

Herbert Kaufman: Celebrating a Century of Contributions to Public Administration

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HERBERT KAUFMAN: A CELEBRATION

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In accepting American Society for Public Administration's Dwight Waldo Award in 1996, Herbert Kaufman reflected on his relationships with both the award's namesake and its previous awardee, Herbert Simon. On one hand, Kaufman throughout his career emphasized the strong influence Simon's work on process and efficiency had on his approach to public administration. On the other hand, he deeply appreciated Waldo's efforts to deal with the challenges bureaucracy posed for politics and accountability. Simon and Waldo, he quipped, "presented me with a challenge because I sought to follow both paths." (Kaufman 1996b, ii)

No one in the history of public administration has balanced these competing tugs or perspectives on the field so well. And everyone in public administration has benefited from Kaufman's long, thoughtful, and witty efforts to weigh that balance. The four essays in this roundtable focus on the enduring contributions Herbert Kaufman has made along the way.

Born in New York City on September 21, 1922, Kaufman attended the City College of New York, where he found himself intrigued by courses that focused on the role of the civil service in implementing public policies. With a career in bureaucracy in mind, he began graduate work in political science at Columbia University, but after just one semester, he was drafted into the armed forces as part of the mobilization for the Second World War. After serving three years in the infantry, Kaufman returned to Columbia where, with the support of the GI Bill and a research position in Luther Gulick's Institute of Public Administration (IPA), he honed the analytical, research, and writing skills that proved the hallmark of his work for the next seven decades. As Donald Kettl notes in the opening essay, what once intrigued him as a student soon developed into a lifelong effort to find answers to some of the field's central questions.

Kaufman is perhaps best known for *The forest ranger*, which became a classic for its crisp and clear case study of administrative behavior. In their contribution to this roundtable,

Norma Riccucci and Melvin Dubnick explore Kaufman's aspirations for the role of case studies in advancing the administrative sciences, as well as for how it continues to serve as a model for qualitative ethnographic research in the social sciences.

Much of Kaufman's work also demonstrates that significant—even groundbreaking—insights can be expressed in clear and lively prose. He demonstrated this in widely read journal articles, many of which have become part of the public administration canon. But his skill in weaving a lively argument about the issues of public administration is most evident in his 100-page masterpiece, *Red tape: Its origins, uses and abuses*. In her contribution to the roundtable, Leisha DeHart-Davis shows how that work laid the "intellectual foundation" for what would become a major subfield in the study of public administration and governance.

For William Resh, Kaufman's research on administrative behavior shows how a wide variety of approaches, rather than a narrow orthodoxy, can fundamentally enrich the field. This heterodoxy, he argues, is an invaluable bridge among the many approaches that have struggled for the heart of the field.

Kaufman's sweeping research career stretches far beyond the topics discussed in this roundtable. For example, his co-authored book with Wallace Sayre, *Governing New York city: Politics in the metropolis* (1960, 1965), is notable as the "most detailed and comprehensive analysis of the city's government ever written," according to Robert Caro, himself a masterful storyteller about the transformation of New York (Caro 1974, 745–746)—a study that gave "manageable ordering" to an extremely complex subject (Long et al. 1961, 25).

Moreover, in other works Kaufman explored, in an especially prophetic way, the "cycle of values" that constantly bring about changes in how we approach the role of the bureaucracy in American democracy (Kaufman 1956, 1969, 1981b). Kaufman capped his career with *Time, chance, and organizations* (1985, 1991), a work that offers a theoretical lens through which to view his previous works. An exploration of these contributions, as well as a synthesis of Kaufman's

remarkable insights into the broader tensions between the politics and efficiency of public administration, will provide ample room for the exploration of future scholars.

Indeed, a full appreciation of Herbert Kaufman's contributions to public administration requires more than an assessment of individual works. It would demand, as well as a careful look at how he went about his work, the uncommon grace and remarkable humor that characterized his writing.

Almost all of Kaufman's work has a somewhat apologetic tone. He is invariably meticulous in his research, but he is also quick to warn readers about the limitations and shortcomings of each study. In addressing critics, he frequently shoulders the blame for any misunderstandings, although some of those apologies serve more as a mirror held up to the arguments of his detractors. He is always quick, however, to respond to criticisms that he believes to be unfair, often with a wry eye (see Kaufman 1975, 536–537; also Kaufman 2017).

Kaufman has long held the admiration of scholars in the field, especially about *The forest ranger*. For Larry Lutton (2007), the work exemplified “some of the best aspects of its author, giving us insight into why he has had such a successful and respected career” (168). For Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., “Herbert Kaufman—the man, the scholar, and the author of a revered book—has become, himself, a classic of public administration” (2016, 121). Nothing could better sum up Herbert Kaufman's contributions to public administration—the author of classics with remarkably enduring power, and a giant whose career in and of itself is a classic.

DISCOVERY THROUGH SURPRISE: TAGGING ALONG ON A LIFETIME OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Donald F. Kettl

In musing about his remarkable career, Herbert Kaufman noted that “some fortunate people hear the music of the spheres,” a notion created by the ancient Greeks that held celestial spheres emit their own special kind of music, which could be sensed only with the soul. In contrast, he wrote, “I seem to have hearkened to less celestial strains” (1996a, 127). He had spent a lifetime studying public administration.

That had not been his original plan. From his grade school days, he had been intent on becoming a lawyer. In those days, like today, the best road seemed to be a major in political science. The subject was “tedious,” he remembered, but he put up with it because that was the road down which law school admissions ran. After all, “Nobody said it was supposed to be fun” (1996a, 127).

From Walter Sharp, who was enticed to move from the University of Wisconsin to the City College of New York to transform the Department of Government, Herbert Kaufman took a course in public administration. And that turned out to be fun. “I found myself intrigued by the process of transforming pronouncements of policy intentions—the wishes of elected officials and the language of legislation—into tangible governmental actions,” he recalled later (1996a, 128). Shaped by interactions with a truly remarkable collection of researchers, including especially Herbert A. Simon as he wrote the first edition of *Administrative behavior* (1947), Kaufman put aside his father's career in law and committed himself completely to both the study and practice of public administration.

Along the way, Kaufman charted some of the most important work of post-Second World War public administration.

There were nine books, led by *The forest ranger* (1960) and capped by *Time, chance, and organizations* (1985), and a wide range of articles, including most notably “Emerging Conflicts in the Doctrines of Public Administration” (1956). Together, they weave important links between public administration and political science.

That connection, in fact, is one of the most important contributions of Kaufman's remarkable career. In the 1950s, he and Yale colleague James W. Fesler explored the possibility of creating a professional program for career training in public administration, but outside the Department of Political Science, where they both had appointments. They had been hearing from the university's alumni in Washington about the need for students well-versed in the practice of administration. As was so often the case, Kaufman and Fesler's instinct for cutting-edge puzzles was right on target. They anticipated the creation of a new generation of public policy programs by Harvard, Berkeley, and Texas, among other universities.

They carefully explored the issue and concluded that “public administration and political science are intellectually inseparable” and that “more would be lost than gained by dividing them from one another organizationally” (1996a, 137). Much of the rest of the field came to disagree with them, including Yale itself, which created its School of Organization and Management in 1973 (and renamed it the School of Management in 1994). Indeed, SOM became known simply as “Yale's business school.”

He established himself as a leading scholar in the Yale Department of Political Science, at a time it housed other luminaries like Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom and trained doctoral students like Aaron Wildavsky, Raymond E. Wolfinger, and Theodore J. Lowi. But after 16 years in New Haven, he and his wife, Ruth, made the difficult decision to leave New Haven. “I had begun to feel I was growing stale as a teacher,” he remembered later (1996a, 135), a notion that anyone who ever knew him would find impossible to believe.

More fundamentally, he decided to focus more directly on “the theory and behavior of government organizations.” For that, he said, “Washington was the place for me to be” (1996a, 135). So, he and his wife Ruth packed up and moved to Washington to take a position as senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. That ignited one of the most prolific and influential periods of any public administration scholar of the last century.

He published *The limits of organizational change* (1971), followed by four important books from Brookings, namely *Administrative feedback* (1973), *Are government organizations immortal?* (1976), *Red tape* (1977), and *The administrative behavior of federal bureau chiefs* (1981a). These books were not only remarkable for the keen insight of the questions they asked (are government organizations immortal?) but also for the simple power of the answers they provided (yes).

He became the master of the short book. *Red tape*, at just 100 pages, is quite simply a masterpiece. He worked his way through these issues with an uncommon instinct for engaging government managers. The constant revelation in his books is not only his insight into what makes government tick but is also that this insight so often—and sometimes surprisingly to him—rings true.

In looking back over such an illustrious career, the natural question is how he planned it. That is a puzzle important to those who would want to follow in his footsteps—and a matter of fundamental curiosity to him as well. One cannot