ROBERT S. LORCH

STATE AND LOCAL POLITICS

THE GREAT ENTANGLEMENT

SECOND EDITION

state and local politics

THE GREAT ENTANGLEMENT

second edition

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Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey
07632

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

LORCH, ROBERT STUART, (DATE)
State and local politics.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1.–State governments. 2.–Local government—United States. I. Title.
JK2408.L67–1986 320.8'0973 85-12109
ISBN 0-13-843467-0

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Editorial/production supervision and interior design by Judith Winthrop
Manufacturing buyer: Barbara Kittle

ISBN 0-13-843467-0 01

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*
Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*
Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*
Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*
Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*
Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*
Prentice-Hall of Southeast Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*
Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*
Whitehall Books Limited, *Wellington, New Zealand*

preface

"Cover the subject, but don't give us an encyclopedia." "Don't make it too long; we plan to use some supplementary reading." "Give us about three-fourths state and one-fourth local." "Above all, write a book that will hold the interest of the students, especially students enrolled in their first political science course, who may never take another."

Those are some of the things I have been told by numerous teachers of state and local government. This book is an attempt to respond.

From my point of view, the nicest thing anyone could say about this book is that it is accurate, that it is lucid, that it broadly covers the subject, and that (in places at least) it is fun to read. In all sincerity I dedicate this book to those who are forced to read it at gunpoint, who are reading it because they have to—because it is assigned. You are with me in every paragraph. I understand you. I was a college student for eight years.

It is not easy to teach a course in state and local government, or to study the subject. The 50 states vary so much that professors have difficulty saying anything definite that applies to them all. Yet the states do have many fundamentals in common. In a sense our states are like a pack of dogs (pardon the comparison). They all have four legs, two eyes, one tail, and a nose. Yet they have great differences. The bull terrier's tail is different from the foxhound's, and the doberman's legs aren't like the chow chow's.

The eighty some thousand local governments have lots in common, despite their differences.

In writing this book I often had to say "often"; frequently had to say "frequently"; commonly had to say "commonly." After hundreds of pages the sight of one of those fuzzy words was painful. I ached for something concrete

and universal. But in the study of state and local government nothing is as lonesome as a concrete universal truth.

All purported conversations in this book, though entirely fictional, are based on actual conversations or on data acquired in other ways. They are simply intended to be a somewhat less formal way of presenting information. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

The English language has no singular third-person pronoun that is both masculine and feminine. To correct this unfortunate circumstance we have used "he or she" rather than just "he," "his or hers" rather than just "his," and so on, except in passages where such double pronouns would impede the flow of language.

If any person reading this book is moved to write me a letter about it, please do so. I want to know what you like or don't like about the book. Future editions may reflect your observations. Your letter will be gratefully received, and answered if possible.

Certainly I would not want to lay responsibility on anyone but myself for these pages, but I must acknowledge with gratitude the numerous helpful criticisms made by W. Lee Johnston, University of North Carolina; Mavis Mann Reeves, University of Maryland; Donald Ranish, Antelope Valley College; and Ed Sidlow, Miami University of Ohio. I am also grateful to the reviewers: Karl Svenson, California State University; David Bingham, West Virginia University; and Kenneth T. Palmer, University of Maine.

Robert S. Lorch
Colorado Springs

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introduction

HOW ENTERTAINING IS A STATE?

The 56-year-old man with flowing white hair tried to hold his temper, tried to be polite. He tried to answer insinuations calmly. He tried to do what panelists at the American Political Science Convention usually try to do: avoid ruffling any feathers, avoid insulting anyone, avoid treating fools as if they were fools. But finally he exploded. His fist came down on the panel table. Water in drinking glasses splashed. An ashtray bounced to the floor. The great head of white hair flew in all directions as the editor of the *Capitol Crier* shouted at a frail and balding professor in the audience, "Don't you know what the newspaper business is all about, you bloody fool?"

Such language was unheard-of at meetings where learned scholars exchange ideas politely among themselves. But the editor was not a professional scholar. He owned and ran the most profitable newspaper in his state.

The target of his wrath, sitting near the back of the room, wasn't accustomed to being called a bloody fool by anyone except his wife. Color drained from his face.

The editor continued to erupt: "For the past ten minutes you've been trying to make me out as some kind of hideous ogre devoid of any shred of social consciousness. You act as though you think the job of a newspaper is to be an educational institution for the masses. Education is your job, not mine. I run a business. That business is to make money. My stock in trade is something called 'news.' It isn't really news all the time—quite often it's entertainment in the guise of news. Whatever it's called and whatever it is, I'm not going to print it unless readers are going to read it. That's how I sell papers. I'm not going to print educational stuff that'll put me in the poorhouse."

The editor slowly sat down, eyes still glaring at his adversary. Stunned silence gripped the room. Finally the moderator, a young instructor from Nebraska who looked like Brooke Shields's twin brother, had the presence of mind to ask the professor whether he would care to respond to the editor's thoughtful remarks.

The professor paused and cleared his throat theatrically. This somehow produced a few giggles. Everyone turned around to see what he would say. "Now sir," began the professor, "I do not wish to paint you as any sort of ogre. I respect the important role played by the free press in America. I fully understand that a free press must be a private enterprise with a profit motive, and that you, unlike myself, have a payroll to meet and maybe some stockholders to satisfy. But your paper, which calls itself the *Capitol Crier,* gives almost no coverage of the state capitol—of state government. Why can't you entertain your readers with some state news?"

"I can't do that because the state government simply is not all that entertaining. I can't afford, and neither can anyone else, to hire a reporter to sit in the state capitol sending back dreary reports about a dreary government. People don't care about state government. They'd rather die than read about it. I'd go broke trying to get people interested in state government."

"But you do send a man to cover the legislature when it's in session, don't you?"

"Yes, because there's enough drama and idiocy there to amuse my readers. When the legislature adjourns, I pull my man back and put him to work writing up local murders."

"A good reporter," protested the professor, "can find drama, suspense, human interest, blood, and sex even in the state bureaucracy. A good reporter who is also a good writer can make the state department of agriculture as fascinating as a Shakespeare epic."

"If I had reporters who could write like that, they'd demand six times what I can pay."

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

States and the Mass Media

In America today the saying "out of sight, out of mind" can definitely be used to describe the governments of the states. They have a visibility problem. They are ignored, or at least overlooked, by the mass **media,** which probably give more coverage to foreign governments than to state governments. During the hostage crisis in Iran, for example, the U.S. media delved into every feature of Iranian politics; many Americans actually knew more about the government of Iran than about the government of their home state. The mass media are really not to blame for this. It's not their fault if people are more intrigued by hostages in Persia than by the sometimes dreary happenings in the statehouse.

State governments exist in the shadow of media coverage. Even local governments get more attention than states. One reason is that local newspapers and local television stations cover local events chiefly. There are very few state-oriented newspapers or television stations. True, some capital-city papers (the *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune,* for example) have a strong statewide circulation, but they remain first and foremost local papers and are apt to regard happenings at the state capitol merely as local news.

Newspapers

Only the biggest newspapers are likely to have a full-time reporter stationed in the capital city to cover state government, except of course capital-city papers. Quite commonly that reporter will remain at the capitol only while the legislature is in session, which "implies a rather bizarre view of the governmental process—namely, that only the legislative branch makes decisions important enough to warrant sustained coverage."[1] An astonishing number of adult Americans do not read any newspaper at all and get no state news except for the rare items that happen to appear on television.

Some states are blessed with periodicals that address chiefly state politics—the *California Journal,* the *Empire State Report,* and *Illinois Issues,* to cite three

[1] William T. Gormley, Jr., "Coverage of State Government in the Mass Media," *State Government* (Spring 1979), p. 47.