

# STRATEGIES FOR GOVERNING

## *Reinventing Public Administration for a Dangerous Century*

ALASDAIR ROBERTS

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS  
ITHACA AND LONDON

—-1  
—0  
—+1

Copyright © 2019 by Cornell University

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850. Visit our website at [cornellpress.cornell.edu](http://cornellpress.cornell.edu).

First published 2019 by Cornell University Press

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Roberts, Alasdair (Alasdair Scott), author.

Title: Strategies for governing : reinventing public administration for a dangerous century / Alasdair Roberts.

Description: Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019011211 (print) | LCCN 2019012871 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781501745607 (pdf) | ISBN 9781501745591 (epub/mobi) |

ISBN 9781501714405 | ISBN 9781501714405 (cloth) |

ISBN 9781501747113 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Public administration.

Classification: LCC JF1351 (ebook) | LCC JF1351 .R528 2019 (print) |

DDC 351—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019011211>

-1—  
0—  
+1—

The idea of the state is the conscience of administration.

—WOODROW WILSON, 1887

The formation of states must be an experimental process. . . . Since conditions of action and of inquiry and knowledge are always changing, the experiment must always be retried; the State must always be rediscovered.

—JOHN DEWEY, 1927

The loss of the stable state means that our society and all of its processes are in continuing processes of transformation. We cannot expect new stable states that will endure even for our own lifetimes. We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations.

—DONALD SCHÖN, 1971

Strategy should be thought of as glue that holds together the purposeful activities of state.

—COLIN S. GRAY, 2015

—-1  
—0  
—+1

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: Time for a New Approach	1
PART 1. KEY IDEAS	
1. Summary of Propositions	23
2. Acknowledging the State	26
3. States and Societies	31
4. Leaders and Their Goals	35
5. Strategies for Governing	43
6. Factors and Forces	50
7. Laws, Organizations, Programs, and Practices	55

—-1  
—0  
—+1

8. Aspects of Institutional Stewardship	59
9. Challenges in Strategy-Making	65
10. The Struggle for Mastery	72
11. Danger, Strategic Fragility, and Realism	77
12. Time and Progress	81
13. Unexceptionalism	87
PART 2. DILEMMAS IN STRATEGY-MAKING	
14. Efficiency or Extravagance	93
15. Tight or Loose Control	98
16. Separation or Connection	103
17. Present or Future	107
18. Commitment or Equivocation	112
19. Planning or Improvisation	116
PART 3. APPLYING THE APPROACH	
20. Research	123
21. Teaching	127
22. Practice	131
Conclusion: Grand Challenges	135
A Glossary of States	141
Further Reading	153
Notes	157
Index	193

## INTRODUCTION

### *Time for a New Approach*

This is a book about public administration and what its aims should be. It is intended for researchers in the field, practitioners in public service, and students preparing to become researchers or practitioners, but it will also interest readers concerned about building secure and thriving societies.

My argument is straightforward: In the United States, the field of public administration was launched almost a century ago by people with bold aspirations. They were not interested only in the efficiency of government offices; they wanted a thorough overhaul of the creaking American state so that it could manage the pressures of modern-day life. Unfortunately, this expansive view of the field's purpose has been lost. Over the last four decades in particular, the focus within the field has been mainly on smaller problems of management within the public sector. This narrowing of focus might have made sense in the United States and a few other advanced democracies in the waning decades of the twentieth century, but it does not make sense today. As we shall see, many people have recently protested this shrinking of

—-1  
—0  
—+1

ambitions. It is time for a change of direction. We need to recover an expansive view of the field, and I propose a way to do so.

I proceed from the premise that it is impossible to talk about public administration without also talking about the larger challenge of governing a state. Woodrow Wilson, often seen as a founder of American public administration, also made this claim in a famous 1887 essay. Before we can say how the state should be administered, Wilson insisted, we have to talk about the things that the state must do.<sup>1</sup> We can turn Wilson's proposition around as well: before we consider what the state ought to do, we must know what it is actually capable of doing. In other words, the overall approach to governing determines administrative priorities, while practicalities of administration constrain our choices about the overall approach to governing.

My argument has a sense of urgency as well. We must recover the capacity to talk about the fundamentals of government, because the fundamentals matter immensely. Right now, there are billions of people on this planet who suffer terribly because governments cannot perform basic functions properly. People live in fear because governments cannot protect their homes from war and crime. They live in poverty because governments cannot create the conditions for trade and commerce to thrive. They live in pain because governments cannot stop the spread of disease. And they live in ignorance because governments do not provide opportunities for education. The expectations that we hold of our leaders can be stated simply: They should protect us from foreign enemies, maintain internal order, increase prosperity, improve well-being, and provide justice. Even in the twenty-first century, most governments on this planet fail to do this.

In defense of leaders, it might be said that our expectations are easily stated but not so easily fulfilled. Governing is hard work. Leaders of most states struggle just to understand what is going on inside and outside their country's borders. Then they must determine the relative importance of national goals, given that resources are scarce and goals are often incompatible. Leaders must next decide, under conditions of great uncertainty, which policies are likely to achieve their priorities. Leaders struggle to execute these policies too. Institutions are hard to build and run effectively. It is not easy to find soldiers, bureaucrats, policemen, and judges who are competent and willing to follow instructions. And even well-considered plans go awry because of an unexpected change of circumstances.

The challenge of governing was described by the Florentine diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli a half millennium ago. Machiavelli warned the rulers of Italian city-states such as his native Florence that their work was fraught with danger. Sometimes the threat was posed by other city-states, and sometimes it arose within the city walls because people were restless and hard to please. A clever leader sought advice on how to build institutions that would bolster his authority both inside and outside the city walls. But even strong institutions could be toppled by the tempest of public affairs. They had to be renovated constantly to keep up with changing conditions, and this was very hard to do. States that did not constantly renew themselves, Machiavelli warned, were likely to collapse.<sup>2</sup>

Some commentators have suggested that Machiavelli lived in unusually precarious times. In some ways, though, the rulers of sixteenth-century Florence had it easy. Florence was merely a city-state: its walls contained only four square miles of territory and sixty thousand people. Today the average state has more than two hundred thousand square miles and more than thirty million people. Compared to Florence in 1500, China has a million times as much land and twenty-three thousand times as many people. The institutional apparatus required by a state like China is more vast and complex than anything Machiavelli could have imagined.

There are additional complications for today's rulers. Machiavelli warned about renewing institutions to keep up with the times, but the world in which he lived was relatively stable. In important ways, it was not much different when he died in 1527 than when he'd been born sixty years earlier. By comparison, the pace of change today—social, economic, technological—is blistering. The planet's current population of seven billion is also more restless: urbanized, literate, wired, and mobile. And they have higher expectations of their rulers. Standards for security and order, public services, and protection of human rights are more demanding today than they were in the sixteenth century.

The leaders of modern-day states have a difficult assignment. They must devise a strategy for leading their countries toward security, order, prosperity, and justice. Next, they must design and build institutions that translate their strategy into practice. And then they must deal with the vicissitudes of time and chance, adapting strategies and institutions in response to altered circumstances and unexpected events. To do this well, leaders need advice

—-1  
—0  
—+1

about the machinery of government—what it is capable of doing, how it should be designed and constructed, how it ought to be run, and how it can be disassembled and reconstructed. Researchers who work in the academic discipline of public administration should be expert in providing this sort of advice. One of their most important functions is helping leaders to devise strategies for governing that are effective, durable, and normatively defensible.

This was certainly the view of the people who founded the public administration field, even if they did not express it in exactly these words.

### **The Founders' Bold View of the Field**

The academic discipline known as public administration is about one hundred years old in the United States. People sometimes say that it is older, pointing to Wilson's 1887 essay, but that is not quite right. The first self-styled school of public administration was established in 1922, and the first textbook in public administration, written by Leonard White of the University of Chicago, was published in 1926. Wilson's work did not get much attention until the 1930s, when professors of public administration invented a history for their new field, which included a contribution from a well-regarded then-recent president.

The first generation of scholars and practitioners in public administration were tied to a political movement in American politics known as progressivism, which coalesced in the 1890s and gained strength over the next two decades. American society was convulsed during these years by the emergence of big industries and cities, stark inequality and labor unrest, a surge in immigration, extraordinary technological advances, and shifts in the international balance of power. Americans had great hopes for their country. But many also worried that events could spiral out of control. Institutions designed for a simpler time did not seem sufficient for new realities. "The government of the part of the world in which we live," Luther Gulick warned, "is in many respects three generations behind our necessities."<sup>3</sup> Gulick was one of the leading figures in American public administration in the early twentieth century. He believed that progress required a complete reconstruction of the old order. The writer Walter Lippmann called this "the fitting of government to the facts of the modern world."<sup>4</sup>

-1—  
0—  
+1—