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## The Suspect Handmaiden: The Evolution of Politics and Administration in the American State

Part VI: The Past as Prelude: Were the Predictions of Classic Scholars Correct?

*Scholars of an earlier era predicted a more secure role for the administrative state in American political culture. This vision overlooked a historical irony that governs the relationship between politics and administration. For American society, the administrative state is a suspect handmaiden. Citizens have looked to public administration to enable extraordinary growth while simultaneously distrusting it. In recent decades, these contradictory trends have grown. The growth of the state, increased polarization, and political attacks on government have produced a set of values, perspectives, and capabilities that often do not mesh with one another or with many governmental activities. As a result, we find outdated mechanisms of accountability, politicization, and a broader illegitimacy that threatens the capacity of the state to act effectively.*

**Guest editors' note:** In 1942, the University of Chicago Press published a book edited by Leonard D. White titled *The Future of Government in the United States*. Each chapter in the book presents predictions concerning the future of U.S. public administration. In this article, Donald P. Moynihan and Patricia W. Ingraham examine the predictions of V. O. Key in his famous essay on politics and administration published in that book, comment on whether Key's predictions were correct, and look to the future to examine public administration in 2020.

The nexus of politics and administration remains as important as ever, determining the size, nature, legitimacy, and workings of the administrative state. This article considers this relationship for the future of American governance. To do so, the editors of this symposium have asked us to revisit a bold prediction offered by the eminent political scientist V. O. Key in the midst of World War II: "That administrative hierarchies have profound influence

on the course of legislative policy is elementary. That they determine, within the limits of their vaguely defined jurisdictions, a broad range of policy questions is equally obvious. That in both of these spheres the influence of administrative hierarchies is likely to grow seems plain. Unless our civilization collapses completely this is going to continue to be a bureaucratic world" (1942, 146).

Our civilization remains intact, more or less. The vision of the bureaucratic world that Key describes does not. The state has grown its sphere of influence. But Key's basic optimism skirted over a fundamental distrust of government in American political culture (Huntington 1981). In large part, this is because Key wrote during an anomalous period in U.S. history—an administrative heyday characterized by trust in government, faith in bureaucracy, and bipartisan agreement on major policies. This period is arguably at odds with U.S. political traditions, and it is certainly at odds with the current period, which is characterized by distrust in government, attacks on bureaucracy, and a style of politics variously categorized as paranoid, polarized, plebiscitary, hyperpluralistic, or simply dysfunctional (Hetherington 2009; Hofstadter 1965; Kettl 2002; Skowronek 1992). The net result is an undermining of the legitimacy of the administrative state, limiting its capacity to act. The current period is also characterized by a form of administration unforeseen by Key: the reliance on networks and contract governance rather than hierarchies to conduct a wide array of government services.

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As we look to the future, the American administrative state is bedeviled by a profound irony: even as society has embraced tasks that require more government and expertise, suspicion of administration has grown. We expect more of government than ever before, but trust it

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less. For America, the administrative state is a suspect handmaiden. The growth of the state, increased polarization, and political attacks on government have produced a set of values, perspectives, and capabilities that often do not mesh. These contradictory impulses show no sign of dissipating.

## The Historical Background

The basic cleavage between politics and administration has most often been reflected in terms of tensions between elected officials and the administrative arm of government (Ingraham 1995). The debate has frequently played out in terms of efficiency and neutral competence (i.e., administrative actors would apply their expertise in a neutral way in responding to direction from elected officials), but also on issues of executive power, the balance between Congress and the executive, and the problems of bureaucratic power writ large (Arnold 1998; Carpenter 2005). Within administrative scholarship, the boundaries have also been set, and the debate altered by excesses (perceived or real) on the part of both the administrative arm of government and elected officials. “Patronage versus merit” incorrectly summarizes the contemporary nature of the controversy and the tensions it embodies, but states very clearly the terms of the debate as it is most often rhetorically presented. Throughout American history, the understanding of the relationship between the two has evolved, but has not necessarily grown more constructive.

At the founding of the United States, it was largely assumed that politics and merit were not distinct or at odds. Mosher (1982) refers to the founding period as “government by gentlemen,” with the top officials in the administrative arm mirroring the qualities of those in top elective posts, and both groups sharing the same class background. The prerogative of elected officials to appoint to higher administrative posts, though not inalienable, was regarded as appropriate and necessary.

But patronage did not remain so pure, nor did elected officials remain so high-minded. There was movement from Thomas Jefferson’s “I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men . . . may we not even say that the form of government is best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government?” (quoted in Ingraham 1995, 19). The transition was complete with Andrew Jackson’s statement in 1829 that “the duties of all public offices are . . . so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance” (quoted in Ingraham 1995, 20). Men of “intelligence” were quick to take Jackson and succeeding presidents up on that offer; the selling of public offices became pervasive.

As the practice of essentially untrammelled patronage became increasingly apparent, a correction was inevitable. Early administrative theorists argued for making administration a sphere of professionalized activity, limiting the corrosive influence of politics on the basic machinery of the state (e.g., Goodnow 1900; White 1926; Wilson 1887). These arguments were later simplified into a rigid dichotomy that explained the function and legitimacy of the growing administrative state by articulating a series of principles: (1) the number one value of administration is efficiency; (2) government work is very similar to the work of private sector organizations and can be run like a business; and (3) because the civil service is a neutral body, it can and will respond to executive and congressional

direction in an unbiased and nonpartisan way. If the intent was to sharpen and clarify the distinction between politics and administration, the overall impact was undoubtedly to point out the distinct features of each that contributed to the ongoing tension.

The passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883 introduced a civil service to the federal government, but in a very limited way (it covered only 10 percent of public employees). This, however, was not the solution to the problem. The creation and growth of a civil service introduced yet another set of tensions into the politics–administration debate. The debate increasingly focused not on “administration,” but on “merit.” In its purest terms, this difference strove to make clear that merit was the necessary balance to patronage. Merit in administration and public service was (and is) the ideal and the goal (Ingraham 2006). The civil service was the *mechanism* for achieving merit.

The underlying paradigm for a civil service system, however, is bureaucratic: hierarchical, graded responsibilities, ascending authority, narrow and clearly specified scope of work. Thus, the “merit system” as supported by the civil service was a set of bureaucratic organizations. Administration became synonymous with bureaucracy rather quickly, and the civil service became one lens through which the relationship between politics and administration was framed.

## The Administrative Heyday

The New Deal and the Second World War made the role of the national bureaucracy even more significant. In Carpenter’s terms, “war begets bureaucracies and bureaucratic power” (2005, 43). To understand the perspective of administrative scholars at the time, including Key, we must consider the context in which they wrote (Moynihan 2009a). We describe this period as the administrative heyday—a time when government and administration were held in high popular esteem, trusted, and enjoyed bipartisan support. While defining administrative epochs is an inexact practice, the beginning of the New Deal in 1932 represents a reasonable starting point for this period, while the political repudiation of the Great Society in 1968 represents an endpoint.

It was a time when public administration was perhaps at its apex in terms of influence and prestige. Americans embraced expertise and administrative capacity in the permanent bureaucracy, a fact that marks the period as an anomaly in the history of the administrative state (Balogh 2009, 17). In the popular mind, the government had overcome a painful depression, and engaged in a fierce battle for the future of civilization. Scholars of administration advised presidents and played a role in managing the apparatus of government. V.O. Key was one of them, working at the Bureau of the Budget during World War II. Public administration was at the center of social science, its scholars leading figures in management and political science (Kelman 2007). The science of administration had yet to face two quite different attacks—Herbert Simon’s questioning of the empirical rigor of the key hypotheses of administration, and Dwight Waldo’s questioning of its basic democratic legitimacy.

For administrative scholars who had experienced the tremors of the first half of the twentieth century, especially the New Deal and World War II, it seemed irrefutable that a new administrative state was needed, one that was capable of dealing with the challenge

of a more complex world. Key believed this, and we see the same logic in the work of other leading scholars of the time, such as Paul Appleby (1949) and Leonard White (Moynihan 2009a). The job of the administrative scholar and practitioner was to prepare the state for the demands that society was making of it. Solving the great problems of the day necessarily demanded a reliance on administrative expertise: “In the meeting of these problems great reliance must be placed on the inventiveness and creativeness of administrative hierarchies. Whether we like it or whether we even realize it, permanent corps of administrators have great influence either through or around political department heads on the direction of public policy” (Key 1942, 150). Key was not a blind-eyed optimist. He pointed to the limitations of bureaucracies—they can be slow to adapt, unresponsive, and reluctant to coordinate—and worried whether they were up to the tasks demanded of them. But he saw no alternative for the onward progress of civilization than a reliance on bureaucracies.

Key was generally sanguine about political-administrative conflict, however, as he ultimately saw both politicians and bureaucrats as functions of societal values. One may be running ahead of the other in meeting societal demands, but they are both pulling in the same direction. The gradual growth of the civil service system provided reassurance that the state was departing from its history of spoils to provide a secure role for the administrator. The prospect that the public could view bureaucratic power as illegitimate was so remote to Key that it was not even considered. Indeed, Key was more concerned that bureaucracies would fail to keep up with the demands of the public, noting complaints about bureaucratic “obstruction” and “sabotage” in the face of the New Deal. Key was also unconcerned about the tension between this new administrative state and the design of the U.S. Constitution. He noted that the separation of powers undermined the potential for an integrated approach to policy (Key 1942, 155–56). To correct this problem, Key recommended that the president take more direct control over the administration. A decline of congressional power was simply an inevitable cost of the new society. Again, Key is typical of peer administrative scholars, who generally favored an executive-centered approach in the name of efficiency and coordination (Rosenbloom 1983).

In the midst of the administrative heyday, government enjoyed strong trust among the public. Polls by the American National Election Studies, which asked whether the government could be trusted to do the right thing, found that more than 70 percent of respondents responded “just about always” and “most of the time” in the late 1950s, when the question was first asked, and into the mid-1960s. By the late 1960s and increasingly in the 1970s, trust in government went into a freefall. There have been fluctuations in levels of trust (most notably a spike after 9/11), but the level of trust in government is consistently markedly lower than it was during the administrative heyday. The most recent American National Election Studies data, from 2006, show that less than 24 percent say they trust government (Roberts 2008, 34), and 2009 polls using the same wording finds scores of between 20 percent and 23 percent (<http://PollingReport.com>).

### ***The Decline of the Bureaucratic Ideal***

As the nature of American society changed and the civil service grew to meet new needs and demands, so too did the desire of

elected officials to control and not merely direct the civil service. This desire for political control of administration preceded the creation of the civil service system, but now had to work within the context and logic of a newly created set of bureaucratic institutions. For example, the Brownlow Committee likened the president to a chief executive who needed more authority (Ingraham 1995), but some of the administrative incoherence faced by Roosevelt was a direct function of his own tendency to work outside the civil service system.<sup>1</sup> Presidents would come to use and expand the authorities that administrative scholars had proposed to better control the executive branch. Every president since Roosevelt has been willing to embrace the image of chief executive and to reform or otherwise make the bureaucracy more receptive to direction and control. Many of these efforts had strong overtones of the “government as business” model that was popular in the early part of the twentieth century. As the century moved on, such reforms increasingly were characterized by an underlying perception of the federal civil service as bloated, wasteful, unresponsive, and inefficient.

Suleiman describes this evolution in attitudes toward the bureaucracy: “It used to be accepted as an article of faith that a neutral bureaucracy served the general interest, or democracy, more effectively than a politicized bureaucracy. Politicians generally claimed that a neutral bureaucracy was important to the democratic order. And they were quick to criticize anything that appeared to involve political interference in the bureaucracy. Times have changed. Once the process of politicization was clearly visible and seen as resulting from actions taken by politicians, it was not long before justifications were forthcoming” (2003, 212).

It may be impossible to pick a specific turning point, but President Jimmy Carter’s Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 is notable for reframing the debate about politics and administration. For the first time, bipartisan legislation was premised on the notion that bureaucracies were significant barriers to performance, a stark contrast to the administrative heyday. While many at the time hoped that reform would imply a return to the “protection” doctrine that argued for insulating civil servants from political influence, Carter instead seemed to accept many of the criticisms that Richard Nixon had made about an unresponsive bureaucracy, and pushed reform toward a “flexibility” doctrine that called for weakening the traditional protections of the civil service (Moynihan 2004; see also Ingraham and Ban 1984; Pfiffner 1988).

Presidents of both parties in the late twentieth century shared a reliance on the flexibility doctrine in their criticisms of the civil service system, and utilized similar strategies of administrative control. These strategies included an increasing use and expanded placement of political appointees in the hopes of generating responsiveness, and concentrating greater policy-making authority in the White House (Arnold 1998; Lewis 2008).<sup>2</sup> But there was a marked difference in how far some presidents were willing to pursue what Moe (1985) calls the “politicized presidency.” Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush shared a deep distrust of the career bureaucracy, believing that it was made up of ideological opposites (Rudalevige 2009). The politicized presidency involved some new techniques: violating the spirit, and sometimes the letter, of civil service rules by targeting untrustworthy bureaucrats, and by taking into account ideological beliefs when making decisions about civil

service positions. But to a large degree, the politicized presidency simply utilized a more aggressive use of appointees and policy centralization. George W. Bush would carry this tendency to new extremes, moving to what Sidney Milkis calls “a nearly complete melding of presidential and partisan politics” *within* the White House (2005, 400; see also Pfiffner 2007, 2008; Moynihan and Roberts, 2010).

## The Contemporary Reality

### *Administration*

As the tension between politics and administration has most often been played out in terms of presidential efforts to exert control, it becomes easy to miss broader trends. While presidents still focus on bureaucracies and apparently continue to distrust them, the nature of governance has changed in important ways, incorporating a greater range of tasks, more complex tasks, and more complex structural characteristics. As Key predicted, the federal public service began its movement away from relatively straightforward, standardized tasks in the years following passage of the New Deal legislation and the Second World War. Society has increasingly assumed that the federal government has the capacity and skills to effectively play a vastly expanded role in a wide variety of policy areas, including the economy, education, the health system, the welfare state, homeland security, both foreign aid and foreign trade, space exploration, and science and technology research. The public expects a government capable of monitoring and regulating daily aspects of our lives, including a more complex marketplace, the workplace, food, drugs, and travel (National Commission on the Public Service 2003, 34).

Shifting responsibilities created a different kind of workforce. Between 1950 and 2000, the occupational composition of the federal workforce shifted from more than half of the total workforce in lower-level clerical occupations to just over 15 percent. In the same period, the numbers of professional and technical positions exploded. Scientific and highly technical positions went from minute numbers to quite large ones, and the federal government was in a constant quest to find qualified applicants for the jobs. At the same time, the contractor workforce grew exponentially (Ingraham 2005b, 299–302).

It is important to note the consequences of the American structural form as these changes occurred. Delivery of many federal services through state and local agencies, as well as through the private sector, obfuscated and minimized the reality of the role played by the federal government. In the eyes of many citizens, the “feds” grew ever larger, cost more, and apparently did less. Sheingate notes that “[o]ne reason many Americans might possess a skeptical if not hostile view of the federal government is because, for so many, the federal government is a rather distant force in their lives” (2010, 11).

The fundamental desire to limit both federal authority and the number of direct government employees, while continuing to create

and support publicly funded services, has contributed to the growth of what has been variously referred to as third-party government, the hollow state, or a state of agents. While Key could imagine no alternative to governmental administrative hierarchies, such hierarchies are now just one player—albeit a stable and critical one—in a network of service providers that can include different functional actors from the same level of government, state and local officials, and public and nonprofit actors. Even so, elected officials still focus on hierarchy and bureaucracy as the basic means of control.

### *Politics*

Another significant change is the relationship between partisan politics and administration, as well as to politics itself. How far has the pendulum swung? Consider this: Key worried that some of his mild criticisms of bureaucracy would seem “heresy against the cult of adoration of administration” (1942, 150). No public administration scholar today would labor under such an illusion. Rather, even as different strains of scholarship, as varied as

the New Public Management, postmodernism, and the New Public Administration, have criticized bureaucracy, their criticisms pale relative to general political and public attitudes.

A distrust of government characterizes American political culture. The core values of the American political creed, says Huntington, are “liberal, individualistic, democratic, egalitarian, and hence basically antigovernment and antiauthority in character. Whereas other ideologies legitimate established authority and institutions, the American Creed serves to delegitimize any hierarchical, coercive or authoritarian structures, including American ones” (1981, 4). It has become a rite of passage for presidential candidates to recite the American creed. By criticizing the bureaucracy and promising to fix it, they fuel reform efforts in government (Arnold 1998; Ingraham 1995; Moe 1994; Moynihan 2009b).

This basic distrust of government has been increasingly married to what Richard Hofstadter (1965) dubbed the “paranoid style.” This form of politics is characterized by “qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (3). Adherents of the paranoid style see a vast, well-organized conspiracy to undermine the American way of life—an imminent threat that, if successful, will have catastrophic effects. In the twentieth century, the paranoid style evolved. Whereas previously, it had been used to warn against threats by secretive outsiders, such as the Masons, the primary villains now became public officials exercising the machinery of government. While not the province of any political party, the paranoid style has taken hold with greatest impact among conservatives who use it as a vehicle for antigovernment rhetoric. When Hofstadter wrote, he identified it not just among McCarthyites, but also among many of the supporters of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater.

Under President Barack Obama, the paranoid style has appeared to have reached particularly high levels of breadth and intensity,

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with significant consequences for the relationship between politics and administration. At the extreme end, there has been a rapid growth of militias and other organizations that view the federal government as engaged in a conspiracy to reduce liberty (Potok 2010). The contemporary tea party movement represents a more mainstream example, one that may reshape contemporary politics (Brooks 2010). While many of its members limit their concerns to the size of government, some are wary of governmental authority per se and in its growth see a conspiracy to eliminate their freedom (Barstow 2010; McGrath 2010). A poll found that 92 percent of tea party supporters believed that President Obama was moving the country toward socialism, while only 41 percent were confident that the president was actually born in the United States (Zernike and Thee-Brennan 2010).

Another factor that contributed to the passing of the administrative heyday was the increasing polarization of politics, “with party members clustering toward the ideological poles and the middle a vast wasteland” (Hetherington 2009, 415). The “vast wasteland” of the ideological center is where bureaucratic expertise and preferences tends to fall. As parties become more polarized, they become more committed to ideological goals and less willing to defer to bureaucratic input that may caution them about the feasibility of proposed policies. Elected officials also become more likely to exert political control over agencies if they perceive a distance between their beliefs and bureaucratic preferences (Lewis 2008), a gap that only widens under polarization. When polarization occurs in a system of divided government, bureaucrats are necessarily enmeshed in a web of countervailing demands and expectations—for example, oversight committees may be staunchly opposed to presidential policies. Though the bureaucracy is technically a component of the executive branch, bureaucrats must also be responsive to Congress.

### **The Irony of the Dynamic and Distrusted State**

The discourse between politics and administration throughout American history has birthed a series of ironies; according to Michael Nelson (1982), the chief irony is that repeated efforts to make public employees more responsive to the political branch (through civil service protections and investments in expertise) enhanced bureaucratic power, insulating public agencies from political control. But there is another grand irony that underpins this relationship. American history demonstrates a nation that simultaneously relies on public administration to enable extraordinary growth, but deeply distrusts the institutions of the state.

Relative to its European counterparts, American public administration does not have a deep tradition (Stillman 1999). But another exceptional aspect of the American administrative state is its dynamism. Since its origin, it has facilitated an extraordinary and ongoing growth in the size, power, and influence of the nation it serves. Administration played a central role in the nation’s westward expansion, political consolidation, and growing force as a world power (Balogh 2009; Carpenter 2001; Skowronek 1982; White 1951). At the same time, if Huntington (1981) is correct, a basic distrust of centralized authority colored how American political culture viewed the administrative machinery it was increasingly relying on. This

distrust is certainly present in the *Federalist Papers* (Rossiter 1961) and, as noted earlier, has increased since the 1970s.

The irony of the dynamic and distrusted state suggests a national cognitive dissonance. This duality is nicely summarized by Posner, who notes that Americans simultaneously hold two contradictory beliefs: “get the government off our backs; there ought to be a law” (2010, 18). These conflicting attitudes result in a series of perverse consequences, explored next.

### ***A Growing Gap between the Promise and Capacity of Government***

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Presidents who campaign promising to limit the power and size of government find, once elected, that the administrative state is a valuable tool to be used to pursue their policy goals, and to deal with unanticipated problems. This is not a new phenomenon: Jefferson was a critic of federal power until he became president, when he actively utilized it (Balogh 2009; White 1951). More recently, President George W. Bush, an advocate of limited government, significantly expanded both the national security apparatus

of the state and some key domestic programs, such as Medicare and education. These expansions were accompanied by a deliberate strategy of reduced taxation. This fostered large deficits in the short term, but also contributed to a longer-term chasm between the promises of government programs and the capacity to pay for them—that is, the ability of government to meet expectations.

In general, the public wants government services, but objects to taxes. Elected officials have responded to these contradictory impulses, with the result being an ever-growing gap between the promises of the state and what it can actually provide. This is true even of the tea party supporters who urge smaller government, but object to cutting the entitlements that constitute the majority and most rapidly growing part of the budget (Zernike and Thee-Brennan 2010). When we consider that supporters of the tea party movement are disproportionately older than other Americans (Zernike and Thee-Brennan 2010), but are opposed to eliminating entitlement programs that skew federal spending toward older Americans, what message is sent to the administrative state? One that is not markedly new—individuals may want smaller government, as long as the programs that benefit them are unaffected. The hard choices—reducing the cost of entitlements or living with higher taxes—remain.

### ***Accountability***

The trend in recent decades toward reducing the number of government employees while providing government-funded services through third-party actors has changed the nature and face of government. While this technique has grown to unprecedented levels in recent decades, it represents a long-used tactic to bridge the gap between negative perceptions of government and the demand for its services. Balogh argues that from its origin, the American administrative state was active, but disguised its role by working with and through third-party actors and a mixture of less visible policy tools: “Although the United States has governed differently than its industrialized counterparts, it has not governed

*less*. Rather, Americans govern *less visibly*” (Balogh 2009, 9:3). This allowed citizens to overlook and forget about the state, while remaining antagonistic toward more direct forms of government involvement, such as bureaucracy. As the administrative heyday gave rise to more visible forms of governance, it encouraged the perception that the state was playing a more active role in social interactions, as well as in economic and political relationships. But the decline of the bureaucratic ideal also saw the state return to a reliance on third-party actors. Because the state had also grown, the size of, and reliance on, third-party government reached unprecedented levels. It has also been argued that this trend may have brought some improvements in flexibility and performance, though this is an open question (see Brown, Potoski, and Van Slyke 2010; Hodge 1999).

But the trend’s most obvious manifestation, network governance, raises two fundamental implications for political-administrative accountability. First, the size, complexity, and fragmentation of the contemporary federal service do not lend easily, if at all, to hierarchical control. Network governance has made lines of responsibility and accountability nearly inscrutable, for both elected officials and the public (Ingraham 2005b; Van Slyke and Roch 2005). The extent of contracting rapidly bypassed the ability of the federal contract management workforce to write and oversee good contracts. Even if elected officials could exert complete control of the bureaucracy, this creates imperfect control of a network in which contract activity is often only loosely evaluated. Network theory has not, as yet, offered a clear alternative to hierarchical forms of accountability.

As troubling as this is, there is an even more troubling corollary: despite having little control over many contracts and few means of effectively monitoring and evaluating the work of contractors, members of the federal service remain accountable for their performance. Elected officials apparently do not recognize these levels of complexity, but continue to believe that hierarchical models of direction and control can be effective. Thus, presidential management strategies continue to rely heavily on greater numbers of political appointees to direct the bureaucracy, on contracting for more services, and on admonitions about size and cost. Even if the old model were still applicable, the quality and management skills of appointees would have to be *very* high to succeed. Further, the many appointees would have to be approved by Congress and in place in a timely way. This part of the system is also broken (National Commission on the Public Service 2003).

### **Politicization**

Adherents of the politicized presidency pointed to the value of greater responsiveness and effectiveness (Knott and Miller 1987; Moe 1985; Nathan 1983). But this approach has also generated significant costs. It is one thing to centralize policy decisions, but it is another to exclude bureaucratic expertise and constitutionally relevant actors, relying instead on partisans. Such decision processes do not live up to the basic administrative value of means-end rationality, which Bertelli and Lynn define as “habitual resort to reason to ensure transparent justifications for managerial action” (2003, 262). The effects of such processes could be seen in many of the decisions to emerge from the Bush administration (Moynihan and Roberts, 2010), though perhaps none as clearly as the initial failures in occupying Iraq (Pfiffner 2008).

Yet another dimension of dysfunction is the appointment of clearly unqualified persons to critical jobs. This practice demonstrates disdain for the tasks of the federal service; it also has significant costs. Probably the most glaring recent example was Michael Brown, the Bush-appointed head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, who came to personify the failure of government following Hurricane Katrina (Lewis 2008). There is a case to be made that politicization has undermined the institution of the presidency itself. Bush and Nixon provide the clearest examples of a willingness to shirk the rule of law and ignore constitutional tradition (Pfiffner 1988, 2007, 2008, 2009).

### **Legitimacy**

The combined impact of politicization, an underlying distrust of the federal bureaucracy, and an increasing partisan polarization has contributed to a crisis of legitimacy for the federal bureaucracy (Suleiman 2003). Members of the public increasingly describe themselves as angry with government.<sup>3</sup> The growth of an instant gratification electorate combined with a sclerotic set of policy mechanisms has created a toxic environment for consensus and partnership building.

The concomitant loss of legitimacy has profound implications because it erodes the capacity of public institutions to take bold action when the need arises. When President Obama took office, the government faced extraordinary challenges. While Americans wanted solutions to the problems, they were skeptical of the government as provider. Columnist David Brooks (2010) identified the conundrum: “The Obama administration is premised on the conviction that pragmatic federal leaders with professional expertise should have the power to implement programs to solve the country’s problems. Many Americans do not have faith in that sort of centralized expertise or in the political class generally.” Brooks saw a public increasingly at odds with the educated class, and increasingly responsive to the antigovernment tea party movement. Changes in information technology have enabled such movements, allowing like-minded groups, whatever their objectives, to find one another, and to avoid both factual disproof and social disapproval that would otherwise curb beliefs or potential actions (Sunstein 2009). In such forums, the paranoid style weaves together attacks on government, incredulity about expert claims, and conspiratorial beliefs.

It is easy to dismiss such views as the beliefs of cranks or a very limited number of people, and public administration has been inattentive to the implications of both the style and its growth. But consider the debate over health care and the battles with myths about government-run “death panels.” Consider also the case of global warming: substantial scientific certainty about the causes of global climate change faces a polarized public response that paralyzes major policy change. Even as evidence of global warming has become stronger, public opinion has become more skeptical. Between 2006 and 2010, over five separate polls, Gallup found that the percentage of people who believe that the threat of global warming is exaggerated rose from 30 to 48 percent (<http://PollingReport.com>). Even as members of the public complain about the failures of corporate America, government interventions have been criticized as steps leading to socialism or fascism, or simply as ineffective. While the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that the 2009 federal stimulus package has created 2 million jobs, only 6 percent

of the public believe that it created any jobs (Posner 2010). Despite agreement that there is need for better approaches in areas such as health care and financial markets, the antigovernment politics of the current age runs contrary to the desire to take on such tasks. As he argued for new policies to combat these and other problems in his first State of the Union address, President Obama acknowledged the “deficit of trust” that threatened them.

### Conclusion: The Future of the Suspect Handmaiden

V. O. Key wrote at a somewhat unusual time in American history: an administrative heyday when bureaucracy enjoyed a moment of popular legitimacy. Scientists, engineers, doctors, academics, and others were honored for the capabilities that their expertise added to government in a time of national need. Academics, in fact, played an important role in the strategic planning and coordination efforts of many components of the governmental bureaucracy in war time. In an ironic twist, many of these scholars had been placed in agencies and positions created by Franklin D. Roosevelt outside of normal civil service procedures. McCarthyism had not yet reared its head. Interest group politics was, of course, present, but so was a much stronger bipartisanship than we see today (Hetherington 2009). The outlook for the reputation of government and its agencies seemed rosy.

But the placid and settled relationship between politics and administration that Key predicted has not come to pass. This is attributable in good part to the ways in which politics changed as the federal service grew larger and more complex. But Key also missed something basic about American political culture—he assumed that the United States would become more statist in a European sense, and more comfortable with government. The first half of Key’s prediction, may be true, but the latter half is not, and it is no more likely to be in 2020. Here, the founders remain prescient. Their limited expectations of government reflect the view that continuing tension is a healthy condition for democratic governments, and that balance is better than harmony between the executive and the legislative branches. These expectations continue to shape our system. Happy coexistence between politics and administration is not the norm, and Key mistook an anomalous historical period as the way of the future.

On the other hand, there is a danger that “tension” can become vitriol; skepticism can easily deteriorate into vilification. Today, the public service is unable to satisfy an increasingly partisan and hostile politics, a growing tradition of presidential distrust, a diminution of capacity in critical areas, and a need to respond quickly and nimbly to a new set of crises. The charged climate in 2010, most notably the highly polarized health care debate, illustrated the deep distrust and antipathy that many hold toward government. The individualized pain and suffering of job loss, mortgage collapse, and lingering war have led citizens to question the capacity of government to act effectively.

At the same time, paradoxically, demands for effective government solutions are also prominent. The basic elements of the irony

of the dynamic and distrusted remain. Government continues to expand its role and take on more complex projects; in addition to domestic concerns, the United States, as global leader in security, energy consumption, and financial markets, owns a disproportionate share of the responsibility in governing such issues. Because bureaucratic institutions absorb change slowly and in small doses, the need to be responsive to these demands quickly is a particular challenge.

Can administration rise to the challenges now presented by politics? In most cases, we believe the answer will be yes. For practitioners, this means providing competent service that defies stereotypes of an inefficient Leviathan, while increasingly relying on forms that look less and less like bureaucracy. For scholars, if history is any indication, the cleavage means developing reformist ideas that both reflect and co-opt criticism, but that offer—and perhaps create—some measure of legitimacy not granted by the Constitution (Moynihan 2009a). This will necessitate being able to differentiate between core ideals and more mutable structures and mechanisms to create those.

In the U.S. setting, the value of merit emerged as a way to respond to public concerns about governmental legitimacy. Perhaps because the meaning of merit is malleable, it can continue to usefully serve this purpose in the future (Ingraham 2006). For much of the twentieth century, the ideal of merit was pursued through bureaucratic structures and civil service mechanisms. While the ideal of merit should

remain inviolate, the means by which it is achieved are not, and in practice have been undermined. This creates multiple challenges as we seek to accommodate the conflict between norms of old and new. We need to ensure that new structural forms and mechanisms continue to reflect merit. We also need to know when it is time to conduct proper burials for approaches that no longer work, while accepting that hierarchical structures will continue to be a prevalent part of governance, albeit with a different role than in the past. Relative to Key’s general faith in bureaucracy, and the narrow prescriptions of its detractors, a more complex understanding of administration is required,

one that is capable of exploring how more mongrel forms can be made to function in a way that reflects widely agreed-upon values.

For the political class, merit can be protected by not making the administrators they rely on—either appointed, protected, or contracted—part of the political battlefield. This implies valuing competence, balancing justified criticism with praise of public service, avoiding reforms that actually weaken the capacity of government, and restricting politicization while allowing qualified appointees to be quickly placed (Ingraham 2005a; Moynihan and Roberts, 2010; National Commission on the Public Service 2003). Such changes may seem unrealistic. But in this area, Key was correct: elected officials ultimately have an interest in ensuring that the capacity of government is strong enough to implement their preferred policies.

Will this mean that politics and administration will come to a more perfect union or even a tentative union in the next decade?

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We think not. Rather, the relationship will be one of “agreeing to disagree” or mutual adaptation. Government is unlikely to be eliminated; it is equally unlikely that citizens will recognize administration as a legitimate force in their daily lives. This does not preclude occasional—or even frequent—agreement and harmony. It does strongly suggest, however, that agreement and harmony will not be the norm. The handmaiden, however necessary, will never be fully accepted. The mutual dependencies and needs for accommodation created by the founders will be as much a part of the future as they have been of the past. Academic and judicial debates will continue, but so will the tensions and we can only hope that an appropriate balance will be maintained.

## Notes

1. Perhaps no president demonstrated such contradictory attitudes toward the civil service as Franklin D. Roosevelt. Initially, he saw the civil service as an impediment to change. The vast majority of new positions he created were outside the civil service system, thereby reducing the percentage of government covered under civil service rules to its lowest point since Teddy Roosevelt. At the same time, Roosevelt publicly supported the merit system, although he did not begin to move toward a return to it until after the 1936 election, when Republicans made an issue of patronage. As new agencies were established, and trusted, he moved more of them into the civil service, thereby limiting the capacity of his predecessors to undermine the administrative state he had done much to create (Ingraham 1995; Knott and Miller 1987).
2. Interestingly, Key recommended increased reliance on the Executive Office of the Presidency to coordinate policy: “It is primarily through these and other sorts of leadership by the president as the political chief of the administration that individual administrative agencies (and their outside allies) may be held in check” (1942, 156).
3. Recent polls speak to this point. A series of ABC News/*Washington Post* polls conducted between 2000 and 2010 offered respondents a range of options to describe their attitudes toward government (enthusiastic, satisfied, dissatisfied, and angry). The results show a gradual increase in those describing themselves as dissatisfied (from 34 percent to 48 percent) and a marked increase in those describing themselves as angry (from 6 percent to 19 percent). Between 2002 and 2009, the percentage of people who said that the federal government has too much power increased from 39 percent to 51 percent (<http://PollingReport.com>). Other polls paint a similar, or even more extreme, picture. Using a scale composed just of levels of anger, a series of Rasmussen polls in 2009 and 2010 found that 66 percent to 75 percent of voters described themselves as either “very angry” or “somewhat angry” at the federal government, with the percentage describing themselves as “very angry” reaching a high of 48 percent in March 2010 (<http://Rasmussenreports.com>). A February 2010 CNN poll found that 56 percent of Americans agree with the statement that the federal government is “so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens” ([http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/02/26/citizens\\_rights.poll/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/02/26/citizens_rights.poll/index.html)).

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