Jay D. Starling

MUNICIPAL COPING STRATEGIES

"As Soon as the Dust Settles"

Volume 7
MANAGING INFORMATION:
A Series of Books in Organization
Studies and Decision-Making

Series Editor: **AARON WILDAVSKY**

SAGE PUBLICATIONS
The Publishers of Professional Social Science
Beverly Hills London New Delhi

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A Series of Books in Organization Studies and Decision-Making

Edited by **AARON WILDAVSKY,** *University of California, Berkeley*

What impact does the computer have on organizations (both public and private), and the individual decision-makers within them?

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Who produces (and who consumes) such data? with what effects? under which conditions?

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PREFACE

THIS IS THE FINAL volume of a long-term, multi-faceted study of urban problems in the city of Oakland, California.[1] The Oakland Project began as an effort to use social science to help solve urban problems. But, in the end, it has been social science that has benefited from the opportunity to observe urban decision makers at close quarters. Among many other insights gained from the experience, particularly illuminating was an appreciation of the profound uncertainty under which local officials frequently must act. This volume analyzes their responses to conditions of uncertainty and explains why and how social science must integrate these findings into improved theories of decision making and public administration.[2]

Urban political and administrative leaders have suffered painful blows in virtually every arena of local government and politics for more than two decades. Well-to-do citizens, retail tradesmen, and manufacturers have fled from the core cities. Idle land and inflation have seriously eroded local governments' tax base while the commuters, the elderly, the poor, and the handicapped need and demand more services. Neither traditional nor innovative political or management solutions have successfully meliorated this situation. There is anger, resentment, and fear among citizens, political leaders, and public administrators alike.

NOTES

1. Earlier reports of the Oakland Project were made by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973a) and were documented in a variety of other books and articles, including Meltsner (1971) and Pressman and Wildavsky (1973b).

2. I rely primarily on the common language meaning of the term "uncertainty" and on the sense the reader should pick up in Chapters 2 through 8. But see the Appendix at the end of Chapter 1 for a more thorough definition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS RESEARCH IS drawn from practitioners, scholars, and participant-observers who were part of very ambiguous administrative situations and were interested in developing a more complete understanding of how decision makers cope with such ambiguity. Many individuals are responsible for the information and insights that are contained in this volume. Much of the data was collected unobtrusively from public documents, memoranda, and other written materials, while still other information was gathered from carefully drawn questionnaires and intensive interviews administered by the members of the Oakland Project. However, each case was enriched by having at least one of the contributing researchers serve an apprenticeship in the focal organization. For example, Donald Tamaki, coauthor of Chapter 3, was a leader of the low-resource pressure group examined in that case. The point is that the following studies are thorough and detailed. The members of the Oakland Project expended a great deal of time and effort to document the arguments so that they do not rest only on personal observation and anecdotal evidence.

Although the germ of the idea was mine, as is the responsibility for the analysis, many individuals contributed time, effort, and valuable insight to this volume. Particularly, Aaron Wildavsky, Arnold Meltsner, and Jeff Pressman from the Oakland Project offered support and valuable criticism, and freely shared their ideas. My colleague Ned Woodhouse deserves special mention; he labored long and hard to help clarify both thought and language.

Attempts to resolve the dilemmas of much needed services and insufficient financial reserves have had little effect other than to increase hostility and distrust between leadership and the citizenry and, ironically, to cost more. Despite increasing concern for efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of public services and a seemingly endless supply of analytically based panaceas like PPBS, ZBB, Productivity Analysis, and Cutback Management, it appears that citizens pay more and more for diminishing services. In addition to analytic cure-alls,

there also seems to be an unending number of programs—usually originated by the federal government—to remedy urban problems. Model Cities, Community Action Programs, Drug and Alcohol Diversion Programs, Summer Jobs, and CETA Programs have come and gone and had little lasting effect other than to increase anger, resentment, and fear. Tax bases still erode, the well-to-do flee, and retail centers as well as light and heavy industries increasingly locate in the exurbs.

Why have these problems been so resistant to a bewildering variety of attempted solutions? Is it because local problems cannot be solved by local actors? Perhaps local leadership is not sufficiently talented, concerned or trained for their jobs. There is nothing to be gained by conceding defeat at the outset and assuming that nothing can be done by locals to solve their problems. Moreover, there is strong evidence that urban leaders today are well trained, honest, and committed to the community and professional service delivery.

Perhaps the difficulty is not with particular individuals or with institutions that provide public services. The argument put forward in this volume is that in the past two decades, local public decision-making processes have become increasingly outmoded. Decision methods—including style, form, reasoning processes, and substance—that may work acceptably in relatively quiescent political and administrative arenas are not adequate for situations marked by persistent problems, numerous changes, and social, economic, and political complexity. The basic understanding of, approach to, and methods for making decisions in arenas characterized by complicated, potentially explosive problems must be altered or citizens and leaders alike will continue to find themselves confronted with personal, professional, and institutional failure.

This volume examines citizens', citizen activists', elected officials', and professional administrators' responses to public policymaking in difficult, confusing circumstances—or stated somewhat more precisely, under conditions of moderate to high uncertainty. The setting is Oakland and the focus is on local government. The plan of the volume is that each succeeding chapter moves more deeply into the public policy process, with the penultimate chapter depicting a city's elected and appointed leadership wrestling with a problem that is completely beyond their understanding and that threatens to overwhelm them.

An unorthodox thesis is offered in this work. It argues that the way public officials avoid decisions and otherwise protect themselves when faced with confusing problems is not nearly as pathological as is commonly believed. Such behavior is at least normal and perhaps even healthy. The great error in common perceptions of bureaucratic behavior has been the assumption that public officials should always do their best to fulfill the stated mission of their agency or organization. In fact, society may be served better when officials do not try to fulfill their perceptions of ideal behavior. Instead, public officials ought to follow their natural inclination to protect themselves even if the prevailing view is that the organization's goals and programs appear to suffer as a result.

The basis for such a counterintuitive notion will become clear in later chapters. Chapter 1 simply introduces the argument. The first section of Chapter 1 describes the setting for the research. The second section explains how social scientists and practitioners commonly think about good administration and points to several key problems with the reigning view. The third section develops a theory of how public officials actually behave when confronted with moderate to high levels of uncertainty. The fourth section describes the structure of the rest of the volume. An appendix to Chapter I discusses the concept of uncertainty.

Chapter 2 analyzes Oakland's citizens' perceptions of city hall and their reactions to its policies. Chapter 3 carefully scrutinizes a low-resource pressure group's attempt to influence public school policy in Oakland. Chapter 4 observes the other side of this process: a policymaking body—the city council—reacting to a low-resource pressure group. In Chapter 5 attention is turned to professional administrators, as the police department, a hierarchically structured department that relies heavily on routine, is observed grappling with the uncertainties in its budgeting process. Chapter 6 examines the planning department's adaptation to considerable ambiguity about its purpose, and Chapter 7 chronicles a newly reorganized parks and recreation department's struggle to establish itself with few guidelines. Chapter 8 presents a graphic analysis of elected and professional policymakers laboring with a technology they did not understand and, like the "tar baby," could not subdue.

As suggested by James Thompson in his work on bureaucratic organizations, uncertainty emanated from the citizens', group leaders', elected officials', or administrators' respective environments, in each

case analyzed in this volume. In Oakland, as elsewhere, there are elaborate rituals for diminishing personal or intraorganizational uncertainty, including religious beliefs, cultural myths, laws, rules, standard procedures, and many others. None of these methods succeeded in controlling the uncertainties induced by the external environment.

1 RESEARCH SETTING

BEFORE THE TURN of the century, elected officials and administrators in most city halls were confident of their ability to govern their cities. Old, well-established cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, or Chicago have had turbulent histories. But many, such as Los Angeles, Houston, Oakland, or Orlando, have only recently encountered burgeoning problems that threaten to exceed elected and administrative decision-makers' capabilities for resolving them.

The situation in Oakland, California, was no different from that of many American cities after World War II. It had grown from a small to a rather large city on the crest of a large in-migration during the 1940s. Many, especially blacks and browns, had come to work in the shipyards during the war. Oakland also experienced the rapid development of a constraining suburban ring in the postwar years. Despite a magnificent setting, it became increasingly blighted, shabby, and dull. Industry and retail trade no longer settled within its borders. Suburban commuters drained city services and returned little revenue to the city.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s several factors combined to produce unusual burdens on city hall. These pressures were the product of a complex process that is difficult to explain through crisp, causal sequences. But the main factors are well known. After the war, 20 years of unprecedented prosperity and development, abundant cheap energy, rapidly spreading road networks, and ample quantities of cheap motor vehicles had a cumulative, unhappy effect on the American city.

Prosperity and mobility encouraged people, in ever-increasing numbers, to move to newly developing neighborhoods at the city's edge. In this same period, generous federal housing subsidies (particularly VA

and FHA loan guarantees) further increased the number of persons able to move out of cramped, inner-city housing to low-density, single-family dwellings in suburban areas.

As the population around cities began to spread out, the central city—now very likely constrained by a solid ring of "independent" suburban communities—also began to lose hegemony over the commerce and manufacturing in its region. Tax advantages and ready-access roads for supply and distribution encouraged manufacturers to move away from the central city. Retail stores branched out to serve large suburban populations, and by the late 1960s the shopping center had become the regional center of retail trade. Such multifaceted withdrawal from the central city increased its decay rate so that blight spread faster than the city could be rejuvenated. Those persons who were left behind, together with those who moved into blighted areas to acquire cheap housing, demanded the same services as their well-to-do neighbors who had moved out of the city to more desirable neighborhoods.

This outmigration and spreading blight began to sap the city's ad valorem tax base. Roads, parks, parking facilities, and other public projects used up large chunks of taxable land; it is now common for 40% or more of a city's land-area to be used for public, nontaxable purposes. The result was increasing strain between the central city's income (revenue) and outgo (service costs). City officials and community leaders began earnestly looking for ways to increase revenue and to hold down increasing costs. In addition, the plight of those trapped in a blighted inner city was not improving; in fact it was worsening relative to that of its suburban counterparts. In many urban areas, moreover, inner-city dwellers were becoming noticeably restive. In short, the economic, social, and political condition of the American city for the most part was not good and was getting worse. Consequently, state governments and federal agencies were beginning to formulate new or expanded aid programs for large cities.

Socioeconomic and political factors combined with many hastily fashioned federal and state programs caused surprise and confusion among many municipal officials. It seemed that in a few short years, unemployment in the central cities was spiraling upward; development stopped; and no one wanted to live or work in the city except the few very rich and the numerous very poor. Problems that had plagued policymakers in a few "impossible" cities like New York for more than a century were now affecting most American cities, and municipal officials were not prepared for them. Many city officials were trying for the first time to cope with and adapt to persistently ambiguous situations