

From *For the People: Can We Fix Public Service?*  
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Forthcoming in May 2003 from Brookings Institution Press

## **Introduction**

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Americans have been ambivalent about government from the start. The Framers cherished liberty more than efficiency, and designed our institutions accordingly.<sup>1</sup> Their goal, as it is sometimes said, was to make it impossible for King George to govern America--if necessary, at the expense of making it close to impossible for anyone else. While the founding generation revered public service, they viewed it not as a separate profession, but as the right and the duty of leading citizens at large. The proper preparation for public service was thus no different from the education that elites chose for their sons whatever their ambitions-- a general grounding in the classics, or later, apprenticeship in law.

"Public business must be done by someone," John Adams wrote to his son in 1789; better that it be done by those well endowed with wisdom and integrity. But Adams warned that public service must be an avocation, not an occupation. The true public servant

"must make it a rule never to become dependent on public employment for subsistence. Let him have a trade, a profession, a farm, a shop, something where he can honestly live, and then he may engage in public affairs, if invited, upon independent principles."<sup>2</sup>

Adams himself, to be sure, flagrantly violated his own maxim; from young manhood onward he was intensely and almost exclusively devoted to public life. Many other revolutionary-era leaders were full-time public servants with a sideline in farming, law, or silver-smithing rather than the reverse. But it is nonetheless true that government employment was a decidedly modest occupational category in America's early decades. Aside from George Washington's army--which nearly everyone viewed as a temporary, if vital, aberration--government was mostly small, overwhelmingly local, technically and administratively simple. The relative handful of appointive state and federal offices were regarded as "spoils of battle," to be allocated by electoral victors to allies endowed with loyalty (to be sure), good character (to be hoped), but seldom any specialized skills.

This model gradually became less workable as a national economy emerged, technical and social complexity increased, and the Civil War and its aftermath sparked a surge in the scale and duties of the Federal government. As the downside of the spoils system became apparent, Congress passed the Pendleton Act of 1883 creating a structured, "merit-based" Federal civil service. Many states followed suit. Yet while the notion of a professional *military* career solidified with the establishment of West Point in 1802, the concept of a career in civilian public service developed only late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the growth of federal government employment is largely a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Although the Progressive Era led to significant increases in government regulation, as late as 1929 the federal government represented only 3 per cent of America's economy. It was the military and social mobilization of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that produced a federal government accounting for over 18 percent of GDP, with state and local government adding roughly another 10 percent.<sup>3</sup> At the century's end nearly one

out of every seven workers was employed by government.<sup>4</sup> While these percentages were low compared to other developed countries--and well under the peak of more than one-fifth of the workforce a quarter-century earlier--they were high by historical standards.

In the waning decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Americans expressed growing dissatisfaction with government and public servants. Opinion polls in the early 1960s found three-quarters of respondents holding a great deal of confidence in the federal government. By the end of the century, this had slipped to little more than one quarter. State and local government scored slightly better in absolute levels of confidence, but showed the same slide in citizens' esteem. Government employees – from teachers to postal workers and FBI agents – were increasingly portrayed in a negative light in popular culture. It became entirely unremarkable for politicians--even incumbents--to campaign against "the government." Educated young people, including graduates of schools of public policy and administration, became less likely to enter government service. Politicians and public officials from across the ideological spectrum grew concerned about a "human capital crisis" in government.

When the Visions of Governance project got underway in 1996, the first area of inquiry was the loss of confidence in government.<sup>5</sup> We found a variety of causes--some clearly related to the public sector's actual performance, but many not. Declining esteem for the public sector was driven in part by changes in the news and entertainment media. Most people report forming their views of government from the media rather than from their direct experience. For example, according to one study in the 1970s (when the sharpest declines in trust occurred), two thirds of the people who had direct dealings with federal and state bureaucrats reported they were satisfied

with their treatment, even while disapproving of "government" in the abstract. If the conventional wisdom conveyed by political campaigns, news reports, and entertainment media is that "government is a gang that cannot shoot straight," then it is not surprising that polls mirror back this conventional wisdom. And it is illuminating that the anomalous instances of agencies that bucked the trend of declining confidence – such as the military and the Post Office – were the ones permitted to deploy advertising campaigns to present themselves in a positive light.

Moreover, government was not alone in the loss of public confidence. Business, universities, the press, and many other institutions suffered a similar loss of esteem. In many ways this is both inevitable and healthy; as cultures mature, both here and abroad, citizens tend to become more questioning of authority and more skeptical of institutions in general. Particularly in the United States confidence in government may well have been artificially inflated in the 1950s and early 1960s as a result of success in World War II, so that the subsequent slump can be seen as a reversion to the long-term American norm.

Yet it would be a mistake to let government off the hook completely. For one thing, the decline in confidence is not merely an American phenomenon. Polls show similar trends in most developed societies, including ones with strong state traditions like France and Japan. And the polls are echoed in changes in behavior. Once the brightest university graduates in France sought entrance to the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, and the top graduates of Toyko University rushed to join the civil service, but the public sector is losing its perch at the pinnacle of the job market. Nor did the revolt against government start with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The sense that government had become insular and aloof, bureaucratic and unwieldy

(and a corresponding enthusiasm for markets as suppler and more flexible instruments) became widespread in the last quarter of the century. In fact, as Elaine Kamarck relates in her chapter below, the reaction against government bureaucracy started earlier and went further in countries like Great Britain and New Zealand.

The perception of government as bureaucratic and inflexible undermines the willingness of young people to enter traditional public service. Money is part of the problem, too. As George Borjas demonstrates in his chapter, government tends to pay less-skilled workers better wages than they would earn in the private sector. But government compensation is relatively meager for more skilled workers, reducing the incentive for the most talented people to enter or remain in government service. While the pattern of relative compensation is fairly clear, its implications are not. Talented young people are motivated not only--indeed, not primarily--by money, but also by the desire to “make a difference.” This does not necessarily make government's recruitment problem easier, however. As the Brookings Institution political scientist Paul Light has put it, skepticism about government careers is not merely a matter of “show me the money”, but also of “show me the work.” To the extent that the work is highly bureaucratized, hostile to initiative, rule-bound and rigged into rigid career ladders, it is less appealing to young people today. Added to this is the blow to morale inflicted by politicians' and the media's ingrained habit of casual contempt for government workers. It is by no means surprising that many public-spirited young Americans view the non-profit more favorably as a setting for doing good without the rigidities and indignities of government work.

At first glance, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks seem to have reversed some of these effects. The atrocities themselves remind us that the common good is no empty abstraction and that markets cannot solve all problems. Beyond that, the indelible memory of New York police, firemen and rescue workers climbing the stairs of the World Trade Center while others were streaming down created a vivid, visceral image of what public service can mean. It is not surprising that applications for government work increased, or that polls showed a rise in confidence in government to levels not seen since 1964. But September 11 did not put an end to the underlying problems that have plagued government and public service. Americans predictably rally around public leaders and public institutions in a crisis but (just as predictably) lapse back to prior attitudes and behaviors as the crisis ebbs. Polls about confidence in government and interest in public service dipped back downward within a year of the attacks.

This is in no way surprising. Even a shock as stunning as September 11 can have only a limited impact on deeply etched public perceptions. Nor does the dramatically demonstrated importance of public tasks guarantee that government will be able to perform them well. Our work in the Visions Project identified three long term trends that are changing the context of government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These interrelated forces include "marketization" (the elaboration and extension of market principles and institutions); globalization (the development of transcontinental interdependence that shrinks the effects of distance); and the information revolution (the dramatic decline in the costs of computing and communications.)<sup>6</sup> While these trends are not the only forces at work, they are acting to diffuse a degree of power, responsibility, and even legitimacy away from central governments. If one imagines the terrain of collective activity extending vertically from local, to national, to supranational, and horizontally across the

private, public and non-profit sectors, one can map the changing pattern of governance across a nine-cell matrix.

Governance--the authoritative organization of collective choice and action--thus extends beyond formal government. Private rules and standards can produce, undercut, or reshape public goods; witness the benefits of certified accounting when it operates as advertised, for example, and the havoc it wreaks when it goes bad. Non-profit institutions can aggregate and assert political preferences, pursue on their own almost any specialized definition of the public good, or contract to provide government services across traditional boundaries. Central governments remain key actors, but they increasingly have to share the stage with other levels of government as well as other sectors.

While formal government remains at the center of governance, not only is its role progressively diminished but dissatisfaction with conventional bureaucracy is forcing change in how it plays that role. The “new public management” and related reform themes stress performance measurement, outsourcing, and an enhanced reliance on indirect action rather than direct production of services by government agencies. The result is a need for different skills in government work--not only the capacity to discern public value through policy analysis and deploy government workers to deliver services directly, but also the ability to structure and supervise contracts, and negotiate with a broad range of actors in different sectors.

Public service in the era of "distributed governance" depends less on traditional aptitudes for direct administration, and more on six categories of professional skills that can be roughly summarized this way:

*Appraisal*--calibrating the dimensions of a governance challenge and the defects of the *status quo*;

*Analysis*--appreciating, in a sophisticated way, the forces at work in a policy arena; identifying the incentives and predicting the behavior of the actors within it;

*Assignment*--selecting the institutional players to be tasked with a particular responsibility (to the extent the organizational constellation is malleable);

*Architecture*--designing a structure of information flows, financial relationships, and accountability arrangements with the best odds of focussing the energies of public and private participants on real sources of collective value;

*Assessment*--evaluating the enterprise, to whatever level of precision permitted by the available data and the degree of normative clarity and consensus that exists; and

*Adjustment*--deploying formal or informal authority, guided by analysis and assessment, to fine-tune the structure, targeting, or operations of the endeavor.

The concept of public service is thus evolving to encompass the creation of shared benefits by actors outside formal government. If one defines leadership as the work of articulating and advancing shared goals, then *public* leadership is exercised by anyone who does this work for a community as a whole (as opposed to a self-selected subset of members, customers, or investors.) Public leaders are defined by their activity (creating collective value) and not by their location in the traditional public sector. This is not to suggest that "leadership" is becoming an undifferentiated commodity that works in the same way, and to equal effect, in any setting. Often successful leaders in one group, time, and or sector prove to be unsuccessful when the context changes. Yet a recurrent phrase in current work on leadership is the importance of "leadership without walls" – the ability to operate across different contexts, sectors, times and institutions. One of the key issues for the future of public service broadly defined is how to prepare people for this type of work.

As Keyssar and May point out in their chapter, the United States has only recently embraced the mission of training people for public service even as conventionally and narrowly defined. Only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did the idea of training in public administration develop. Later in the century this was enriched by training in public policy and public management. Economics supplemented and in some cases, supplanted administration and law as the dominant discipline for such training. The 250 or so schools and programs that comprise the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration vary widely in their approaches, and serve different segments of the market from local to regional to national. But they are far from constituting a monopoly in the preparation of public servants. Recruits come from a wide range of backgrounds, though (as Donahue's chapter demonstrates) top leaders, at least in the Federal

sector, still tend to spend much of their careers in government. Perhaps what is needed most is not a resolution to the old internal debates about how best to prepare people for government work, but rather a broader, more ambitious discussion about the education of public leaders for work that is anchored in but not limited to formal government. This is a conversation that includes not only schools of public policy and administration, but also schools of law, business, and other professions.

Just as war is too important to be left solely to the generals, so public service may be too vital to restrict to government professionals. Like Moliere's bourgeois gentleman who discovered he had been writing prose all his life, though, we may have been practicing this craft without discerning its principles. The United States has never had a tradition of an elite civil service, relying instead on a veneer of Federal appointees serving short stints at senior levels. This often results in rapid turnover and loss of expertise at the top. But as Derek Bok argues in his chapter, this pattern provides for a more rapid infusion of new ideas and for greater democratic accountability than is true of the elite services of Europe and Japan. For the benefits of this model of public service to outweigh the costs, he argues, these "amateurs" must be both educated in relevant skills and enculturated in the ethic of public service.

John Adams no doubt would endorse Bok's prescription. Indeed, restoring and revising public service for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a twofold challenge. Some public leaders will follow Adams' advice and serve episodically in government while pursuing mostly private work. Others will follow Adams' example and dedicate their careers to the public sector. We need to

structure our rules and institutions--in government, in the private sector, and in academia--to affirm both paths and to equip budding leaders to follow them.

The diffusion of public leadership does not mean its diminution; quite the contrary. Government itself remains a distinctive and indispensable--even if not exclusive--arena for the exercise of public leadership. What we are witnessing, in short, is not the end of public service, but its evolution. The evidence and arguments assembled in the chapters to come make it hard to deny that many aspects of public service are strained, bent, even broken. But they also offer grounds for optimism. The imperatives of public work and the systems allocating talent to tasks have been badly misaligned before. This is not the first time public service has been broken, and we are not the first generation challenged to fix it. From the Pendleton Act to the Progressive reforms to the first wave of professional training for government, our predecessors have developed ways to better align the efforts undertaken “by the people” with the work to be done “for the people.” The problems today are different, to be sure, and doubtless the remedies will be, too. But it is by no means reckless to expect that, guided by analysis like that assembled here, we will prove able to improvise fixes that fit the challenges of public service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>1</sup> To be precise, the champions of efficiency among the Framers lost most of the arguments on institutional design, as Robert Behn's chapter describes.

<sup>2</sup> John Adams letter to Thomas Boylston Adams, September 2, 1789, excerpted in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) p. 415

<sup>3</sup> Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2003*, Historical Tables

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Product Account Table 6.5. About 3.5 percent of the workforce was employed at the Federal level (including the armed services and postal service) while another 12 percent worked for state and local government.

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph S. Nye, Philip Zelikow, and David King, editors, *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1998)

<sup>6</sup> On these large trends shaping the challenge of governance see the previous four books in the Visions series published by Brookings Institution Press: *Governance in a Globalizing World*; *Governance Amid Bigger, Better Markets*; *Governance.com*; and *Market-Based Governance: Supply Side, Demand Side, Upside and Downside*.