

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN AMERICA: THE EXCEPTIONALISM OF A HYBRID BUREAUCRACY

Fred W. Riggs

Political Science Department, University of Hawaii, USA

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1. Introduction

American public administration is truly exceptional and has limited relevance to the solution of administrative problems in other countries. Such an understanding requires a comparative analysis of other regimes based on the same constitutional principle, i.e. the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers. International comparisons reveal that public bureaucracies are not only instruments for the management of public policies but they also play a political role, and sometimes become politically dominant. This contradicts a widely held view, especially in America, that politics and administration are, and should be, sharply separated from each other.

A basic dilemma faced by all modern polities involves the need for a well-organized bureaucracy willing to serve under the direction of political leaders. The most

exceptional feature of the United States political system can be seen in its ability to maintain control throughout its history over a reasonably effective administrative system. Unfortunately, in other regimes based on the separation-of-powers constitutional principle, the established bureaucracies have been powerful enough both to prevent reforms that would make them more efficient; and also, during crises, to seize power and create military dictatorships. An understanding of this phenomenon helps us explain the American exception.

2. Attractions of Presidentialism

Because the American administrative system is widely admired and emulated in developing countries, their leaders claim that if they followed this example, they could create a successful democracy. The striking success of the United States as a wealthy industrialized nation and as an exemplar for democratic government easily accounts for the uncritical admiration of foreign observers. Moreover, the ambitious leaders of revolutionary or reform movements in new states are also attracted to the American model because it legitimizes their personal aspirations, especially if they think they can be elected to the presidency.

American advisers often contribute to this illusion by promoting the export of familiar practices they view as widely applicable. Impressionable leaders in client states tend to accept the advice offered by American advisers, especially when it is accompanied by a variety of attractive fringe benefits. Moreover, American advisers are pleased when people in other countries seek their advice and, since they typically lack the historical and comparative perspective needed to understand the essential uniqueness and irrelevance of public administration in America to the problems faced by other countries, it is understandable that they often promote the transfer of familiar bureaucratic structures based on the American experience.

A deeper comparative and historical analysis might well persuade them that, although certain administrative practices have been quite successful in America, the conditions that made this possible are unique and cannot be replicated elsewhere. In order to understand why this is true we need to take into account the special problems and risks faced by any would-be democracy that adopts the American separation-of-powers constitutional design, and also consider the historical events that produced bureaucratic adaptations in the U.S. that were not possible in other countries organized on similar constitutional principles.

Admittedly, the greater viability of parliamentarist (as opposed to presidentialist) regimes is a controversial finding rejected by most American political scientists. Although they may well be aware of the catastrophic history of other presidentialist regimes, it is easy enough to rationalize them as due to economic, cultural or social differences while ignoring the institutional factors which are primarily responsible. Consider, also, that viability is not the same as effectiveness; to say that a system survives longer is not to say that it is better. Just as we may expect higher performance from a very complicated car but longer life from a simpler one, so the fusion of power under parliamentarism may enable such regimes to last longer than more complex and otherwise preferable systems based on the separation of powers. Many comparativists

view parliamentarism as an essentially simpler or more rudimentary type of constitutional design than one organized on the separation of powers principles.

If one accepts the proposition that presidentialist regimes are inherently fragile and likely to collapse, then it becomes necessary to explain the American exception. If the separation-of-powers structure produces internally conflicted regimes likely to succumb to military rule during a time of severe crisis, how can one explain the long-term survival of such a system in the U.S.?

3. The American Exception

The exceptionalist argument claims that America is so different from other countries—geographically, culturally, economically, socially, religiously, historically—that it cannot be compared. However, every country in the world is unique in some respects that distinguish it from every other country. To explain differences, we need to identify relevant variables that apply to different countries, starting with those that are easiest to identify and where more or less plausible cause/effect sequences can be found. For example, size permits geographic comparisons between large and small countries; demographic distinctions involve population statistics; degrees of ethnic homogeneity/heterogeneity may be compared. The point is that a practice which works well in one type of regime may prove harmful in another.

3.1 Making valid comparisons

When we compare the U.S. with other presidentialist regimes, we find that one of the most important differences may be found in the fact that the American system remains oligarchic whereas other such systems have often sponsored more equalitarian rules—including proportional representation (PR) and compulsory voting. The point is that majoritarianism in single-member districts excludes many minorities from political representation. Exceptionally, in the U.S., it has also contributed to the maintenance of a centripetal two-party system that leads competing candidates to seek support from undecided voters in the center of the political spectrum. This centripetalism has also promoted diversity within each party, thereby encouraging political moderation instead of ideological partisanship. This tendency not only contributes to regime stability, but it also alienates voters further to the right and left who, therefore, decide not to vote. One might add that similarities between the competing parties also bore many potential voters whose apathy leads them not to vote. The typically low electoral turnout in America is, therefore, one of the causes of the oligarchic nature of this system.

Another factor involves the motivation for costly campaign funding. The presidentialist system compels Congress to make many policy decisions that, under parliamentarist principles, are decided by the Cabinet and top bureaucrats. Practically speaking, this means that a Congress (any legislative body in a presidentialist system) needs to disperse political responsibility to many committees and sub-committees—something that does not happen in parliamentarist regimes. The result is that special interests seeking legislative favors have a strong financial incentive to support the candidates who have the authority to approve their requests. A pyramidal effect extends this dynamic to the highest offices, making the candidates for President especially vulnerable to the prospects for generous funding without which, of course, they could

easily lose to their rivals. A vicious circle aggravates this dynamic despite the sincere efforts of some members of Congress to promote campaign-funding reform. The outcome, however, is that campaign finance in America is not only a huge factor in elections, but it results, inescapably, in special interest favoritism that accentuates the country's oligarchic dynamics. The regime's stability can be attributed to the interlocking interests of top politicians and the country's corporate elite, both of which are united in their determination to perpetuate the system.

Democratizing pressures have led many other presidentialist regimes to adopt proportional representation (PR) and/or to impose compulsory voting. One predictable result of these structural changes is a great increase in voter turnout. An important consequence of mass voting is political polarization. When parties know that they can attract mass support from the far right and far left, they will aim their political rhetoric to the right or the left. The result is the rise of centrifugal parties, pulling away from the center toward the political extremes, often with violence and instability. This generates high levels of public interest and participation but weakens the regime.

The American system, by contrast, has rejected PR and left voting as a voluntary act. Since many voters feel they have little to gain by voting, they stay away from the polls. As a result, party leaders also know they have little to gain by seeking their votes, and much more to gain by aiming for the center. By attracting middle class independents they can swing the election their way, while counting on party loyalty to bring in the mass voter of party faithfuls. This produces the American centripetal party system and a strongly oligarchic political dynamics. The trade-off is that while it is less democratic, it is more stable.

3.2 Power and performance

Here, in order to focus attention on American public administration, let us consider how the structure of a country's bureaucracy affects the ability of a democracy to survive. Concretely, by contrast with almost all other presidentialist regimes, appointed officials, headed by military officers, have never seized power in the U.S. This may be the most striking difference between the American experience and that of other presidentialist (separation-of-powers) constitutional systems. To explain this American exception we need to consider two variables: bureaucratic *power* and *performance*. In general, these variables are positively correlated: the more powerful a bureaucracy, the greater its capacity to administer. However, there is a ceiling in this relationship.

When bureaucratic power grows above the capacity of political leaders to maintain control, they are able to seize power during a time of severe crisis. Since this is a reciprocal relationship, one might say, instead, that when the ability of a regime to control its bureaucracy drops below a certain level, it courts disaster in the form of a coup leading to the imposition of bureaucratic domination. Moreover, the lack of effective controls by non-bureaucratic institutions destroys a regime's administrative capabilities. Consequently, uncontrolled bureaucrats in power are especially vulnerable to corruption, laziness, and ignorance. These failings ultimately destroy the capacity of any dominant bureaucracy to govern effectively and they produce regime instability, often taking the form of a counter-coup whereby rival intra-bureaucratic cliques contend

for power. Sometimes they also lead to popular movements that, perhaps with international support, contribute to a restoration of democratic governance.

In all democracies, political control over the bureaucracy centers on an elected assembly and a responsible head of government. However, the fusion of powers in a parliamentarist regime enables it to manage a more powerful bureaucracy than any presidentialist (separation-of-powers) system. This is simply because the unity of authority principle, inherent in any Cabinet (parliamentarist) system of government, permits more effective control over a bureaucracy than does the separation-of-powers (presidentialist) principle. From the bureaucratic perspective, disunity at the top often confuses and frustrates officials, undermining their morale and ability to coordinate their work. This is scarcely a new idea. Nevertheless, the deeper implications of this structure were not appreciated.

Disunity at the top has major costs. Conflict between branches (magnified by clashes between the components of each branch) hampers effective administration. Indeed, the competing values of rival agencies, in the absence of effective coordinating mechanisms, often block effective policy making. The result is frequently the gridlocks that occur even in the United States, where oligarchic practices make political decision-making easier than in other presidentialist regimes. Study of the experience of presidentialist regimes reveals that their inability to shape coherent sustainable policies and to control their bureaucracies lies at the root of the problem of maintaining their democratic institutions.

They cannot empower their bureaucracies enough to ensure competent public administration without at the same time making them so powerful that they can overthrow the regime when serious crises arise. The separation-of-powers principle also hampers their ability to make good public policy decisions and to make optimal use of the bureaucratic resources they have available to them. By contrast, most parliamentarist regimes are able to maintain sufficient control over their bureaucracies (military and civil) to permit them to be powerful enough to administer well. Coping effectively with the increasingly complex problems of a modern industrialized society also moderates popular disaffection with government and reduces the pressures for revolutionary change or bureaucratic intervention.

To explain the American exception, therefore, we need to understand how its bureaucracy has been kept weak enough not to be able to seize power, but strong enough to administer reasonably well. The explanation involves many variables that affect both bureaucratic power and performance. But two appear to be crucial: *experience* and *coordination*. Long-term experience in public service gives appointed officials specialized knowledge about how to solve difficult problems. It also enhances their power potential. Balance, therefore, is needed to give officials enough experience to improve their skills as administrators but not so much as to enable them to seize power. As for coordination, the rotation of assignments among different agencies and levels of governance, from the center to the periphery, enables officials to coordinate their work more effectively than when they work only in one specialized field. But broadening their work experience also increases their capacity to exercise power.

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Biographical Sketch

FRED W. RIGGS, Professor Emeritus (Ph.D., Columbia, 1948). Trained in international relations and Chinese philosophy, Fred Riggs subsequently specialized in comparative and development administration and became interested in the conceptual and terminological problems involved in writing about phenomena not recognized in conventional Western social science vocabularies. Under the auspices of UNESCO and the International Social Science Council, he organized an interdisciplinary committee that developed a new "onomantic" (i.e, naming or non-semantic) framework that uses hypertext technology on the WWW and e-mail listservs to disseminate glossaries for interactive use on a global multi-lingual basis.

Recently, he has also developed a neo-institutional comparative framework for understanding political and administrative problems usually ignored by comparativists. In this context, he points to the political role played by public bureaucracies, including military officers, in all countries, including the United States, but especially in the third world. When the ordinary political institutions of democratic government are weak and ineffectual, he argues that bureaucrats, led by military officers, often seize power and establish bureaucratic authoritarianism. Among the constitutional democracies of the third world, he thinks that those based on the American presidentialist model rooted in the separation of powers are the most fragile and likely to collapse, whereas those grounded in parliamentarism have better prospects for survival. He has explained why the U. S., as the only notable exception to this rule, has sustained its constitutional system for more than two centuries.

Since retiring from teaching, he has been promoting an understanding of these issues through numerous papers and publications, plus the launching of a global network of concerned scholars and practitioners: the Committee on Viable Constitutionalism (COVICO). Drafts and more details can be found on his Home Page Home Page He has recently focused his energy on the increased violence of ethnic nationalism around the world and the need for viable constitutional democracy in order to replace civil war with non-violent politics. He has organized a global network for liaison officers of the major groups, organizations, and committees promoting research on ethnic problems--and has created a Web site to support this activity. Most recently, he has been studying "globalization" as a contemporary process with far-reaching causes and consequences, especially in relation to the problems of democratization as it evolves when military authoritarianism or one-party dictatorship collapses -- see: DEMOGLO and the Forum for Global Studies.