

# What's Missing in Public Administration? The Big Picture

By Alasdair Roberts

IT IS A SAD TRUTH that the field of American public administration does not enjoy the respect among the public that it did two generations ago. This is partly a self-inflicted wound. Scholars in public administration have made choices that have undercut the public's interest in the work they do.

Evidence of this decline comes in many different forms. The news media do not give much attention to research in the field. The trade press rarely publishes best-selling books by scholars in public administration. When people want big ideas about the role of government, they usually turn to political scientists and economists, not specialists in public administration.

It was not always like this. In the 1930s, scholars in the new field of public administration were called to Washington to help build government capability to manage the big challenges of that time. The biggest one, of course, was the economic crisis. But, there were other problems, too: climate change in the Midwest, mass migration from South to North, extraordinary technological advances, new military threats from Germany and Japan and pandemics of influenza and polio.

Skeptics doubted that a democratic system could manage these and other problems. The task, as Luther Gulick said in 1933, was to prove the skeptics wrong. Gulick was not interested in narrow questions of management and organization for their own sake. The real goal was to build government capability

to address large-scale economic, social and military challenges.

"There is but one grand purpose," the Brownlow Committee wrote in 1937: "To make democracy work today."

This was an expansive view about the aims of the new field of public administration. Its job was to build government's capacity to tackle the operation of such large forces as changes in the economy, technology, structure of international relations, demography and patterns of disease. Most prominent public administration scholars shared this view. "We need to escape the sterile conception that administration is an end in itself," J. Donald Kingsley said in 1945. The true objective, John Gaus agreed, was to show how governments could adapt to "social and political forces."

Leonard D. White of the University of Chicago, the first editor of *Public Administration Review* and 1947-48 ASPA president, was the most prominent advocate of this expansive view. He wrote a series of books that showed how the American government had evolved to deal with the "influence of external forces." He was the first and last scholar in public administration to win a Pulitzer Prize. White passed away in 1958.

By that time, a new generation of scholars was narrowing the boundaries of research in public administration. Big questions about the handling of social and economic forces were no longer seen as legitimate subjects for research. The field became preoccupied with narrower questions about organizational

behavior, public management and policy implementation. This is how many scholars define the boundaries of the field to this day.

Not only are the boundaries of scholarship narrower than they used to be, we actually have forgotten that the boundaries used to be much broader. White's award-winning work is rarely mentioned, while Gulick is remembered mainly as an advocate for universal and inflexible "principles of administration." In fact, this is the opposite of Gulick's real attitude. He was a pragmatist interested in the messy process by which governments grappled with large social and economic forces.

This shift in understanding about the boundaries of public administration research has had serious consequences for the field. Certainly, there are scholars interested in bigger questions about the role and structure of government, but they mostly are in other disciplines, such as economics and political science. In 2013, the president of the American Political Science Association actually described political science "as the only discipline devoted to learning how to make democracies work better." The authors of the 1937 Brownlow report would have disagreed strenuously.

We need to revive the broad view of the field of public administration that prevailed until the early 1950s. The challenges that confront American government today are just as daunting as they were in the 1930s: a turbulent economy, climate change, extraordinary



Luther Gulick

advances in technology, demographic transformations and shifts in the structure of international politics. Every one of these changes requires adaptations in government capability. The field of public administration should be addressing this subject head-on. That is how we will revive flagging public interest in our work.

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