

THE AMERICAN MIND

Salvo 02.26.2025 10 minutes

Denizens of the Deep State

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Public administration is the engine of despotism in America.

It's long past time to rein in the field of public administration, which supplies the bureaucrats who populate the administrative state. About 12,000 U.S. students a year graduate in the field, mainly at the master's

level through the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. About half of all MPA graduates end up in government, mostly at the state (25%) and local (15%) levels, but some (about 10%) at the federal level. This means that about 1,200 public administration graduates enter the federal bureaucracy every year, presumably in leadership and management-track roles.

Christi Grimm, a former inspector general in the Department of Health and Human Services, is one such MPA holder who did damage from the federal bureaucracy. Grimm issued a panicked report on COVID in its early days that President Trump viewed as an attempt to undermine his handling of the crisis (she has since sued for reinstatement after being fired shortly after Trump's second inauguration). Another is Karen Chen, a senior analyst on environmental issues in the Government Accountability Office, who previously worked for Michael Bloomberg's net-zero initiative for local governments that sought to counter policies of the first Trump Administration.

Long overlooked, public administration is today a training ground for the malign imprint of the Deep State, with its overtones of inefficiency, mission creep, unaccountability, and ideological bias. The Trump Administration's storming of the bureaucracy will not be complete without a parallel assault on the miseducation of bureaucrats. It's time to discipline the field of public administration.

Public administration in the United States has always been synonymous with the expansion of government and "expert" control. The field took shape in the early Progressive era of the 1880s, when Woodrow Wilson published "The Study of Administration," an essay arguing for increased "mastery" of the private sector by government.

Following Wilson's advice, the first wave of public administration training looked to the specialized and scientific "bureaucratic management" tradition of Germany, rather than to the generalist and amateur "civil service" ethos of Britain. In his seminal book *The Promise of American Life*, New York journalist Herbert Croly argued for a corporatist management of economic and social life built along German

lines with government commissions that would “deliberately plan a policy of individual and social improvement,” and would be “entirely different from that of a so-called free democracy.”

The emphasis on German (and to a lesser extent French) administrative prerogatives is why the humor of the classic 1980s British series *Yes, Minister*, where bureaucrats continually subvert the will of their elected officials, was lost on Americans. Our bureaucrats grew up with a sense of entitlement because of their specialized, scientific management of society—there’s nothing funny about it.

The fetish for wise bureaucrats planning every aspect of American life was then formalized in the new field of public administration under the New Deal. Bureaucrats no longer saw their role as “looking for methods to fulfill responsibilities defined by the public through politics,” wrote University of Chicago historian Barry Karl in a 1976 essay, but rather as “fulfilling the demands of interests defined by their own growing expertise.” The American Society for Public Administration was founded in 1939 by, among others, the Marxist professor Charles Beard.

The discipline experienced some self-doubt in the 1950s as the U.S. fought against a bureaucratic-military monstrosity in the Soviet Union, whose agents were found throughout the American bureaucracy. Almost forgotten in Eisenhower’s farewell warning in 1961 about the threat military-industrial collusion posed to a free society was his even greater concern about academic-bureaucratic collusion. Rather than the “free university” fueled by “intellectual curiosity,” scholars of government were starting to worship all forms of government, as well as their own expertise. “The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present and is gravely to be regarded,” he said. So too the threat “that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.”

Too little, too late. The 1960s became a heyday for public administration, in terms of both growth and influence. A third—and massive—wave of public administration training and placement put the

discipline at the center of the new Great Society programs. From there it was a short step to becoming a think tank for the Democratic Party, and an advocate of ever-expanding notions of administrative power.

Having worked alongside public administration scholars in my home institution, I can attest to the deeply socialistic ethos of the field. A typical curriculum will provide only a few useful skills in areas like budgeting and policy analysis. Most students never read classics that ask the question of whether more government is needed or useful in any given sphere, such as Ronald Coase's seminal 1960 article "The Problem of Social Cost." The influential Clinton-era book *Reinventing Government* that sought to infuse basic questions of efficiency into the bureaucracy is taught, if at all, only for the purpose of ridicule, a sad relic of neoliberal thinking. When teaching a graduate seminar to public administration students, I found that my library did not even own a copy.

The discipline today seeks a continual extension of the bureaucracy through new leveraging of its authority, resources, and social influence, which is often put under the term "new public governance." Under this theory, as some of my colleagues have noted, bureaucrats far more than elected leaders represent democracy because of their "collaborative" and "public value" orientation. The "public good" is now explicitly defined by the bureaucracy, not elected leaders. Defending democracy means defending the right of bureaucrats to ignore elected leaders.

In a 2024 study by the Manhattan Institute, Frederick Hess and Riley Fletcher found that only 7% of the 443 faculty at the nation's top ten policy schools (which usually include public administration) were right-leaning. The remainder were either left-leaning (49%) or centrist (44%). Since public policy, unlike public administration, often includes economists, its rate of conservatives is surely higher. I personally have never met a scholar of public administration who is anything short of an American Jacobin. As Hess and Fletcher concluded, "While one can dream up rationales (no matter how tortuous) as to why ideological groupthink is acceptable elsewhere in the academy, such claims collapse when it comes to schools of public policy."

Political scientists who dabble in the field have contributed to the problem by providing empirical justification for the ideological tilt to the Left. It is often said that political scientists are “closet Leninists” who in their deepest dreams admire strong states with well-read bureaucrats who have the authority to order society. Stanford’s Francis Fukuyama is Exhibit A of this tendency, having intellectually drifted from supporting democracy to putting a quasi-Leninist emphasis on “political order.” This follows the lead of his mentor Samuel Huntington, who, among other things, praised the ruling capacities of North Korea. After Fukuyama published a prolix and turgid two-volume book on the subject, ASPA gave him its lifetime achievement award, safely putting him back inside the longhouse after his dangerous flirtation with ideas of a free public.

Not surprisingly, when Donald Trump was first elected president in 2016 with designs on taking on the Deep State, the discipline of public administration went into a neuralgic panic. The doyen of the field, Donald Moynihan of Georgetown University, declared that “the Trump record is appalling.” The president threatened what Moynihan regarded as the highest ideals of public administration, namely “to expand federal administrative capacities.” Faculty and bureaucrats should have been more ready to rush to the barricades and rally against Trump, he argued. They needed to be more political and more ideological, not less.

Another leading light in the field, Charles Goodsell of Virginia Tech, charged in a peer-reviewed article in the *American Review of Public Administration* that Trump was unfit for office, basing his advanced research on “an archive of contemporary newspaper clippings I have built during Trump’s presidency, collected mainly from the *Washington Post*.”

Trump Derangement Syndrome among public administration scholars is different from other academic fields only in its profound lack of a sense of irony. Having spent the better part of a century touting its credentials as nonpartisan and socially responsive, it collapsed into a politically partisan and virulently snobbish mob that’s overtly hostile to the preferences of Americans. One legend of the field, Barry Bozeman of Arizona State, provided a playbook for bureaucrats on how to subvert the will of elected leaders like Trump, including through secret

“guerrilla government” networks. Having ranted against Trump for 15,000 “peer-reviewed” words, Bozeman added that it’s important to be seen as nonpartisan.

The field was primed to join the Resistance the second time around. ASPA complained in early February about the harm done to “our collective mission of a more equitable and sustainable future.” The organization would continue to promote “bedrock” values like “sustainability and social justice.” The following week the association’s newsletter featured an essay by a social worker in Washington State who lamented the dismantling of DEI programs. She suggested it was the obligation of civil servants to disobey their political masters in pursuit of the “values of social justice and equity for all.” “As public administrators it is our duty to enforce the rules of society.”

The accrediting body for public administration programs, NASPAA, likewise demanded protection of “century-old concepts like merit, nonpartisanship, and tenure” after Trump’s flurry of executive orders. The year prior it had introduced new DEI standards for all public administration programs “to end anti-black racism” and “lead the charge for progressive social change and justice.”

The only note of caution came from the influential Donald Kettl, a long-time professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, who warned his fellow Deep State revolutionaries in a December essay that they needed to take more seriously the reason why Americans see them as inefficient and unaccountable shells for the Democrats. “Members of the public administration community might well want to fight a rear-guard action against this onslaught,” he wrote. But “it’s folly to dismiss the critique as false.”

The subversion of the intellectuals is deep, as deep as the Deep State itself. Since public administration as an academic discipline, and thus as a practice, is its origin, the solution to stopping the malign Deep State lies in reforming that discipline. Without massive change in the field of public administration, the university-to-bureaucracy pipeline will continue to deliver its ill-trained staff to our governments at all levels.

Here are four concrete ways to remake public administration.

First, there should be an immediate blanket ban on the federal hiring of graduates with degrees from NASPAA-accredited schools. The congressionally mandated National Academy of Public Administration should be overhauled and repurposed as the nation's leading engine of new standards for public administration research, analysis, and training.

Secondly, as former FTC Chairman Charles Dunlevy has done with respect to law schools and associations, federal political appointees should be prohibited from holding leadership positions in groups like ASPA, NASPAA, and APPAM.

Third, there is a desperate need for the equivalent of the Federalist Society in the field of public administration that would advocate for a laser focus on democratic loyalty, government efficiency, policy rationality, and freedom. The Trump Administration should work with leading universities to identify a new host institution for such a group.

Finally, federal funds and support should be withheld from schools of public administration that do not get their houses in order with pluralistic programs, along with faculty and curricula that reflect a real diversity of viewpoints. Taxpayers should not fund intellectually stagnant institutions. Our "so-called free democracy" depends on it.

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