

The peanut principle

Government action, public space, and
private behavior

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About the Rappaport Public Service Lecture Series

The Rappaport Public Service Lecture series offers a forum to explore a wide range of issues facing the region. Held at the historic Old South Meeting House, the lecture series will present new visions for issues such as public order, the environment, civic capital, and the built environment of the region. The Rappaport Public Service Lecture series is sponsored by the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston.

The first Rappaport Public Service lecture took place on October 29, 2001. Thomas M. Keane, Jr. offered his thoughts on the “peanut principle” – the idea that small acts often produce important impacts on public order and the public imagination. Keane, a former member of the Boston City Council, is a partner at Murphy and Partners, a venture capital firm based in New York. He writes a weekly column for the *Boston Herald* and is active on a wide range of civic issues.

Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston

The Rappaport Institute is a non-partisan policy center at the Kennedy School of Government that seeks to improve governance in the Greater Boston area by engaging students in public service, strengthening networks of academics and practitioners involved in public policy work, contributing useful and academically rigorous research to inform policy debates, promoting dialogue on policy matters in forums and on the web, and providing training for municipal officials in the Greater Boston area.

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The peanut principle

Government action, public space, and private behavior

by Thomas M. Keane, Jr.

I have a very simple theory that explains everything about government. It explains crime, wealth, poverty, education, and most importantly, behavior. It explains what government should do and can do and helps to understand its limits.

Pretty tall claims, I know. I'm not even certain they're true claims. But so what? Marx claimed to explain the whole world with his theories, too. He was wrong, but at least he produced a few best sellers and a revolution or two.

Since I came up to this podium, I've been eating peanuts and dropping the shells on the floor. Does it bother you? I bet it bothers the good folks who manage the Old South Meeting House. They figure I'm being disrespectful; worse, they have to clean it up. How about you? Does it grate? Make you uncomfortable? Moreover, what does it make you think about me? Probably your opinion, not high to begin with, has fallen.

I'll let you in on a secret: It bothers me, too. Doing this makes me feel uncomfortable. Even without you telling me, I know I'm acting badly, inappropriately. But there are times I've done this and not felt bad at all. My guess is a lot of you have done the same: At the ballpark.

When we go to watch the Red Sox lose – and unfortunately, that's what it was for the last few months of the season – we all buy peanuts and, risking aflatoxin, we munch on them and throw the peanut shells on the ground. It's expected. That's what one does at Fenway Park. Indeed, can you imagine what a fool you'd feel if, instead of throwing the shells on the ground, you carefully put them into a little trash sack, dusting up around you to make sure you caught every crumb?

Why do we throw peanut shells on the ground when we're at Fenway? Well, everyone else does it. We're supposed to. We're expected to. It's part of the culture. Why don't we throw peanuts – well, with one exception – when we're listening to people like me deliver lectures at the Old South Meeting House? Same reason.

I call it the "Peanut Principle." The expectations of the environment we are in influence, sometimes profoundly, our behavior. And that observation leads to some important conclusions about public policy. At least, I think they're important.

There was a sketch in the television show “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” that some of you may remember. A woman – actually, John Cleese in drag – it is British humor, after all – is interviewed. Her name in the sketch is Anne Elk. Not “an elk” but “Anne Elk.” “Miss Anne Elk.” She announces self-importantly that she has a theory about the dinosaurs – to be precise, about the brontosaurus. It is her theory, and only hers, and she is very proud of it. After much pushing and prodding, the interviewer finally persuades her to tell the audience her theory, which amounts to the following: “All brontosauruses are thin at one end, much *much* thicker in the middle, and then thin again at the far end.”

“That’s it, is it?” asks the host.

“Right,” she says.

“Well,” the host says, “this theory of yours seems to have hit the nail on the head.”

Indeed. Hardly original, hardly profound – two possible criticisms of the Peanut Principle, as well.

Let’s start with originality. The Peanut Principle has two close cousins. One is James Q. Wilson and George Kelling’s “Broken Window” theory about the causes of disorder – crime – in a neighborhood. Their idea first appeared in an article in the *Atlantic* in 1982. Since then it has proved to be one of the most remarkable examples I’ve ever seen of political science entering into the vernacular. Virtually every cop on the street knows it and, more importantly, subscribes to it. It has become, in many respects, the intellectual underpinning for both zero-tolerance and community policing as effective means of reducing crime.

The second close cousin is more recent: Malcolm Gladwell’s argument about the “Tipping Point.” Here the belief is that, at some magical point – the tipping point – “little things,” in Gladwell’s words, “can make a big difference.” Individual behaviors suddenly become collective, influencing all behavior. Gladwell thinks of individual behaviors as having the potential to be like an infection – something that starts small, spread and eventually can affect everyone. He uses this notion to explain changes of all kind, from reductions in crime to the popularity of smoking to the effectiveness of Sesame Street in encouraging literacy.

Both the Broken Window Theory and the Tipping Point rely, like the Peanut Principle, on the observation that external environments affect individual behavior. And the Peanut Principle, while different, certainly owes some debt to both. So I’ll give on the originality point.

As for profundity: The proof, I suppose, is in the power of any theory to both explain and to guide public policy. Tonight, I’m going to suggest a few things. Do they make sense or not? I’ll let you be the judge.

The peanut principle in daily life

It may be that you don’t buy into the basic notion of the Peanut Principle. I don’t have any broad based studies to prove it to you, nor do I have any laboratory experiments to underpin the claim. But if you think about it for a while, there are anecdotes galore.

I once moved into a nice suburban town with beautiful green lawns. I did not have a lawn mower and I did not intend to cut my grass. I gave in after three weeks. Now I live in the city

Within neighborhoods, for example, local government is clearly responsible for the provision of basic city services, be they street cleaning, maintenance of parks or public safety. Much has been made in recent years of so-called “quality of life” issues. Paying attention to such concerns, local governments have discovered, is good politics. But it’s also good public policy. Those seemingly mundane quality of life concerns are the stuff that influences behavior. Government’s lead in setting expectations – for safety, for civility, for economic growth – ultimately, I believe, changes the standards each of us sets for ourselves.

And I’m not simply talking about crime and good housekeeping issues. In a community where most people drive their car, it’s the rare individual who won’t also drive his or her car. In a community where many use public transportation, people will feel pressure to use public transportation. If everyone else is recycling, then I’ll recycle. If others are picking up after their dogs, then I’ll do the same with mine.

One complex example of this is schools. Why do some schools fail while others succeed? We know it’s not just money. There are too many examples of parochial schools out there, operating on a shoe string, that easily outperform much better financed schools.

Most educators ultimately point to something they think of as the school’s culture. Each school has one that’s unique. Those cultures set up expectations about how children should behave and how children should learn.

How does one create the right culture? One quick fix schools have tried is dress codes. By making kids wear certain clothing, it’s thought, the culture of the school will change. The use of uniforms sends a message. It tells kids that school is a serious place, a place of discipline and respect.

Or take the elementary school my kids go to. When they began first grade, they were told to address their teachers by their first names: Biff, Sally, Nancy. However, the school administration was beginning to believe that the school was becoming increasingly less disciplined. So mid-way in the year, an edict came out: from now all of the students – and parents too – were to call teachers by their last names. Biff became Mr. Smith. Sally became Mrs. Jones. The belief was that the use of first names encouraged some level of disrespect, that it made the teachers more into buddies rather than authority figures.

Things like these have an effect; some school systems swear by them. My guess is that while dress codes or honorifics help, it will usually take more than that to create a community of learners. A host of factors matter: leadership, parental involvement, ethics codes, school rules, classroom rules, curriculum, and so on.

These things may sound to you like they’re details, but that really is the point: when it comes to local governance, detail matters.

The upshot of this is straightforward: public policy should pay attention to environment – to making sure that it sends the right behavioral signals. Moreover, the best place for government to do this is at the local level, where concrete and detailed policies, tailored for a specific community, can be created and implemented.

From peanuts to public housing

Let's move from this to a second issue. If one accepts that environment affects behavior, how does one change that environment so that the underlying behavior itself changes in ways that we might find desirable?

My example of peanut shell tossing at Fenway Park was, in fact, quite trivial. Eating peanuts and throwing them on the floor is hardly a core component of one's personality. But some things are: getting an education, holding a job, taking responsibility for one's children, and running one's life by a moral code that, at a minimum, fits within the boundaries of a society's criminal code – all of those things are core behaviors. All of those things, one would think, would be tough to change. I agree. So how do we do it?

Let's go back to Fenway Park for a moment. My guess is, if you've been there, you have at some point participated in "The Wave." Why? Why does anyone do this? It really is a dumb, pointless thing. Which is not to say I don't participate. I do, and for exactly the reason the Peanut Principle would predict: everyone else is doing it.

But the interesting question is: how does it ever start? Have you ever watched people trying to initiate the wave? A few people – usually sitting in the bleachers – will stand up, hands outstretched, and then sit. And there it dies.

They try again, and again. Each time, a few more join. And then at some point, at what Gladwell might think of as the "tipping point," it seems to catch and for several minutes, virtually every fan will be rising in his or her seat as the wave circles around the park.

Another example. And this time, let's go to the movies.

For some reason, it is customary in movie theaters to leave one's trash behind when the movie is over. Popcorn buckets, candy wrappers, drink cups are all left on the floor as the moviegoers exit. I have no idea why that's the culture, but it is. In recent years, however, the theatre owners have embarked on a campaign to change that behavior. The cute little trailers at the beginning of the film urge us to dispose of our trash. Signs on the door request the same thing. Is it working? Kind of. Some people are throwing trash away. But it still seems that most leave it behind.

Will it eventually work? I don't know. More time, more effort, and perhaps more amusing trailers might do the trick. But one thing is clear: it's hard to change a culture once it's become engrained.

And that, I suspect, is true of more core behaviors. Change takes time, sometimes, indeed, in takes the passing of a generation. It probably takes resources and, most critically, it takes an energetic, sustained, and committed effort.

So how do you do it? Or more precisely, who should do it?

At Fenway Park, it's a few determined fans in the bleachers. In the larger, civic realm, who should it be? Do we just wait around, hoping that things improve over time, hoping that a few people, a la the "tipping point," get a good idea that catches fire and eventually transforms things?

To me, the answer is obvious: the single most influential actor out there, the one with the

resources and power at least to initiate change, is the government.

Let's look at a couple of examples. First: public housing. Public housing projects are places for poor people. I know that sounds terrible, but people with little or no income have to live somewhere, and what we did many years ago was to put them all together in one place. Having done that, we then decided that we should provide those poor people with an array of services to help them get out of poverty.

So we provided health care, counseling, specially designed educational programs, and job training programs. And what happened? Very few got out of poverty. And the places in which they lived deteriorated. Tenants didn't care for their buildings, crime proliferated, and circumstances got worse, not better. It was, as some have written, "a culture of poverty." Poverty created poverty. And guess what? All of those interventions, all of those special programs, did little to fundamentally change things.

Why? Because they focused on individuals and tried to change individual behavior. The context of that behavior was ignored. It was the Peanut Principle in action. We created a set of expectations. Those people were different. They were poor. And so they remained: different and poor.

How does one change that? There's one experiment, not far from here, that's trying to alter those expectations.

Mission Main, a large public housing project at the foot of Mission Hill, was, in the 1990s, one of the worst places imaginable. The construction of the streets was such that the complex turned in on itself, essentially isolating tenants from the outside world. Pavement was everywhere; green space was almost nowhere. Tenants were afraid to go outside, and it had the reputation as New England's largest open-air drug market.

A few years ago, we tore the whole thing down and rebuilt a new Mission Main. The physical differences are startling. The area has opened up, reconnecting it with the rest of the neighborhood. The residential buildings are attractive; they look more like conventional housing. And, most interestingly, it's no longer a place for just poor people. Now it's mixed income, a blend of subsidized, affordable, and market-rate housing.

What government is doing at Mission Main is changing the environment, hoping that those changes transform individual behavior. The hope, at its most fundamental, is that Mission Main moves from being a place that perpetuates poverty to one that discourages it.

So too there is an experiment on Blue Hill Avenue. Blue Hill runs south from Roxbury through Dorchester and Mattapan all the way to Milton. Once a thriving commercial strip, it was essentially destroyed in the riots following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. It never recovered and, by my lights, its destruction marked the destruction of the neighborhoods around it. Many of those communities descended into a virtual abyss: impoverished, forlorn, crime plagued, and gang ridden.

Over the last few years, Boston has worked aggressively to restore Blue Hill Avenue, to bring back businesses, to pave the streets, to make the place simply look nice. It's been a process that has had its starts and stops. Yet, things have begun to get better. The question – still unanswered – is will these improvements affect the neighborhoods around Blue Hill

Avenue as profoundly as did the destruction of Blue Hill Avenue. My belief is that, yes, they will.

Key issues to consider

So here's my suggestion. Not only does government, through its influence on our environment, affect how we behave, but government also has the ability to initiate changes in our environment that can transform – fundamentally alter – behavior. That's what's going on at Mission Main and on Blue Hill Avenue.

There are a number of interesting issues that surround this proposition. Here are three. First, of course, is simply figuring out what it is we want to accomplish. Can we achieve consensus that certain behaviors are desirable and that government should, in fact, try to make them come about? It's not as easy as you may think. Look at the current debate over trying to inculcate patriotism by requiring children to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Or even the debate that surrounded welfare reform, where people argued at great length that requiring work from welfare recipients was somehow wrong.

Second, is government willing to devote substantial resources and time to bringing those changes about? Changing core behaviors likely takes a sustained effort, one that may take far longer than one budget year or an electoral cycle. Government, frankly, is notorious for not staying the course. If things don't happen instantly, then we as voters usually demand it try something else.

A third issue is the limits we put upon government. Let's go back to Fenway Park one more time – and I promise, this will be the last. A few months ago, I was at a ballgame with my eleven-year-old daughter. A certain fan was quite exercised over the progress of the game and was using an enormous number of Anglo-Saxon epithets to urge the players and managers of the two clubs to follow his line of thinking. Fenway Park has a rule, announced before every game: any fan using offensive language will be ejected. Sure enough, three ushers descended on the guy and, to a round of applause, gave him the boot. Fenway Park is a private operation, not governed by the First Amendment. Governments – sometimes unfortunately – are.

I think there's little question that government can and often ought to try to bring about behavior that we collectively desire. But there undoubtedly is tension – often-enormous tension – between this sometimes-paternalistic action and the liberties enshrined in the Constitution. Not only is government action circumscribed by the Constitution but also those liberties are, in and of themselves, public policy goals – desirable goals, perhaps, in fact, the most important public policy goals. The purpose of government, after all, is not to achieve conformity but to create an environment within which each citizen, as Jefferson wrote, can

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seek “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

A new vision for government

Having eaten all of those peanuts earlier, I am now very thirsty. So, let me wrap up. The proposition that underlies the Peanut Principle is that one’s environment affects behavior and, importantly, that changing that environment can change behavior. The public policy implications? Efforts to simply change individuals without altering the environment in which they live and work will often times either not be effective or will be less effective than efforts to change that behavior by changing environment. People learn when others around them learn, people are law abiding when others around them are law abiding, and people work when others around them work. We take our cues from what everyone else does.

The conundrum is, how do we get the group to change so that the individual will change? It’s hard, but I think government can be a leader on this, using its resources to create an environment where group behavior, and hence individual behavior, is transformed.

It can work. Government, pushed by groups such as Mother Against Drunk Driving, has been able to change markedly our attitudes about drinking and driving – from something that was once fully accepted to something that is widely regarded as irresponsible and criminal. One can’t imagine Dean Martin’s nightclub act getting the same audience reaction these days that it once got.

On the other hand, it’s difficult and often time-consuming to effect these changes. Despite advertisements and lectures in schools and efforts to ban smoking in most public places, for example, the number of adults who smoke today – about 25 percent – is the same as it was ten years ago.

There is a belief out there that substantially discounts the role of government, particularly when it comes to domestic, non-economic policies. I think that much of that stems from the widely publicized failures of many of the programs we labeled the Great Society. Those programs often engaged in what some derided as “social engineering” to change behavior. Their ineffectiveness was widely interpreted as meaning that government itself can rarely be effective.

As I think should be clear, I disagree with that interpretation. The problem, I believe, is not government but the methods we have used to understand and respond to public policy issues. The Peanut Principle is my effort to offer a new lens through which we can see things differently.

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