Ruminations on the Study of American Public Bureaucracies
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Public bureaucracies warrant the attention of political scientists because bureaucrats help determine the contents and effectiveness of public policies. Although the relationships between them and the other participants in public policy making can theoretically range from bureaucratic dominance, or at least autonomy, to passive bureaucratic subservience, most political scientists tend to treat American bureaucrats as significant but not commanding partners in the interplay of checks and balances in the political process. Understanding their roles in this process, however, is beset by ambiguities about when and to what extent their behavior is controlled or controlling. These uncertainties, plus incessant changes in their roles, may mean that we cannot hope for universal, long-enduring generalizations about their place in the polity. Consequently, to fully understand our political system, we must continuously observe, analyze, and reassess the influence they exert and the influences on them.

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Public bureaucracies are a concern of political scientists for the obvious reason, among other reasons, that government policy is brought to fruition in the decisions and actions of bureaucrats. If bureaucrats’ decisions and actions are not in accord with the official pronouncements of the occupants of the formal leadership positions in any polity, those ostensible leaders are reduced to mere figureheads whose policy statements constitute little more than empty rhetoric. In other words, as political scientists, we students of public bureaucracies are particularly interested in the power relationships between bureaucrats and their political superiors.

**Perceived Patterns of Power Relationships**

The hypothetical patterns of such relationships may be represented as ranging from politicians theoretically having little or no control over bureaucratic behavior to politicians theoretically having total control over bureaucratic behavior—from 0 to 10, let us say, on a scale of possibilities. The central region of the scale, clustered around the midpoint, comprises those patterns in which the two sets of government officeholders interact with each

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other on a basis of near equality. Most contemporary analyses of bureaucracy fall somewhere between the poles of this schematic diagram. However, let me add parenthetically, for the sake of logical completeness, that one might also extend the scale beyond the 0 end to a conceivable negative extreme, where it is the bureaucrats who rule the polity, as suggested by Max Weber in some of his writing (as cited in Gerth & Mills, 1946; Weber, 1964) and by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). At present, however, few serious commentators describe the American system in this fashion, so I shall not devote time to it here.

People often disagree about which location on the 0 to 10 scale is the most desirable, depending on the observers’ values and perceptions. There are also disputes, however, about where on the scale a particular system is actually located. Thus, for example, in the United States, the spoils system was justified on the grounds that it reduced to a minimum the discrepancies between politicians and the rest of the government workforce because a workforce selected on the basis of political considerations, and subject to removal for failing to comply with the wishes of its political superiors, would inevitably consist of people not inclined to disagree with or disobey those superiors (Goodnow, 1900; Van Riper, 1958). In terms of the possible relationships between the two groups, the spoils system was described by its supporters as factually and appropriately toward the politicians-incomplete-control end of the scale—that is, toward the 10 end.

Civil service reformers rejected these contentions. They maintained that appointees selected for performing partisan services owed their positions not to elected officials and their cabinets but to local political sponsors and that they were therefore beholden to the benefactors who got them their appointments rather than to the people to whom they nominally reported. Consequently, the reformers argued, they were unequipped to do their jobs well, and their titular superiors had little real authority over them, resulting in inefficiency, disorder, disobedience, and corruption, thus placing such arrangements toward the bureaucrats-uncontrolled (the 0) pole of the scale. In contrast, the reformers said, employees selected by merit on a nonpartisan basis would be professionally committed to serving impartially whoever was elected and would have the expertise and integrity to do what was asked of them. They were represented as neutral instruments governed by the will of the duly authorized political authorities. The reformers, in other words, concurred with the advocates of the spoils system on the desirability of having a bureaucracy dominated by democratically elected political officials—that is, near the 10 end of the scale. They just insisted the spoils system did not produce that result, whereas the merit system would. The two sides differed over means, not ends.

The defenders of the spoils system scoffed at the notion that government workers chosen by merit would be passive tools of the party in power. Instead, the spoils advocates said, they would become an elite, autonomous, unaccountable force in policy making. The merit system, they contended, would move the power relationship between bureaucrats and political leaders from the bureaucracy-subordinate (or 10) end of the scale toward the uncontrolled-bureaucracy pole—the 0 end. And their anxieties intensified when reformers introduced the concept of career service, which in a practical sense meant that there would be restrictions on dismissals as well as on appointments, enabling civil servants to stay on through election after election, administration after administration. This practice, complained the defenders of spoils, would further dilute the impact of the electorate on government operations. Some of them would admit that the spoils system had many deficiencies,
but they were convinced that it at least kept the unelected government workforce under the guidance of elected officials.

The reformers won the first round of this contest, and a growing percentage of public employees were gradually brought under the merit system. But the controversy continued as the government sector expanded, increasing the size of the public workforce; to the other concerns about a professional bureaucracy was added the belief that such a large body of expert, tenured subordinates could not really be controlled by a much smaller number of constantly changing elected officers. And when the New Deal brought about a surge of new programs, new agencies, and new staff, critics skeptical of civil-service reform on the grounds of its antidemocratic effects were joined by ideologues who opposed big government regardless of how democratically it was fashioned. To them, it made no difference whether the decisions and behavior of public employees were or were not in accord with the instructions of their political superiors; it was the programs they objected to, and they consequently considered the civil servants oppressive even if the wishes of elected officers were faithfully executed. Indeed, the more compliant subordinates were to leaders elected on platforms promising new, larger, and more vigorous public programs, the more odious they were to this school of thought. But rather than attack popular programs frontally, the ideologues sought to discredit them by fanning fears of bureaucracy run riot. Thus, though stirred by dissimilar motives, foes of civil-service reform and opponents of vigorous government took similar positions. They both characterized the relationships between professional civil servants and politicians as close to the bureaucracy-uncontrolled pole (the zero position) on the scale of possible patterns.

The contradictory representations of civil servants as puppets or self-directing (not to mention as emergent rulers) stimulated research into their actual behavior. These studies gave rise to another interpretation, locating the relationships between political officials and bureaucrats closer to the middle of the scale of possibilities, the point of near equality between the groups. It fit them into the standard checks-and-balances description of the American governmental process in which all the active participants wield significant powers but are also limited by the powers of others. It rejected the image of civil servants as helpless pawns in the hands of their political masters, emphasizing instead the substantial sources of influence at their disposal. At the same time, it recognized the array of potent weapons at the disposal of the other major branches of the government, interest groups, political parties, the press, and administrative rivals and took account of the impressive constraints such weapons impose. This portrait of the administrative establishment defined it as neither supine, uncontrolled, nor overpowering but rather as engaged in the governmental process on a practically coordinate footing with all the other participants.

My impression is that this picture of public bureaucracies is the prevalent one among political scientists. For my part, it is roughly where I come down; the evidence seems to me to situate our civil servants in the middle sector of the postulated scale rather than nearer to either of the poles.

But elements of this depiction, too, are troubling. It seems to me to rest no less heavily than its rivals on sweeping assumptions about civil servants and politicians that oversimplify the complexities of their composition and conduct while also understating the difficulties of determining when noncompliance, deliberate or unintentional, has occurred. Let us look at each of these shortcomings.
Common Shortcomings

Oversimplifications

First, with regard to oversimplifications, “the bureaucracy” is frequently referred to as though it were a single organism. Actually, of course, it comprises myriad, diverse sets of public servants in different agencies and locations, with numerous functions and missions, having a great variety of skills, specialties, and degrees of authority, serving at all levels of government, and, frequently, organized into numerous unions and professional associations. Bureaucracy is really a loose collection of many components, not an organic entity. Yet for the sake of convenience, brevity, and dramatic effect, I sometimes find myself talking about it as though it were a unit. It is a hard habit to break.

Am I making too much of this issue? Is it nothing more than the familiar level-of-analysis problem? It is possible, after all, to discuss a molar body without necessarily going into the properties of its constituent atoms and molecules. In like fashion, one might reason, it is appropriate to talk of the bureaucracy as a collectivity distinguished from the individual elements and groups of which it is composed. But there is a difference between the two cases; government workers do not operate as an integral unit. The common category into which they are lumped is purely conceptual, not existential—a linguistic abstraction, not a functioning reality. To be sure, we may be able to identify some traits common to all the members of the class. That does not mean they constitute a cohesive, disciplined body. For analytical purposes, they should not be treated as though they were one. Taking a construct for a tangible item can be misleading.

In this case, it may cause overestimation of the influence of bureaucrats in the governmental process. Their powers are not uniformly distributed among them; most of the subsets of the whole bureaucratic population possess only some of them, and in different degrees; none has them all. Nor are their powers exercised in a unified, coherent fashion. But when we assemble all their separate capabilities into a single list, the inventory seems overwhelming. And when we also speak of the fragmented administrative establishment as though it were an individual wielding all those powers, the abstraction takes on frightening proportions. In the actual give and take with the other participants in the governmental process, however, its components are often overmatched. In head-on confrontations, they are apt to lose. Although not “paper tigers,” they cannot run free. (Indeed, knowing this, many of them are cautious, whereupon they are reproached for their excessive timidity. That can of worms I leave for examination at another time.) My point here is that viewing civil servants as a single entity is one of two factors that can lead to serious misperceptions of their place in the system.

Ambiguities

The other, as I indicated, is the ambiguity surrounding the term compliance. Determining whether the decisions and actions of civil servants are consonant with the directives of elected officials is not a simple task because many of those directives are not specific and univocal. The political strata of our governments speak to administrative agencies with many voices. At the federal level, for example, in each of the congressional chambers, legislative committees, appropriations committees, oversight committees, budget
committees, their staffs, and the General Accountability Office issue cues and signals to administrative bodies. So do individual legislators and their staffs, speaking on behalf of their constituents and other local interests. To be sure, not all the signals are equally authoritative, but agencies hesitate to ignore any of them for fear of possible retribution. The agencies also keep weather eyes on interest groups formed by their clienteles and their opponents and on the communications media, many of whom wield considerable political influence. So federal administrators are the targets of numerous orders, requests, and suggestions from all directions. In the states, the situations vary, but there, too, streams of demands descend on agencies. They hear a chorus—or perhaps a cacophony—of directions.

Conditions are further complicated by competition between the legislative and executive branches for control of administrative agencies. In the 19th century, legislators had the upper hand. Chief executives had tiny staffs, no control of agency budget requests, and no reorganization authority. The powers delegated by legislative bodies were vested in bureau chiefs rather than in department heads who sat in the cabinet, so the chief executives’ personal agents had comparatively little influence on their own organizations. The executives were at a distinct disadvantage in this contest with legislative bodies.

Circumstances changed in the 20th century. Executives were granted or asserted many of the powers they previously lacked. Their staffs increased markedly, executive budgeting was introduced, they were given reorganization powers enabling them to make the administrative establishment more responsive to their wishes, their department heads gained legal authority over their bureaus, and, in the federal government, the president’s executive office and White House staff began to exert direct control over administrative action, ushering in what Richard Nathan (1983) has called “the administrative presidency.” All these changes were propounded as measures to rationalize administrative machinery and make it more efficient; in fact, of course, they were also battles over the conduct of public policy. In any event, they changed the balance between the branches. Legislatures still exercise great power over administration, but executives, too, now have very strong hands in the administrative process.

Moreover, courts have a major part in the behavior of administrative agencies. Their rulings on both substance and procedure profoundly affect what administrative personnel do and how they do it. Indeed, some critics complain that judges have “judicialized” administrative procedure, thereby reducing the flexibility and informality that were among alleged benefits of the administrative process. However that may be, they certainly add to the mix of instructions given to the government workforce.

All of these currents cascading upon the administrative establishment make it hard to establish conclusively when bureaucrats have complied or failed to comply with the edicts of their political superiors. Complaints of agency intractability commonly turn out to mean nothing more than that an agency was more responsive to a branch, or to a subdivision of a branch, different from the one the complainant belongs to or favors. That is quite different from allegations that bureaucrats routinely flout political authority.

Lest you think this argument is contrived and that the official promulgations of governmental leaders are not really as ambiguous as I suggest, bear in mind how often judges, when interpreting statutes, search committee proceedings and reports and the records of floor debates in efforts to determine legislative intent. And consider further that legislation may be deliberately framed in ambiguous terms so as to attract sufficient votes to secure
enactment; ambiguity is the solvent of disagreement. Bear in mind also that the accumulation of laws, executive orders, judicial rulings, and binding regulations issued by different administrative bodies is profuse and constantly growing, piling ever more provisions on the mass already on the books, thus creating further uncertainties about what is required and expected of those who administer them.

It is not logically inconceivable that civil servants could take advantage of these uncertainties, picking and choosing among equivocal or discordant directives in such a fashion as to strike out in directions nobody else intended or anticipated. But the system is so loaded with ambiguity that what looks like willful insubordination and evasion from one standpoint may seem like defensible and even dutiful behavior from another. It is difficult to be sure which is which because of the plethora of commands.

In addition, the rank and file of administrative agencies—the government workers with whom the public usually comes in contact—are subject to practical constraints that often go unrecognized. As Simon (1946), Barnard (1948), and Gulick (1933) all pointed out long ago, these are the people whose actions actually turn out the products and services of organizations. Just keeping up with the quotidian workload and getting through each day keeps them fully occupied. Their frame of reference is mostly the handbooks, manuals, training, standing orders, and instructions they receive from their immediate supervisors. These, rather than general statements—even general statements in legislative form—are the things that govern their routines and daily behavior. Once again, what appears to the proponents of change to be deliberate recalcitrance may well be regarded by first-line operatives as simply obeying the rules they are handed.

As though all this were not enough, still more ambiguity stems from general moral precepts indicating that subordinates should at times decline to follow the orders of their superiors. When a superior issues directives to perform unlawful, unethical, unprofessional, or otherwise inappropriate acts, it would, by ordinary moral standards, be improper for an underling to carry them out. Complying under these circumstances makes the subordinate as guilty as the superior; “I was just following orders” is not an exculpatory defense, no matter how democratic the process by which the superior came to office. People who decline to cooperate on moral grounds are not uncontrolled; they may simply be honoring higher principles.

Compounding the uncertainty is the variety of meanings different individuals attach to these principles. We cannot be certain how many instances of alleged bureaucratic resistance and defiance are rooted in this kind of moral dilemma; they may constitute only a small percentage of all such cases. Nonetheless, they intensify the fog enveloping the concept of compliance.

So I do not believe I have exaggerated the ambiguities to which the field is heir. Considering all the equivocality confronting us, we students of bureaucratic behavior, no matter which view of relationships between civil servants and politicians we endorse, need to be wary of broad assertions about the motives, objectives, and strategies of government workers. More than 60 years ago, Simon, in an article he called “The Proverbs of Administration” (1946), later incorporated into his Administrative Behavior (1947), pointed out the shallowness and inconsistences of some of the administrative “principles” of the times. It is a warning that never grows obsolete. We need to guard against glibness in our inquiries into public bureaucracies.

Similarly, the late Harvey Sherman, a brilliant thinker who, among his other accomplishments, was president of the American Society for Public Administration and a distinguished
public servant, wrote a little book he called *It All Depends* (1966), in which he stressed the importance of contingency in organizational behavior and the consequent uniqueness of every situation. I chided him for being antiscientific, arguing that science is a process of synthesizing general principles from the confusing diversity in the world. Over the years, however, I recognized, and acknowledged to him, the justification for his suspicion of what he called “platitudes,” which were advanced as scientific laws in management literature. Were he here today, I think he would be pleased to hear how far I have come in his direction.

**The Road Before Us**

Nonetheless, I remain committed to the idea of trying to discover regularities in the perplexing heterogeneity we encounter all around us. Experience tells us such regularities can sometimes be found in the midst of seeming chaos if we go about the search systematically. That means the general beliefs and paradigms in our field, including some accepted propositions that seem so obvious as to need no investigation, should be subjected to rigorous empirical testing. Checking the obvious is often the way to make progress. We give lots of brownie points for originality; maybe we need to give greater recognition and rewards to those who perform the tasks Thomas Kuhn (1962) called “normal science,” even if they often merely confirm the familiar. These, too, are essential contributions to the larger enterprise.

It is possible, and perhaps even probable, that everything we discover will prove valid only for a relatively short time because our field is constantly evolving. In particular, its underlying premises change from generation to generation. In recent years, for instance, there has been a noticeable shift away from the traditional apparatus of the merit system and toward greater reliance on political loyalty as the criterion for appointment. Faith in the principle of career service—that is, in a lifetime commitment to working in government—has given way to belief in a workforce composed of more “in-and-outers,” who move back and forth between the public and private sectors. At the same time, many elected positions have become less competitive, and incumbents tend to stay in office for decades, acquiring experience and expertise as great as that of civil servants. Furthermore, greater emphasis on contracting out and privatizing hitherto public services is altering the system. These trends could sharply change the relationships between civil servants and politicians; conclusions reached in one era are likely to be inapplicable in the next.

But you never know unless you try. Indeed, there is at least one thing we can already say with confidence will endure: the low level of coordination among the components of the administrative establishment. In the future as in the past, grand commissions will be set up from time to time to rationalize structures and procedures. Some of them will score temporary, partial successes. But the problem will persist because power in the governmental process is dispersed, and there are consequently many different interests and values to be accommodated. As long as this remains the case, the tendencies toward fragmentation will remain strong. The administrative system is never going to function like a well-oiled machine.

All of which means generations of political scientists interested in bureaucracy will have their work cut out for them as they strive to describe and appraise the administrative behavior of civil servants. The target keeps moving. I trust they will go on tracking it, for I expect that bureaucrats will continue to play a major part in the governmental process, and I hope the
findings of students of bureaucracy will ensure that textbooks on American government will provide appropriate, balanced analyses of that role. Although the U.S. Constitution and many state constitutions give scant attention to public bureaucracies, as is the case with other vital elements of our governmental system such as political parties, interest groups, and the media of communication, bureaucracies are distinctive among these so-called extra-constitutional developments because administrative agencies possess and exercise official powers of government—legislative, judicial, and executive (though these are often called “quasi” powers to avoid contravening constitutional language defining the traditional three branches)—and their decisions and actions are legally binding on the public. Efforts to understand American democracy in every epoch will therefore depend in part on understanding their role in the system. And that, after all, is what drew us into this business in the first place.

References


Herbert Kaufman, now retired, received his bachelor’s degree from The City College of New York and his graduate degrees from Columbia University. He was for many years a professor of political science at Yale University and a senior fellow in governmental studies at the Brookings Institution. His books include The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior (RFF Press, 1967); Are Government Organizations Immortal? (Brookings Institution, 1976); Red Tape: Its Origins, Uses, and Abuses (Brookings Institution, 1977); The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs (Brookings Institution, 1981); and (with Wallace S. Sayre) Governing New York City: Politics in the Metropolis (Norton, 1960).