A New Vision for Public Administration

Employing the metaphor of human sight, this essay advances a new vision for public administration. It is a departure from past visions in that it asks us to “see” the field from its own viewpoint rather than that of others. First, three common perspectives on public administration are critiqued as possessing a vision of the field that is not in accord with its core contributions to the democratic republic. Second, a new vision is advanced comprising three elements: a concept of government-based yet nongovernmental governance in which the contributions of administration are fully accounted for; a trajectory image of the administrative agency propelled by a strong sense of mission; and the notion that administration’s highest purpose is to build the public trust that makes democracy possible.

In his imaginative book Seeing Like a State, James Scott (1998) employs the metaphor of human vision to critique broad tendencies in public policy that he disdains. In this essay, I adopt his metaphor of seeing to make a positive normative statement on American public administration.

In its full form, the metaphor makes two assumptions. One is that we can think of social constructs such as public administration as possessing physical features that reflect light and thus can be “seen” in different ways from a variety of angles. The second assumption is that public administration and other social constructs can be thought of as possessing the capacities of human eyesight and visual interpretation that allow them to “see” such objects.

From an epistemological standpoint, the metaphor allows for the existence of objective reality and yet, at the same time, the creation of contrasting interpretations of that reality, each advanced with total sincerity. Though the human eye may be regarded as an objective sensor of incoming light, what the human mind interprets as being seen is very much a subjective matter. This point is well illustrated by Akira Kurosawa’s classic Japanese film Rashomon, in which a single incident of murder and rape is depicted in four radically different ways by four observers. Applying this idea to public administration, no matter how compelling or relentlessly “here and now” the daily world of administration seems to be, its underlying nature and broad aims are always open to conflicting assessments. In short, what the field “is” (or should be) depends on the onlooker.

How is public administration in the United States seen? This essay argues that the professors and practitioners of the field have inadvertently allowed it to be observed and interpreted from standpoints imposed by others who are external to its institutions and subject matter. These include elected officials and politicians and a variety of commentators advocating agendas for reform. The depictions of the field projected by these outside observers have been unthinkingly accepted within public administration, leaving the field ripe for manipulation as a tool for purposes other than its own. This situation has made it difficult for the field’s leaders to formulate a separate intellectual vision for public administration that is consonant with their appropriate goals and concerns.

The central purpose of this essay is to contend that it is time for the field to mature, in the sense that it must articulate, at least to itself, a vision that captures its interpretation of public administration’s fulfilled contribution to a democratic polity. Though the vision presented in this essay is no more “true” in an objective sense than the visions of others, it can offer those who labor in the vineyards of public administration an intellectual banner under which they can pursue their own studies without being restricted by the limiting paradigms that are in vogue.

In the first part of the essay, I lay out the basic characteristics of three perspectives on the field that have received wide acceptance. These are presented in a somewhat magnified form in order to highlight the issues that are at stake. I critique these perspectives as requiring a new vision. In the essay’s second part, I propose a new vision for public administration that
outlines how its role and goals within the firmament of democratic governance might best be visualized.

To facilitate comparative analysis among these four visions of the field—the three common ones and the one I propose—I use a trio of conceptual categories. Each represents an aspect of the sight metaphor’s interpretive act. The first is the visual direction chosen, which refers to the overall “angle” or visual line of sight selected by the observer to view public administration. The second is favored features sought, a set of desired characteristics that are positively valued if they are indeed found by the observer within that field of vision. The third category, desired outcome visualized, points to what that observer hopes will ultimately come to pass as an ideal state for public administration.

We turn now to the visions that are contrary to what I believe to be the field’s better opportunity for normative validation. They correspond to what a recent analyst of governance described as society’s three major institutions: the state, the market, and civil society (Kooiman 2003). The state sees public administration from the standpoint of centralized, integrated control by the chief executive. The market sees it in terms of private sector values and the culture of business. Civil society’s viewpoint is that the field’s democratic potential is realized through direct influence over administration by those affected by it. In advance of elaborating these ways of seeing, figure 1 summarizes them according to the trio of conceptual categories just described.

How the State Sees Public Administration

Visual Direction Chosen
The state’s view of public administration centers on issues of proprietary control. Administration serves the executive authority’s direct purposes and is regarded as its instrument. This tool must be closely controlled from the top. If the head of the government is a ruthless dictator, control is made absolute by threats and purges. In a democracy, the situation is more complicated: Laws and elections must be honored, a free press tolerated, and, in America, the separation of powers and divisions of federalism dealt with. In such an encumbered, exposed, and fragmented system, how is central control of executive power envisioned?

Favored Features Sought
At one point during the 19th century, the political party seemed to provide an answer: by harmonizing legislative-executive relationships through party discipline and by ameliorating social and economic problems using state and local political machines. This solution evaporated as the parties lost influence, however, and the task of concentrating power fell to government office holders. As a consequence of accumulated steps rather than planned design, over time, the bureaucracy came to be perceived as coterminous with the executive branch of government, under the sole direction of the chief executive. Without consulting the Constitution, this was simply assumed to be the case. Edwin Meese, the former U.S. attorney general, once remarked, “Managing the United States government—with its broad scope, gigantic size and tremendous cost—is a daunting task for any president” (1996, 29). Attorneys general especially should know that the term chief executive is not mentioned in our founding document. In fact, the Constitution imposes numerous legislative and judicial controls over administration that check the president’s power over administration. Although the president is explicitly designated commander in chief of the army and navy, over civilian matters no such authority exists.

The unified executive idea has been applied to all levels of American government to some degree. At the local level, an early form was the council-manager plan championed by the Progressive movement (East 1965). Later, it was manifest in state administrative reforms that abolished boards in favor of single administrators and created gubernatorial budget offices. In the 1930s, the Brownlow Committee applied centralizing ideas to the presidency by calling for the consolidation of agencies and the establishment of the

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Figure 1 Three Common Ways of Seeing Public Administration
Executive Office of the President (President’s Committee on Administrative Management 1937). In subsequent decades, the Executive Office became ever larger and more powerful as presidents dealt with wars and exercised global leadership (Patterson 1988). The extreme extent to which the George W. Bush White House is today regarded in Washington as the ultimate “first manager” of the executive branch reflects the culmination of this concept (VandeHei 2005).

Meanwhile, in the arena of intergovernmental relations, the federal grant-in-aid blossomed as a principal means of financing government at the state and local level. This gave the money-dispensing national executive branch a high degree of dominance over the entire administrative system. A Washington-centric, hierarchical bureaucracy with high degrees of policy discipline, thick layers of political appointment, and saturated media attention at the top became the conventional textbook image of what American public administration is all about (Pfiffner and Presthus 1960, 197–214; see also Heclo and Salamon 1981; Light 1995).

**Desired Outcome Visualized**
The preferred outcome of the executive branch view is one of top-down, centralized administrative control. Presumably in this way, the energized executive power dreamed of by Alexander Hamilton in *Federalist No. 70* is realized. Such control permits the presidency to exercise its asserted obligation of domestic policy leadership at home and its assumed mandate to direct abroad the far-flung operations of the world’s only superpower. Policy coherence and consistency across the domestic government and around the globe are insisted on as essential to rational government and national security. Interference by Congress is depicted as unjustified “micromanagement.” State government independence, guaranteed by the Tenth Amendment, is overcome by assertions of power by all three branches of the national government. Although the classic European model of unitary rule is not achieved, nearly the same result is yielded by a nationalist, presidentialist, and monocratic vision of public administration (Lane and Wamsley 1998; Wamsley and Dudley 1998).

**How the Market Sees Public Administration**

**Visual Direction Chosen**
The market sees public administration not as a politically directed domain of unified action, but almost the reverse—a set of largely noncommercial activities amenable to free-market direction and coordination. Flexibility, competition, and entrepreneurship are assumed to be the keys to delivering efficient services in a way that is both economical and pleasing to consumers. The contribution of what is left of traditional public administration is to take care of the few matters that are not otherwise handled by the market, such as providing essential public goods or correcting occasional market failures (Osborne and Plastrik 1997).

The motivational system that is seen as best for the public sector is a measured performance process by which managers are given explicit, quantified goals and then rewarded in accord with how they perform in achieving those goals. Meanwhile, members of the public are expected to seek personal preference satisfaction through the exercise of rational choice. This is the principal way, according to the market perspective, that complex, mass action can be accomplished with economic efficiency and minimal transaction costs. Although public policy and administration are not quite reduced to a market of exchange, they emulate market values as comprehensively as possible (Johnston 2000; Pollitt 1993).

**Favored Features Sought**
The institutional model of this vision of public administration is that of the business corporation. The favored features sought are drawn from the latest ideas adopted in corporate management and organization. Stodgy, inflexible government departments that are mired in accumulating rules and made sleepy by risk-averse habits of monopoly are replaced by the “room to manage” dictum of the business world, in which leaders are told to be bold, innovative, and willing to fail. They must flatten their hierarchies, break down their stovepipes, and adopt the latest information technologies. Specialization and middle management are out and flexible work teams and competitive skunk works are in. The organization is committed to continuous change almost for its own sake, dedicated to the rituals of strategic planning verbalized by the latest reform acronyms (Abramson and Kamensky 2001; Laurent 2000).

In addition to emulating the culture and technologies of the corporation, government is asked to outsource much of its work to that institution. Though contracting out can be traced at least to the 18th century, in recent decades the way American government works has been transformed by contracting’s expanded extent and scope. Two public sectors may now be said to exist side by side: many increasingly hollow agencies with legal responsibility for the operation of programs they do not control, and tens of thousands of contractors who implement public policy as a business venture. At the national level, the two spheres are roughly equivalent with respect to aggregate employment (Cooper 2003; Light 1999).
Desired Outcome Visualized
The ultimate outcome is not without its ironies. Traditional public administration is seen as hopelessly inefficient, inflexible, and old-fashioned. Yet the outdated administrators are nonetheless eager consumers of the management doctrines sold by business trainers and consultants. While the wave of antitax, antiregulation, neoliberal sentiment that is said to be sweeping the world demands a diminished public sector, its budgets nonetheless soar in order to pay growing procurement costs. At the end of the day, an inept, big-spending bureaucracy seems to be the perfect problem to have.

How the Civil Society Sees Public Administration

Visual Direction Chosen
Civil society, too, is interested in control and reform with regard to public administration, but its central concern is opening it up to direct public involvement. Those who voice this desire usually see themselves as speaking for the economically underprivileged and the politically weak, with special attention to racial minorities and community residents whom they believe should have a direct voice in administrative decisions that affect them (King and Stivers 1998; Pateman 1970).

Although this argument seems persuasive enough, it is difficult to separate these categories of citizens from others in civil society who might also wish to claim the same right. Examples are local merchants, corporate chief executives, association executives, religious activists, and arms dealers. Even though these people already enjoy insider influence in government through hired lobbyists, social contacts, and campaign contributions, it is difficult to imagine a system that would neatly separate deserving from undeserving citizen participants.

Favored Features Sought
A number of structural or process devices have been used over the years to furnish civil society access to administration. Some were put in place early in the last century as a way to accommodate powerful groups with which government dealt—for example, clientele-dedicated agencies, industry advisory boards, administrative law hearings, and crop-support referenda (Herring 1936; Leiserson 1959). The types of access favored by citizen participation advocates began to appear during the 1960s in the Model Cities and Community Action programs of the Johnson administration, in which poor urban residents were intentionally placed on governing boards and in staff positions. Another approach, representative bureaucracy, has been sought for decades through affirmative action. Some academics have promoted not just higher proportions of minorities and women but “active” representation in the form of pro-group conduct by bureaucrats (Frederickson 1980; Selden 1997).

Other mechanisms for greater access and representation apply to all social and economic groups. The analytical concept of stakeholder analysis is seen as a way to anticipate public reactions to a planned measure from all quarters. Collaborative public planning is a way to structure face-to-face discourse among members of all pertinent groups to allow citizens—not just bureaucrats—to frame and address issues. This tool has been particularly popular in the natural resources area, in which ranchers, timber companies, sports enthusiasts, and environmentalists compete for influence. Moreover, several techniques of interactive e-government have been the subject of experimentation, especially at the local level (Box 1998; Roberts 2004).

Desired Outcome Visualized
It is conceivable for civil society to gain influence in public administration from all directions. Establishment organizations and their lobbyists could do so from the top down. Those advocating citizen participation see themselves promoting bottom-up influence. Collaborative planning and e-government may be thought of as ways to permit sideways influence. Stakeholder analysis and active bureaucratic representation seek to impart internal influence. If all of these succeed, the councils of public administration will be well penetrated indeed.

Assessing These Ways of Seeing

Assessing the State’s View
Before proceeding to outline how public administration might best see itself, let us consider a bit more the merits of these other ways. A preliminary problem with the way the state sees public administration is the simple fact that not all government agencies in the United States are accountable to the chief executive. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Amtrak, the Federal Reserve, and other organizations report not to the president but to their directors and governors. Congress controls its own bureaucracies, such as the Government Accountability Office and the Congressional Budget Office. At the state level, independently elected constitutional officers such as the secretary of state, state treasurer, state auditor, and attorney general are sovereigns of their own departments, not the governor. Local transit and other authorities may not be under the supervision of the mayor or city manager.

Beyond this basic corrective point, it is clear that the control premise of the executive branch cannot be carried too far. Though the exercise of electoral democracy through the chief executive and political appointees must never be seriously abrogated, the principle of executive leadership certainly tolerates
and, in fact, requires democratic influences from other sources. These include legislative bodies and committees, independent auditors and inspectors general, and the elected judiciary found in many states and localities. Any attempt to wall off a branch of American government would be profoundly contrary to our constitutional traditions, inasmuch as internal institutional conflict lies at the very heart of America’s pluralistic system.

Practical considerations also bear on the matter. Even within the chief executive’s announced policies, any large-scale public policy space usually contains plenty of room for multiple influences without committing disloyalty. In fact, the presence of contrasting and even opposing currents of opinion in a bureaucracy can have the effect of stimulating creativity and responsiveness. The opposite, a culture of conformity obsessed with enforcing the “administration line,” can stultify (t’ Hart 1990).

From the standpoint of public administration’s own view of itself, the most fundamental flaw in the state perspective is the relegation of administration to a purely subordinate role. It evokes the simplistic politics—administration dichotomy and suggests that public servants should be subservient beings. Successor intellectual doctrines such as the policy-implementation dyad and the principal–agent distinction do little to correct the impression of inferiority. Politicians obviously are more policy makers and principals than bureaucrats, but to conclude that the latter never engage in formative or constitutive political activity is short-sighted in the extreme (Cook 1996).

Assessing the Market’s View
The transfer of business-management techniques to government has its advantages. Added flexibility, greater management latitude, more concern for evaluation, and a keen interest in satisfying clients can be beneficial. Still, wholesale adoption of the business culture is incompatible with the ethos of public service and public interest. Entrepreneurship that breaks rules and glorifies risk can lead to contempt for the law and cavalier treatment of taxpayer dollars. Giving bonuses to managers encourages egoistic rather than altruistic behavior. Assessing performance according to quantitative goals or borrowed benchmarks alone leads to a skewed appraisal process that diminishes the consideration of such unquantifiable values as equity, fairness, and decency. Holding administrative units to outcome goals that are set in advance pretends that public sector work occurs in a self-contained sphere like that of a factory, where all variables are controllable. Automatic pursuit of the latest across-the-board management reforms authored by business gurus invites disregard of staff-discovered insights that may be uniquely useful to an institution (Carroll 1995; Kettl 1993).

Another problem with the market view is its bias in favor of business outsourcing over in-house capacity. Such critical activities as planning and evaluating programs and nurturing and socializing the workforce should not be contracted out; armed law enforcement in public places and military activities in war zones should not either. Certainly, the management process itself should not be outsourced, but often it is (Cooper 2003; Kettl 1993).

Perhaps the most fundamental defect of this perspective is that its preoccupation with the private sector mantra of efficiency does not satisfy the purposive obligations of government. It is the nature of the public sector to seek multiple, varied goals, many of which cannot be monitored by the monetary metric; although the values of economy, efficiency, and productivity remain obviously important in public administration, a more thoughtful calculus of purpose is needed.

Assessing Civil Society’s View
Public administration’s role in promoting equity and democracy can be significant and, in fact, always has been. By law, bureaucrats must treat all citizens equally, and their programs must include far-reaching economic redistribution and social improvement initiatives. At the same time, public bureaucracies spend billions of dollars to benefit the rich and powerful. Bureaucracy is itself an establishment institution operating within a capitalist culture.

Given this reality, can citizen participation help democratize administration? The answer is yes, but only under the right circumstances. There are limits on how much and how often authority can be shared. In crisis situations, time is of the essence, and truly discursive democracy is impossible. In matters of great contention, continued debates may actually exacerbate the tension and do nothing to achieve consensus. Eventually, someone must make a decision, and this uncomfortable duty usually falls to the legally responsible public administrator.

The other consideration is that the word citizen includes not only the Jeffersonian patriot of the ward republic but the Hamiltonian chief executive officer of the commercial republic. If public administration invites the first into its decision-making circle, the second must be allowed in, too. But when that
happens, capture, not consultation, can occur. By and large, bureaucrats must continue to exercise their lawful powers of discretion at a prudent arm’s length from those who are affected.

A New Visual Direction: Integrated Public Governance

In sum, public administration is not seen at its best by the controlling executive, the market reformer, or the participation advocate. How, then, can the field best see itself, in keeping with its societal importance and a fulfilled self-image?

My own version of this preferred way of seeing is offered in three sections, each corresponding to one of the three categories of visual experience employed earlier (i.e., visual direction, favored features, and desired outcome). The visual direction proposed is called integrated public governance. It may be thought of as the larger framework of the field’s new vision.

The term governance has a notoriously slippery meaning these days. It has been defined as the exercise of collective authority whereby a society steers itself; the operation of regimes that constrain, prescribe, and facilitate governmental activity; and the coordination of autonomous organizations in behalf of joint interests (Freisat 2004; Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000).

Underlying most current discussion of the subject is the assumption that a transformation in government and public administration has occurred in recent years. Official hierarchies of government are said to have become less important as some public responsibilities have been devolved to local jurisdictions on one hand and to international bodies on the other. At the same time, public policies are now massively implemented by business corporations and nonprofit organizations, blurring the distinctions between public and private (Kettl 2002). At the extreme, these developments eschew intentional public action in favor of spontaneous outcomes of complex interaction generated by multiple societal forces (Kooiman 2003).

The new institution taking over governance is the self-organizing network. This is a loose collection of private, public, and voluntary organizations that have common policy interests, exchange specialized information, and negotiate shared purposes. They create themselves, are interactive rather than managed, and function with minimal regulation. Nonetheless, members of the network individually or together administer pieces of government programs. The consequence is what the British scholar R. A. W. Rhodes (1996) calls “governing without government.”

As popular as this image is in current literature, it is not without its critics. Rhodes himself complains that the new governance has had deleterious effects in the United Kingdom, creating fragmented policy systems that are weakly coordinated and not truly accountable (1996, 662–67). Some networks become essentially private governments run by privileged insiders, he says, whose interests lie in satisfying their own goals, not those of the public.

Salamon (2002) is of the view that because public administration has shifted from direct administration to the use of third-party implementation tools, its leadership is now achieved by negotiation and persuasion rather than by command. But this very point, he warns, means that a strong and competent government must be present to make sure that private interests do not supersede the public good. Dutch scholars Fleurke and Willemse (2004) agree that networked, privatized governance is more common in our current time than in the past, but it is not necessarily new. They recall a specialist in their country who took note of the phenomenon as early as 1931 but called it osmosis. Furthermore, they worry that without having government retain a key role in the situation, one invites both a deficit of political democracy and a loss of urban autonomy. Keohane and Nye (2000, 12) assert that although national governments increasingly interact with international bodies, transnational corporations, and nongovernmental organizations, the state is not in the process of being replaced; though it is no longer the only important actor on the world stage, it remains the most important.

My own use of the term governance echoes much of this discussion. The notion of integrated public governance assumes that dispersed public action must remain integrated from the standpoint of government’s central role and public administration’s involvement in that role. Figure 2 depicts this model.

Governance and Networks

With respect to governance as a constellation of varied actors, an initial point that must be made is that the degree to which public action is distributed among private organizations varies widely. In some policy realms, private-actor networks are prolific, whereas in others, the unified government agency remains dominant. Examples of the former include health care, public welfare, environmental protection, and economic development. By contrast, direct administration by the agency is more important in military operations, postal systems, the public schools, law enforcement, and the regulation of business. Thus, dispersed governance may be a trend, but it is not as universal as the term transformation suggests. Despite the influence of networks, U.S. administrative agencies remain alive, if not well, at all levels of government.

This is a good thing because the second major point regarding dispersed governance is that in public policy
networks, it is crucial for government to have a prime role. Ideally, agencies are the hubs of the networks, making them a central node of influence and coordination (see figure 2). Though administrators may employ persuasion and negotiation in dealing with other network members (as they have always done), they must be regarded as “first among equals” at a very minimum because of their legal authority and mandate to seek out the public good. Thus, the agencies are special nodal members of the networks—they are, or should be, the responsible parties and points of public accountability. Without this anchored feature, the self-organizing network does indeed become a spontaneous, closed, private government serving its own desires.

Governance and Administration

Found within the governmental hub of integrated public governance are the dual functions of rule and response (figure 2). The process of democratic governance may be regarded as consisting analytically of these two ongoing, elemental activities. In practice, they merge into one seamless, interwoven dynamic. Rule is the institutionalized public direction of people and affairs. It is the side of government that exercises lawful authority. In a constitutional republic, this authority is granted to identified officeholders alone, circumscribed by individual rights and judicial review, and it is valid only when and where the law stipulates. In the network system of governance, it is the stabilizing force that gives public action legitimate authority and renders it accountable to responsible officials.

Many humanistic and critical administrative theorists will be uncomfortable with the term rule because they see it as an endorsement of unilateral or even despotic control. My notion of response, as we will see, demonstrates a parallel commitment to liberal democracy and interpersonal dialogue. Authority is the essential complement to a responsive democracy—without it, there would be no dependable procedures for solving problems interactively, no security for subordinates and citizens against the powerful, and no opportunity for society to settle some questions so that others might be addressed.
Hence the second function, response, is the adaptive counterpart of rule. It is the capacity to alter the terms of rule in light of changing or unforeseen circumstances or the infusion of new ideas. When agencies act as network nodes, response occurs continuously in interaction with other network actors. In agency relationships with groups and citizens, response is such that osmosis-like penetration or capture is prevented while reasoned give-and-take takes place in a number of venues, such as advisory committees and collaborative planning exercises. The very use of honest consultation devices has the added advantage of making it publicly evident that government welcomes and takes seriously the response function.

In a broad sense, response also refers to adaptive interactions that bureaucrats experience daily in democratic government. These include responding to the policies of elected officials, the statutes passed by legislatures, and the decisions handed down by judges. It also covers reacting to ideas spawned by media debate, public mood swings, and the outcomes of elections. The most dramatic example of response is what happens after an incumbent leader or party fails to be reelected and a new regime comes to power.

Rule and response are clearly performed by elected officials, their appointees, and members of the judiciary. The major point here is that public servants and their agencies are heavily engaged in both. In fact, cases arise in which public administration’s involvement is just as significant. For example, decisions made by the Federal Communications Commission on nudity and coarse language in commercial radio and television broadcasting constitute rule for the entertainment industry, as do pornography decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court. The construction of highways by state departments of transportation spurs regional economic development just as much as the tax incentives and pork projects enacted by legislatures. The response to 9/11 by the New York City fire and police departments is more deeply etched in the American mind than the president’s contemporaneous efforts to seek out Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The emergence of the environmental movement was not the result of clarion calls by prophets and politicians alone but decades of research, investigation, and advocacy by administrative agencies.

Indeed, it can be argued that on a purely volumetric basis, most rule and response actions are taken by public administrators and their agencies. Every day, firemen and policemen on the streets and social workers in welfare offices make decisions of both types that affect the lives of millions of people. Administrators hold hearings, write regulations, and hear appeals that both control and respond to industries, unions, professions, and taxpayers. The ways that agencies design programs, define clients, calculate budgets, set priorities, train employees, and talk to citizens constitute a steady stream of rule and response.

One could even claim that of all the actors in democratic government, the bureaucracy has the most capacity to carry out both rule and response. In another place, I list the generic capabilities needed, such as political power, financial resources, legal authority, technical skills, and professional knowledge (all good for rule), plus links to elections, representative composition, external accountability, openness to change, and acceptance of participation (all helpful for response). My deductive analysis concludes that legislatures, parties, interest groups, the press, bureaucracy, contractors, and nonprofits all have power and money. But administration is the only actor to possess the full range of these capabilities—that is, authority, skills, professionalism, an election link, a form of representation, accountability, openness, and participation (Goodsell 2005, 19–23).

New Favored Features: The Agency Mission in Trajectory

The second aspect of my new vision for public administration focuses on the prime institution of public administration, the government agency. Its favored features are a strong sense of institutional mission coupled with a standing commitment to a pathway of movement in pursuit of that mission, which I call a trajectory.

This component of the vision develops a notion that my colleagues at Virginia Tech and I developed in 1982 and published in 1990 (Wamsley et al. 1990, 36–39). We called it the agency perspective, one of several ideas contained in an essay that came to be known as the Blacksburg Manifesto (1990, 31–51). According to this perspective, American administrative agencies represent an indispensable repository of specialized knowledge, historical experience, time-tested wisdom, and consensus on where the public interest lies in their given domains. Together, these characteristics form a behavioral gyroscope or center of gravity that guides professional conduct. The agencies sustain their contribution to society within the external political environment by engaging in a struggle with the other actors there for jurisdiction, legitimacy, and resources. Adversely affecting this struggle is the American political culture’s general tendency to denigrate public bureaucracy.

I will now articulate these ideas more fully by elaborating the agency’s repository and gyroscope functions as a concept of agency mission and the agency’s engagement with the political system as a mission trajectory. Figure 3 is pertinent to both.

The Concept of Mission

By mission, I do not mean the boilerplate statement of purpose that hangs on office walls. I am also not
referring to what fans of reinvention call “mission-driven government,” by which they mean the avoidance of rules-bound behavior and acceptance of entrepreneurial flexibility (Osborne and Gaebler 1993, 108–37).

Rather, I am talking about the deep-seated cultural belief system that animates the public institution. Unlike the business corporation, which seeks financial targets and values brand names, and unlike the non-profit organization, which embodies its cause in its name, the public agency is ideally energized by an article of faith that goes beyond marketing. At its best, the mission is a fundamental, institution-specific, purposeful commitment to the larger society. It is what the organization “stands for,” a raison d’être or underlying rationale that gives employees a source of dedication and external observers a perception of contribution. For example, the mission of the Peace Corps is international development fostered personally by individual American citizens. For the New York Police Department, it is the reduction of the city’s rates of homicide and other violence. For the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is safeguarding the nation’s health from epidemics.

A strong, animating sense of mission possesses some typical components. One is a programmatic purpose that is unified conceptually and thus easily understood. Examples are the rapid and secure delivery of the mail, the revitalization of depressed areas, and the maintenance of homeland security. A second component is a past that is in some way celebrated. This usually includes historical incidents that sparked establishment of the agency, the passage of an organic statute, and the pioneering work of legendary founders. It is from this heritage that the agency molds a self-identity it can carry forward into the future. The National Park Service, for example, traces its roots to John Muir’s interest in Yellowstone and John Wesley Powell’s exploration of the Grand Canyon.

A third component of mission is the aiming of its tenets in two opposite directions, at two audiences. One direction is internal, seeking to socialize the workforce. This includes long-term employees, new hires, and the key category of incoming political appointees. This internal transmission of culture is carried out through the communication of professional expectations; the issuance of equipment, work sites, and perhaps uniforms; and exposure to symbolic artifacts, memorials, and monuments. The audience in the other direction is the attentive outside world, which is reached by such means as testimony before legislative committees, press conferences, media outreach, presentations to professional organizations, public tours and museums, and agency volunteer programs.

The Concept of Trajectory
The agency moves in a pathway from past origins toward aspirations for future accomplishment. En route, it faces opposition from competing political
forces and obstacles raised by circumstances that are beyond its control. Effective engagement of this competition springs, in part, from the convincing nature of mission beliefs and the momentum of forward movement. Yet continuance on the trajectory is by no means assured. The power needed to sustain the trajectory aloft is derived from the innate indispensability of the mission, skill in altering it successively to meet changing times, and the good fortune of contemporaneous political leadership that supports the mission. All of these factors add up to what Norton Long called the administrative lifeblood of political power (1949, 257).

Needless to say, public administration’s scholarly community has been divided on the issues raised by this image. Those adhering to the politics-administration dichotomy reject the need for power as irrelevant. The statist view of public administration sees the trajectory idea as tolerating deviations from the administration line. Political scientists in general look upon an empowered or quasi-autonomous bureaucracy as a threat to electoral democracy. A recent book on public administration history treats the point more subtly by arguing that bureaucratic autonomy arises when an agency establishes a unique reputation for expertise and then mobilizes a supportive political coalition around it (Carpenter 2001).

I propose that the field of public administration frame the question of bureaucratic power not from the standpoint of autonomy at all, as that word implies breaking loose from justified restraints. In contrast, the notion of mission trajectory accepts the idea that a certain degree of empowerment is necessary to carry out assigned responsibilities. This benefits not only the agencies themselves but also the broader public. Most agency missions are not, after all, casually created; they derive from the ongoing, vital needs of a modern society, making their presence not a matter of choice but a requirement accepted by all save a few extremists. Examples of missions that must always be in trajectory are public education, public safety, corrections, national defense, public highways, business regulation, public health, mental health, and environmental protection. The question is not whether they should be carried out, but how well. The missions persist over time because the needs behind them do not expire. Accordingly, each year chief executives of both parties request budgets to sustain them, legislatures at all levels of government enact appropriations to fund them, and nonpartisan judges make decisions that halt attempts to gut them.

This is not to say that all administrative missions enjoy elongated status. As Figure 3 indicates, they can drop out of their trajectories if they are not adequately adapted to the times or political climate. This occasionally happens, as illustrated by the disappearance of economic regulation of the truck industry, the termination of tobacco-grower subsidies, and the dying state of Amtrak. Other missions are born in controversy and always remain vulnerable, such as government scrutiny of library lending records and social service grants to churches. The larger point is that all missions, even those that are widely accepted, must adapt to change or face displacement. To illustrate, to remain credible, the nation’s intelligence agencies must supplement technology-based information gathering with more human informant sources. State institutions of higher education must find other ways to obtain income than appropriations and tuition. The mission trajectory is not a fixed path but one of continued adjustment.

Of course, the trajectory’s continued advance must also depend on its compatibility with the wishes of elected officials. The creativity and good faith of administrators, let alone any attempts at bureaucratic deception or manipulation, must not lead to explicit violation of the clear expectations of elected executives and lawmakers. Fortunately, a rather large body of empirical evidence on the subject indicates this generally does not happen (Goodsell 2004, 125–28). At the same time, the possibilities on this score loom large if we conceive of the political masters as continuously mulling over whether to keep or change all existing public policy. In actuality, the attention of top elected officials is not that intense or sweeping. Most policies are seriously reviewed only when scandals or problems arise or outside factors affect the political agenda. In their absence, administrators are entitled to assume that tacit support exists for their missions. When that is present, they should actively pursue them. As the only officials paying attention to all governmental activities all the time, public servants are obligated to do so.

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A New Desired Outcome: Public Trust
In this third and final part of the new vision for public administration, the subject is not the vision’s framework or institutions but its purposes. As I have noted, the ends of public administration are typically set by others. Elected officials, political appointees, legislative bodies, and judges tell administrators what to do by means of statutes, orders, memos, and decisions. Others actors, such as lobbyists, activists, experts and the press, try to convince administrators what to do. This barrage of external direction puts administration in the position of being a tool for others to use. The field’s own intellectual orthodoxy agrees: Agencies are
there to execute policies, enforce laws, reach targets, and do what they are told.

It is time for the field to remind itself and others that administration is more than an instrumental tool. It is a social asset at the core of democratic governance. It is responsible for ongoing missions that meet the long-standing and long-term needs of the society. Moreover, as a cumulative by-product of its daily work, administration makes critical contributions to society that go unnoticed. A century ago, the construction of all-weather roads and the operation of a national post office bound the country together. Since that time, upward mobility in society has been fostered by the public schools, civil service employment, military service, the G.I. Bill, and many other activities.

What I wish to highlight here is that yet another residual but vital aftermath of administrative activity consists of building and maintaining the level of public trust in government that makes a democracy possible. Figure 4 pictures public administration’s structure of purpose in the form of a mountain. At the foothills of the mountain are many goals. Each is critical and characterizes how administration’s externally provided (and internally assigned) instructions should be carried out—lawfully, honestly, efficiently, effectively, and so on. Yet the key point here is that their successful realization over time cannot help but strengthen the public’s overall sense of trust in government—something no one has told administration to do. I suggest that we consider this to be the pinnacle of our field’s mountain of purpose.

The point is made negatively by pointing to examples of governments around the world in which corruption, waste, incompetence, and favoritism run rampant. Unfortunately, these shortcomings are all too common, causing good governance to become a prime objective of international development organizations (OECD 2000). The current frustrations being encountered in planting the seeds of democracy in Iraq are a perfect example of the problem. A lack of potable water, undependable power grids, dangerous streets and roads, and constantly threatened schools, hospitals, and government offices all deeply undermine efforts to build a functioning democracy. People have no faith in the polity as a whole because of the way it affects them from day to day.

At first glance, America, too, lacks a foundation of public trust. Trust in government surveys, run periodically by polling organizations, usually show mediocre scores. Students of public administration sometimes interpret these as indicating a lack of faith in government agencies, as bureaucracy is a traditional object of scorn in our popular culture. Yet the same Americans who respond to the trust polls say they are proud of their democratic political system. How can we reconcile this democratic faith with bureaucracy’s low popular image?

My conjecture is as follows: First, national government trust ratings go up and down depending on the reputation of the sitting president, the current state of the economy, and the degree of stalemate in Congress. These swings have little relevance to administration. Second, a contrary indicator of citizens’ opinion of bureaucracy exists: surveys that ask about direct personal experiences with administrative agencies. These show, fairly consistently, a level of two-thirds to three-quarters favorable response (Goodsell 2004, 24–33). Thus, despite their distrust of the system, Americans are usually undisturbed by the way they are personally treated by it.

Third, this direct, favorable experience does not countermand instinctive antibureaucracy beliefs in the population because of their embedded presence in our individualist, private-enterprise culture. At an abstract level, Americans continue, as they always have, to use the word bureaucracy in a deprecatory way. The fact that government works well most of the time when they encounter it is filtered out.

Moreover, administration’s contribution to public trust tends to be invisible because most of its contribution is at a routine or below-the-surface level. With most of the millions of actions of rule and response conducted with reasonable honesty and dependability, the public’s interactions with administration are generally predictable and regularized. It is only in the rare instance in which a bureaucratic file is lost, a government check is late, or a police officer is negligent that citizens think at all about public administration. At that moment, of course, their thoughts are decidedly negative. In 1995, when a dispute between the president and Congress caused much of the federal government to shut down, the population was so shocked by this unfamiliar
breakdown of the silent infrastructure of administration that politicians were forced into retreat.

Despite the public’s failure to pay attention to and credit public administration for what it does, the field must never rest in attempting to increase its level of performance. Administration’s contribution to public trust, however invisible and routine, can never be great enough. Progress toward realizing all the foothill goals of public administration must be the field’s constant preoccupation. Helping to support the treasured benefits of living in a free democracy is an exalted calling that can have no end.

A New Vision for Public Administration

The new vision for public administration that I offer in this essay proposes that we examine the field on its own terms, not those of others. The vision rejects the proposition that public administration serves the chief executive alone. It refuses to regard public administration as a quasi-market of noncommercial business. It contemplates consultation with citizens when appropriate but does not permit its decisions to be controlled by private interests.

Public administration is asked to see itself as a major contributor to democratic life. Its agencies bear important responsibilities for anchoring the networks of governance. They constitute great engines of rule and administration. They maintain mission cultures that can be internally animating and externally empowering. Most importantly, perhaps, their success contributes crucially to the building and maintenance of the public trust underlying democracy.

The time has come for public administration to assert itself conceptually and normatively. If the field does not develop its own vision for itself, no one else will. And if it does not, the field’s sense of self-worth and image of significance will continue to wane as the new century unfolds. This would be to the detriment of all.

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References


