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Characterizing American public administration

The concept of administrative culture

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Abstract *Comparative administrative study lacks agreed-upon concepts for cross-national analysis. This essay suggests “administrative culture” as a useful concept which has been overshadowed by two related concepts, “organizational culture” and “political culture.” The American experience is highlighted in its public personnel dimension and administrative sub-cultures are introduced to characterize the enormous diversity of values, beliefs, and attitudes in the public sector. An evolutionary perspective is used to show change over time from the earliest “Government by Gentlemen” period to the current emphasis upon merit, modified by affirmative action and demands for accountability, flexibility, and entrepreneurial behavior. Sources of administrative culture are also discussed to reveal the unique origins of the system which, nevertheless, has been exported to numerous other nation-states.*

Introduction

Administrative culture is not a new concept but neither is it one in common usage in the USA. Book length treatments have been developed for Canada (Dwivedi and Gow, 1999), Israel (Caiden, 1970), Korea (Paik, 1990), India (Sharma, 2000) and elsewhere but none for the USA. In various ways, it has been the organizing concept for journal articles (e.g. Anechiarico, 1998; Keraudren, 1996) and academic colloquia but it has been largely eclipsed by other cultural interpretations, particularly organizational culture and political culture.

The intent of this article is to show its relevance in the US context and its potential for cross-national comparison. Personnel in government service (“public officials,” “bureaucrats”) will be examined using the concept administrative culture, along with three current sub-cultures. Sources of the overall “merit culture” will be indicated and an evolutionary approach adopted which shows discrete time periods. The concept will first be contrasted with organizational culture and political culture, one rooted in the study of politics and policy, the other in managerial studies.

“Culture,” of course, was originally used in anthropology to indicate clusters or patterns of common behavior, knowledge, custom, etc. and has since been adapted and expanded in numerous ways in other fields of inquiry. Academic interpretations of “American culture” along with widespread journalistic and popular usage of that term make it familiar. In the US context, administrative culture allows us to focus on the values, beliefs and attitudes held by administrators, recognizing change over time from a Patrician notion of “administration by gentlemen” in colonial times, through endemic spoils as the reward for winning political office, to the merit system for government employment, modified in the last half-century by the introduction of values relating to equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. Comparative features and evolutionary changes in public administration – reflected in numerous reorganizations



and reforms, as well as subtle changes in morale within the government workforce – can be well understood through the concept of administrative culture.

Organizational culture

There is a vast literature on organizational culture in the field of organization theory, most of it centered on the “culture” within an organization. Edgar Schein was one of the pioneers, with his detailed listing of dimensions of workplace analysis associated with culture (Schein, 1985, 1992) and, along with other pioneers such as Pettigrew (1979) and Hofstede (1980, 1991), helped to define the concept. Earlier studies of organizational climate by social psychologists informed the later formulations by Schein and others. Schein elaborated a number of categories of organizational analysis which include:

- (1) Observed behavioral regularities when people interact (language, customs, traditions, rituals).
- (2) Espoused values (e.g. “product quality,” or “price leadership”).
- (3) Formal philosophy (guiding a group’s actions toward stockholders, employees, customers, and others).
- (4) Rules of the game (implicit rules for getting along in the organization; the “ropes” that a new employee must learn).
- (5) Climate (the feeling conveyed in a group).
- (6) Embedded skills (e.g. special competencies).
- (7) Habits of thinking, mental models, linguistic paradigms (Schein, 1992, pp. 8-10).

The seven categories are artifacts and patterns of behavior of organizational culture and are the most visible aspect of it. There are also underlying basic assumptions deriving from the culture at large (Schein, 1992).

Climate (No. 5) is included in the categories and represents a departure from the original field theory approaches and the quantitative study of attitudes within organizations by social psychologists. In a more recent discussion, Schein seeks to clarify the difference between climate and culture (Schein, 2000).

Organizational culture has developed since the early work to encompass a vast number of studies of business organizations and a few of public agencies. Bozeman, for example, has recently researched the Internal Revenue Service in terms of its “risk culture” (Bozeman, 2003). Organizational culture remains a useful concept and one that should be borne in mind as we move to a higher level of abstraction and a public focus. A good overview of the field is found in Martin (2002), *Organizational Culture: Mapping the Terrain*. Martin, a leading figure in current organization theory, includes the latest research and an insightful three-perspective model. Disputes in the field are highlighted and her own approach elaborated. A good compendium to supplement Martin is the *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate* (Ashkanasy *et al.*, 2000).

Political culture

Political culture – on the other hand – takes the entire political system as the unit of analysis rather than discrete organizations. It derives from the well-known work of Almond and Verba on civic cultures. It is the structuring framework for many introductory texts and is familiar – in its various guises – to all students in the field. Although it has been criticized and is sometimes regarded as a concept

associated with earlier development and modernization theories, it remains in widespread use.

The political culture reflects distinguishing values, attitudes and beliefs characterizing a political community. In nearly all the US formulations, democratic-constitutional values are at the core, typically including liberty, freedom, majority rule, minority protection, equality, self-government, unity, representation, rule of law, judicial review, separation of powers, secularism, tolerance, individualism, participation, transparency, civil rights and similar concerns. The political culture in the USA is participatory – based on indirect representation – and emphasizes values that many Americans regard as universally valid.

Eagles and Johnston (1999, p. 137) indicate that every society possesses a political culture (and, often, subcultures) that encompasses beliefs, attitudes, and values people have about politics. They regard political culture as the “collective political consciousness of a polity” (p. 138); it is an important comparative concept.

Similar constructions are legion in introductory texts and interpretations of American democracy.

In public administration interpretations, the administrative side of American government reflects the ebb and flow of political trends and movements, along with the basic values of the broader political culture. Political scientists have sought to characterize administration and administrative personnel in the US context with themes such as growth and power, trade-offs between democracy and efficiency, proper oversight and control, policy development and implementation, and bureaucratic politics. The link between civil service systems and elected officials is an important administrative theme (see Ingraham, 1995).

Administrative culture as a concept

Administrative culture will be thought of in this article as a mid-point between orientation analyses of personnel in individual agencies (organizations) which can be studied as organizational culture, and the broader political science concern with the entire polity and its features which has been labeled political culture. At its most basic, administrative culture may be thought of as general characteristics of public officials (i.e. shared values, attitudes, beliefs) – federal, state, and local. Administrative culture is related to the broader political culture, from which it derives, and can be further discussed in terms of sub-cultures. Therefore, American administrative culture will be defined as that set of commonly-held values, attitudes, and beliefs to which public servants (appointed not elected “public officials,” or “bureaucrats”) subscribe and are expected to follow, and which provides an “ideal-type” of actual and official behavior. Because of the enormous variation in administrative contexts in the USA, as well as changes over time, additional constructs for proper understanding and cross-national comparison are required. These will be identified as “sub-cultures” and are three in number: traditional, self-protective, and entrepreneurial. Students of political science will remember that political culture in the USA has been similarly analyzed, such as Elazar’s three cultures: traditional, moralistic, and individualistic, corresponding to regions of the country and early historical experience (Elazar, 1984, pp. 114-22).

The administrative culture in the USA has reflected the struggle over how political values would be realized and who would have the responsibility for managing government service delivery. From the “era of the gentleman,” to the Jacksonian “era of

the common man,” to the belief that objectively determined skills and abilities (merit) should be paramount, the USA has evidenced differing interpretations of how political values can be translated into administrative values. Differences and challenges are found throughout American history, recently in the emphasis upon new public management (NPM) and the “Reinvention” movement (inspired by Vice President Gore’s National Performance Review of the 1990s). As a new paradigm – reflected here in the “entrepreneurial” sub-culture – NPM valued innovation, customer service, and adaptability over rule-application and constitutional responsiveness. A lively debate argued the virtues of the more conventional approach – properly rooted in constitutional law and service to the public – in opposition to the business-world values of flexibility, consumer satisfaction, and entrepreneurial skills. (for a good review see Kettl *et al.*, 1996).

Sources of administrative culture in the USA

Many argue that the American experience is unique. As the “first new nation” we have been fortunate in our geography both in its richness and plentitude, and our isolation by two oceans from the conflicts of Europe and elsewhere. The “spirit of the frontier” gave rise to an independence of character, an equality in interpersonal relations, and a chance to physically move to better circumstances or the prospects if not the reality of all these. An optimism and hopefulness in society, coupled with sharp regional differences, served as sources for the development of administrative culture. Some have argued that there is a way of thought embodying the value of “individual distinctiveness” or “independence” which contrasts with Eastern modes of thought embodying the values of “harmonious social relations” or “interdependence” (see Nisbett, 2003).

Even when contrasted with other parts of the world, it is clear that American administrative culture – as with American political culture – is a product of indigenous experience. Dwight Waldo long ago showed its uniqueness (Waldo, 1948) and its “culture-exclusiveness” Armed struggle to separate from English rule, expansion to the West, a devastating Civil War, and world-involvement help define the American style.

Economic prosperity, propelled by an industrial as well as agricultural sector in the nineteenth century, was coupled with relative isolation until the early twentieth century and, then, continued prosperity interrupted by a major depression and both mild and severe recessions. Involvement in the world’s affairs and leadership thereof commenced on a large scale with the First World War, although the failure of the USA to support the League of Nations doomed it to failure and contributed to worldwide instability. The Second World War reordered the international landscape and propelled the USA – and its allies – into a “cold war” with the Communist block of nations. Subsequent collapse of Communism again reordered the relationships of nation-states and left the USA as the sole super-power, politically and economically.

Throughout this process, American corporate behavior has influenced the US administrative culture, first by its excessive influence through financial power, pressure groups and political parties; later by its dominant value systems, information technology, and techniques for improved productivity. Recent emphasis upon the new public management derives from the suggested superiority of the business model over the allegedly inefficient and ineffective public sector. Similar quests for improved performance and productivity have inspired numerous other reform efforts.

Many point out that civil society developed early and rapidly in the USA, with distrust of the government prominent in the nineteenth century and consequent efforts to severely limit the powers of officials. Elected officials in particular were held to short terms and long ballots, and administrative officials to patrician standards (to the 1820s), then spoils standards (from the 1820s to the 1880s) and – from the end of the century – merit.

The progressive era brought reform of abuses, extension of the merit principle to state and local officials, and a watchful and participatory civil society assisted by a vigilant group of journalists. War and depression made their marks and left a legacy of “big government” which prevailed up to the Reagan era, when public administration became not the solver of problems but – in conservative, Republican terms – “part of the problem.” Big government, of course, continued but the rate of growth was reduced. Some functional areas were deregulated, privatized, contracted-out, or shifted to the state level; and considerable talk of downsizing – as found in the private sector – impacted government bureaucracy.

The current administrative culture – it might be argued – reflects some defensiveness on the part of non-elected American officialdom to attacks from both the political right and left, including elected officials at all levels, as well as journalists and pundits. This “bureaucrat bashing” is widespread and is not limited to the USA.

Since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the public work-force has been affected by the realization that only government can lead the War on Terror. The prominent protective role of public-sector unions has been tempered by successful efforts to achieve more Presidential control – in the case of the Homeland Security Department – and by further attempts to undercut traditional union power among civilian workers in the Department of Defense. An article in the *Washington Post* characterized the latter and its extension to other Departments as “An overhaul, not a tune-up” (*Washington Post*, 2003).

Patrician (guardian) administrative culture

Van Riper’s definitive study of the US public (civil) service describes the administrative environment of the early years of the Republic. Government officials were selected on the basis of their social and economic background, with high valuation placed on birth, educational attainment, and ownership of property (Van Riper, 1958). Their orientation was one of guardianship with the widespread belief that “men of character” (of course, only white men and no women) should lead the nation and staff its incipient government agencies. The Platonic logic reflects the understanding of the Founding Fathers on proper governance that would – without question – be best pursued by those with the highest social standing. In addition, prior to 1800, the staffing was largely confined to philosophical Federalists, that political grouping which supported a strong central government as opposed to the decentralized, state and rural preference of the Anti-Federalists. Once in power after the presidential election of 1800, the Anti-Federalists continued elitist staffing until Andrew Jackson’s presidency.

George Washington and his “men of character” (Dresang, 2002) staffed the early public administration apparatus with a dedicated group united by military service and social status. Washington looked for loyalty, family background, and formal education. There were letters of recommendation from prominent politicians attesting to reputational traits and these were usually enough to make the case, along with the additional advantage of military service. (Dresang, 2002, p. 19).

As might be expected, Washington's successors found their men of character on their home turfs. Both Adams sought appointees among New England merchants and professionals and Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe (from Virginia) found many of theirs in the ranks of southern landholders. (Riley, 2002, p. 7).

The importance of the Patrician administrative culture is more than merely historical. Through the years and even at present a few agencies, jurisdictions, and departments at various levels of government (local, state, and federal) have evidenced a strong elitism combined with parochial selection of a particular ethnic, religious, and/or social grouping.

The Patrician orientation is one of "father knows what is good for you" and "trust us to do what is best." In many ways, it is anti-democratic and it is now an isolated phenomenon.

Patronage (spoils) administrative culture

Begun under earlier presidencies but usually ascribed to the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the notion of the election winner taking the spoils of the election (like the spoils of war) was an alternative administrative culture to the Patrician. Although often combined in early years, it is the dominant set of attitudes with which we are concerned. A different orientation is associated with highly educated, socially prominent Patricians who see themselves as the rightful providers of government services because of their personal qualities, and the often uneducated (even illiterate) "Spoilsmen" who were appointed in the Jackson years and thereafter. Less believers in service and stewardship than in a narrow self-advancement and promotion of a political position, the Spoilsmen (again, nearly always white men) were a different breed. Jackson – in a well-known quote – stated that the duties of government were sufficiently simple that any able-bodied man could perform them. Indeed, the scope of public administration was limited and the required expertise no approximation to present day reality. Nevertheless, public administration scholars for many years decried the Spoilsmen and pointed to numerous evidences of their petty corruption and misuse of position. The contrasting revisionist view is that this was an instance of true democracy that moved the public service from the hands of the elite to a more representative bureaucracy. The era of the common man is the way it is now often described, with emphasis upon the inclusiveness of political and administrative action rather than its quality. At least it expanded the base for recruitment.

The historical record is clear that a reform movement developed after the Civil War (Lincoln was a greatest indulger in patronage) and sought encouragement in Europe, first in Germany and then in Britain. The Northcote-Trevelyan Act of 1854 in Britain was understood and admired by the reformers who sought a similar type of legislation in the USA but one without the British notion of the generalist/well-rounded official. It was not until the assassination of President Garfield by a disaffected office-seeker that the precipitating impetus for reform was realized. Senator Pendleton gave his name to the Civil Service Act of 1883 that gradually delineated the dominant administrative orientation since that time.

As with the Patrician administrative culture still found in some élitist organizations, so is it possible to find instances of spoils as paramount value systems in some jurisdictions. Of note, some highly-politicized town and city governments in the Northeast and county governments in the South which exist in partisan political areas

can evidence spoils in their appointments to bureaucratic positions and in their overall orientation. This is in spite of nominal merit systems in the jurisdictions, required for federal grants and by various laws.

Merit administrative culture

The dominant value of administrative culture in the USA for the last 120 years can be labeled “merit”. The values, attitudes, and beliefs of civil servants are expected to reflect this orientation in both professional and technical manners, although there have been numerous deviances and a number of challenges. The essential idea, of course, is that spoils or patronage concepts should be rejected in favor of those related to skills and abilities, as measured by some objective test or – more recently – by tests and considerations of diversity and representativeness (EEO/Affirmative Action).

As is well known, the Pendleton Act (Civil Service Act) of 1883 provided for tests of fitness administered by a bi-partisan Civil Service Commission (only two of the three members could be from the same party) and elimination of particularistic criteria related to partisan politics and – additionally – race, religion, or sex. Recent extensions of the concept have included the elimination of age discrimination, disabilities discrimination (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1970), and sexual preference. The latter is in contrast to the milieu of the 1950s when President Eisenhower issued an executive order banning homosexuals as security risks in the public service.

Originally, only 10.5 percent of the federal workforce was covered by the Civil Service Act and the number of positions was only 132,800 (Key Communications Group, 2003, p. 13). Subsequently, the coverage expanded and state and local jurisdictions developed their own systems. Today, well over 80 percent of all employees in federal service are covered and many of the others are in specialized personnel systems similar to the general one. This would be true of the Foreign Service, the Armed Services, the CIA and FBI, the Public Health Service, the Forest Service, the Postal Service, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and others. All of these have their own merit-type systems. State and local government officials also operate under merit systems.

The 1883 Act has been supplemented by other legislative enactments including:

- The Retirement Act of 1920, which established a Civil Service Retirement Plan.
- The Classification Act of 1923, which created classes and series of positions.
- The Hatch Act of 1939, which prohibited partisan political activity.
- The Veteran’s Preference Act of 1944, which provided for a number of changes in the Civil Service as well as bonus points for veterans, including an appeals process for unfavorably perceived personnel actions.

The Classification Act of 1949 which amended the 1923 Act by – among other things – introducing GS 16, 17, and 18 super-grades:

- The Sick Leave Act of 1951.
- The Incentive Awards Act of 1954.
- The Group Life Insurance Act of 1954.
- The Training Act of 1958.

- The Health Benefits Act of 1959.
- The Federal Salary Reform Act of 1962.
- The Pay Comparability Acts of 1970 and 1990 (2003 Federal Personnel Guide).

Other Acts as well as Executive Orders related – importantly – to equal employment opportunity (and, beginning with President Kennedy, affirmative action) and collective bargaining in the Federal workforce. It is important to emphasize that the philosophy of EEO/affirmative action argues for a representative work force as well as one based on merit. The notion of a “meritocracy” in which people skilled at test taking dominate the public service has been replaced with a modified merit concept, which stresses the “public” nature of the public service. The public service should reflect in gender and race the composition of the broader society that it serves. Numerous court cases have eschewed quotas as a selection and promotion standard but have emphasized the significance of targets and representation objectives. On occasion, courts have required jurisdictions to bring the classified service into conformity with the broader community which it serves; i.e. if the jurisdiction is 18 percent Hispanic, then the government work force should approximate 18 percent and – until it does – personnel decisions should favor Hispanics.

Civil Rights, whistleblower protection (Act of 1989), retirement and pay provisions, and other matters have been dealt with formally over the years. All are part of the values, belief, and attitude pattern of Federal civil servants and most have been applied in state and local jurisdictions with resulting reinforcement of the merit culture, as modified for equal employment opportunity/affirmative action.

If one legislative authorization needs to be identified as the most important in the last 30 years, it would arguably be the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, aggressively pursued by President Carter and finally enacted by Congress. This Act abolished the Civil Service Commission (but not its purpose) and allocated its functions to two new agencies, the Merit System Protection Board and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Thus, appellate functions were included in a separate agency from personnel standard setting and oversight. The 1978 Act also provided for merit pay, a generalist senior civil service (long sought by reformers) and other changes.

While the early years of the OPM were clouded by what the public administration establishment regarded as politicizing, there was no successful demand for additional structural change until the Homeland Security Department was created in 2003 as a response to terrorist threats. Republican congressional efforts in the mid-1990s – following the 1994 election – were ambitious in their attempt to change the civil service by eliminating departments and traditions, but were unrealized. President Bush, however, in the wake of 9/11, was able to quickly get the Patriot Act through Congress, create an Office of Homeland Security in the Executive Office of the President, and finally – against the opposition of Civil Service unions and their Democratic allies – to obtain a 15th Federal Government Department (Homeland Security) that would eliminate certain existing civil service protections.

As suggested above, beginning in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement – but promoted earlier (for a good analysis see Krislov, 1974) – a shift occurred in the merit orientation towards a more representative bureaucracy. This is reflected in the attitudes, values, and beliefs of much of the civil service. The trend for many years had been to recruit, hire, and promote white males who had military

service. The latter became a key consideration with the introduction of “veterans’ preference” following World War II and the consequent exclusion of those who had not served in the military. Typical were five to ten point bonuses on Civil Service entrance exams. Clearly, this increased the proportion of males since few women qualified as veterans. Women had assumed a variety of government jobs during the Second World War – while men were away – and many continued in the public service, helping to gender-balance the new male hires in an expanding public service. Over time, however, as women retired the disparity increased, particularly at the higher levels.

Additionally, the Civil Rights movement called attention to the lack of minority representation in government and attempts to remedy the imbalances were begun at all levels.

Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission assumed the leadership and enforcement of civil rights legislation affecting both the public and private sectors. Its mandate included hearing and resolving discrimination complaints.

Finding that merely not discriminating was insufficient to remedy past abuses, political demands were made to affirmatively bring about a more representative public work force, without sacrificing the merit concept. Affirmative action became the theme of the day.

Various empirical surveys have been done on the social backgrounds of public officials and their values, attitudes, and beliefs. Generally speaking, it has been found that as a group they are somewhat more liberal, tolerant, and better educated than the population at large. Both the Merit System Protection Board and the Office of Personnel Management have conducted broad-based empirical surveys of federal employees. The former, in 1997, released the results of a survey of federal views of the merit principle (Merit System Protection Board, 1997) and the latter conducted attitude surveys in 1983, 1991/1992, and 2002. In 1991/1992, questionnaires for the primary sample of federal employees – randomly selected – were mailed to approximately 57,000 employees and nearly 32,000 were returned (OPM, 1992). In the 2002 “Human Capital Survey,” the OPM questioned over 100,000 Federal employees – also randomly selected – and found that 91 percent believe they do important work. Other findings were that 68 percent are satisfied with their jobs compared to 67 percent in a private industry survey. There were reservations, however, on the part of many federal employees about rewards for good performance, with only 30 percent agreeing that the awards programs give them an incentive to do their best. Also, it was discovered that a substantial proportion of federal employees are considering leaving their current jobs.

The OPM indicates that the survey was “the largest survey of federal employees ever undertaken to assess the presence and extent of conditions that characterize high performance organizations” (OPM, 2002, p. 1).

Academic research in public personnel administration/human resources administration has also addressed the question of government employees’ attitudes, values, and beliefs. Results have not always been consistent, contributing to a debate over the “bureaucratic mind” as opposed to the “dedicated official.”

Considerable speculation surrounds the true mentality of the American ‘bureaucrat.’ At one extreme is the exposition of Ralph Hummel who finds endemic pathologies and a bureaucratic mind-set which not only determines work-place behavior but behavior

in their private lives. His bureaucrat is a narrow minded, rule-bound tender of the government store who has few redeeming values. That his widely-read book has gone into five editions bespeaks its influence (Hummel, 2000). The fifth edition has added critiques of postmodern theories of organization and evidence that it is still “business as usual” for bureaucracies, in spite of nearly a decade of “reinvention.”

At the other end of the spectrum is the extolling of virtues, dedication, commitment, and contribution of “public officials” (a better sounding term than “bureaucrats”). Ceremonies, honors, traditions, public employee interest groups, yearly awards for excellence, commissions (e.g. the Volker Commissions), and other factors promote a positive view of public officials.

Academically, Charles Goodsell’s answer to the Hummel thinking exemplifies this more positive view and is closer to the position held by most public administrationists, who find Hummel’s thinking a stereotype pandering to popular denigrating of government. Goodsell presents considerable evidence that public officials are ordinary people who approximate the larger society in their values, attitudes, and beliefs (Goodsell, 2003).

Experts differ on the degree of risk-aversion in American officialdom; the popular perception, of course, is one of cautiousness in contrast to the private sector. Similarly, there is no agreement on “public service” as a motivator in contrast to the instincts that drive people into business. “Bureaucratic reasoning” is thoroughly discussed by Gormley and Balla utilizing four different theoretical perspectives and successfully bringing the four frameworks together (Gormley and Balla, 2004). They quote high-level former officials such as Donna Shalala (Secretary of Health and Human Services) and James Baker III (Secretary of the Treasury; Secretary of State). Shalala indicates:

Bureaucrats are motivated by economic incentives, job security, a sense that they’re doing something worthwhile and being appreciated. I’ve never found bureaucrats different from staff members at universities or private foundations (in Gormley and Balla, 2004, p. 40).

The common thread

Under the long-lasting merit administrative culture, certain commonalities may be discerned among American public officials at all hierarchical levels and in all functional and geographic areas. Although they provide a common thread, they are frequently obscured by the enormous variety of perceived behaviors and expressed values, attitudes, and beliefs.

American officials share a unique heritage and have been politically socialized by family, peers, school, religion, media, and other agents to share common values, beliefs, and attitudes. Nearly all have been born, raised, and educated in the USA and share an implicit view of American exceptionalism. In contrast, many high-level administrators in developing countries were educated abroad and reflect some values, beliefs, and attitudes deriving from that experience.

An ironic distinguishing feature is the very emphasis upon individuality and distinctiveness from one another. Americans in general and public officials in particular have a curious attitude towards their own culture: “we don’t think we have any,” “yet it is exactly this concept of the individual as the prime mover of American life that is our greatest shared belief” (King and O’Boyle, 2002, p. 1).

Also noteworthy in American administrative culture is the lack of any significant tracking into administrative positions. There is no Ecole Nationale d’administration;

Oxbridge classics background, Tokyo School of Law or the equivalent that has been acknowledged as the preferred avenue to recruitment and advancement. Similarly, at lower hierarchical levels there are numerous backgrounds for those who meet minimum qualifications.

Easily overlooked but of considerable significance is the use by American officialdom of only one language (with occasional digressions for Spanish). Next door to us, Canadians operate in two official languages. Likewise, European counterparts and certainly many Third World bureaucrats at the higher levels value – and often are required to have – proficiency in foreign language, often English.

Attitudes of American exceptionalism – variously expressed – are part of the common thread. Perhaps no major administrative system is less affected by externalities or proximities to other administrative traditions than our own. Lacking the legacy of empire or domination by another nation-state, US officials could develop a unique orientation unencumbered by influences from beyond our shores. Since the “Patrician era” and some mid-nineteenth century explorations into British and Continental merit reforms, they remained far removed from outside administrative influences. On the other hand, many developing countries reflect the dominant administrative pattern – and the language – of their colonial forebears, even as they seek to escape dependency and “neo-colonialism.” Groupings of nation-states (Commonwealth, Arab League, ASEAN, etc.) also may pursue common administrative values through discussion and exchange within the group..

The following suggestive core values, and attitudes and beliefs for American officials – in addition to the above allusions – are not intended as a definitive classification but as a starting point for debate on this important topic. Clearly, the benign tone – paralleling Goodsell – will be anathema to those individuals and groups experiencing repressive bureaucratic directives (e.g. Native Americans under the Bureau of Indian Affairs), subject to police brutality and unjust criminal justice systems at the local level, singled out arbitrarily for suspicious activity (e.g. Americans of Middle Eastern descent questioned or detained under the Patriot Act), etc. More generally, those who accept an image of inefficient, corrupt, or politicized administrators (media accounts are typically negative) may also regard the following as a parody.

Core values

- *Neutrality and objectivity.* Although recognized to be “political” in the generic, behavioral sense, the public service reflects neutrality in relation to political parties and factions. It is not selected, promoted, reduced in size, disciplined or otherwise acted on in a partisan political fashion when it comes to individual personnel decisions. It also serves its public objectively – in accordance with laws and rules – without partiality towards those of any particular creed, area, gender, race, ethnicity, age, or other such variables.
- *Professionalism and expertise.* Public servants are competent to do their work as measured by tests of fitness and by professional standards. Firefighters know how to put out fires; regulatory administrators know their regulated organizations; Foreign Service officials know diplomacy. Pay and benefits accord with skill requirements (as well as the marketplace and negotiated union agreements) and advancement is also by tests of fitness. Frequently, professional organizations maintain standards: for librarians, the American Library

Association defines professionalism and expertise; teachers' organizations promote certification requirements; doctors, lawyers, engineers and others are covered by the standards of the American Medical Association, American Bar Association, etc. The American Society for Public Administration has established general criteria to advance the "science, processes, and art of public administration." It lists five basic principles supplemented by 32 sub-principles: Serve the Public Interest; Respect the Constitution and the Law; Demonstrate Personal Integrity; Promote Ethical Organizations; and Strive for Professional Excellence (ASPA, 1994).

- *Transparency and accountability.* As also recognized in the ASPA Mission Statement and Code of Ethics, neutrality, objectivity, professionalism, and expertise are not sufficient for public administrators. They must also avoid both impropriety and the appearance of impropriety by being open to scrutiny, responsive to the public, and accountable for their actions. The latter, of course, is somewhat different in the American context than the parliamentary, which emphasizes Ministerial and collective responsibility for all actions. The American standard – in general – is one of open reporting, public records, and access to public agents, including their formal decision-making meetings. The legislative body oversees executive action, and reporting occurs routinely up the hierarchy and outside it to legislators and the public. This may consist of only a yearly budget hearing and quarterly or annual reports or may involve constant and pervasive oversight and hundreds of reports. Since passage of the Freedom of Information Act, fewer documents qualify as sufficiently confidential to warrant exclusion from the public eye, although the Patriot Act of 1991 has introduced new security restrictions. In the information age, the availability of data and its accessibility increase dramatically, raising a host of new possibilities for bringing services to citizens at the same time as questions of security, privacy, confidentiality, and misuse of data arise. And, investigative reporters keep a watchful eye on public officials, always interested in ferreting out wrongdoing or unusual action which will make news.

Core beliefs and attitudes

- Belief in equity, the rule of law, constitutional norms, private property, and a workable legal order. "At a minimum, democratic public servants have reverence for laws, commitment to participation, and tolerance and respect for others in pursuit of the public interest" (McKinney and Howard, 1998, p. 6). Slightly more than in the Commonwealth or Continental traditions – it might be contended – American officials emphasize equality of treatment and mechanisms for participation in dealing with each other and the public.
- Belief in progress, solubility of problems, and American answers to issues. The efficacy of administrative action beyond symbolic or merely political expression is usually assumed. The early literature of comparative public administration is replete with case studies of Third World administrators whose actions are redundant or who function essentially as surrogates for political leaders.
- Beliefs and attitudes based on expectations of stability, predictability, safety, and agreed-upon mechanisms for change. Civil strife, potential coups, external

aggression, and erratic international events – as in many nation-states – are not controlling factors.

- Attitudes of secularism, separate realms for state and society, and linear rather than cyclical or seasonal patternings. Unlike some Islamic or confessional systems, there is no religious qualification for office, no oversight by religious leaders, and/or no expectation that officials will serve primarily a religious community.
- Attitudes based on specialist – rather than generalist – position classifications and on individual – rather than group – identities. The British classification systems still emphasize generalist job titles to a greater extent than in the USA (our senior executive service, of course, follows the British model). Some Asian administrative systems stress group decision making, honoring of the group, and deference to colleagues in a different style than in the USA. (For a good discussion see Turner and Halligan, 1999, pp. 135-7.)

Each of these items – along with others – could be more fully explored and each has exceptions. The comparative literature which takes national or regional administrative systems as units of analysis is rich with discussion of national differences (see Jreisat, 2003; Farazmand, 2001; Heady, 2001; Henderson and Dwivedi, 1999).

Administrative sub-cultures

Sub-types are necessary to help differentiate the sets of values, beliefs, and attitudes in American public administration and to avoid static characterizations. At one level it is possible to talk of the American administrative culture but to distinguish variation over time (e.g. demoralization in the Reagan era; reorientation for “Homeland Security” in the post-9/11 era) and by place, hierarchical level, even age requires “sub-culture” analysis: three are suggested here.

Traditional

This sub-culture defines a large group of officials (probably the largest) in federal, state, and local government who appreciate the security and benefits provided but at the same time are oriented to serving the public following laws and rules. They are at the heart of Goodsell’s analysis and they do their jobs faithfully and with some degree of efficiency and effectiveness. As Riccucci (1995) points out, many officials labor in relative obscurity yet make significant contributions beyond the normal duties and responsibilities of their positions. They should be celebrated – Riccucci tells us – but usually escape public attention.

The range of federal, state, and local officialdom is enormous, with “street-level bureaucrats” (e.g. police, case workers, educators) composing a large group who are in direct touch with the public. Others are less visible and may become known only in the breach (or alleged breach) of some rule or norm while the vast majority of officials continue to work outside the scope of media scrutiny.

A large body of empirical and theoretical literature exists which characterizes groups of US officials (e.g. elites), compares officials in different nations, contrasts public and private sector employees, and assesses areas such as risk-aversion.

Self-protective

At certain times and in certain places, public officials have perceived themselves under attack from chief executives, legislators, and the public. The response – short of

paranoia – has often been to redirect their behavior towards careful and cautious calculation of ways to survive downsizing, rightsizing, threats of privatization, or just widespread “bureaucrat bashing”. Golden (2000) provides a good description of this process during the Reagan years. Strategies of exit, voice, and loyalty (Hirschman’s well-known trilogy) are supplemented by “neglect”. Officials hunker down for a difficult time during which they feel under-appreciated and over-scrutinized by legislators, political appointees, the general public, and (often most importantly) the media. However, they continue cooperating, at least in a passive sense. “In essence, neglect is cooperative behavior motivated by reasons other than loyalty” (Golden, 2000, p. 19).

Entrepreneurial

One of the goals of the new public management – evidenced clearly in the reinvention movement of the 1990s – was to change the culture “away from complacency and entitlement and toward initiative and empowerment” Achieving such an entrepreneurial culture would be a major objective of the Clinton White House, the guidelines for which were first defined by Osbourne and Gaebler (1992) in their celebrated work. The official end of “reinventing government” through the National Performance Review (renamed the National Partnership for Reinventing Government in its second phase) preceded slightly the end of the Clinton administration but its directives and initial experiments were not overturned by the Bush administration. Rather, Bush and his policy advisors prior to 9/11 talked mildly of civil service reform, greater flexibility in the merit system and in pay schedules, and new accountability and performance measures. The Congressionally-mandated Government Performance and Results Act remained in force.

After 9/11, “entrepreneurial” took on new significance as government officials were called upon to answer the challenge of Homeland Security through rapid, flexible, coordinated responses to internal and external threats. Agencies were realigned – most notably in the new Federal Department of Homeland Security – and new cooperative mechanisms instituted which would involve state and local officials along with federal. Funding was adjusted accordingly with high priority to defense and security functions and lower priority to standard programs less involved in defense and security.

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the US government took on the task of re-creating the government of Iraq, even as it continued to build institutions and reorient behaviors in Afghanistan. Administrative globalization assumed a new meaning, arguably requiring “entrepreneurial” – or at least innovative – actions by US officials in a variety of agencies from USAID (Agency for International Development) and State generally, to the Defense Department, Agriculture, Energy, and other Departments involved in the reconstruction efforts.

Conclusion

Public administration – as a study – seems perpetually caught between the fields of political science and management, without a distinct vocabulary of its own. Administrative culture is suggested in this article as a public administration concept, useful in understanding familiar material and in cross-national (or cross-sectoral) comparisons. Along with political culture for the larger political system of which it forms a part and organizational culture, a well-developed specialty in management

studies, it provides a middle-ground between the broad core values of the former and the agency-specific understandings of the latter.

Considerable literature has been devoted to values in administration from the perspective of overall ethical, democratic, and professional standards and appropriate codified statements. Integrity, fairness, loyalty, responsiveness, tolerance, compassion, etc. have been analyzed along with the three core values (paired) discussed here. The nature of these formulations is consistent with early twentieth-century emphasis upon principles of good administration and an end of century theoretical concern with a science of values. Without referring to administrative culture, Kernaghan (2003) provides a good summary of this material and important comparisons of four Commonwealth countries: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the UK.

In analyzing American public administration utilizing administrative culture as a framework, a point of reference is provided for researchers in other national traditions, many of whose administrative systems have been influenced by American practice. By including sources of American administrative culture, its uniqueness is revealed. Similarly, an evolutionary approach – which shows major shifts over time – contributes to a fuller understanding of the American public sector. Supposedly universal current values (merit rather than patrician or spoils concepts) may be considered in light of the particular historical, social, and economic context of American public administration and perhaps re-evaluated for different applications. The new public management – developed in New Zealand, Australia, Great Britain and elsewhere, as well as in the USA – reinforces Western values but encourages the risk-taking, empowerment, customer-oriented, “rightsizing” orientation of the entrepreneurial sub-culture discussed here. This orientation has been exported around the world and has formed the basis for reforms and reorganizations in varied circumstances. Nevertheless, the new public management remains controversial in its Western applications, as well as its extensions abroad.

Consensus is elusive but many would agree that changes in administrative culture are necessary for improvements to occur in most civil services. Sharing ideas and best practices may be helpful in this regard.

In providing leadership, information technology, international competitiveness, and avoidance of parochialism would be key elements of the American public service in the twenty-first century. Accordingly, a “new administrative culture” (in the words of Rosenbloom and Kravchuk, 2002, p. 597) would be required which “will be at ease with complexity, law, and flexibility. They (sic, the public officials) will be performance oriented, have a strong service ethic, span boundaries, and be adroit at conflict avoidance and resolution”. Such a new administrative culture would extend the core values of the merit system in the USA to embrace twenty-first century needs without sacrificing neutrality, professionalism, and transparency.

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