformers, then we can trust government and its employees to do the right thing most of the time, or at least enough so that we can dispense with the overhead cost and inefficiency of checks. The reformers hold this position even while embracing market-oriented reforms based on the belief that self-interest is a very powerful motivator.

Any work failing to take these different perspectives on human nature into account is seriously deficient—and much of what we received did not and was. They are encompassing. Is corruption an insignificant concern? (Those history lessons might be useful here!) Do you trust the landlord to keep the elevator in good repair, the food and drug companies to sell only products that are safe, the airlines not to skimp on safety? Would you rather have governmental or third party inspection? Do you want a backup regime of tort

and criminal negligence law?

No editorial like this could possibly escape some observations regarding methodology. Based on the submissions and reviews we received, the field is definitely becoming more sophisticated in terms of methodological and statistical technique. We have been developing and using better ways of knowing, and we are paying greater self-conscious attention to how we know what we claim to know. Where facts are central, reviewers have been quick to urge rejection of pieces relying on the claims of an earlier generation of scholars. Although case studies remain suspect in some respects, their quality has been improving substantially.

One area where the field may be going awry is in the logic of reform-oriented pieces. Many of these—and this goes well beyond *PAR* manuscripts—start with a description of a problem, perhaps offer a diagnosis, and then prescribe a cure that is neither compelled by the problem/diagnosis nor even necessarily related to it. A medical researcher can certainly identify cancer or HIV, diagnose it, and not have a viable cure for it. He or she may win substantial prizes for so doing. It is a non sequitur to argue, "Here is a problem, therefore what I am proposing is an improvement." Unfortunately, one questioning administrative prescriptions may face the charge of being in favor of an unacceptable status quo or asked to offer a better, though unavailable, solution. The conversation is as productive as:

Researcher 1: "This is a form of AIDS."

Researcher 2: "Fight it with aspirin."

Researcher 1: "Aspirin won't work."

Researcher 2: "Do you have something better?"

In a field with a history of adopting fast-failing budgeting and personnel reforms, beating something with nothing may sometimes be appropriate.

Another problem with the way arguments for reform are sometimes couched is more political than methodological. In order to sell change—even highly desirable change—it is generally necessary to show that it will improve things or that there is no choice. One technique is to exaggerate the faults of the status quo and the urgency of changing it. There was a noticeable tendency in many of the *PAR* manuscripts to slip into bureaucrat and government bashing. Although some of this abated after the Oklahoma City bombing, it subsequently began to creep back into some reform-oriented pieces. This is probably inevitable given the anti-government feelings pervading both public opinion and the overall public mood. And yet there is a "chicken versus egg" quality about this tendency among contributors to *PAR*: those familiar enough with the realities of public administrative life to know better, end up feeding the bureaucracy bashers. Rather than focusing on the dilemmas of public management and implementation, they inadvertently help create and perpetuate cultures of blame pointing directly to public agencies and employees—but now with potentially deadly consequences. Scoring rhetorical points ought to be secondary to maintaining our integrity as responsible members of the public administration and academic communities.

Finally, those 1,400 manuscripts suggest that the field is paying significant attention to comparative public administration. It may come as a surprise to many readers, but American public administration is considered the standard in many foreign nations. Our texts are used even where parliamentary and unitary (nonfederal)

systems are in place. *PAR* has many readers in democracies throughout the world, as well as in some nondemocracies. There are many important lessons to be learned from one another's practices and globalization makes it likely that we will do so. Of course, caution is appropriate, especially when recommending large-scale change. The fact that something is done in a small, relatively homogeneous, parliamentary nation with a minimal defense capability and little crime, such as New Zealand, does not mean that it will travel well to the United States. And vice versa. At the federal and state levels, the American separation of powers will often make a major difference. But this issue was raised by Woodrow Wilson

in his seminal call for "The Study of Administration" (1887) and it is likely to remain with us.

In sum, things look pretty good and definitely interesting from the catbird seat. We look forward to reading *PAR* without first massaging its contents. Glad to have been here, done this, and ready to move on.

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