



# THE CASE FOR BUREAUCRACY

A PUBLIC  
ADMINISTRATION  
POLEMIC

SECOND EDITION

CHARLES T.  
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CHARLES T. GOODSSELL

*Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*

CHATHAM HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
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## THE CASE FOR BUREAUCRACY

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edited by Aaron Wildavsky  
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*For Amanda*

## PREFACE

This book is a polemic. I consider it a gentle polemic in that I avoid *ad hominem* attacks and take the trouble to back my position with evidence. But it is a polemic nonetheless.

I have been moved to write a polemic out of growing irritation with a view that has long been dominant in popular culture and the social sciences, namely, that governmental bureaucracy in the United States is a generalized failure and threat. This viewpoint comes to us from all directions. Political conservatives insist that bureaucracy blunders constantly and threatens the superior instruments of private enterprise and market organization. Political liberals reject bureaucracy as a tool of the elitist establishment and as an oppressor of the hapless individual. The press finds bureaucracy to be a splendid source of interest-arousing stories. Academics within several disciplines—who, above all, should know better—make extravagant, outraged claims as to bureaucracy's overall breakdown and oppressive nature.

I am not claiming that bureaucracy is perfect or anywhere near that wondrous state. Any large administrative apparatus, including that found in the United States, is riddled with individual instances of inefficiency, maladministration, arrogant behavior, repressive management, and abused power. My point is simply that, in America at least, these deficiencies are particularized rather than generalized, and that they occur within tolerable ranges of proportionate incidence. They do not constitute a comprehensive inadequacy or overarching threat within the society or political system. Bureaucracy is, instead, a multitudinous, diverse reality in which is found a vast mix of performance and quality. Within this mix, acceptable and responsible conduct is far more common than unacceptable or irresponsible behavior. The drumbeat of antibureaucratic criticism, emanating as it does from multiple sources within the society, supports a powerful myth that wildly exaggerates shortcomings in government's performance and invariably underestimates government's achievements. A main objective of the book is to expose that myth, although I have no expectation of destroying it.

To many, the word "bureaucracy" in itself means bad public administration. To defend something that is admittedly "bad" would be difficult, to say the least. Although I find myself in a polemical mood, I am not prepared to

try the impossible and make a case for evil. I wish only to make a case for something that most Americans mistakenly consider evil.

In the pages that follow the term bureaucracy refers collectively to governmental administrative agencies found in the United States, that is, American public administration. My defense of bureaucracy is not necessarily limited to its U.S. manifestation, although for reasons of strategy and inadequate information I choose to make a case for American public administration alone at this time. Surely, however, some of my observations apply to some other countries, and perhaps students of the subject in those countries will be moved to reconsider the total performance record of their executive institutions.

I should like to emphasize that the book is not a defense of the status quo or a restatement of theoretical orthodoxy. I do not make a case for bureaucracy out of loyalty to current regimes or a commitment to existing managements of organizations. The position I take is, in fact, radical to the study of public administration, as anomalous as that may seem to the outsider. The field tends, amazingly enough, to condemn categorically rather than approach sympathetically or at least with an open mind the institutions it purports to staff and advise. While other writers within public administration have in the past stated views parallel to my own, the active case for bureaucracy has been presented in limited scope and in a fragmented manner. Meanwhile, articulate bombast from bureaucracy's critics has dominated the scene. One of my aims is to help correct this imbalance.

The book is addressed, therefore, in part to my fellow students and teachers in the field. Additionally, I hope to find a substantial audience among lay citizens. My reasoning is that citizens have a right to grant legitimacy to their public institutions to the extent that these institutions earn it through performance. This is true with legislatures, courts, political parties, presidencies, and governorships, as well as with bureaucracies. But the near-monopoly of a one-sided view of public administration within the output of the mass media and the utterances of politicians and professors does not permit a fair judgment of it. Unjustified delegitimization of publicly owned institutions is, in a way, robbing the people of what is due them.

Several persons helped make this book better than it would have been. The initial idea for the volume was discussed more than five years ago with a former colleague, John L. Foster, and on reviewing the final product he suggested a number of concrete improvements. A current colleague, John A. Rohr, spent many tedious hours with the draft, uncovered hundreds of major and minor flaws, and accompanied all of them with constructive suggestions. Two individuals who are not "colleagues" organizationally but are intellectual co-workers with all scholars of public administration because of their prominence



in the field, Dwight Waldo and Aaron Wildavsky, made useful comments at one stage or another of the project. My favorite high school science teacher, citizen participant in local and state government, candidate for public office, and personal critic of bureaucracy—Barbara G. Clark—identified in the manuscript many examples of stuffiness and needed clarification. My publisher, Edward Artinian, demonstrated an infectious enthusiasm for the undertaking throughout, and my typist, Beth Burch, exhibited uncommon technical skill and personal good will. A sincere “thank you” to all these individuals.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In this Second Edition, I have not rewritten the original text but instead have added an additional chapter, “From Grand Myth to Grand Assault.” The first part of this chapter updates the material presented earlier, as would a revision. Then the chapter extends the polemic by contending that the Reagan administration has presided over a powerful and dangerous attack on the quality and effectiveness of American public administration at the federal level. The chapter concludes with a three-pronged strategy for attempting to reverse the assault.

Allow me to thank the following persons for their assistance in connection with preparing chapter 8: Beverly A. Cigler, Judith C. Hoover, Robert T. Maslyn, and Neil A. Morgan.

In the years since the book was initially published I have received scores of communications from readers wishing to comment on one or another aspect of its contents. Receipt of more such comment, especially from students, would be greatly welcomed. Write to me at the Center for Public Administration and Policy, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061.

## CONTENTS

1. BUREAUCRACY DESPISED AND DISPARAGED	I
Depictions in Popular Culture	2
Depictions in Academic Writing	6
Reconsidering a Hate Object	11
The Case for Bureaucracy Previewed	14
2. THE WATER GLASS VIEWED DIFFERENTLY	16
Surveying the Surveys	17
More Definite Surveys	21
Reflections on the Surveys	29
Direct Performance Measures	34
3. SOME SUSPICIONS, SOME SURPRISES	38
Bureaucracy as Stereotype	38
Bureaucracy as Discriminator	42
Bureaucracy as Bungler	48
American Bureaucracy Compared	55
4. GREAT (BUT IMPOSSIBLE) EXPECTATIONS	6
No-Win Situations and Red Tape	61
Administration by Proxy	67
Solve Those Problems!	72
Bureaucracy and Social Change	76
5. BUREAUCRATS AS ORDINARY PEOPLE	82
Who Are the Bureaucrats?	82
The "Bureaucratic Mentality"	88
How Bad Is Work in Bureaucracy?	95
The Bureaucrats' Reputation	104

6. BIGNESS AND BADNESS RECONSIDERED	110
The Size of Bureaucracy	110
Growth, Aging, and Badness	116
The Political Power of Bureaucracy	126
Inequity and Drift	133
7. A BRIEF, A MYTH, A CHALLENGE	139
The Case for Bureaucracy: A Brief	139
The Grand Bureaucratic Myth	143
The Challenge for Public Administration	146
8. FROM GRAND MYTH TO GRAND ASSAULT	150
The Case Updated and Reinforced	151
The Reagan Presidency and the Federal Bureaucracy	164
Public Action for a Public Asset	177
NOTES	181
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	204
INDEX	208

CHAPTER 1

## BUREAUCRACY DESPISED AND DISPARAGED

To make the case for bureaucracy: What a ridiculous idea! The author must be an earthbound Screwtape or plain mad. Only a diabolic polemicist would present a brief for evil. Only an insane mind would come to the defense of the indefensible.

I hope that the reader, as he or she turns these pages, quickly revises this initial impression. The first point to make is that the discussion is not bound by the pejorative definition of "bureaucracy." That usage in itself refers to incompetent, indifferent, bloated, and malevolent administrative departments of government. The need to escape this definition points to a fundamental error commonly made in interpreting American government: the tendency to downgrade and malign U.S. public administrative institutions regardless of their tasks, limits, and record. Contrary to first impressions, this book neither defends evil nor exhibits insanity but argues that such a tendency is both unjustified and productive of inaccurate understanding. Stating the book's thesis in a positive way, the case is made that American administrative agencies of government function surprisingly well. In other words, bureaucracy in the United States is not nearly as "bureaucratic," in the pejorative sense, as commonly thought.

To clarify my definition of bureaucracy right away, in this book "bureaucracy" refers simply to American public administration. The reference is a collective one and includes all administrative agencies at all levels of American government, not just those in Washington, D.C. Individual "bureaucracies" are single examples of those agencies.

This descriptive category is, then, vast. Also, it embraces a hodgepodge of institutions. Yet the variety of public bureaucracies in a country like the United States is itself a basic truism that we must incorporate in our understanding of American public administration. This hodgepodge nature itself argues against quick and simple generalizations about bureaucracy, whether cynical or not.

Academic writers on bureaucracy often use the term in a quite different way. To them "bureaucracy" often refers to a type of organization. Originally

conceptualized by the German sociologist Max Weber, the bureaucratic model of organization possesses these characteristics: large size; a graded hierarchy, formal rules, and written files; and employment of salaried, full-time staff hired for long periods to perform stated duties using technical knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of organization is usually, and rightly, thought of as dominating government within most societies. In fact, Weberian organization is often associated with governmental administration. The bureaucratic form, nevertheless, has great importance beyond the public sector—for example, within the corporate world of American society. In any event, for the most part, American public administration is highly “bureaucratic” in the Weberian sense (the main exception being that governmental organizations are often much smaller than expected). Hence, making our case for bureaucracy inescapably involves defending the use of Weber’s model. Students of the subject will immediately recognize that such a step flies in the face of much well-known and long-worshipped academic theory. Weberian organization is attacked in most emphatic terms as unworkable and even immoral in not just one but several disciplines. Thus, the reader should be forewarned that by making the case for bureaucracy, this book not only rejects much popular wisdom but steps on a number of intellectual toes.

## DEPICTIONS IN POPULAR CULTURE

Let us begin by elaborating common depictions of public bureaucracy so that we can appreciate what making the case for it confronts. As for portrayals in mass media, we encounter a relatively simple picture, confidently expressed. The employee of bureaucracy, that “lowly bureaucrat,” is seen as lazy or snarling, or both. The office occupied by this pariah is viewed as bungling or inhumane, or both. The overall edifice of bureaucracy is pictured as overstaffed, inflexible, unresponsive, and power-hungry, all at once. These images are agreed upon by writers and groups of every shade of opinion. One is hard pressed to think of a concept more deeply ingrained and widely expressed in American cultural life.

To exemplify popular culture’s image of bureaucracy, a newspaper feature on the subject describes it as “a brontosaurus of unimaginable size, appetite, ubiquity and complexity.” At the federal level alone, the feature notes, this dinosaur owns 413,000 buildings, leases 228 million square feet of space, operates 450,000 automobiles, and owes a trillion dollars in debt.<sup>2</sup> In another illustration, a columnist likens American bureaucracy to “several hundred lidless baskets of snakes placed in a single room,” with confusion rampant within and between baskets.<sup>3</sup> A Sunday supplement article solemnly proclaims that

despite the tradition of individualism in America, bureaucracy is reducing us to “a nation of paper-shuffling petitioners, forever waiting for permission from some government office for our next step, continually putting aside the work of the world in order to fill out forms.”<sup>4</sup> An article in a monthly magazine declares that “the performance of the bureaucracy constitutes the biggest crisis facing our country today,” comparable to Watergate or Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> In short, the phenomenon of bureaucracy is seen as so terrible that metaphors of snakes and Jurassic monsters are needed to describe it, and disasters like military defeat and presidential perfidy are required as standards of comparison to indicate the magnitude of crisis involved.

What evidence do the popular writers have for their attacks on bureaucracy? If we asked them, they would rephrase the question by wondering where evidence to the contrary could be found. One source the popular critics always draw upon is that item found in almost every edition of every daily newspaper, the bureaucratic horror story. This is the graphic and sympathetic account of how some poor citizen has been mistreated by incompetent bureaucrats or how in some other way a great bureaucratic error has been committed. Here are summaries of a few such stories:

- A Chicago woman undergoing chemotherapy for cancer of the breast applied for Medicare. She received a computer-produced letter indicating she was ineligible since she had died the previous April.
- A chronic alcoholic was arrested and mistaken for another man. When he protested, his claims of misidentification were diagnosed as paranoia and schizophrenia, and he was committed to a mental hospital.
- The Department of Energy set out to declassify millions of documents inherited from the Atomic Energy Commission. Eight of the released documents contained the basic design principles for the hydrogen bomb.
- A woman on welfare ran up astronomical medical bills because of terminal illness. She was denied Medicaid on grounds that her welfare payments created a personal monthly income \$10.80 above the eligibility maximum.
- A unit of what is now the Department of Health and Human Services sent fifteen chimpanzees to a Texas laboratory for the purpose of launching a chimp-breeding program. All were males.

All right, you will say, these stories were newsworthy precisely *because* such horrible and ridiculous things happened. And “bureaucracy” let them happen! Is this not *proof* that bureaucrats are heartless, asinine, and plain stupid?

Notice, however, that the bureaucratic horror story is usually short. Often not many details of the case are included, and those that are given stress the citizen's anguish or the incident's adverse effects. Certainly any extenuating circumstances or the government's side of the story are not covered. Journalists are perfectly aware that what arouses reader interest is the maligned citizen and the horrific outcome, not restrictions faced by bureaucrats in terms of rules with which they must live and workloads with which they must cope. With respect to the Chicago breast cancer case, for example, who would care that a new computer-based information system was at the time being installed and many bugs had yet to be worked out? As for the misidentified alcoholic, how many readers are interested in the fact that another man with the same name, similar physique, and almost identical birth date was entered on police records? On the Medicaid case, how newsworthy is the fact that personal income maximums are not set by local welfare departments and, if exceeded by them in any amount, result in an adverse state audit and charge-back?

Another point on bureaucratic horror stories has to do with what social scientists would call a sampling problem. The cases appearing in print are selected for attention and not because they are representative. This is so despite the implication often given that repeated occurrence is precisely why these stories are published so often. (One story begins, "Brace yourself. It's more bureaucratic madness."<sup>6</sup>) Actually, a random selection of cases would yield routine and thereby uninteresting subject matter; nothing could be less newsworthy than the smoothly processed eligibility claim or by-the-book police arrest. Moreover, a selection of instances of unusual government efficiency would violate the media's desire to appear independent by being skeptical.

What *is* of interest, to journalists and readers alike, is the bizarre case. In a country as large as the United States, and in a society as efficient in transmitting news as the American, plenty of bizarre cases can be singled out each day. But by definition they are atypical. Especially of interest is the atypical case that reinforces stereotypes of bureaucracy and thereby strikes a responsive chord. All citizens old enough to have conscious memory have experienced incidents from time to time in which officials have acted toward them in baffling and frustrating ways. Hence, everyone can relate personally to the bureaucratic horror story. That is why it is printed. Nevertheless, such stories are not a good research source for finding out how bureaucracy actually operates.

Another kind of evidence frequently cited by popular critics is poll results that reflect the negative overall image of bureaucracy propagated in the media and ingrained in our culture. This is a highly abstract, depersonalized image that I later analyze as central to a grand bureaucratic myth. The polls quoted by critics tap this abstract level almost exclusively, which merely reinforces the

conventional wisdom. Gallup, for instance, asked a national sample whether federal employees “work harder or not so hard as they would in nongovernmental jobs.” He also questioned whether the federal government “employs too many or too few people to do the work that must be done.”<sup>7</sup> In both instances he was surveying abstract images of the federal government and not personal, concrete experience with its agencies or personnel. We are not surprised that about two-thirds of the sample said bureaucrats work “not so hard,” and a similar proportion replied that government “employs too many.” The conclusion then drawn is that Americans are alienated over poor government services. Yet the questions asked are nicely set up with dichotomous phrasing, and there is little doubt as to the “right” answer in terms of accepted norms. Also, the questions reflect national frustrations that go beyond bureaucratic performance; pollsters have found an erosion of confidence in almost all national institutions in recent years. When we move, in the next chapter, to survey questions where citizens are asked specifically about past personal experiences with government agencies, a radically different picture emerges. This more meaningful set of survey results is ignored by the high priests of popular culture—it is too damaging to their preconceptions and intentions.

To frame this discussion in terms of “evidence” actually elevates popular discussion of bureaucracy above its usual level. Most of the antibureaucratic commentary assumes everyone hates bureaucracy and does not bother substantiating its negative attributes. The impression is given that consensus is so complete on this issue that the time and trouble needed for verification are unnecessary. Bureaucracy is portrayed as so wicked that its sins could hardly be subject to exaggeration.

It is easy, then, for individuals and enterprises to exploit this fixation against public bureaucracy without fear of being called to account. Their interest is not in describing American government but in using antibureaucratic sentiment to their own ends. Countless politicians run for office (including the highest posts in the land) on platforms that blame society’s problems on “the bureaucrats” and their burdensome rules, wasteful extravagance, social experimentation, and whatever else nettles. Candidates promise that when they are elected, they will deal fiercely and conclusively with these enemies; when, after the election, neither the bureaucrats nor the perceived problems disappear, voters conclude that the survival of the former has caused the perpetuation of the latter.

The exploitation of antibureaucracy sentiment is not restricted to politics. Comfortable livings are made from the phenomenon. Numerous amusing books are written that ridicule government servants and agencies, and they sell well. Public lectures are given on the subject at substantial fees. Parlor



games on evil bureaucracy are manufactured and marketed. Literary reputations are made by fictional depictions of bureaucracy that use the imagination of the novelist to satisfy the keenest cravings for cynicism and despair. Futurists make best-seller lists by contending that the rejection and replacement of bureaucracy is the inevitable wave of the future—and indeed is already upon us.

It could all be considered harmless. After all, politicking by scapegoat and buck-chasing by entrepreneurship are the American way. Yet, as a result we are treated to the spectacle of the opinion molders of a national culture bent on reinforcing dismal perceptions of a government that is unusual by world standards. It is a government subject to periodic review in relatively honest elections. It is a government massively constrained by law and constitution. It is a government widely admired by foreigners for organizational innovation and technological prowess. Is American bureaucracy really that bad?

### DEPICTIONS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Meanwhile, academic writers on bureaucracy address the subject not only from the standpoint of breakdown of a particular set of institutions but also from the perspective of inherent problems of the bureaucratic (Weberian) form of organization. Yet, since American public administration is largely in accord with that form, the two orientations end up addressing essentially the same topic.

With few exceptions, academic analyses of bureaucracy are pessimistic and condemnatory. Using different vocabularies and contrasting conceptual models to be sure, professors from disparate disciplines conclude overwhelmingly that bureaucracy in the United States and elsewhere has served mankind disadvantageously, to put it mildly. One might organize their criticisms in various ways, but at least three evils are perceived as paramount: unacceptably poor performance, dangerous manipulation of political power, and intolerable oppression of the individual.

As for bad performance, the notion that bureaucracy fails to work properly is arrived at through various chains of deductive reasoning. We might first mention the **market-oriented economists**. They are hostile to government bureaucracy on the grounds that competitive markets and profit-based incentive systems are the only feasible means to attain economic efficiency, which is their distinctive definition of the public good. The basic problem perceived is that bureaucracy does not respond to a market of multiple consumers, but rather to a single “buyer” in the form of an appropriations committee or budget bureau. Also, bureaucracy does not face competition with other producers