

# A History of Public Administration in the United States



# A History of Public Administration in the United States:

## *The Rise of American Bureaucracy*

By

Mordecai Lee

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A History of Public Administration in the United States:  
The Rise of American Bureaucracy

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## MAJOR ABBREVIATIONS

AP	Associated Press (newswire service)
APSA	American Political Science Association
<i>APSR</i>	<i>American Political Science Review</i>
ASPA	American Society for Public Administration
BOB	US Bureau of the Budget (renamed Office of Management and Budget [OMB] in 1970)
<i>CR</i>	<i>Congressional Record</i> (daily gazette of the US Congress)
<i>CSM</i>	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i> (daily newspaper based in Boston)
<i>CT</i>	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>
FDR	Franklin D. Roosevelt, president, 1933-1945
FDRL	Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY (operated by the US National Archives)
FY	Fiscal year. <i>Note:</i> The traditional fiscal year in the American public sector starts on July 1 and ends on June 30 of the next calendar year. A fiscal year is titled by the year it <i>ends</i> in. For example, FY 1941 started on July 1, 1940, and ended on June 30, 1941. In the mid-1970s, Congress bumped the federal fiscal year forward by a quarter, beginning on October 1 and ending on September 30. Most other units of government, such as state and municipal, retained the traditional fiscal year.
GPO	Government Printing Office (a federal agency, formally part of the legislative branch)
ICMA	International City/County Management Association (earlier names: City Managers' Association, International City Managers' Association, International City Management Association)



<i>LAT</i>	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
NA	US National Archives
<i>NMR</i>	<i>National Municipal Review</i> (monthly of the National Municipal League)
<i>NYT</i>	<i>New York Times</i>
<i>PAR</i>	<i>Public Administration Review</i>
PAS	Public Administration Service (see chap. 11)
<i>WP</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>
<i>WS</i>	<i>Washington Star</i>
<i>WSJ</i>	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>
WWII	World War II

## PREFACE

History is sometimes out of fashion. “Who cares?” is often the predictable response by people. The pace of events in modern times seems to have sped up so much that something which occurred in the previous decade feels more like a century ago. These perceptions are understandable. However, in the case of government history, I’d argue that the past is important because so much of our personal interactions with government have been shaped by the past, shaped by *history*. Why, for example, does most of the world use the metric system, but the US stubbornly insists on sticking with inches, feet, yards, and miles? The simple answer to that is, like the song from the musical and movie *Fiddler on the Roof*: tradition. From its beginnings, America has long used that measurement system and, not surprisingly, the past is *sticky*. In this case, *very* sticky. Changing to the metric system means shifting to a different paradigm. Americans are used to the current measurement system and don’t feel any pressing need to change.

This minor example of the powerful weight of history sheds light on the value of exploring the history of government. In particular, during the twentieth century, the American public sector gradually evolved to reflect the rise of public administration as a way to organize how government agencies were structured and managed. The goal was a merit-based, politically neutral, and expertise-oriented bureaucracy that chugged along regardless of election results. By the twenty-first century, some began calling it the “Deep State” and viewed it with hostility, as an enemy.

Whether a citizen likes it or not, the weight of history has shaped present governance in the US. Therefore, learning about government history is a way to understand the present and why it can be hard to change the status quo. In the context of the American public sector, history helps us understand how we get where we are now. When did it begin? What happened? What’s happening? History gives us the backstory, context, and insight into the modern administrative state, which is so integral to modern life. Whether we’re happy with it or not and wherever we might live, bureaucracies touch our lives, probably daily. Renewing a driver’s license, going to the post office, complaining about garbage pickup, or a health advisory concerning an epidemic, all these are routines of modern life that relate to services we receive from government. They, in turn, are organized

and managed by large pyramidal organizations in the public sector. Hence the value to understanding how we got there.

This study of the history of American bureaucracy encompasses several disciplinary fields, including public administration, political science, history, public management, organization theory, and management history. The book is an effort to contribute to the rising level of academic interest in the history of the public sector. This is a compilation of my writings as a professor during the twenty-first century. My interest in government history began during my doctoral studies in the early 1970s at Syracuse University in upstate New York. My dissertation, researched while a Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution, examined the largely futile efforts by Congress in the 1950s and '60s to control agency PR. Then, after a career in politics (legislative assistant to a member of Congress, elected to the Wisconsin State Legislature) and in the nonprofit sector, I resumed my academic career at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. I picked up where I had left off and continued to do so for the next twenty-five years. Now, holding emeritus status, Cambridge Scholars Publishing has provided this opportunity to pull together some of my twenty-first-century writings. I have selected eighteen pieces that present a *tour d'horizon* of the subject, including the scope of the field, its emergence as a field of practice, the power of budgeting as a management control technique, legislative hostility, the development of the institutions undergirding the new profession, examples of nontraditional historical research methodologies, and the state of historiography in public administration. For readers interested in pursuing the matter further, the volume ends with an appendix of my other writings on the general subject.

This book can be used in two different ways. First, it presents a comprehensive and integrated overview of American public administration history for use as a textbook and as a reader. Divided into five parts, this structure enables a detailed examination of discrete subtopics (or silos) within the broad scope of government history. For example, I expect that this volume will be useful to those practitioners-in-training (in, for example, MPA programs) who would benefit from understanding the historical context of their chosen profession. It might also be a good fit for advanced courses of upper-class undergraduates (juniors and seniors) majoring in such fields as public administration, American history, and political science. The reason for presenting a bibliography of sources at the end of each chapter is to permit an individual chapter to stand on its own as a complete whole. This structure can be particularly useful when assigned readings do

not cover the whole book but rather specific chapters and perhaps even in a wholly different sequence than presented here.

Second, the book is intended for those with a more advanced academic and research interest in the subject, whether they are based—again—in public administration, political science, history, public management, organization theory, or management history. Hence, the book is likely to be useful to graduate students and doctoral candidates in these fields. For advanced researchers, the book is intended to be beneficial to faculty (and faculty-in-training) who have an interest in American public administration history. Finally, as a comprehensive volume of peer-reviewed research in this subject matter, the book would likely appeal to academic libraries that seek to develop and enhance their collections in these disciplines.

A note on the referencing style used here. Generally speaking, parenthetical citations are the most concise for traditional published sources, such as academic articles and books. They are also useful for journalism, whether the article was bylined or not. For the latter, I presented a truncated version of the headline of the article or editorial for the in-text citation. However, this referencing style is very cumbersome when sources are unpublished materials, such as archival documents, online sites, and interviews. Parenthetical citations for such sources would be quite prolix. Therefore, to avoid such excessively long parenthetical references within the text of a chapter, I have instead used endnotes in those situations. Endnotes are much more concise and less verbose for these sources.

Some chapters are a mix of, on the one hand, conventional published sources and, on the other, archival documents and other unpublished sources. Therefore, for those chapters I used a dual referencing style. The seventeenth edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017) gives authors and publishers a specific guideline in this situation: “As long as a consistent style is maintained within any one work, logical and defensible variations on the style” are permitted (§14.4). Cambridge Scholars Publishing had permitted me to use this dual approach in my 2023 volume on government public relations. I have, again, used this mix of both referencing styles in chapters 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 16. (As every rule has an exception, chap. 3’s endnotes cite newspaper articles, but there were so many that the less-wordy endnote style seemed a pragmatic choice.) These numbered endnotes are located after the conclusion of the text. Endnotes are then followed by a list of references for the in-text parenthetical citations of conventional academic and other published sources.

Also, reflecting current style, I have adapted references to be as succinct and condensed as possible. The goal is to provide the reader with sufficient information to locate the cited source, but to otherwise avoid cluttering sourcing with excessive detail or with dense and distracting punctuation.

As editor of my own writings, I tried to maintain a light touch when possible. Most changes were to assure a consistent style throughout the volume, which would be advantageous to the reader. Some of these relatively modest changes included assuring standard citation formats and spelling in order to have a uniform style throughout the volume. In another effort to assure that the book would be as up to date as possible, I reviewed the URLs that had been cited in the originally published materials and modified them as necessary so that sources that are still online continue to be accessible. Similarly, I routinely deleted anachronisms or substituted more current published discussions and references (sometimes a later writing by the same author) for older ones that seem to have already passed their freshness date. Hence, the oddity of a chapter in this volume containing sources that hadn't yet been published when the original piece had appeared. Some chapters needed more updating than others.

I added a postscript at the end of two chapters (13 and 15). They are intended to give readers further context about the chapter, particularly the backstory relating to my personal involvement relating to the subject. Finally, given that the book seeks to integrate various aspects of governmental history into a whole, I have inserted an editor's note flagging for the reader the instances when the text refers to a subject covered in more detail in a different chapter of this book. I hope this will help readers gradually see how the various parts of the book are related pieces that comprise a bigger picture, components that synthesize well into a common theme.

I leave it to readers to come to their own conclusions. Have the historical case studies and controversies covered by the book impacted practices in the present? Or, perhaps, they describe what are merely historical curiosities that may have value as so-called "pure history," but little else? I'm sure readers will gradually recognize that I find government history to be interesting and important, whether as building blocks to the present or merely as valuable historical events worth remembering.

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# CHAPTER 1

## A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE FOUR ERAS OF AMERICAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: CLERKS, CIVIL SERVANTS, ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGERS, AND THE DEEP STATE

### **Introduction**

The historical development of American public administration has evolved through four eras: clerical, civil service, administrative management, and government under siege. During its early years government staffing was very sparse. A gradual thickening of the government workforce occurred during the 1800s, which was the era of clerks. Some were one-person agencies consisting of an elected official with administrative duties; others were patronage appointments by the candidate winning the presidency (or governor or mayor) rewarding supporters with jobs. After the Civil War, Union veterans increasingly populated nonpatronage positions.

The assassination of President Garfield in 1881 by a disappointed office seeker crystalized public dissatisfaction with patronage, whether in Washington or by corrupt urban political machines. In 1883, the US Congress passed a bill to create a merit-based civil service system. This began a second era of American public administration, that of civil servants. The original law only covered about 10 percent of all federal employees, but it set the precedent for gradual expansion of an apolitical civil service. Presidents came and went, but expert and qualified civil servants were unaffected. The rise of civil service also necessitated having employees to oversee them. These apolitical and expert managers led to the new profession of public administration, a development that required not only qualified practitioners but also credentialed faculty to train them.

The 1932 election of Franklin Roosevelt as president triggered a third era, that of administrative management. This was a term used by FDR's reorganization planning committee partly because it connoted a high-level

focus on the *president's* managerial needs. The concept encompassed both line and staff roles. Line officials ran bureaus and were accountable to the president. Staff functions, such as centralized budgeting, HR, and planning, facilitated effective presidential management.

In the post-FDR decades, especially after the 1960s, there was a gradually growing backlash against his kind of public administration. This became the fourth era, of government employees under siege. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 epitomized it. Government was not the solution, he liked to say, government was the *problem*. Politicians now ran for office *against* government. Increasingly, the bureaucracy at all levels of government was viewed with hostility, an enemy needing to be controlled and reduced. Bureaucrats became the bad guys in America's ongoing political narrative. After the election of President Donald Trump, a more ominous term came into use: the deep state. Supposedly, the bureaucracy now had a life of its own and could even destroy a president if it wanted to. Presumably, a fifth era of American public administration will eventually succeed this age of hostility toward all things governmental. If American history tells us anything, the outlines and themes of the fifth era will likely be surprising and unexpected. Nonetheless, government in a democracy will always need some form of public administration. No matter its precise outline, the future of American public administration will likely retain the core values that government cannot be run exactly like a business, that government's purpose is to promote the *public interest*, and that public administration cannot be perfect. Mistakes will always happen, but these can be learning experiences for improvement rather than excuses for increasingly dysfunctional bureaucratic behavior.

## Can “History” Change?

We tend to think of history as a fixed matter. The Roman Empire rose and then fell. What else is there to know? In particular, after all this time, what else *new* is there to know? The answer is that, surprisingly, history is dynamic and “is far more fluid and amorphous than it first appears” (Gibson 2014, 83). Same as old movies! Some rise in reputation, some drop. One reason is that history focuses on what those in the *present* find interesting and relevant. This changes. After the American Civil War, when the focus was on restoring national unity, historians of the time (unbelievably) made the subject of slavery a minor cause of the war, even claiming that the war was unnecessary and was triggered by a blundering generation. Similarly, the racist view of post-Civil War Reconstruction was accepted without

argument, including a benign view of the KKK and the supposed incompetence of ex-slave elected officials and carpetbaggers (aka outside agitators). One of the tectonic impacts of the 1960s civil rights era was a readiness to revisit the subject. Foner's reinterpretation of Reconstruction, first published in 1988, prompted a wholly new view of that era (2014).

Conventional wisdom practically begs for a revisionist take. This is often reflected in the changing historical reputations of presidents. For example, for the first quarter century after he stepped down, President Eisenhower's reputation was relatively low, viewed as a passive executive. Then, with the 1982 publication of Greenstein's *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, Eisenhower's record was rehabilitated and his historical reputation began rising. The same has happened for President Truman's image. Foner emphasized that even though history will always be rewritten, all versions must present "a reasonable approximation of the past" (2002, xvii). They must pass the routine scholarly standards of professional historians, even if some might disagree with a new narrative's interpretation. The key is the accuracy and overall comprehensiveness of the sources cited, as opposed to cherry-picking facts and quotes.

The historical literature of American public administration has greatly benefited from new research published in the twenty-first century (Durant 2020; Roberts 2019; 2020; Durant and Rosenbloom 2017; Raadschelders 2010; Newbold 2010; K.-H. Lee and Raadschelders 2005; Stivers 2000). This chapter (and book) presents an opportunity to reexamine the overall subject. In particular, it permits adding texture and new detail to the given version by including some smaller-scale subjects and events that have largely been unexplored or are even unknown in the historical literature. These less well-known stories are useful as a synecdoche for the larger trends and developments of the historical narrative of American public administration.

## 1789-1797: George Washington's "Public Administration"

Why do Americans refer to a president's *administration*? "The Biden administration announced," and so on. The oddity of this American usage (also somewhat common in Western Europe) is that it arose before the executive branch had much to *administer*. Until the first decades of the 1800s, there were only a handful of cabinet departments and a few hundred clerks in the capital (Balogh 2009; Nelson 1982). For example, at the end of the last day of President John Adams's term, he made some last-minute appointments. What to do with these official commissions? There was no

one at the State Department to leave them with who would still be employed the next morning. Therefore, the documents were simply left on a table at the department's offices to be discovered the next day by one of President Jefferson's incoming team. Given this sparseness of the early staffing of the federal government and the absence of administrators, the English language offers many terms that might have been more fitting to convey the concept of the president and his (and someday, her) very small group of direct appointees. Why the president's *administration*?

This common phrase seems to have evolved as an abbreviated usage of the term "public administration." Its earliest uses had everything to do with presidents beginning with George Washington and practically nothing to do with the modern meaning that conveys the work of the day-to-day managerial class in the large bureaucracies of the federal executive branch. President Washington used the term commonly and familiarly. In his first message to Congress, in January 1790, he said that due to the benefits of education and knowledge by the citizenry "those who are entrusted with the public administration" should seek "the enlightened confidence of the people" (Twohig 1987, 545). In his third State of the Union message, he emphasized the importance for government "to consult the wishes of every part of the community, and to lay the foundations of the public Administration in the affection of the people" (Mastromarino 1987, 113). In his Farewell Address, Washington condemned factions (later called parties or special interests) because they try "to make the public administration the Mirror of the ill concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common councils and modified by mutual interests" (Fitzpatrick 1931, 225).

Washington's usage was neither novel nor unusual. Rather, "public administration" was a commonly used term. For example, James Madison used it in one of his essays in the 1787 newspaper series called *The Federalist*. In making the case for ratification of the proposed Constitution, he condemned the "effects of the unsteadiness and injustice, with which a factious spirit has tainted our public administration" (Pole 2005, 48). A few days after Washington was inaugurated, he asked Alexander Hamilton (not yet appointed as treasury secretary) for advice on presidential etiquette. Hamilton suggested, among other things, "that the members of the Senate should also have a right of *individual* access [to a president] on matters relative to the *public administration*" (Syrett 1962, 337, emphasis in original). After appointing Hamilton as treasury secretary, Washington again asked him for advice. Writing about the role of gratitude and respect in the political system as well as international relations, Hamilton suggested, "it is

incumbent upon those who have any concern in the public administration, to appreciate its true import and application” (Syrett 1963, 43). Similarly, when the Connecticut Legislature congratulated Washington on becoming president, it wrote him of their “zeal to support our public administration” (Twohig 1987, 203).

As with so much in American history, Washington’s precedents became institutionalized. When President Tyler submitted a message to Congress in 1842, he reported that “the condition of the public administration will serve to convince you that every proper attention has been paid to the interests of the country” (US House 1842, 11). It looks like a short hop to abbreviate the usage from referring to the federal government relatively generally to a particular president’s *administration*. Given this earlier political and presidential meaning of the term “public administration,” applying the contemporary meaning to American history is a neologism. Nonetheless, even if it wasn’t *called* that, it was at least sketchily there. One can identify and examine the actual practice of what later was called public administration as occurring simultaneously with the emergence of the Constitution-based national republic.

Benjamin Franklin can be seen as one of the earliest Americans to engage in what would be considered professional public administration. In 1737, the British colonial government appointed him as deputy postmaster for the colonies, with responsibility for the mail in the northern half of the colonies. (His counterpart in the South was William Hunter of Virginia.) Typical of Franklin’s involvement in so many projects, he promptly sought to reorganize the mail by making it more efficient and systematic. He surveyed postal roads, created a home delivery system as well as a dead-letter office, and inspected his far-flung empire. Quickly, the enterprise began making a profit, which he was entitled to pocket. In 1774, the British government fired him for his rebellious political stance (Isaacson 2003, 157). However, a year later, he was restored to his role by the Continental Congress and thus was the first postmaster general of the nascent independent country, then called a Confederation. (The first postmaster general under the new Constitution was Samuel Osgood, appointed by Washington in 1789.) For early Americans, the “postal system *was* the central government” (John 1995, 4, emphasis in original). It served as a model of what a well-organized and large federal agency could do.

After the US Constitution was ratified, the first Congress (1789-1791) quickly embarked on creating an “embryonic national bureaucracy” (Bordewich 2016, 159). It passed laws leading to the appointment of

customs collectors, surveyors, and clerks (oddly called naval officers) who registered coastal vessels. Similarly, the earliest presidents appointed agents to deal with Indigenous tribes and these officials became the nascent federal bureaucracy dealing with them (Rockwell 2010). As the first treasury secretary (1789-1795), Hamilton can be seen as an early example of someone who thought deeply and in abstract terms about the importance of management and administration in government. For example, he strongly recommended that government agencies be headed by single administrators, rather than by a multi-person board or committee. Hamilton was also an effective practitioner. “He imposed a new discipline on the financial staff he had inherited from the Confederation period. . . . He caused a quantum leap in the efficiency of these officials” (McGraw 2012, 132).

### **1800s: A Few Clerks of All Kinds—Elected, Patronage, and Veterans**

The constitutional federated system of government gradually became organized and stumbled toward an institutionalized bureaucracy. However, this was not inevitable and Americans tried other alternatives, too. That professional public administration won out in the twentieth century was not foreordained. For example, electing a person to an *administrative* job was a kind of one-person governmental department and was the most common template for staffing the provision of public services. There were thousands of elected offices at the state, county, and municipal levels of government. This was an election-based method of putting government officials into public office. For example, electing a county sheriff solved the problem of administering law enforcement. As sometimes romanticized in cowboy movies, the sheriff was often *it*. No deputies, assistants, secretaries, or other staff. If the sheriff needed more help, he could round up a posse, temporarily deputizing local civilians for that specific task. But otherwise he worked by himself and was responsible for law enforcement in a county covering hundreds of square miles. It was the same for a slew of other *de facto* public administration duties in states, counties, and cities. These included clerk of courts, county register of deeds, county clerk, municipal treasurer, city attorney, state treasurer, and state attorney general. They all were one-person elected government agencies.

The election of Thomas Jefferson as president in 1800 can be seen as one historical pivot point, of a president preaching small government and trying to practice it, particularly in the capital and the military. However, he also was willing to make major exceptions to his principles, including

maintenance and expansion of slavery and the Louisiana Purchase. In his eyes, the governmental ideal was the American model of rural township government, particularly of the annual town meeting when the citizens would decide all major issues. No muss, no fuss, and, certainly, no bureaucracy. Just direct democracy—by white men who owned property.

Alexis de Tocqueville described the American public sector in the 1830s and noted the relative paucity of official records compared to France: “Public administration there is in a way oral and traditional. It is not written, or what is written flies off at the least wind . . . and disappears” (Mansfield and Winthrop 2000, 198). He was also surprised by the thinness of governmental presence and, sometimes, the complete absence of government in so many places he visited: “what is great is above all not what public administration executes but what is executed without it and outside it” (234).

President Andrew Jackson (elected in 1828) followed up on Jefferson’s disregard for government administration by insisting that federal jobs should be filled by his political supporters. He did not accept the premise that only a highly trained and specialized expert could execute the duties of any particular position. Any common citizen could do it. Traditional public administration histories tend to hint that all this came to an end with the rise of the US Civil Service Commission late in the nineteenth century and FDR’s expansion of the scope of the classified service in 1937. However, the appointment of political supporters by the winner of an election continued in parts of American government long after Jackson and his political heirs. For example, through the 1960s, presidents appointed local postmasters, numbering in the thousands. These were highly coveted positions and rewards for those activists on the local level who worked hard for the winning candidate and party. That was why a president’s postmaster general, head of the cabinet-level Post Office Department, was traditionally also in charge of handling all of the administration’s patronage. Reflecting how much politics rather than merit controlled these decisions, for example, there was a vacancy in the postmastership of Boston in 1942. A Democratic congressman from Boston who was a supporter of FDR lobbied the president to appoint someone who was thinking of running against him. If the person was appointed to that job, then the congressman would not face a challenger. When told about it, FDR quickly dashed off a handwritten note to his postmaster general to freeze any action on the position until the president could consider the politics of the request (Lee 2018, 171, 195). On another occasion, one of FDR’s White House staffers asked that the final list of eligible candidates for appointment as postmaster of Muncie (IN), be

reopened so that a politically preferred candidate could be added to it (317n90).

When Richard Nixon became president in 1969, he announced that he was terminating the tradition of political appointment of local postmasters. Thousands of Republican grassroots activists were angered that they would not be rewarded, as had traditionally been the case. A year later, after an illegal strike by postal workers, Nixon convinced Congress to reorganize the Post Office Department into an independent government corporation called the US Postal Service. The new law codified his decision to remove patronage politics from the appointment of local postmasters. Yet the Jacksonian patronage system continued even after that. For example, in the 1980s, the State of Indiana's Bureau of Motor Vehicles was still a large-sized patronage operation. The governor's political party ran the agency's local offices as moneymaking businesses, often operated on the cheap by county party chairs who worked hard to maximize profits for their political party. Rank-and-file employees of the bureau were obligated to contribute a fixed percentage of their monthly salary to the party in power.

Before the American Civil War, the maintenance of slavery required a significant governmental infrastructure, south *and* north. Whether national leaders were small government Jeffersonians or patronage Jacksonians, the federal government was deeply involved in protecting slavery (Ericson 2011). The war itself had a major impact on development of federal military administration and oversight of the uniformed services by the civilian managers of the War and Navy Departments. Then, the aftermath of the war also led to major new national administrative roles. There was "a vast expansion of the federal budget and bureaucracy and a reconceptualization of the government's role. National cemeteries, pensions, and records that preserved names and identities involved a dramatically new understanding of the relationship between the citizen and state" (Faust 2008, 268). Other new federal activities included the Freedman's Bureau and the quasi-public Sanitary Commission.

Another repercussion of the Civil War was the federal government's preferential hiring of veterans who fought for the North. Decades later, this employment policy led to the problem of aged veterans refusing to retire because there was no adequate pension program for civil servants (as opposed to pensions for northern veterans injured in the war). Often called superannuated employees because of their advanced age, the imperative to replace them with younger and more vigorous managers and employees



prompted the beginnings of a federal pension system for its civil servants (Lee 2006b, 38, 120).

Other seedlings of the nascent federal bureaucracy sprouted in the second half of the nineteenth century, including the General Land Office, the Department of Agriculture, and the US Geological Survey. One of the trends during this period to hold down the costs of administrative agencies was “fee-based government,” of funding the costs of government by collection of “fees, bounties, subsidies, and contracts with private individuals or corporations to enforce laws and implement public policy” (White 2017, 357). The problem, of course, was the self-interest of the office holder to maximize income by serving those requesting services. As a sheriff, famous gunman Wyatt Earp could keep 10 percent of all fees and taxes he collected. Similarly, the bounty-hunter system depicted in the 2012 movie *Django Unchained*, of private citizens exercising governmental power to catch outlaws and fugitives, conveyed this model of government on the cheap. No need for an expensive bureaucracy dedicated to catching outlaws and fugitives, as the federal Marshals Service is in the twenty-first century. Another manifestation was how post-Reconstruction racist southern governments sought to enforce state laws mandating racial segregation on railroads. They delegated the state’s police powers to train conductors who were private citizens employed by private for-profit corporations. This included an on-the-spot legal duty to identify a passenger’s race and then expel Blacks from whites-only cars (Luxenberg 2019).

A major trigger for the rise of professional public administration can probably (if roughly) be identified as American city government in the Gilded Age of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Corrupt political machines, such as New York’s Tammany Hall, were able to capture control of city halls by serving the social welfare needs of immigrants and residents of poor neighborhoods in return for their votes. Once in control, these corrupt organizations not only gave patronage jobs to their members but also created no-show jobs and padded payrolls to siphon money to party coffers. They solicited all manner of bribes and payoffs for municipal business and contracts, such as for public works, utility franchises, equipment, insurance, supplies, and the like. These political regimes were like perpetual motion machines, with corrupt revenues funding campaigns to win the next election and stay in power.

## **1883-1932: The Era of Civil Servants and Professional Government Managers**

Somewhat simplifying history, two events and two individuals contributed greatly to the rise of professional government management in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. First was the gradual emergence of nonpartisan and merit-based civil service systems at all levels of American government. In reaction to the governance problems of the late nineteenth century (including the assassination of President Garfield in 1881 by a disappointed office seeker), a mass movement for good government and civil service reform coalesced into a significant political force during the American Progressive era (1890-1920). They demanded a more respectable, honest, and efficient public sector. The first major event was the enactment of the Pendleton Act in 1883 to begin carving out about 10 percent of federal executive branch positions to be within a civil service system. Without regard to politics, an independent and bipartisan federal civil service commission recruited, examined, appointed, promoted, and (occasionally) fired governmental employees based on merit. Following the federal model, New York was the first state to enact a civil service system for its employees, advocated by two good-government reformers, Democratic governor Grover Cleveland and Republican assemblyman Theodore Roosevelt, both future presidents. As would be expected, the spread of civil service in governmental employment also triggered pushback from those who benefited from the status quo, especially machine politicians and patronage jobholders.

The second major trend was the emergence of a new form of city government: the city manager. Begun in Staunton (VA) in 1906, the municipality created a nonpolitical position of a city manager. He would be a nonpartisan professional solely concerned with running the municipal government as efficiently as possible by applying to the public sector the kinds of skills and techniques that the new class of trained business managers were bringing to the corporate world. The city manager was the CEO of the municipality, unconcerned with elections or partisanship, accountable to the city council in the way that a business CEO was accountable to a corporation's board of directors. From this modest beginning, a new profession arose, and with it a national membership organization, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) (Stillman 1974).

Two individuals also played seminal roles in the evolution of public administration during this period. Fittingly for this new field, one was an

academic and the other a practitioner. Woodrow Wilson was a political science professor at Princeton University. In an 1887 article, he suggested refocusing the emerging interest in public administration away from a the legal aspects of governmental regulation of commerce that was propounded by Columbia professor Frank Goodnow. Instead, Wilson argued that the focus should be on the running of all government agencies, not just regulatory commissions, because “public administration is detailed and systematic *execution* of public law” (1941 [1887], 496, emphasis added). In other words, stop obsessing about the statutes, court decisions, and the work of regulatory commissions, such as for utilities and railroads. Public administration should be a field of study about the actual *doing* of all of government’s executive branch responsibilities. (Disappointingly, as president, Wilson exhibited little interest in public administration.)

In industry and mass manufacturing, Frederick Taylor was the founder of the industrial efficiency movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He sought to increase production efficiency through such techniques as time and motion studies. For Taylor, there was always only one best way to run manufacturing plants and other industrial and mass production processes. When done comprehensively, it purportedly amounted to “scientific management.” Engineer Morris L. Cooke led the effort to transfer Taylor’s approach to government. As Philadelphia’s director of public works from 1911 to 1915, he sought to apply Taylorism and scientific management to the public sector (Cooke 1915). Cooke’s writings and record were more textured than later caricatures of Taylorism. Cooke should be credited with the injection of apolitical efficiency as a central tenet of public administration (Schachter 1989). At the same time, he also was sensitive to the democratic context of public administration, a context so different from business administration. For example, he called for improved reporting by government agencies to the citizenry as a way of increasing accountability and civic understanding of governmental performance (Lee 2006a, 459-60).

By the 1910s and 1920s the emergence of the field started taking on a momentum of its own. One manifestation of that was the new profession of colonial administration, which managed America’s new overseas empire, particularly the Philippines. That also meant the need for training programs (Roberts 2020). Other events included the creation of the nonprofit Bureau of Municipal Research in New York City (later the National Institute of Public Administration), which spawned counterpart bureaus in most major American cities. They advocated for good government, executive-centric government budgeting (and apolitical professionals to staff it), increasingly complicated methodologies for civil service systems, and university-level

training programs for senior public administrators. Congress even created the US Bureau of Efficiency to oversee efficient management throughout the executive branch (Lee 2006b). Optimism abounded that a *science* of public administration was coming into existence.

Another logical development was the self-perceived professional imperative for standardization. In 1928, several public administration and good-government organizations (who were often competitors) jointly created the National Committee on Municipal Standards. The next year, the International Association of Chiefs of Police promulgated standards for uniform crime records and annual reports of these statistics. Also in 1929, Clarence Ridley, longtime head of ICMA, drafted proposed uniform measurements for public works, such as street cleaning and refuse removal. In 1931, another coalition of public administration and good-government organizations created the National Committee on Municipal Reporting. It published standard templates for governmental reports to the citizenry, including annual and departmental reports. Later in the 1930s came a National Committee on Municipal Accounting and a Joint Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. These efforts, by necessity, tended to be highly specialized, whether by the vertical siloes of public administration, such as public works and law enforcement, by its horizontal layers, such as municipal or federal levels of government, or by auxiliary staff services, such as accounting or personnel. In retrospect, these largely reflected the inherent centrifugal tugs pulling against the conception of public administration as a unitary profession and practice.

Other initiatives were centripetal and were intended to mold a secular and broad definition of generic public administration. Beginning in 1930, Louis Brownlow, a former city manager, gradually created the Public Administration Clearing House (PACH) on the campus of the University of Chicago and with seemingly unlimited funding from Rockefeller family foundations. His ambition was for it to be a kind of national capital for all of public administration, a physical location for the headquarters offices of various professional associations to work together, as well as an intellectual center for research, consulting, and conceptual development.

One result reflecting the culmination of these developments occurred in December 1931. Several academicians and national organizations affiliated with PACH launched a pioneering national publication called *Public Administrators' News Letter*. The letterhead of this monthly bulletin stated its mission as “advancement of public administration as a science and as a profession.” On a very spare budget, it was typed and mimeographed, and

each issue was about seven pages long. On the front page of the inaugural issue, in May 1932, the editor addressed the novelty of the effort and the vision it encompassed:

The development of a profession of Public Administration as an honorable calling, which will attract to public service the finest men that our country can produce, we believe to be of fundamental importance to the advancement of government. We hope that the group of men trained in the science of public administration to which this news letter [*sic*] is circulated may form the nucleus of this rapidly evolving profession.

The purpose of this news letter is to foster this professional development and to serve as a medium for the expression of the very considerable group consciousness and esprit de corps which already exists among those who have seriously prepared themselves for careers in public service. (Leet 1932)

The contents of the newsletter involved categories of information that were routine in bulletins of the various American professions, including doctors, lawyers, electrical engineers, or accountants. It published short articles by leaders within the profession, notices of job openings, welcoming newly graduated trainees just entering the profession, updates on activities of members, new books, and other developments of interest to the readership. The seminal nature of this bulletin has unfortunately been ignored or lost in the historiography of American public administration. One reason may be its literal disappearance. Apparently, only one partial set survives at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library.

However, the *News Letter* was different from the standard bulletins of other professions in one important respect. Whereas most such publications were produced by the national membership association of a given profession, there was no national organization to sponsor a public administration bulletin. The *News Letter* folded at the end of 1934. By then it had largely helped to inaugurate this comprehensive perspective on the field and PACH was fully functioning and could take up the mantle.

More quietly, early indications of some negative reactions to the rise of public administration became faintly visible. The bureaucratic imperative for autonomy was increasingly obvious during the early twentieth century. The principle that public administrators and government employees were nonpartisan and professionally trained experts was hardening, in particular with authentic accomplishments benefiting the public along with accompanying favorable publicity. Agencies were not to be questioned, especially by politicians whose motives were likely unsavory and who wanted to *meddle*

in science. Government experts were to be deferred to. The emergence of nearly autonomous and self-directed federal bureaucracies included a chemistry bureau and soil research office in the Department of Agriculture as well as the US Forest Service (Blum 2018; Carpenter 2001).

While initially successful, autonomous bureaucracies would gradually and inevitably attract critics and pushback, especially given the political environment in which they operated. For example, Senator Kenneth McKellar (D-TN) was appointed to the Appropriations Committee in 1923. In that capacity, he was not afraid to confront bureaucrats appearing before the committee. He was not impressed by their expertise and stature and he frequently asked hostile and probing questions. He also was very patronage-oriented, seeking to hold back the expansion of the federal classified service and to expand the number of appointed administrators requiring Senate confirmation. For example, unlike most of his awed fellow appropriators and lawmakers, he was unintimidated by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. McKellar was depicted (relatively accurately) in brief scenes in the 2009 movie *Public Enemies* and 2011's *J. Edgar*. These scenes vividly conveyed his skeptical, even adversarial, view of apolitical public administrators. He is seen vigorously challenging Hoover's testimony and claims regarding the agency's effectiveness, budget, and administration. The ultimate exchange between them was not a cinematic invention. At an appropriations hearing during FDR's first term, McKellar sought to undermine Hoover's image and qualifications by asking him point-blank, "Did you ever make an arrest?" Hoover squirmed, refusing to verbally confirm it but could not deny it either (US Senate 1936, 199). McKellar was making the point that Hoover's claims of his expertise and experience were limited to being a *mere* government manager with no actual field experience.

Another negative reaction to the rise of public administration was an unexpected evolution of the recall movement. Some good-government reformers argued in the initial decades of the 1900s that in a true democracy voters should have the power to remove elected officials from office before their term expired. Arguments over the principle of recall were a kind of proxy debate over what was the most important element of modern governance? Traditionalists said that the central tenet of republican government was that elected officials were delegates, chosen to exercise their independent judgment. On the other side were those supporting direct democracy. They said elected politicians should be subject to popular control and public opinion at all times, not just through regularly scheduled elections. They sought the option of recalling any elected official. (Some even supported referenda to reject major court decisions [Lee 2013].) Then,