Remarks of Under Secretary of the Interior John A. Carver, Jr., before the National Capital Area Chapter of the American Society for Public Administration, Washington, April 21, 1965

The Political Officer and the Bureaucracy--Their Roles in Effecting Change

I must apologize at the outset for a somewhat stuffy title. Your Chairman rather frightened me by suggesting "Need the Marriage of Political Appointees and Career Officials be a Shotgun Wedding?" Art Jebens suggested a series of alternates, which ranged from the succinct "Managing Change" to "The Secretarial Officer--His Role in Maintaining the Dynamics and Vitality of Departmental Management." At least I didn't choose that one!

The one on your program, "The Political Officer and the Bureaucracy--Their Roles in Effecting Change" was a compromise. It seems to accept Mr. Rapp's suggestion of continuing conflict between politicians and career people, and adds Mr. Jebens' suggestion that there is a dynamism or process of change against which the performance of each is to be measured.

As some of you may remember, I was here four years ago. I think I must have been a last minute substitute for someone, for I came without notes and only have my recollection as to what I said. I was too new to be as worried as I am now.

Now I've been around four years, and I have a record against which my words may be measured, and there are a lot of people here with both the ability and the inclination to make the measurement.

I do have a new job, but I'm still in the same Department, facing the same people each day. To be promoted from Assistant Secretary to Under Secretary is, by all the rules of the game, a promotion. As Assistant Secretary, however, I had well-defined responsibilities for the supervision of specified Bureaus. As Under Secretary, I can muse on a remark attributed to the Vice President: "There is nothing wrong with this job a little power wouldn't cure."

Four years ago, I thought I understood the distinction between a political executive and a career executive, the relative roles of leadership by political appointees and response by the career service, or the bureaucracy, if you will.
Marver Bernstein, in his volume on the job of the Federal Executive, had distinguished the political and the career executive based on method of appointment, and that seemed to me to point to substantive differences in role and standard of performance.

Now I'm not so sure.

If the distinctions I felt existed when I came in in 1961 in fact exist now, they are much blurred. For some period after a change of administration involving a different party taking the Presidency, there is some kind of cohesion among the political appointees. But they are soon caught up in the loyalties of their bureaus and agencies. Some of our bureau chiefs are political, some career—I would defy you to identify the differences. The political appointees can be fully as bureaucratic as the career people, and they can also be fully as professional. It all depends on which adjective you choose.

The President has blurred the distinction in important ways by opening the doors of the highest positions in Government to career people. More than that, he has tendered an even more meaningful accolade, I think, by his own uncompromising insistence on quality performance from both the career executive and the political executive—there is no double standard. That means a lot to the morale of both groups.

The situation was not the same in the years immediately prior to my appearance before you in 1961. This was rather dramatically emphasized for me in the perusal of a most interesting publication. A former secretarial officer in Interior recorded on a weekly basis his observations about his work to send to his company. His widow has recently published them. Listen to some of these excerpts:

"We have a complete staff of planners—I believe they call themselves a 'Program Staff'."

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"All of that is going to be abolished tomorrow. The tragedy of it is that in eliminating an office like that we only push the top people down one or two grades and reduce their salary. They in turn bump others all along the line and finally I guess we lose the elevator operators or the switchboard operators—somebody at the bottom. The net result is that everybody is unhappy. But that is the working of the Civil Service system and we can do nothing about it."
"We want to get into it a certain policy matter ourselves and not trust it to some of the subordinates because they only confuse the issue and will not carry out the kind of thinking we believe is necessary."

"We are really having trouble trying to get certain key positions exempt from Civil Service so that we can make some of our appointments. Not long ago we requested the exemption of some 382 people out of 58,000 from protected Civil Service positions. So far we have received approval of just 20... and at the rate we are going now, we may ultimately have a total of about twenty-five or thirty! That is simply an impossible position because if you cannot bring in more of your own kind, you cannot do a job."

"I am still having a running fight with the Civil Service Commission, or rather with the Chairman of the Commission, on the theory that we ought to be able to place more people of our own selection. He insists that we cannot possibly have 375 or 380 people in the Department who are high policy making people. He finally did agree with me that if the people I have in mind do not make policy they certainly can wreck policy."

To that man, it was "they" and it was "we". All of us indulge ourselves in a little group name-calling occasionally, on both sides. But it is more often the other way round—it isn't the "Secretary's program", it is "our" program, and conversely even Cabinet officers refer to themselves as bureaucrats, go to bat for the Civil Service rights of their subordinates, and in word and spirit see themselves as "fellow-workers", or "fellow public servants", not "political executives".
Under a President who has given thirty some years of his life to public service, it is unfashionable to speak longingly of going back to private industry.

Where then is the conflict, or is there one? I grope for the right word, and can come up with one that is inadequate--to me what we all ought to be fighting for is to keep the system "worthy". Dictators have demonstrated what hierarchy and control can accomplish when marshalled for unworthy purposes.

The bureaucracy can do anything. It has to be managed and led by people who have a sense of public morality worthy of the immense power which is there for both good and ill.

Our title speaks of effecting change. Is there something about the structure of Government, related or unrelated to career or political executives, which is inimical to change?

Arthur Schlesinger, speaking of the effect President Kennedy had on people, "of forcing them to fresh approaches--exciting them because of his great interest and his own brilliance, and forcing them to a higher, more imaginative performance than the bureaucracy would ordinarily produce or tolerate" suggests that bureaucracy resists change, and that it scarcely tolerates, much less produces, imaginative performance.

I do not agree with the implication. The bureaucracy, of course, responds to inspired leadership; but it also carries on and delivers for mediocre leadership, bad leadership, or no leadership.

Furthermore, the function of at least part of the bureaucracy is to deliver creativity and innovative activity for its own sake; and it does so most creditably in a variety of fields. I have heard the President speak most eloquently of the responsibility of the Government structure to feed ideas upward, including up to him.

Is it the tendency of bureaucracy to stifle change? In my own Department, the evidence points the other way most dramatically. The Department has in my opinion responded brilliantly to the inspiration and leadership of a gifted and able Secretary, and has itself basked in the glow of satisfaction as it has seen its own corporate aspirations realized. It has seen itself become a national rather than a regional Department, for one example; it has seen itself recognized in reputation if not in name as a Department of conservation.
Nevertheless, there is in bureaucracy a resistance to change. Listen to the somber words of William McNeill, Historian of the University of Chicago, who concludes his book "The Rise of the West" on this note:

"Hierarchy and control remain as vital as ever, perhaps even more so; for the complex coordination of human effort required by modern industry, government, and warfare make it certain that some few men will have to manage, plan, and attempt to foresee, while a majority must obey, even if retaining some right to criticize or approve the acts of their superiors. But who has the right to manage whom? And toward what ends should human capacities be directed?"

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"... perhaps a really tough-minded critic of twentieth-century society would have to say: The wider the range of human activities brought within the scope of deliberate management, the more irrelevant questions of social hierarchy and managerial goals become. Admittedly, as the managerial elite of any particular country gathers experience and expertise, reduces new areas of human activity to its control, ... the bureaucratic machine exercising such powers becomes increasingly automatic, with goals built into its very structure. ... The administrative totality, its overall structure and functioning, and even the general lines of policy remain almost unaffected by changes of elected officials. Even energetic reformers, placed in high office and nominally put in charge of such vast bureaucratic hierarchies, find it all but impossible to do more than slightly deflect the line of march.

"A really massive bureaucracy, such as those now constitute every major modern government, becomes a vested interest greater and more strategically located than any 'private' vested interest of the past. Such groupings are characterized by a lively sense of corporate self-interest, expressed through elaborate rules and precedents, and procedures rising toward the semi-sacredness of holy ritual. These buttress a safe conservatism of routine and make modern bureaucracy
potentially capable of throttling back even the riotous upthrust of social and technical change nurtured by modern science. Consequently, as the corporate entities of government bureaucracies grow and mesh their activities more and more perfectly one with another, both within and among the various 'sovereign' states of our time, use and wont---the way things have 'always' been done--may become, bit by bit, an adequate surrogate for social theory. By sustaining an unceasing action, administrative routine may make rational definition of the goals of human striving entirely superfluous."

Hierarchy and control--bureaucracy if you will--cannot be abandoned. Modern industry and Government grow more, rather than less complex. We can wish away Government, indeed we can try to build a national Presidential campaign around the wish, but our sense tells us that it is not the enemy by itself, in spite of what Mr. McNeill suggests.

I've tried to suggest that few real differences exist between the politically appointed executive and the career executive, at least after a sustained period in office. Naturally I could not be heard to suggest that there should be a turnover in administrations simply so that we could get a new crop of political managers.

The differences among leaders which count are not those which proceed from the source of appointment, but those which reflect their commitment to goals and objectives outside the orbit of the mission assigned to their administrative unit, however big that unit may be.

We might say the test is whether the leader runs the system, or the system runs him. Or we might say, as I did in a famous secret speech to the Park Superintendents, that loyalty to a Bureau should not transcend loyalty to a Department and to an Administration.

Whether career or political, our leaders must believe in our system of Government, however corny that may sound to some. Both politics and hierarchy--the bureaucratic structure for getting things done--are devices for assuring accountability to the public as a whole.

Stephen Bailey, in an essay for a memorial volume to Paul Appleby, observes that the normative model for a public servant involves the same qualities in public servants in every branch and
at every level of Government--judges and legislators, as well as executives and administrators, staff as well as line officers, technicians as well as generalists.

Use and wont, precedent, the way things have always been done will never substitute for social theory, if public servants have the mental attitudes and moral qualities which are derived from Dean Appleby's writings, synthesized by his successor.

The three essential mental attitudes are: (1) a recognition of the moral ambiguity of all men and of all public policies; (2) a recognition of the contextual forces which condition moral priorities in the public service; (3) a recognition of the paradoxes of procedures. A public servant who cannot recognize the paradoxes of procedures will be trapped by them.

The three moral qualities start with optimism. This optimism must reject the fatalistic attitude about where bureaucracy is going, as suggested by Mr. McNeill's "really tough-minded critic of twentieth century society." It must see the administrative structure as responsive, or capable of being responsive; as creative or capable of being so; and above all as worthy, or capable of being so.

It is worthy for everyone in this room, probably. Of all governmental roles, says Bailey, the administrative role is procedurally the most flexible. Without optimism on the part of public servants, the political function of creative response to the gross discomforts of mankind are incapable of being performed.

The greatest challenge to the creativity and responsiveness of any bureaucracy is found in this country in this century, articulated by the President. He has turned the attention of the country toward cleaning up the messes we have already made, restoring the beauty we have trampled, making our cities and countryside beautiful again. He called this "a creative conservation of restoration and innovation" concerned "not with nature alone, but with the total relation between man and the world around him. Its object is not just man's welfare, but the dignity of man's spirit."

There is a challenge indeed.

The other moral qualities are courage, and fairness tempered by charity.

These attributes distinguish among those placed in authority. Personal and public life are so shot through with ambiguities and paradoxes that timidity and withdrawal are quite natural and normal responses for those confronted with them.
One area for consistent courage in the public service is in the relationship of general administrators to experts—it takes as much courage to face down minority expert opinion as to face down the majority opinion of a clamoring crowd. And then, too, there is the poignant discussion of the necessity of a courage to decide.

I could go on, but it is time to summarize.

Under President Johnson, the whole country is called to an extraordinary awareness of higher goals. These range from erasing racial injustice to the vision of the Great Society. Within the public service, the old distinctions are erased—particularly political and career. Both are expected to perform at a very high level of efficiency and professionalism.

President Johnson also understands the capability of the bureaucracy—there is no limit yet apparent of what he is willing to ask of it. The bureaucracy is responding, and responding well.

But the negative tendencies are always there. What Mr. McNeill said fits facts as we've all observed them. These tendencies must be resisted constantly, and the ability to thwart them, to take command of the system and make it work worthily, is what divides men placed in positions of authority.

In our system of free government, the duty to have such a concept of public service is spread widely, not reposed in the hands of a benevolent few.

Public service is a high calling.