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# Response to Holzer's "Communicating Commitment"

Robert K. Whelan  
University of New Orleans

## Abstract

*The image of our public servants is not as negative as Holzer and others suggest. However, it is not good enough to attract the "best and brightest" into the profession. We can use our skills to study significant innovations. Some reforms and a modest, research agenda are proposed.*

Let me begin by saying that I am in basic agreement with Marc Holzer's arguments. I share his concerns and frustrations. There are three aspects of his paper, which I will address directly: the image of our public servants, recruitment of young people into government, and innovation in the public sector. In addition, I will offer some comments on our misplaced concerns in Public Administration, and will make some modest suggestions for our research agenda.

## I. The Image of Our Public Servants

While I am a great admirer of Marc Holzer's (and Charles Goodsell's) work on bureaucracies, they sometimes overstate the case to make a point. Perhaps the image of public servants is not quite as bad as they suggest.

Professor Bernard Ross of American University and I are currently researching urban crime fiction. While our research is not conclusive, there are many instances of "good" bureaucracies and "good" bureaucrats in urban crime fiction. Successful criminal investigations, and happy endings, are often dependent upon the virtues of large scale bureaucracy. In many cases, the detective gets help from a conscientious individual bureaucrat inside of a pathological bureaucracy. Often, the protagonist is a bureaucrat – a police department detective, a federal investigator, or even a sewers inspector (in the case of Jimmy Flannery, an interesting Chicago character

who mixes “politics” and “administration” in a Robert Campbell detective series). Overall, urban crime fiction gives us a mixed picture of bureaucracy.

The portrayal of bureaucrats in the news media is similarly mixed. Consider, for example, Ambassador Bushnell, the U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, in the aftermath of the recent bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi. Anyone who has seen Ambassador Bushnell has observed a dignified, caring public servant. And, there are other positive examples accompanying the negative ones in the media on a daily basis.

One of the recommendations of the ASPA-NASPAA Committee on the Advancement of Public Administration is that these two organizations “should periodically establish a joint committee to assess the treatment of public administration, of public bureaucracy, in American government textbooks” (APSA-NASPAA Committee, 1998: p. 1). There is not much discussion of this recommendation in the body of the report, but we can hypothesize that the textbook treatment of bureaucracy is not overly sympathetic. Textbooks’ treatment of bureaucratic institutions directly influence the views of generations of students. Indirectly, they affect media presentations of the bureaucracy.

Professor Holzer makes an excellent point in his discussion of the misapplication of the term “bureaucracy.” Many of us have had classroom experiences in which a student started railing about the “bureaucracy.” On closer examination, as in some of Holzer’s example, the “bureaucrat” turned out to be an elected official. We badly need to use our best communications and teaching skills to help clarify governmental roles for students and for the general public. In the APSA-NASPAA report, Bob Durant suggests a number of ways (APSA-NASPAA Committee, 1998: pp. 14-22) in which we can reconnect with citizens, redirect media attention to bureaucracy, and re-engage the political science community. (The citizenry and the media are especially important, in my opinion). In an outstanding edited collection, Joseph Nye and his co-authors analyze the decline of confidence and trust in American government. This decline is related to the scope of government, the performance of government, and economic, social, cultural and political causes. The roots of citizen dissatisfaction with government are deep and complicated. Yet, the authors remain optimistic about the future prospects of American governance (Nye *et al.*, 1997).

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## **II. Recruitment**

Marc Holzer's comments on recruitment are highly suggestive. As a long-time MPA coordinator, I am concerned that we don't get our share of the "best and the brightest" in Public Administration. Often, the MPA program is the second choice for students who were denied admission to law school. While I don't think that all of our MPA students should have cum laude GPA's or top percentile GRE scores, it would be nice if some of them did. Perhaps we don't get the best students because of the recruitment policies of our national and sub-national governments.

Are our governments doing a good job of recruiting younger people into public service careers? Certainly, we can agree with Holzer, Goodsell and others that there are many dedicated, competent public servants who perform their jobs with efficiency and humanity. However, will this always be the case? How many of our local governments have special programs for recruiting and training younger people? We are all aware of the exceptions: Dallas, Fort Lauderdale, Kansas City, Las Vegas, and Phoenix are cities which have special opportunities. We have had several outstanding graduates who went to work in those cities. These are the exception, not the rule. Only one of my examples is in our region.

The main avenue for federal government recruitment is the Presidential Management Intern (PMI) program. This venture is poorly designed as a recruitment tool, in my view. In one case, we had an absolutely outstanding graduate who could not find federal employment with her PMI "hunting license." (Her story has a happy ending for Public Administration, since she is employed in local government.) Last year, the program qualifications were changed. We were told that students concluding their programs could be considered, but people who had completed their degrees prior to last year were ineligible. This seems to be short-sighted, for a number of reasons, both academic and practical.

## **III. Innovation**

Holzer is enthusiastic about using "exemplary best practices" from government in bettering our image with the media and the public. I am somewhat skeptical because of the self-promotion and entrepreneurship that is involved in getting awards. With a bit of tempering, however, this may be a good idea.

The kind of tempering process I have in mind has been suggested in a recent paper by Professor C. Lloyd Brown-John of the University of Windsor (Brown-John, 1998). During an academic year, Brown-John required his students to study specific innovations in Canadian municipal and provincial government. These were award-winning innovations as chosen by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada with the help of Coopers and Lybrand, a private sector management consulting firm. Each student had to study one innovation in detail, and then make an oral presentation to the class “selling” the innovation. The students ultimately evaluated the innovations, and ranked them using criteria given to them by Professor Brown-John. Original evaluations were based on duration, productivity, strategic influences, and evidence of verification of the claimed results. The rankings were categorized as very innovative, having potential, limited, and not very innovative.

To summarize: I suggest that we, as academics in Public Administration, use our skills to examine alleged innovations before we extol their virtues to the media and the general public. For example, the Rudy Bruner Awards for urban excellence between 1987 and 1993 included twenty one winners and finalists. Only one of the twenty one cities (Miami Beach, Florida for its Ocean Drive Improvement Project) is in the SECOPA region. Why is this the case? Are we still a “backward” region? Or, do we simply lack connections in networks that are still dominated by the “eastern establishment?” These are the kinds of questions we might ask in examining awards, before we tout them to the public.

#### **IV. Reinventing Politics**

I would like to go to beyond Holzer’s papers, and offer a few thoughts about the future direction of public administration.

We have heard a great deal about Osborne and Gaebler’s Reinventing Government since its publication in 1992. As Donald Kettl points out, recent national governmental reforms have not utilized the skills of the academic public administration community. Presidents Nixon and Reagan looked to the business community for expertise in reform efforts. In the Gore-Clinton “reinvention of government,” Vice-President Gore was advised by a journalist, a former city manager, state government officials, and federal bureaucrats. In Kettl’s words: “The reinventers were quite

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explicit about not turning to academics. Government reforms have often looked outside political science – and outside public administration to private management – for answers to government management problems (APSA-NASPAA report, 1998: p. 10).

This raises many questions. Are our skills and expertise irrelevant? Or, did the government miss an excellent opportunity when it excluded the advice of the academic Public Administration community? Perhaps, more important in my view, should we let Osborne and Gaebler (and, for that matter, Gore and Clinton) set our teaching and research agendas? We may be comfortable with them as agenda-setters, because their concerns mesh with our interests in administration and bureaucracy.

The truth is that it is not the bureaucracy that needs to be “reinvented.” It is American politics that is broken, and needs to be fixed. We must turn our attention 180° to the “politics” side of the equation. While we usually focus on the implementation and execution of policies, our analytical skill and reformist bent can be used to examine American politics.

A reinvention of American politics might begin with a thoroughgoing reform of the system of campaign finance. Our political party system is in substantial decline, and no longer serves as a bridge between citizens and government. The old spirit of bipartisan cooperation in the making of public policy has been replaced by vicious, mean-spirited partisanship. Our election system badly needs reinvention. Candidates spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to contest local elections. Campaigns seem endless, and more heat than light is generated by the sixty second spots. There is a lot we could contribute by using our skills and influence to improve these processes within our region.

In the recent APSA-NASPAA report, Bob Durant writes of the D<sup>3</sup> agenda: “downsizing, defunding, and devolution” (APSA-NASPAA report, 1998, p. 17). With concerns about the national deficit, many programs have been “devolved” to the state level. Many of our colleagues think that devolution to the states is a wonderful thing. In this region, however, we know that no persons “life, liberty, or property” is safe while the state legislature is in session. And, in terms of re-inventing politics, our state capitals are, relatively speaking, even more dominated by special-interest groups than is the government in Washington.

## V. Research Agenda

In addition to the reformist agenda suggested above, I want to propose a modest research agenda.

First of all, we now very little about the public administration programs in the region. Who's doing what in terms of curriculum matters? Is there anything innovative in our schools? Do we have any interesting collaborative ventures? What are our salaries? How are our graduates faring?

Secondly, what is the status of the profession in the region? Are we becoming more professional or less so? How is the profession regarded? Are there Management Intern, or other programs, to bring our most talented young people into government?

Perhaps the SECOPA treasury could be tapped to support a regional research project on these matters? Or, perhaps we could take up the Kennedy School's call for collaboration on these matters? In any case, we need to know the state of reality before we can make effective reforms for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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