

ADMINISTRATION, A FOUNDATION OF GOVERNMENT*

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The authors of the Constitution of the United States regarded it as a triumph for the human spirit in America that a new form of government could be established by the process of discussion, deliberation, and popular action, as distinguished from the age-long processes of violence. Looking backward from their time and forward into our own, we may say that they were justified in their celebration.

With reference to a far less momentous occurrence, this modest occasion, we may properly regard as a triumph for the same spirit a voluntary action of public officials and interested citizens looking to the resolute and continuous improvement of the public services. It is this action, the establishment of a Society for Public Administration, that we are ratifying and approving today. These officials and these citizens are no hirelings of a despotic power, taking orders from above. They are not seeking the aggrandizement of a class, bent on exploiting and holding down a subject people. They are not concerned primarily with emoluments, promotions, and honors as such. On the contrary, they are proposing to search their own hearts and minds, to study ways and means of making more efficient and economical the services rendered by government to the people. They do not wish to diminish either civil liberties or individual responsibilities in society. On the contrary, they cherish these eternal values and intend to discover and develop schemes and methods of administration deliberately adapted to the perpetuation of these precious elements in the American heritage.

The step taken today, though it may seem novel to some, is only the culmination of a long chain of events, extending over a period of forty years and more. The establishment of systematic instruction in comparative administration under the auspices of the late Frank J. Goodnow at Columbia University long ago was among the great beginnings. The organization of the New York Bureau of Municipal Research was another advance. The foundation of

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the Governmental Research Association was still another. The spread of instruction in administration among our universities, the creation of numerous societies of public officials, the growth of civil service legislation, the self-dedicated and distinguished careers of innumerable men and women in various branches of public administration, the deepening recognition of the vital relation between efficient and honorable administration and the very existence of our society and form of government—all these and more have signaled through the years the coming of this day and the action which is here taken.

It is perhaps because I have been associated in a humble capacity with the history of this movement since my student days under that great and good man, Frank J. Goodnow, that I have been invited to speak on this occasion. Perhaps I am a gray and moss-covered monument, set down in time, as one of the marks on the long path leading to the present event. Circumstances invite memories, therefore, but I shall spare you any such recital, knowing full well that it is not what I say here but what you do here that will count fatefully in the history of our political system in the distant years to come.

It seems far more appropriate that I should summarize in a few sentences the main conclusions in respect of administration which I have reached in my experiences and studies. Paraphrasing the language of my distinguished friend, Dr. Alfred Cohn, specialist in cardiac diseases at the Rockefeller Institute, I may remark, by way of preface, that it is the business of science, in dealing with any subject, to make true statements about it, of the utmost generality, and in the fewest possible words. Remembering this admonition, I present, for what it is worth, and may prove to be worth, the following bill of axioms or aphorisms on public administration, as fitting this important occasion:

1. The continuous and fairly efficient discharge of certain functions by government, central and local, is a necessary condition for the existence of any great society.

2. As a society becomes more complicated, as its division of labor ramifies more widely, as its commerce extends, as technology takes the place of handicrafts and local self-sufficiency, the functions of government increase in number and in their vital relationships to the fortunes of society and of individuals.

3. Any government in such a complicated society, consequently any such society itself, is strong in proportion to its capacity to administer the functions that are brought into being.

4. Legislation respecting these functions, difficult as it is, is relatively easy as compared with the enforcement of legislation, that is, the effective discharge of these functions in their most minute ramifications and for the public welfare.

5. When a form of government, such as ours, provides for legal changes, by the process of discussion and open decision, to fit social changes, then effective and wise administration becomes the central prerequisite for the perdurance of government and society—to use a metaphor, becomes a foundation of government as a going concern.

6. Unless the members of an administrative system are drawn from various classes and regions, unless careers are open in it to talents, unless the way is prepared by an appropriate scheme of general education, unless public officials are subjected to internal and external criticism of a constructive nature, then the public personnel will become a bureaucracy dangerous to society and to popular government.

7. Unless, as David Lilienthal has recently pointed out in an address on the Tennessee Valley Authority, an administrative system is so constructed and operated as to keep alive local and individual responsibilities, it is likely to destroy the basic well-springs of activity, hope, and enthusiasm necessary to popular government and to the flowering of a democratic civilization.

The validity of these axioms may be illustrated, though not proved, by reference to the fate of that great society, the Roman Empire of antiquity, which perished from the earth. Historians of the decline and fall are fairly well agreed that in the latter years of the Empire, its administrative system, which had grown ever more complicated and centralized in the days of prosperity, at last destroyed local autonomy, proved to be incompetent for its tasks, and sank into ruins with the society which it had once powerfully helped to sustain.

If these things be true and of good report, it follows that this occasion, which may seem trivial amid the rush and roar of affairs, may receive a strange elevation at the hands of those historians who, in distant years, seek to trace the trajectory of our civilization,

At all events, we may be well assured that good work, honestly done, with an unflinching interest in the public welfare, is worthy of great talents and high aspirations, brings its own rewards and satisfactions, and somehow anchors itself in the economy of universal history. With this assurance and under this sign, the new society, launched today, may look forward to a service which will not end until the language of the Gettysburg address is heard no more on this continent.