

# Current Criticism of American Bureaucracy

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One of the major internal problems of American society in this century has been related to the growing size and power of the government bureaucracy. This trend is by no means unique to the United States experience, however it poses special problems in a nation which is the most prosperous in the world and whose national power and prestige have resulted in a special kind of leadership role to a large portion of the world's population.

Current criticism of the American bureaucracy comes not only from disenchanted clients but also from increasing numbers of scholars from various academic disciplines, particularly political science, public administration, economics and sociology. In this article I have categorized some of these criticisms, though there has been no attempt at an exhaustive survey of the literature on the subject.

## Max Weber's Model of Bureaucracy

In any discussion of modern bureaucracy it is imperative to recognize and pay homage to the first great scholar of the subject, Max Weber. A German, Weber wrote his essay on "Bureaucracy" in 1911 and is still looked to for his insights into the complex mechanism and operation of the bureaucratic apparatus. For Weber, bureaucracy was seen as "*the* means of translating social action into rationally organized action"<sup>1</sup>—a uniquely

modern way to cope with the sheer magnitude of large government and capitalistic enterprise. He observed that bureaucracy had become fully developed only in the modern state and in the most advanced institutions of capitalism.

In the essay on "Bureaucracy" Weber has delineated characteristics of modern bureaucracy which still serve as a model for modern organization theory and practice and as an essential foundation for scholarship on the subject. For properly understanding the American, or any, bureaucracy we must then outline Weber's model. Firstly, he has spelled out six institutional or structural characteristics, as follow:

- 1) Jurisdictional areas as defined by established rules, which establish bureaucratic authority.
- 2) Hierarchical organization with a "firmly ordered system of super- and subordination in which there is a supervision of the lower offices by the higher ones."
- 3) Files for maintaining records in their original form.
- 4) Differentiation of functions, or specialization, attained through "thorough and expert training." Special qualifications for office must be delineated.
- 5) The "Full working capacity" of a bureaucratic official, as opposed to a pre-

1) Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, in three volumes,

Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, editors; Ephraim Fischhoff *et al.* translators (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), p. 987.

modern view which saw official business as a secondary activity.

- 6) A rule-oriented management in which “the management of the office follows general rules which are more or less stable, more or less exhaustive, and which can be learned.”

In addition to the above structural characteristics, Weber has described three behavioral or operative characteristics of bureaucracy: 1) objectivity—a relatively value-free adaptation of means to ends; 2) continuity and permanence of the bureaucratic office and structure regardless of the personnel occupying particular positions; and 3) secrecy in dealing with sensitive issues.<sup>2)</sup>

Weber saw himself as describing a new institutional phenomenon—bureaucracy—and the professionals expected to fulfill their tasks “without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm.”<sup>3)</sup>

### **Current Criticism of American Bureaucracy**

Most American critics, using the Weberian model to gauge the performance of the United States bureaucracy, have expressed concern over “dysfunctions” or problem areas within the bureaucracy—the corruption of, or inherent contradictions within, the original Weberian principles. These problem areas, in the words of Howard E. McCurdy, are “characteristics that are designed to promote efficiency but that incapacitate the organization and its ability to respond to change.”<sup>4)</sup> Robert

Merton in 1940 recognized and categorized dysfunctions of bureaucracy in terms of goal displacement; excessive rigidity; red tape; impersonal treatment of clients; and unreasonable resistance to change.<sup>5)</sup>

The rash of new criticism of American bureaucracy in recent years can be viewed largely as an elaboration or modification of Merton’s analysis and might be classified into at least five categories, as follow :

- 1) By definition, modern bureaucracy is big, however the growth in recent years has made it vast—virtually a fourth and extra-Constitutional branch of the U. S. governmental system in addition to the Presidency, Congress and Federal Court system.
- 2) In practice, bureaucracy has required substantial pathological adjustment of individuals to the life of the bureaucracy.
- 3) Bureaucracy tends to treat clients in an impersonal way, a situation most clients find difficult to accept. Clients often feel, not always without reason, that the bureaucracy moves too slowly and dispassionately and does not adequately meet the needs of those it was designed to serve.
- 4) “Secrecy” as an operative principle has been misused in bureaucratic procedure.
- 5) Perhaps the most fundamental criticism—one that in many ways encompasses and sums up the others—is that the bureaucratic machinery is inclined to engage in subversion, distortion and/or displacement of policy goals as determined by elective officials.

The remaining pages of this article are devoted to elaboration of the above points.

2) *Ibid.*, pp. 956-1005. In these pages are found Weber’s essay on “Bureaucracy.” Weber’s works are also in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, translators and editors, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

3) *Ibid.*, p. 225.

4) Howard E. McCurdy, *Public Administration:*

*A Synthesis* (Menlo Park, California: Benjamin/Cummings, 1977), p. 87.

5) Robert Merton, “Bureaucratic Structure and Personality,” in *Reader in Bureaucracy* (New York: The Free Press, 1952).

1) *Bigness*. In an entertainingly stated but most serious study, C. Northcote Parkinson has devised a "law of the rising pyramid." Based upon his examination of the British Colonial Office from 1936 to 1954, he found that the number of employees rose as Britain's colonial holdings diminished. Thus, Parkinson's law: *Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion*. Parkinson's conclusion is that the growth of bureaus has nothing to do with the volume of work required.<sup>6)</sup> The crucial question raised by Parkinson, "why does government grow?", is the subject of a 1977 publication on the American bureaucracy, *Budgets and Bureaucrats—The Sources of Government Growth*.<sup>7)</sup> In his two articles included in this volume, Thomas E. Borcharding has found that in the United States "over the last ten decades public spending has been rising at an annual rate almost two or three percent faster than has the Gross National Product (GNP)."<sup>8)</sup> From 1902 to 1970 "government spending rose at the rate of 5.3% per year, while incomes rose at only 3%," with the greatest acceleration from 1930, producing four-decade figures of 5.4% and 7%.<sup>9)</sup> From 1902 to 1970 the real rise in public spending was from 3.2 billion dollars in 1902, constituting an annual growth rate of 5.3%.<sup>10)</sup> Borcharding has concluded that "the Bureaucratic Rule of Two seems an appropriate description: to wit, removal of an activity from the private to the public sector

will double its unit costs of production."<sup>11)</sup>

Others whose research has led to the conclusion that bureaucratic agencies strive for a maximization of budget include Anthony Downs<sup>12)</sup> and William A. Niskanen, Jr.<sup>13)</sup> Niskanen's thesis in particular has been reinforced by the more recent research of Robert J. Staat in his studies of educational bureaucracy.<sup>14)</sup> And Gordon Tullock has concluded that "the growth of the bureaucracy to a larger extent is self-generating," because the factor suppliers "are permitted to exercise political influence in many ways"—particularly in being able to vote.<sup>15)</sup>

The essential point to be derived from these studies is that modern bureaucracy has grown in a manner that is not totally rational—that is, staffing and budgeting have grown at a substantially greater rate than the increased policy functions to be performed by the bureaucracy.

2) *Individual adjustment to bureaucratic life*. Robert Presthus has characterized individual adjustment to bureaucratic life in terms of three patterns of accommodation: upward mobility, indifference and ambivalence. Each contributes to a bureaucratic organization that does not function in as rational a manner as might be expected from Weber's model. He says that only one of these patterns tends toward innovativeness—that of ambivalence.<sup>16)</sup>

11) *Ibid.*, p. 62.

12) Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). See especially chapters XX and XXI.

13) William A. Niskanen, Jr., *Bureaucracy and Representative Government* (Chicago: Aldine and Atherton, 1970).

14) Borcharding, editor, chapters 7 and 8 on "The Growth of the Educational Bureaucracy: Do Teachers Make a Difference?" and "The Public School System in Transition: Consolidation and Parental Choice."

15) *Ibid.*, chapter 15.

6) C. Northcote Parkinson, *Parkinson's Law and Other Studies in Administration* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957).

7) Thomas E. Borcharding, editor, *Budgets and Bureaucrats—The Sources of Government Growth* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1977).

8) *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 27.

10) *Ibid.*, p. 45.

My own observations and research on U.S. cultural and educational exchange programs with other nations generally substantiate the validity of Presthus's perceptions in this regard. His categories of individual response to bureaucratic life do indeed exist in the American governmental bureaucracy, and they can be easily observed. Further, an individual who does not fit into one of the above categories generally will leave the bureaucracy, either voluntarily or involuntarily. On a related point, Victor Thompson has observed a "growing imbalance between ability and authority" as "the most symptomatic characteristic of modern bureaucracy."<sup>16</sup> Lawrence J. Peter and Raymond Hull are more forthright in saying that "every post [in the bureaucracy] tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties."<sup>17</sup> With this kind of underlying personnel structure, the bureaucracy tends to be cautious as an organization, and is slow to change internally or to react to change externally.

3) *Impersonal treatment of clients by the bureaucracy.* Merton, among others, has pointed out that employees of the bureaucracy often do not meet the needs of clients because of a single-minded application of rules and regulations. The rules tend to become ends in themselves.<sup>18</sup> Peter Blau has shown that lower-level bureaucrats often subvert the intent of the established procedures when they are governed by an elaborate set of rules and in a closely supervised, hierarchical struc-

ture.<sup>20</sup> Ralph P. Hummel has observed that "there is something innate in bureaucracy that turns bureaucrats into people who provide service coldly, impersonally, without a frown or a smile."<sup>21</sup> Further, "to bureaucrats, humanizing efforts by clients always constitute aggression. In fact they are aggressions against their bureaucratic identity. For these reasons, bureaucrats gladly embrace the injunction against full personal interaction with clients. Such interaction threatens their identity, challenges their norms, and endangers their power position."<sup>22</sup> Weber himself concluded that "Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism."<sup>23</sup>

McCurdy's concise summation on this point is that "Bureaucrats require people to be patient, to be impersonal, to submit to self-evaluation, to place obligations above rights—in other words, to substitute self-discipline for passion."<sup>24</sup>

4) *Secrecy.* Little has actually been added to Weber's essential views of bureaucratic secrecy which he saw as a given of bureaucratic organization, especially in the management of diplomacy and in military administration. He cautioned, however, that the practice of secrecy could not be defended outside of such "specifically qualified areas." Weber was aware that power is derived from superior

16) Robert Presthus, *The Organizational Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 257.

17) Victor Thompson, *Modern Organization* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 6.

18) Lawrence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 8.

19) Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), p. 197.

20) Peter Blau, *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

21) Ralph P. Hummel, *The Bureaucratic Experience* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 22.

22) *Ibid.*, p. 15.

23) Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 975.

24) McCurdy, p. 89.

knowledge and that "in facing a parliament the bureaucracy fights out of a sure power instinct every one of that institution's attempts to gain through its own means expert knowledge from the interested parties. Bureaucracy naturally prefers a poorly informed and hence powerless, parliament—at least insofar as ignorance is compatible with the bureaucracy's own interests."<sup>25)</sup> Bureaucratic knowledge as secret knowledge ultimately constitutes a "means to safeguard the administration against supervision."<sup>26)</sup> A more subtle but nonetheless effective means for maintaining bureaucratic secrecy has been the development of bureaucratic language which is incomprehensible to clients. Hummel has concluded that "Bureaucrats find it in their own interest to define how and when communication will take place: they create their own secret languages."<sup>27)</sup>

##### 5) *Bureaucratic subversion, distortion and/*

25) Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 992-993.

26) Max Weber, *Staatssoziologie—Soziologie der rationalen Staatsanstaalt und der modernen politischen Parteien und Parlamente*, 2nd edition; Johannes Winckelmann, editor (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1966), p. 43—as quoted in Hummel, p. 16.

27) Hummel, p. 3. Specifically concerning secrecy at the top political levels in the United States, Francis E. Rourke has pointed out that "there has been a strong trend in American politics since World War II toward secrecy." To the traditional American feeling that democratic government should be open, "there came to be added the idea that secrecy was indispensable for both the success of the nation's foreign policy and the effective operation of the central office of the political system—the presidency." Recent years have evidenced strain between these divergent cultures of publicity and secrecy, as seen particularly in the Watergate affair and the activities of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, among others. The concept of "executive privilege" has been invoked by Presidents frequently in recent times "to justify withholding information when they believed its release would jeopardize national security or the ability of the White House to function effectively." Francis E. Rourke,

*or displacement of policy goals.* Firstly, I should make it clear that this point does not relate directly to the bureaucracy's role in policy making itself, a matter that has received attention from some scholars. It is a common practice in Japan, for example, for the elective government to depend greatly on the bureaucracy for policy recommendations and formulations.<sup>28)</sup> Presthus has documented bureaucratic initiative in policy determination in Canada, and has pointed out that in the U.S. "the role of higher bureaucrats is precisely political, in terms of their participation and discretion in making authoritative decisions regarding the allocation of public resources."<sup>29)</sup> The U.S. bureaucracy has a well documented role as a contributor to policy formation.<sup>30)</sup>

However, the question of bureaucratic input into policy formation is not the essential point of this category of criticism which rather relates to the reticence or inability of the bureaucracy, for one reason or another, to always faithfully and conscientiously implement policies which have been arrived at

"Executive Secrecy: Change and Continuity," in Francis E. Rourke, editor, *Bureaucratic Power in National Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), pp. 356-359.

28) For example, see Kiyooki Tsuji, "Decision-Making in the Japanese Government: A Study of Ringisei," in Robert E. Ward, editor, *Political Development in Modern Japan* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton, University Press, 1968), pp. 457-475; and Ezra F. Vogel, editor, *Modern Japanese Organization and Decision-Making* (Berkeley Cal.: University of California Press, 1975).

29) Robert Presthus, *Elites in the Policy Process* (London: Cambridge University Press), p. 294. Also see pp. 295-296.

30) For example, see the following: Francis E. Rourke, *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Public Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969); Theodore J. Lowi, *The Politics of Disorder* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); and Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1974).

through Constitutionally based procedures, usually by elective officials. In one sense, the various "dysfunctions" of Merton and related criticisms of other scholars might be considered as subheadings under this single category. If bureaucracy is structured to maximize efficiency in pursuit of established goals and if it is to be the most effective instrument for implementation of public policy, then the problem areas described above must be considered *at least* as hindrances in the realization of this essential bureaucratic function.

Hummel has gone so far as to conclude that "bureaucracy is an entirely new way of organizing social life. It succeeds society..."<sup>31)</sup> He supports this hypothesis by contending that socially, bureaucrats deal with cases, not people; culturally, bureaucrats care solely about control and efficiency; psychologically they are a new personality type, headless and soulless; linguistically, bureaucrats create their own secret languages and find it in their interest to define how and when communication shall take place; and politically they are control institutions, not service institutions as popularly perceived.<sup>32)</sup> The nature of Hummel's evidence is little different from that of other critics, however he has gone further than others in suggesting that the malaise of modern bureaucracy is incurable and that perhaps that George Orwell's totally regimented society described in his work *1980* has actually arrived. In Hummel's words, "Modernity as a way of life has infinite capacities for closure against any escape from itself."<sup>33)</sup>

Observations of other scholars have led to more cautious conclusions. William A. Kelso has pointed to the problem in democracies of agencies "consciously or unconsciously alter-

ing the goals of their respective programs."<sup>34)</sup> Along with Merton and Blau, Kelso has rejected the essential Weberian idea that "organizations are rational instruments that can be scientifically programmed to achieve specified objectives." Rather, an extensive set of bureaucratic rules can act to undermine an organization's original objectives.<sup>35)</sup> "Far from being neutral administrators of the programs they oversee...every bureau wishes to generate enough potential support in the larger political community so that it can fight off legislative attacks that might jeopardize the existence of its programs."<sup>36)</sup>

Although offering a broader view of "implementation," Pressman and Wildavsky have supported the idea that bureaucracy may be a significant source of program distortion.<sup>37)</sup> On the same point Morton Halperin has said, "Once orders are written and sent to the individuals who should act, one might expect at least faithful implementation of the presidential decision, but this does not occur either," because "(1) officials at the operations level may not know what it is that senior officials want them to do; (2) they may be unable to do what they believe they have been ordered to do; (3) they may resist doing what they have been ordered to do."<sup>38)</sup> Former President Harry Truman viewed career officials as usurpers of authority: "The difficulty with many career officials in the government is that they regard themselves as the men

34) William A. Kelso, *American Democratic Theory: Pluralism and Its Critics* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 256.

35) *Ibid.*, p. 257.

36) *Ibid.*, p. 259.

37) Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation* (University of California Press, 1973).

38) Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution, 1974), p. 238.

31) Hummel, p. vii.

32) *Ibid.*, p. 3.

33) *Ibid.*, p. 221.

who really make policy and run the government. They look upon elected officials as just temporary occupants.”<sup>39)</sup> Former President John F. Kennedy is also reported as having had misgivings about the degree of influence over foreign policy by the State Department bureaucracy.<sup>40)</sup> And former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a political appointee, ruffled the traditional organization of the State Department by relying to a large extent on independent channels for policy determination. A more tempered view has been expressed by Francis E. Rourke who believes that, with regard to foreign policy determination at least, bureaucrats occupy subordinate positions in a political system which includes more important elements in the decision-making process, particularly the presidency.<sup>41)</sup> Rourke does not ignore problem areas in bureaucratic structure and procedure, but simply does not see them as quite the ominous threat to society that some other critics do.

One of the most concise summations of the implementation problem has been offered by a French scholar of comparative administration, Michel Crozier :

A basic problem is developing every-

where: the opposition between the decision-making game and the implementation game . . . In the decision-making game, the capacity to master a successful coalition for a final and finite agreement is a function of the nature and rules of the game in which the decision is one outcome . . . In the implementation game, however, completely different actors appear whose frames of reference have nothing to do with national decision-making bargaining and whose game is heavily influenced by the power structure and modes of relationship in the bureaucracy on one hand, and in the politico-administrative system in which the decision is to be implemented on the other. It is quite frequent that the two games work differently and may even be completely at odds. A gap can therefore exist between the rationality of the decision-makers and the outcomes of their activity, which means that collective regulation of human activities in a complex system is basically frustrating.<sup>42)</sup>

Among other things, Crozier's analysis stands to reiterate that the widely observed malaise of modern bureaucracy is not confined to the United States.

On the same point, in my own evaluation of U.S. government-supported cultural and educational exchange programs, I have concluded that whatever degree of success there has been in achieving Congressionally defined goals has been accomplished in spite of the bureaucracy's role which has been oriented more in terms of information and propaganda dissemination than in terms of cultural and educational programs in and for themselves. This approach stands in contrast to considerably less rigid and structured approaches to similar types of programs supported, for example, by the governments of Great Britain, Germany and France. This situation in the U. S. has been aggravated by President Jimmy

39) *Ibid.*, p. 245. From Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*. Volume II: *Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), p. 165.

40) Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), pp. 406-447.

41) Francis E. Rourke, *Bureaucracy and Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 15-16 and 74-80. Also see Ronald Randall, "Presidential Power Versus Bureaucratic Intransigence: The Influence of the Nixon Administration on Welfare Policy," *The American Political Science Review*, Volume 73, September 1979, pp. 795-810. Randall asserts: "That Presidents can affix their indelible stamps on policy by short-circuiting the legislative process and dominating the bureaucracy is more than a remote possibility." (p. 795).

42) Michel Crozier, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. 16. This book was co-authored with Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki.

Carter's 1978 action to achieve greater organizational efficiency through more centralized governmental administration of information and propaganda, together with cultural and educational programs in a single bureaucratic structure—the International Communication Agency (ICA). I have concluded that stringent application of bureaucratic operational principles cannot adequately accomplish the goals of international cultural and educational exchange—the pathological problems endemic to bureaucratic organization and procedure can seriously affect intended outcomes in negative ways.<sup>43)</sup>

In summation, the critics recognize that bureaucracy, for better or worse, is a fact of modern life—or, as Anthony Downs puts it, “Bureaucracy is here to stay.”<sup>44)</sup> The crucial problem is in how to ameliorate the bureaucracy's dysfunctional aspects so as to best serve the interests of the people and nation for which the bureaucratic machinery exists. Alton Frye, for one, has concluded that in the United States, “It falls to legislators and the

political appointees in the executive branch to assure that the results of bureaucratic politics do not diverge from the goals of representative politics.”<sup>45)</sup> Further, “If popular government is to thrive in a bureaucratic age, Congress must not shy away from penetrating the bureaucratic processes early enough to have an impact on the shape of options and the tendencies of policies.”<sup>46)</sup>

Contemporary critics of American bureaucracy probably could agree that it is a proper task of the United States Congress—the members of which are presumably most sensitive to the wants and needs of their clients—to increase surveillance over the bureaucracy in order to minimize significant differences in public policy as enacted and in public policy as realized. Previous legislative neglect in this regard must be corrected by the Congress itself in order to insure that bureaucratic implementation adheres closely to the original intent of public policy formulation.

43) Edward R. Wright, Jr., “Bureaucracy and the Fulbright Program,” unpublished report.

44) Downs, p. 32.

45) Alton Frye, “Congress, the President and Foreign Policy: a Changing Balance,” *Trends* (Tokyo: U.S. International Communication Agency, 1978), p. 4 of mimeographed English version.

46) *Ibid.*, p. 20.