

# **POLITICS AND ANTI-POLITICS: AMERICAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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## **Summary**

American public administration in the nineteenth century was consumed by a fixation on the civil service and its central role in reducing partisanship and corruption. The reformers of that period succeeded in building a foundation for honest government. Without that basis, the professionalization of American public administration that was attained in the twentieth century could not have been achieved.

## **1. Introduction**

Public administration is, paramountly, people. At no time was this reality more central to both the theory and practice of public administration than in the United States of the nineteenth century. Enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, and honesty of government, yet still holding inviolate the constraints imposed by the American political culture on government executives, was the overwhelming question of American public administration in the 1800s, and it remains salient even in the 2000s.

## **2. Stunted and Truncated: Public Administration of the Nineteenth Century**

When American public administration of the nineteenth century is examined, it inevitably emerges as a stunted, truncated creature, both small in stature and absent important appendages: Stunted because, relative to corporate America, government

usually was the public sector's tail to the private sector's dog; truncated because personnel administration—in the civil service—consumed the whole of public administration during this period, and other vital components of the profession were rarely, if ever, on anyone's agenda. Why was this?

## 2.1 A Stunted Government

There were two reasons. First, the relatively small size and power of government were simply facts of economic life in the nineteenth century. By the close of the 1800s, government workers at all levels accounted for less than 2% of the American population (which was itself nearly tripling from only thirty years earlier), and government revenues at all levels amounted to about 8% of the economy. By the close of the 1900s, by contrast, the proportion of all government workers had grown by seven times, and accounted for nearly 14% of the population; total government revenues had nearly quintupled their share of the economy, and amounted to almost 38% of the Gross Domestic Product.

Let us place the relative powers of government and business during the nineteenth century in a more human perspective. By the beginning of the twentieth century, John D. Rockefeller was the richest person in America, with a fortune of about \$25 billion. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Bill Gates was the wealthiest person in America, with about \$85 billion. Rockefeller could have paid off the entire national debt (less than \$3 billion) with 10 to 15 percent of his wealth. But with a national debt of nearly \$6 trillion today, Gates could not even come close to paying it off; neither, for that matter, could the combined fortunes of the 400 wealthiest people in America. So the relatively inconspicuous place of public administration in the nineteenth century seems clear: The corporate state, not the administrative one, was dominant.

## 2.2 A Truncated Profession

Second, as we have noted, the profession of public administration in the 1800s was a profession of people, not of techniques. In other words, the civil service was the whole of public administration, and other important components of the profession, such as fiscal management or intergovernmental administration, simply were not present. These and other parts of public administration would be “invented,” with precious few exceptions, in the twentieth century.

The overriding problem of public administration in the nineteenth century was assuring honesty, and honesty (and dishonesty) can be found only in people, not in the value-neutral techniques that people use. In any case, these techniques, even the most fundamental techniques, were primitive at best in the twentieth century. Consider, for example, budgeting. The federal government did not even have an executive budget until 1921 (the country's first executive budget, Maryland's, appeared only in 1916), and even then the President, having no federal agencies to which he could confidently turn, had to ask a private-sector think-tank to actually write the federal budget. Similarly, systems analysis, performance measurement, government auditing, program evaluation, and just about any other function of public administration that one could imagine outside of human resource management were either nonexistent or barely

nascent in the nineteenth century. Thus we have, by today's more Catholic criteria, a hedged, hemmed, and harnessed notion of nineteenth century public administration that strikes us as little more than a provincial fixation with the civil service. Nevertheless, it was not an illogical fixation in light of the realities of the 1800s.

### **3. A Gentlemanly but Political Public Service**

George Washington, of course, set the tone of American public administration in the waning years of the eighteenth century. As the new nation's first President (1789-1797), Washington established a highly ethical standard, but it was not a standard devoid of political calculation. Washington carefully avoided appointing citizens (and there were many) who doubted the wisdom of the new Constitution. He frequently deferred to Congress's choices in making appointments, inaugurated a form of veteran's preference some 150 years before Congress enacted the Veteran's Preference Act of 1944, and assured that regions, factions, and parties were represented in the national bureaucracy. Washington promoted administrative competence, but competence was not defined in professional or technical terms; rather, it was defined in terms of class and character—that is, in the context of the American establishment and personal integrity.

Washington's successors continued his pattern of presidential appointments, and the result was a legitimate, well-educated, largely moral, mostly talented, and unusually loyal civil service. A statistical analysis of the early federal service (which numbered about 3,000 employees) shows that it was of a highly elitist nature, with nearly two-thirds of the eighty-to-a hundred or so highest-level appointees being drawn from the landed gentry, merchant, and professional classes.

Even though ability and integrity were valued, it did not hurt to be a team player. Two-thirds of the top appointments made by John Adams (1797-1801), and four-fifths of those made by Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) were new office holders. Except at the top, however, these early Presidents did not make that many new appointments because few appointees left the federal employ; the 3,000 employees toiling in the first federal vineyards were a highly stable lot. "Men became clerks in their early years and remained clerks often in the same office until they died".

Although there was no legislation dealing with any "familiar aspects of a personnel system" (other than pay rates) for the first forty years of the Republic, the nation nonetheless had "a genuine career system based strictly on custom and on the deference that one gentleman owed another". It worked rather well.

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