THE STUDY OF ADMINISTRATION

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It is now fifty years since Woodrow Wilson wrote his brilliant essay on public administration. It is a good essay to reread every so often; there is so much in it that sounds modern, so much that will hold permanently true. "It is getting to be harder to run a constitution than to frame one." Was this said only yesterday? No, Woodrow Wilson clearly saw the importance of governmental administration half a century ago. "Administration is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action; it is the executive, the operative, the most visible side of government, and is of course as old as government itself." Yet democracies have badly neglected administrative principles and structural improvements. "Like a lusty child, government with us has expanded in nature and grown great in stature, but has also become awkward in movement.... English and American political history has been a history, not of administrative development, but of legislative oversight—not of progress in governmental organization, but of advance in law-making and political criticism. ... We go on criticizing when we ought to be creating."2

Political scientists owe Woodrow Wilson a debt of gratitude for opening their eyes to the broader importance and implications of administration. His keen mind also discerned the task which would occupy the attention of administrative theorists long after he was gone: "The principles on which to base a science of administration for America," he said, "must be principles which have democratic policy very much at heart." More clearly now than then, we realize that "we should not like to have had Prussia's history for the sake of having Prussia's administrative skill.... It is better to be untrained and free than to be servile and systematic. Still there is no denying that it would be better yet to be both free in spirit and proficient in practice."3 Freedom and democratic effectiveness may be one and the same thing. The ends of the state can be achieved only through an efficient administrative instrument. Hence, as Woodrow Wilson correctly observed, administration is "raised very

2 Ibid., p. 203ff.
3 Ibid., p. 207.
far above the dull level of mere technical detail by the fact that through its greater principles it is directly connected with the lasting maxims of political wisdom, the permanent truths of political progress.”

Public administration is a process or a theory, not merely an accumulation of detailed facts. It is Verwaltungslehre. The object of administrative study should be to discover, first, what government can properly and successfully do, and secondly, how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible cost both of money and of energy.

Administration is generic. It is a social science concept which applies to all organized group activity. Administration arises whenever organization occurs. There are common problems and processes in the household, the school, the church, the business corporation, and the vast modern state. After deciding upon objectives, means must be devised for carrying out the program. This latter process is administration. Anyone who is responsible for directing the work of others thereby becomes an administrator.

An adequate theory of society must obviously be based upon a knowledge of administration. The importance of administration is in direct ratio to the complexity of inter-personal relationships and the number and utility of joint services. The more things that are done for the individual, the greater becomes the importance of organization. Many of society’s most difficult problems, such as security for the individual and uninterrupted economic progress, boil down largely to matters of proper organization.

Ours has become an “administered” society. In spite of our wishful thinking to the contrary, complexity demands organization. With the growth of large business units, our economic life is seen as one whose results depend upon good administration. “Gradually but steadily,” says Gardiner Means, “great segments of economic activity have been shifted from the market place to administration.” In the development of further administrative coördination, concludes Dr. Means, economists “must come to political scientists for aid. We ask that you apply to the field of economic administration the technique of analysis and principles of organization which

4 It is significant that instead of qualifying the term with “public” or “governmental,” Woodrow Wilson wrote merely about administration.
you have developed in the study of the state.76 Whenever social organizations are formed, common problems of organization, leadership, control, personnel, finance, and public relations are bound to arise. It is no exaggeration to say that in the future the balance of power among social institutions, and the survival value of each, will depend upon the relative success which each attains in applying administrative principles to the increasing concentration and complexity found in all fields of activity.

Because administration is the most obvious aspect of group activity, those who are unfamiliar with it are apt to assume that executive operations are not very difficult. By the same token, the study of administration is sometimes thought to be dismal and quite lacking in important theoretical considerations. These are mistaken notions. The competence of administration sets the limits of popular rule and democratic effectiveness. The state in action comes up against the imponderables which make government the most difficult of all fields of study. The carrying out of a program depends, in the last analysis, upon citizen compliance and cooperation. For every structural problem there are three or four psychological ones. Dry-as-dust administration does not do very much; successful executive leadership requires the combination of the best directive and personal qualifications which man can supply.

Administration is both social engineering and applied psychology. It is apparatus and mechanics, incentives and human nature. Let no one think it is merely the former. Nowhere is the need for psychology greater than in the organization, direction, and inspiration of men working in large groups. Outstanding administrative results are produced by spirit, morale, atmosphere; these, in turn, are the product of psychological mainsprings and invigorating incentives. As Benjamin Lippincott has recognized, both governmental and business administration resolve fundamentally into the rôle played by effective incentives.7

Modern governmental administration is a new synthesis. It is necessarily concerned with all fields of knowledge and all matters

6 "The realm of political science is, or lies within, the realm of social associations or administrative organizations," points out Dr. Means. Public administration, as viewed by Woodrow Wilson or Gardner Means, constitutes the bulk of government—its very essence. See Means' article, "The Distribution of Control and Responsibility in a Modern Economy," in a symposium edited by Benjamin E. Lippincott, Government Control of the Economic Order (Minneapolis, 1935), pp. 1–17.

7 In the "Conclusion" to the symposium cited, p. 118.
which enter into the carrying out of official policies and programs. Administration is a means to an end. Hence, as tasks and objectives change, the instrument is also refashioned. That is why public administration may properly be called a "new" synthesis. Fifty years ago, with remarkable foresight, Woodrow Wilson visualized the kind of synthesis it should be; we have just about caught up with his concept.

Consider all of the fields from which administration must needs draw. History and political philosophy tell us what government has done in the past and what it is likely to do well. What the state is expected to do today is expressed in the law. "Every particular application of general law is an act of administration." The study also has roots in sociology, anthropology, and economics. The administrator seeks to solve problems; these are usually surrounded by complex social situations which allied social science disciplines help to explain. Administration does not operate in a vacuum. The public servant's subject-matter is medicine, engineering, law, finance, school-teaching, social service, or any one of dozens of other fields. Somewhere or other in government, every vocation and profession is represented. A knowledge of psychology is peculiarly involved in leadership, personnel, and public relations. Areal delimitation, organization, and control make use of engineering and rationalization factors. Economics supplies standards of measurement and evaluation, while public finance indicates the lines of fiscal policy.

Administration is concerned with "the what," and "the how," of government. The "what" is the subject-matter, the technical knowledge of a field which enables an administrator to perform his tasks. The "how" is the techniques of management, the principles according to which coöperative programs are carried through to success. Each is indispensable; together, they form the synthesis called administration. It is estimated that sixty per cent of all civil engineers are now publicly employed. What percentage of them know the "how" of governmental operations? The same question may appropriately be asked about school teachers, social service workers, and many other groups of public employees. All too many departments are filled with employees who "do not know their way around." Government suffers for want of executive leadership and aggressive administration.

The field of administration, then, is concerned with the problems
and powers, the organization, and the techniques of management according to which policy and program are carried out. The major policies are determined for the management either by a legislature, a board of directors, or some other policy agency. But this does not mean that the administrative side of the institution is unconcerned with law and policy. Increasingly in all large enterprises, whether business or governmental, the professional administrators are relied upon for advice and proposed programs. Then too, the executive branch is called upon to fill in the details of general laws, by means of sub-legislation, discretionary acts, the creation of standards, and decisions between the rights of parties in disagreement. The starting point of every administrator is an understanding of the law or laws that he is expected to carry out; he needs to interpret law into terms of policy and program.

Today we cannot accept unqualifiedly the generalization of Woodrow Wilson to the effect that "the field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study. It is a part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are a part of the life of society." Many is the time that officials have wished that this were true. But it is not; politics (in the sense of law or policy) runs all the way through administration. Group pressures operate directly and ceaselessly upon every branch and subdivision of public administration. Professor Herring's new book shows that when interest groups do not get what they want from the legislature they pursue the administration, and that when the lawmaking body capitulates, the organized interests keep tab on the executive agency to be sure that it performs its work to the group's satisfaction. One of the commonest expressions of the public servant is "every bureau has its clientèle."

Woodrow Wilson also erred in believing that administration has no close connection with the constitutional system and the general framework of government. Inadequate machinery is the principal cause of administrative inefficiency and ineffectiveness. In the last fifty years, there has been a remarkable improvement in the competence of public personnel and the methods employed by governments. In these respects, public administration has greatly out-

9 Ibid., p. 211.
distanced business management. For example, in the installation and use of office techniques and labor-saving devices, such agencies as the United States Census Bureau and the British Post Office Savings Bank have stood in a class of their own, leaders for industry as well as for government. Where government fails is in the articulation of the levels of government, failure to abolish or consolidate needless political subdivisions, and in the discouraging slowness with which individual governments are reorganized and modernized. This is the realm of machinery. Until the mechanism is put into working order, competent administrators and modern techniques are ineffective, or at best only partially successful. Constitutional reform is the condition precedent to most far-reaching administrative improvements. If the basic design is wrong, minor repairs are bound to prove disappointing. This means that federal decentralization, regional devolution, county consolidation, the rationalization of special districts, and the internal reorganization of our larger governments are the most needed reforms in public administration. The most brilliant executive is sometimes broken by an inflexible and utterly unworkable organization system. Here government is handicapped. Business corporations can change their organizations whenever the president recognizes the need of it. Public officials must await the slowness and uncertainty of constitutional change. Political science would do well to level heavy guns on the amassed lethargy which stands in the way of structural reforms.

The American constitutional system of checks and balances makes it difficult to put into operation tried and tested principles of public administration. The lines of responsibility are not clearly marked. Unity of management is hard to achieve because of the fact that the executive is not recognized as the indisputable head of the administrative departments and independent establishments. Executive leadership and administrative control are effective only when the confines of the administrative hierarchy are definite, all units are included, and the lines of authority are simple. In the cabinet form of government, in the city-manager plan, and in the corporate set-up, responsibility and unity are assured. The same superiority is found in the use of staff services. It is the function of personnel, finance, and other staff officers to be helpful to the chief executive; staff persons should never issue orders directly to line officers. This is a universal principle of good administration. When the constitutional system incorporates responsibility at its
center, all staff services can readily be made to occupy their proper position. Not so, though, the American system of checks and balances: the civil service commission becomes a "control" agency; the chief finance officer is the servant of the legislature.

If a democratic people really desires the government to seek assiduously the ends of the state, it will construct the constitutional system so that the administration will be responsible and unified. The checks and balances system makes it necessary and inevitable to violate public administration’s central principles. In a realistic analysis, the intimate interdependence of the constitutional and administrative structures will be closely observed. The fixity of our written constitution, the multiplicity of our governing units, and the failure to provide for responsible leadership and administration make our constitutional system a difficult one within which to build principles of public administration.

Some may question whether we know enough about administrative principles (or possibly whether there is enough that can be learned) to make a comparison between the rival claims of constitutionalism and administrative requisites. This is a fair question, because first principles have been relatively slow in emerging. However, this backwardness is due more to neglect in research than to the mysterious or impoverished character of the subject-matter. What are the component parts of public administration? About what subjects can principles possibly be formulated? The principal questions concern objectives, area, organization, finance, personnel, techniques of management, public relations, and external control. Whenever a coöperative program is to be set in motion, the logic and precedence are roughly as follows: what is to be done; what is the proper area; what form should the organization take; how shall it be controlled and operated; from what source shall its funds come; how shall the personnel be chosen and its interests cared for; what attention needs to be given to public interests and attitudes; and what forms of external control, if any, are necessary?

Planning is the first and most important step in administration.

10 There needs to be a closer working relationship between public law and public administration. I cannot agree with Woodrow Wilson that the distinction between constitutional and administrative questions is that “between those governmental adjustments which are essential to constitutional principle and those which are merely instrumental to the possibly changing purposes of a wisely adapting convenience." Basic design controls, and unless altered will rob administration of its vitality for social accomplishment.
The objectives of the program must be carefully thought out, and the administrative goals and procedures must also be given serious attention. Only when objectives are formulated clearly is an enterprise likely to develop a corporate philosophy and institutional esprit de corps. The goals determine, to a considerable extent, the administrative methods which will be found most efficacious. Strangely enough, many enterprises, among them some very large ones, fail in the first and most important step, the planning function.

There are some objectives of good administration which are sought by every form of enterprise, public and private, business and non-commercial. In the first place, as we have already suggested, there needs to be unity of management. This means that there can be only one recognized head of the organization, that all essential parts are joined and move forward together, and that control and direction of the going concern from the outside will not be tolerated. Unity is necessary for planning, synchronization, control, effective leadership, and esprit de corps. In the second place, the administrative entity should be flexible. It should be able to respond to changes in markets, technology, and tastes. Stated negatively, the enterprise should be free from red tape and rigid regulations and procedures. This suggests a third desideratum, namely, responsiveness. The establishment should look outward, not merely inward. This is to say that all procedures and attitudes should be attuned to consumer wishes and requirements. The outward, responsive attitude on the part of administrators is the crux of what has latterly been called "public relations." Finally, great administration is characterized by atmosphere, spirit—an institutional quality which is pleasing. This end-product of good management is the result of a combination of factors, chief among which are outstanding executive leadership, adherence to sound management principles, and considerate treatment of employees and customers.

It is not necessary to catalogue in detail principles of public administration for all of the component parts of the field. Our present purpose is to make it clear that theoretical formulations are indispensable in this age of large-scale enterprise, that there are universal rules to be uncovered, and that attention to the theoretical systematization of administration is badly and urgently needed. Concerning administrative areas, for example, we may
postulate the rule that boundaries should correspond as closely as possible to the composite of major problems within an area, adequate attention being given to administrative convenience, financial economy, and cultural attachments. Organization principles aim at a structure in which all authority is concentrated in the chief executive, lines of responsibility are hierarchical, staff officers clear through officials of the line, adequate attention is given to staff services, sufficient freedom is guaranteed to operating heads, and the entire organization is meshed at hierarchical levels and simply controlled at the top. There should be no more departments than there are necessary functions, and in no case more than the chief executive can control within the span of his attention and competence. The greater a person’s responsibility, the more he needs to delegate tasks and the greater is the need for staff assistance. Personnel work should never assume control functions; its purpose is to help the executive plan and think. Accounting and auditing are separate responsibilities and should be treated accordingly in the organizational set-up. It is even more important that the executive should lead than that he should control. Authority and responsibility should be coequal. The objects of public relations are to understand and to be appreciated. Finally, regular checks should be provided for the prevention or punishment of illegality, arbitrariness, discrimination, or discourtesy. The administrator should serve all, and none with special favor.

Principles of administration are applicable to all fields of human activity. Their equal applicability is particularly striking when very large enterprises are compared. The management problems and procedures in the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, for instance, are not unlike those which obtain in the federal government. Officials of the A. T. & T. find their most difficult management problems in the relation between headquarters and field, in reconciling operating autonomy and over-all control, in keeping delay and other evidences of red tape at a minimum. Any large government is constantly struggling with the same problems. Where is a sufficient supply of executive ability to be recruited, and how are men of extraordinary ability to be pulled up to the top without injuring the morale of those less gifted? Every large enterprise is perplexed by these problems. Even the undue influence of the Comptroller-General in federal administration has parallels in large corporations; it is always difficult to keep the finance man
effective and at the same time in his proper place. The larger business enterprises become, the more like governments they are. "Bureaucracy is inherent," confess business executives; "the only question is whether its objectionable characteristics are ineradicable."

None the less, there are important differences between large corporate enterprises and our larger governmental administrations. Democratic government creates distinctive problems for public administration. As a rule, only one difference is emphasized: the fact that most private businesses are judged by profitability and most government departments seek only the greatest amount of service. This difference is important, because, as we have already said, administration is ultimately reducible to effective incentives. However, we should not permit this factor of undoubted importance to withdraw our attention entirely from other governmental differences.

Business administration is essentially a dictatorship, or at any rate a monarchy. Administration under a democracy, on the other hand, is deliberately limited and checked. This difference in what may be called constitutional theory accounts, in part, for the unity of management which business management easily achieves and which government administration finds it so difficult to accomplish within the confines of the democratic structure. Hence, too, the greater freedom of corporate executives to make changes in organization, to be responsive to new situations, and to react quickly to consumer desires.

Governmental administration is less responsive than business management because it is more accountable. It must adhere to the law; this being the case, meticulous regulations are promulgated. Business executives are not so circumscribed. They may change rules and regulations when it suits their convenience or when the interests of the business seem to require it. The necessity of legal compliance is the principal cause of government red tape. In its name, of course, regulations and red tape may be carried much farther than they need to be. One of the chief means of improving governmental administration is to reduce the number of inflexible regulations which, like a set of law-books, the administrator has before him on his desk. How to make administration flexible and responsive and at the same time legally accountable and constitutionally responsible—this is one of the most difficult adjustments of democratic government.
Another advantage enjoyed by business management is the greater continuity of policy and executive leadership. It takes time and continuity to give programs a fair trial, to build up a unified administration, and to develop attachments to leaders and to the service. There are few such unbroken periods in a representative government. When one party is voted out and another in, old policies are likely to be stopped and new ones begun, whilst new faces appear in executive posts. These starts and stops, changes of leadership and losses of experience, are part of the cost which a people must expect to pay for popular rule. The price is not too high. Moreover, the upsetting consequences can be mitigated by producing a permanent administrative corps and giving it a proper amount of authority. We simply note this difference between government and business because it helps to explain the relative advantage, from an administrative standpoint, of one, and the difficulty of the adjustment of the other.

Governmental administration is more complex because of the nature of public duties. In large realms of social action, compulsion is necessary. Government regulates, prohibits, prosecutes. This means that public authorities must operate in a hostile or antagonistic atmosphere. Very few such situations arise in business administration; services are usually sought, or at any rate evoke a positive pleasure-response. Then, too, business services are relatively more simple because specialization is greater. Compare the problem of administering a large organization which sells one service or product, such as the telephone or a motor car, with that of a national government, which has within each department literally a score of diverse concerns. The United States Department of the Interior, for example, is charged with responsibility for matters so diverse as hospitals for the insane, oil wells, Alaskan bears, country schools, grazing rights, and universities. Specialization makes it easier to produce outstanding administration; concentration is one of the laws of success. The opposite is likewise true: multiple interests divide attention, make unity and cooperation difficult, and militate against institutional homogeneity and esprit.

It was once thought that an outstanding difference between business and government is that the latter is bureaucratic and the former is not. We now know that bureaucracy is generic, the result of size. Small governments are no more bureaucratic than small business units. Large governments are not necessarily more
bureaucratic than large corporations. Bureaucracy is a necessary implication of large size. Some of its results are efficient, while others are socially objectionable. The problem of administration is therefore to eradicate, if possible, those consequences of bureaucracy which are undesirable. They are the very ones we have mentioned, namely, inflexibility, disunity, unresponsiveness. The objectionable features of bureaucracy can be made to dissolve when sufficient amounts of principle are applied to large organization units. The need of outstanding executive leadership, staff assistance, decentralization, and functional specialization is in direct ratio to the size and complexity of the institution. Woodrow Wilson wisely remarked: "The object of administrative study is to rescue executive methods from the confusion and costliness of empirical experiment and set them upon foundations laid deep in stable principle."11

The problem of the developing science of administration is like that of other social science disciplines in that it needs to become systematic and yet guard against insularity. The need for a consistent theory of large-scale administration is even greater today than it was when Woodrow Wilson wrote—less was known then, but the problems were nowhere near as great. The creative state and an "administered" economy have emerged within the last half-century. One needs simply consider the staggering significance of the administrative problems requiring solution and the empirical nature of attempted solutions to recognize the crying need for a systematic body of principles.

The answer is to be found in a broader view of administration than has heretofore obtained and in concerted attention to an underlying rationale. If the cultural view is steadfastly adhered to, insularity can be avoided. We do not want efficiency for its own sake; we want it for the sake of our democratic form of government. If administration were allowed to develop in a closed compartment, we should probably find that in a generation or so democratically-inspired people would have to tear down or reconstruct much that had been done in order to make the instrument conform to the life and temper of the people. Public administration in a democracy cannot expect to be concerned solely with efficiency.12

12 "An individual sovereign will adopt a simple plan and carry it out directly: he will have but one opinion, and he will embody that one opinion in one command."
The formulation of an acceptable theory and philosophy of administration is likely to be less difficult than the education of legislators and voters in the necessity of applying these findings. There is a natural distrust of a strengthened executive, and yet it is perfectly obvious that most administrative improvements, such as greater unity and flexibility, hinge upon the enhancement of executive responsibility. We need to educate our fellow citizens to see that the advantages of simplification, effectiveness, and responsibility more than offset the theoretical danger of abuse of power. Woodrow Wilson has stated the matter in his usual lucid manner: "There is no danger in power, if only it be not irresponsible. If it be divided, dealt out in shares to many, it is obscured; and if it be obscured, it is made irresponsible. But if it be centered in heads of the service and in heads of branches of the service, it is easily watched and brought to book. If to keep his office a man must achieve open and honest success, and if at the same time he feels himself intrusted with large freedom of discretion, the greater his power the less likely is he to abuse it, the more is he nerv'd and sobered and elevated by it. The less his power, the more safely obscure and unnoticed does he feel his position to be, and the more readily does he relapse into remissness."

Administrators need to educate their masters. Democracy cannot survive unless basic programs succeed in accomplishing their objectives. On the other hand, the only kind of effectiveness which is acceptable to a democratic people is that which is produced by those who can be trusted. "The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question." The acceptability of public administration principles is dependent upon their consistency with and contribution to those democratic values which the community is determined to preserve at all costs.

But this other sovereign, the people, will have a score of differing opinions. They can agree upon nothing simple: advance must be made through compromise, by a compounding of differences, by a trimming of plans and a suppression of too straightforward principles. There will be a succession of resolves running through a course of years, a dropping fire of commands running through a whole gamut of modifications." Woodrow Wilson, ibid., p. 207.

13 Ibid., pp. 213–214.
14 Ibid., p. 217.