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A Condensed Version of

THE STUDY OF ADMINISTRATION by WOODROW WILSON (1887)

Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) had just begun teaching political science at Bryn Mawr College when he was invited to contribute an article to a new journal, Political Science Quarterly. The result was "The Study of Administration," often cited as the first essay on public administration in the United States. Wilson, in his later career, would be closely associated with many Progressive reforms. In this early work, he stressed the importance of the role of public administration as distinct from politics and urged the development of professional education to prepare administrators for the increasingly complex needs facing government in the United States. His introduction outlined the question:

It is a thing almost taken for granted among us, that the present movement called civil service reform must, after the accomplishment of its first purpose, expand into efforts to improve, not the *personnel* only, but also the organization and methods of our government offices: because it is plain that their organization and methods need improvement only less than their *personnel*. It is the object of administrative study 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 either of money or of energy. On both these points there is obviously much need of light among us, and only careful study can supply that light.

In the first section of his essay, Wilson discussed the need for and the problems of reforming public administration in the United States. He began by asking why this country is so late in developing a "science of administration"? His answer:

Up to our own day all the political writers whom we now read had thought, argued, dogmatized only about the *constitution* of government; about the nature of the state the essence and seat of sovereignty, popular power and kingly prerogative....The question was always Who shall make law, and what shall that law be?

...There was little or no trouble about administration,--at least little that was heeded by administrators. The functions of government were simple, because life itself was simple...There was no complex system of public revenues and public debts to puzzle financiers; there were, consequently, no financiers to be puzzled....Populations were of manageable numbers; property was of simple sorts. There were plenty of farms, but no stocks and bonds; more cattle than vested interests.

We may still have constitutional issues to be resolved, Wilson wrote, but they are no longer more urgent than dealing with problems of administration: "It is getting to be harder to *run* a constitution than to frame one."

...There is scarcely a single duty of government which was once simple which is not now more complex; government once had but a few masters; it now has scores of masters. Majorities formerly only underwent government; they now conduct government. Where government once might follow the whims of a court, it must now follow the views of a nation.

And those views are steadily widening to new conceptions of state duty; so that, at the same time that the functions of government are every day becoming more complex and difficult, they are also vastly multiplying in number. Administration is everywhere putting its hands to new undertakings. The utility, cheapness, and success of the government's postal service, for instance, point towards the early establishment of governmental control of the telegraph system. Or, even if our government is not to follow the lead of the governments of Europe in buying or building both telegraph and railroad lines, no one can doubt that in some way it must make itself master of masterful corporations.

The creation of national commissioners of railroads, in addition to the older state commissions, involves a very important and delicate extension of administrative functions. Whatever hold of authority state or federal governments are to take upon corporations, there must follow cares and responsibilities which will require not

a little wisdom, knowledge, and experience. Such things must be studied in order to be well done....The idea of the state and the consequent ideal of its duty are undergoing noteworthy change; and "the idea of the state is the conscience of administration." Seeing every day new things which the state ought to do, the next thing is to see clearly how it ought to do them.

That is why there should be a science of administration which shall seek to straighten the paths of government, to make its business less unbusinesslike; to strengthen and purify its organization, and to crown its duties with dutifulness. This is one reason why there is such a science.

But where has this science grown up? Surely not on this side of the sea. Not much impartial scientific method is to be discerned in our administrative practices. The poisonous atmosphere of city government, the crooked secrets of state administration, the confusion, sinecurism, and corruption ever and again discovered in the bureaus at Washington forbid us to believe that any clear conceptions of what constitutes good administration are as yet very widely current in the United States. No; American writers have hitherto taken no very important part in the advancement of this science. It has found its doctors in Europe. It is not of our making; it is a foreign science, speaking very little of the language of English or American principle....It has been developed by French and German professors, and is consequently in all parts adapted to the needs of a compact state, and made to fit highly centralized forms of government; whereas, to answer our purposes, it must be adapted, not to a dimple and compact, but to a complex and multiform state, and made to fit highly decentralized forms of government. If we would employ it, we must Americanize it, and that not formally, in language merely, but radically, in thought, principle, and aim as well. It must learn our constitutions by heart; must get the bureaucratic fever out of its veins; must inhale much free American air.

Why were Europeans more advanced in administrative science? Wilson suggested two reasons: First, since their governments were "independent of popular assent, there was more governing to be done"; second, since they wanted to maintain government as a "monopoly," they tried to discover "the least irritating means of governing." England and America, however, were more interested in controlling government, trying to make it "just and moderate" rather than "facile, well-ordered, and effective." The effort to establish essential principles had been accomplished, Wilson claimed, but our attention had been slow to turn to other needs of administrative organization and skills. "Why for instance, have we but just begun purifying a civil service which was rotten full fifty years ago?" He reassured his readers that he was not denying the importance of American and English values:

...We should not like to have had Prussia's history for the sake of having Prussia's administrative skill; and Prussia's particular system of administration would quite suffocate us. It is better to be untrained and free than to be servile and systematic.

What's to stop us from having both freedom and good administration?--

Well, principally, popular sovereignty. It is harder for democracy to organize administration than for a monarchy....We have enthroned public opinion; and it is forbidden us to hope during its reign for any quick schooling of the sovereign in executive expertness or in the conditions of perfect functional balance in government....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. 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....

In government, as in virtue, the hardest of hard things is to make progress. Formerly the reason for this was that the single person who was sovereign was generally either selfish, ignorant, timid, or a fool,--albeit there was now and again one who was wise. Nowadays the reason is that the many, the people, who are sovereign have no single ear which one can approach, and are selfish, ignorant, timid, stubborn, or foolish with the selfishnesses, the ignorances, the stubbornnesses, the timidities, or the follies of several thousand persons,--albeit there are hundreds who are wise.

Under such circumstances, the reformer faces a formidable challenge, since "the sovereign's mind has no definite locality, but is contained in a voting majority of several million heads" and clings stubbornly to the preconceived notions, the prejudices of habit, not reason. Thus, "Wherever regard for public opinion is a first principle of

government, practical reform must be slow and all reform must be full of compromises." Not only must the majority be convinced of the wisdom of change, it must be spurred to action.

The bulk of mankind is rigidly unphilosophical, and nowadays the bulk of mankind votes. A truth must become not only plain but also commonplace before it will be seen by the people who go to their work early in the morning; and not to act upon it must involve great and pinching inconveniences before these same people will make up their minds to act upon it.

And where is this unphilosophical bulk of mankind more multifarious in its composition than in the United States? To know the public mind of this country, one must know the mind, not of Americans of the older stocks only, but also of Irishmen, of Germans, of Negroes....minds cast in every mould of race, minds inheriting every bias of environment, warped by the histories of a score of different nations, warmed or chilled, closed or expanded by almost every climate of the globe.

## II.

The second section of Wilson's essay examined the difference, as he saw it, between administration and politics:

The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics...It is a part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are a part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product. But it is, at the same time, raised very 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.

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. It is for this reason that we must regard civil service reform in its present stages as but a prelude to a fuller administrative reform. We are now rectifying methods of appointment; we must go on to adjust executive functions more fitly and to prescribe better methods of executive organization and action. Civil service reform is thus but a moral preparation for what is to follow. It is clearing the moral atmosphere of official life by establishing the sanctity of public office as a public trust, and, by making the service unpartisan, it is opening the way for making it businesslike...

...(A)dmistration lies outside the proper sphere of *politics*. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices.

It is not easy to draw a clear line of demarcation between administrative and non-administrative functions, Wilson acknowledged; it requires examination of individual statutory and departmental situations. Thus, "A great deal of administration goes about *incognito* to most of the world, being confounded now with political 'management,' and again with constitutional principle." It is important to remember, however, that good administrative arrangements do not guarantee liberty; that is a constitutional matter:

Liberty no more consists in easy functional movement than intelligence consists in the ease and vigor with which the limbs of a strong man move....Liberty cannot live apart from constitutional principle; and no administration, however perfect and liberal its methods, can give men more than a poor counterfeit of liberty if it rest upon illiberal principles of government.

To help distinguish between the provinces of constitutional law and administrative function, Wilson offered some criteria:

Public administration is detailed and systematic execution of public law. Every particular application of general law is an act of administration. The assessment and raising of taxes, for instance, the hanging of a criminal, the transportation and delivery of the mails, the equipment and recruiting of the army and navy, etc., are all obviously acts of administration; but the general laws which direct these things to be done are as obviously outside of and above administration. The broad plans of governmental action are not

administrative; the detailed execution of such plans is administrative. Constitutions, therefore, properly concern themselves only with those instrumentalities of government which are to control general law....

This is not quite the distinction between Will and answering Deed, because the administrator should have and does have a will of his own in the choice of means for accomplishing his work. He is not and ought not be a mere passive instrument. The distinction is between general plans and special means.

The area where administrative and constitutional principles seem to overlap is the matter of the proper distribution of constitutional authority: Administrative efficiency requires discovery of "the simplest arrangements by which responsibility can be unmistakably fixed upon officials; the best way of dividing authority without hampering it, and responsibility without obscuring it." At the same time, distribution of authority is a central constitutional question. "To discover the best principle for the distribution of authority is of greater importance, possibly, under a democratic system, where officials serve many masters, than under others, where they serve but a few." The key lies in a system where accountability is clear, thus assuring the trustworthiness of administration:

Public attention must be easily directed, in each case of good or bad administration, to just the man deserving of praise or blame. There is no danger in power, if only it be not irresponsible. If it be divided, dealt only in shares to many, it is obscured; and if it be obscured, it is made irresponsible. But if it be centred 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 entrusted with large freedom of discretion, the greater his power the less likely is he to abuse it, the more is he nerved 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.

The question is, "To whom is official trustworthiness to be disclosed, and by whom is it to be rewarded?" What should be the role of public opinion? Wilson's answer is that "public opinion shall play the part of authoritative critic," and no more.

Our (American) success is made doubtful by that besetting error of ours, the error of trying to do too much by vote. Self-government does not consist in having a hand in everything, any more than housekeeping consists necessarily in cooking dinner with one's own hands. The cook must be trusted with large discretion as to the management of the fires and the ovens.

Americans feel free to express their opinions, even when they are not particularly well informed. The challenge is "to make public opinion efficient without suffering it to be meddlesome." In regard to the details of administration, public criticism is "a clumsy nuisance, a rustic handling delicate machinery." When it comes to issues of policy, however, "public criticism is altogether safe and beneficent, altogether indispensable."

While we might try to educate the public about administration, it is of greater urgency to assure well-educated public administrators. Wilson lauded the new efforts toward universal political education in the U.S. But the growth in colleges' political science programs, thought it might prepare students to be legislators or "multiply the number of intelligent critics of government," would not prepare more competent executive officials. What was needed was better preparation for dealing with the "*apparatus* of government."

I know that a corps of civil servants prepared by a special schooling and drilled, after appointment, into a perfected organization, with appropriate hierarchy and characteristic discipline, seems to a great many very thoughtful persons to contain elements which might combine to make an offensive official class--a distinct, semi-corporate body with sympathies divorced from those of a progressive, free-spirited people, and with hearts narrowed to the meanness of a bigoted officialism....

But to fear the creation of a domineering, illiberal officialism as a result of the studies I am here proposing is to miss altogether the principle upon which I wish most to insist. That principle is, that administration in the United States must be at all points sensitive to public opinion.

Any apprehension that this group of trained officials will somehow be "un-American" is resolved when one understands that administrators' "good behavior" is to be defined as "Steady, hearty allegiance to the policy of the

government," and that policy will continue to be created by "statesmen whose responsibility to public opinion will be direct and inevitable." This strengthens Wilson's argument that:

Bureaucracy can exist only where the whole service of the state is removed from the common political life of the people, its chiefs as well as its rank and file. Its motives, its objects, its policy, its standards, must be bureaucratic.

### III.

In his concluding section, Wilson returns to the matter of European nations as a model for the U.S. in regard to public administration. The role of the people in formulating policy is essential to the American spirit, but, he argues, "So far as administrative functions are concerned:

all governments have a strong structural likeness; more than that, if they are to be uniformly useful and efficient, they *must* have a strong structural likeness. A free man has the same bodily organs, the same executive parts, as the slave, however different may be his motives, his services, his energies. Monarchies and democracies, radically different as they are in other respects, have in reality much the same business to look to.

We ought not be frightened about borrowing from foreign systems, he assured his readers. "We borrowed rice, but we do not eat it with chopsticks. We borrowed our whole political language from England, but we leave the words 'king' and 'lords' out of it." As long as we maintain our distinctive political principles, we need not fear adopting the practices of France or Germany.

If I see a murderous fellow sharpening a knife cleverly, I can borrow his way of sharpening the knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it; and so, if I see a monarchist dyed in the wool managing a public bureau well, I can learn his business methods without changing one of my republican spots....We can thus scrutinize the anatomy of foreign governments without fear of getting any of their diseases into our veins; dissect alien systems without apprehension of blood-poisoning.

America, in developing its own model, would also have to consider another factor which distinguished it from European nations--its federal system.

Our duty is, to supply the best possible life to a *federal* organization, to systems within systems; to make town, city, county, state, and federal governments live with a like strength and an equally assured healthfulness, keeping each unquestionably its own master and yet making all interdependent and cooperative, combining independence with mutual helpfulness....

....(H)ow shall our series of governments within governments be so administered that it shall always be to the interest of the public officer to serve, not his superior alone, but the community also, with the best efforts of his talents and the soberest service of his conscience? How shall such service be made to his commonest interest by contributing abundantly to his sustenance, to his dearest interest by furthering his ambition, and to his highest interest by advancing his honor and establishing his character? And how shall this be done alike for the local part and for the national whole?

If we solve this problem we shall again pilot the world