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## The politics-administration dichotomy : a reconstruction

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## Epilogue: The Study of Administration and Politics

“A theory of administration is in our time a theory of politics also”  
(Waldo 1990).

In this study I have argued that the idea known in the literature as the politics-administration dichotomy is not as nonsensical as it is often believed to be, but (if properly understood) can still be relevant for our theories and practices of government. Now, it may be thought that this endorsement of the dichotomy between politics and administration in government implies a tacit endorsement of the division between the *studies* of politics and administration in academia as well. Should Public Administration not be separated from Political Science? I believe this does not follow, at least not from my position on the dichotomy. There may be other reasons to establish and maintain Public Administration as a separate field of study (separate, also, from Political Science), but the continuing relevance of the dichotomy is not one of them. On the contrary, I think that if we want to improve our understanding and appreciation of the dichotomy we should better not separate the studies of politics and administration but rather combine the two. This brief epilogue is intended to explain this paradox. Returning once more to Dwight Waldo, I look at his involvement in the two fields and his ideas on the relation between them, and then I argue for a closer integration of political and administrative thought in the light of my understanding of the dichotomy as a constitutional principle.

Waldo's great interest in the relation between Public Administration and Political Science can in large part be understood from his biography. Trained in Political Science, he wrote his dissertation at Yale (later published as *The Administrative State*) as a doctoral candidate specializing in political theory, not as a student of public administration (1984: 1-11; Brown and Stillman 1986: 19-33). In fact, at the time he had “a certain animus toward and contempt for” Public Administration (1965: 6), to his later regret sharing much of the pretentious disdain for practical questions and applied science so typical of many political theorists (1984: x-xi; 1990: 74-75). From 1942 to 1946, Waldo was employed in the federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. This wartime employment further stimulated his interest in and his respect for public administration: “The Washington experience gave me an appreciation of the *administrative* component

of government – an appreciation of its importance and of its difficulties” (Brown and Stillman 1986: 46; cf. 1965: 7). After the war, Waldo went to the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught many different subjects, except the one that he was hired for: political theory (1965: 7; 1984: xii). During these years the process of detachment and re-identification continued: “I was still, in those years, between the universes of political theory and public administration but leaving political theory behind and becoming more and more identified with public administration” (Brown and Stillman 1986: 55; 1984: xii; cf. 1987: 100). During the turbulent 1960s, at many American universities the tensions between Political Science and Public Administration rose high. The negative, almost hostile attitude of Berkeley’s political scientists hurt Waldo, and he strongly felt he and his colleagues from Public Administration were treated without proper respect (cf. Brown and Stillman 1986: 82, 100). In 1967, he transferred to the friendlier environment of Maxwell School in Syracuse, New York, to occupy the prestigious Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities. There he took the final step in his “release” from Political Science. When after many discussions and some “inconveniences” the department was split between Political Science and Public Administration, he decidedly opted for the latter: “I chose to go, to join the new enterprise, to put myself formally and physically where my interests and sentiments now decisively were” (Brown and Stillman 1986: 102).

Waldo has repeatedly noted that, in the United States at least, the relationship between Political Science and Public Administration had become increasingly antagonistic and unfruitful (1965: 28-29; 1968: 444-447, 478-479; 1987: 94-95). Before the Second World War students of Political Science typically cultivated a humanist liberal arts ethos, whereas students of Public Administration tried to formulate ‘scientific,’ i.e., value-neutral and universal ‘principles of administration’. After the war the tables turned. As Political Science went through its behaviorist revolution, Public Administration, under the guidance of heterodox authors such as Waldo, increasingly opened up to more humanistic and non-positivist approaches. This sequence of incongruences led to an increasing alienation between the two fields. Neither before nor after the war, Public Administration was able or willing to meet the standards of serious scholarship set by Political Science. The result was that Political Science no longer offered a nurturing and stimulating environment for students of public administration (1968b: 444-445; 1987: 94; 1990: 74-75). Once separated, Waldo asserted, students of public administration should look for other sources of inspiration, for instance in business administration, history, psychology, and other disciplines (1965: 28-29; 1968b: 459-460, 478-479; cf. Fry 1989: 241). Indeed, he said that if ‘the mother discipline’ did not pay more caring attention to its offspring, students

of public administration should even become their own political scientists (1987: 95; 1990: 81-82; cf. Laohavichien 1983: 18).

If this historical analysis is correct it has important implications for the nature of the divide between Political Science and Public Administration. It means that (at least in the United States) the two fields did not primarily divorce because they concentrated on different subject matters, but rather because they had diverging views on scholarship. In Rutgers's terms, the main point was not that they had different 'scholarly objects' ("the concepts, variables, relations etcetera being accepted in [a] science as its (description of) reality"), but rather that they had different 'scholarly ideals' ("the outlook and approaches for research, the accepted methodologies and the purposes of research") (1993: 33-36, 319). This also suggests, interestingly, that the politics-administration dichotomy was not conducive to the academic split-up. Although the dichotomy preceded the disciplinary divide between Political Science and Public Administration by about half a century, it did not draw the dotted line along which the two fields of study broke apart. In fact, the two fields separated only after support for the dichotomy had begun to wane. Contrary to what might be expected, perhaps, the demise of the dichotomy after the war did not lead to a rapprochement of the two fields.

Similar paradoxes can be found in Waldo's own position. When he still considered himself a political theorist he rejected the politics-administration dichotomy, but after he had definitely chosen to be a student of public administration he gradually became more sympathetic to it. In due course, his attitude towards Political Science began to show more conciliatory traits as well. Not only had he retained much of the political theorist in his style of scholarship, he also wished to keep the door open to post-behavioralist Political Science: "In the long run it is hardly conceivable that Public Administration and Political Science should both exist as self-conscious enterprises without significant relationships, intellectual if not organizational" (1968: 479; cf. Laohavichien 1983: 11, 18). Near the end of his career, accompanying his pleas to take the dichotomy seriously again, Waldo even explicitly wondered if he had not been unfairly harsh towards Political Science (1990: 81). Thus, both in the Public Administration literature in general and in Waldo's case in particular we see that an appreciation of the politics-administration dichotomy need not imply support for the separation of the two fields, nor a depreciation of the dichotomy support for their integration. The relationship, if there is any, rather seems the reverse.

Independent from his evolving attitudes towards Political Science, a consistent trait of Waldo's thought was his conviction that administrative theory can be regarded as a form of political theory in its own right. This was of course the main message of *The Administrative State* already, which argues that Public Administration provides its own (not very attractive) answers to

traditional political philosophical questions about the nature of man, the good life and the good society, the criteria for proper action, the selection of rulers, the relationship between different branches and levels of government, and so on. This political-theoretical approach to the study of public administration was unprecedented when *The Administrative State* appeared and can still be regarded as Waldo's most important contribution to the field (Marini 1993: 415; Carroll and Frederickson 2001: 3, 6-7). But in adopting the lens of political theory to look at public administration and its study, he was not unique. Before him, Leonard White had already argued that Public Administration "needs to be related to the broad generalizations of political theory concerned with such matters as justice, liberty, obedience, and the role of the state in human affairs" (quoted in Storing 1965: 49, 51). And a decade after *The Administrative State*, Sayre wrote that "[p]ublic administration is ultimately a problem in political theory" (1958: 105). Still later, Schmidt even more pointedly stated that we should teach "administrative theory *as* political theory" (1983). Understandably, these convictions are particularly popular among those who adopt a constitutional approach to public administration. Rosenbloom speaks for them all when he writes: "As heretical as it may sound to some, public administration theory must make greater use of political theory" (1983: 225; cf. Lawler 1988).<sup>1</sup>

Despite these calls, the political-theoretical approach has unfortunately not been strongly developed in the practically oriented field of Public Administration. Whereas Political Science has 'political theory' and 'the history of political thought' as two relatively well-established subfields, their equivalents in Public Administration are marginal by comparison. This has been particularly detrimental to the debate about the politics-administration dichotomy. As we have seen, the dichotomy has been studied almost exclusively from the viewpoint of administration and Public Administration, and hardly from the viewpoint of politics and Political Science.<sup>2</sup> Only recently has the relationship between politics

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Lowery: "[I]nterpretation of the problem of bureaucracy cannot be separated from the larger political theories governing a society" (1993: 205).

<sup>2</sup> The continuing occupation with the dichotomy in Public Administration may in part be explained by the self-imposed and self-declared identity crisis of the field. Many have seen the dichotomy as a major cause of the meager success and relatively low status of Public Administration as an academic field (cf. Ostrom 1973). Svava, for example, has argued that the idea that Public Administration was initially based on the dichotomy has "reinforced the association of public administration with oversimplification, naïveté, excessive reliance on structure, and emphasis on the prescriptive rather than the empirical and contributed to the general decline in the status of public administration as a field" (1999: 685). He believes that removing the dichotomy from Public Administration theory and the collective memory of its scholars would give the field more respectability and self-esteem. In this study I have argued, however, that the identity crisis was not caused by the dichotomy, but rather by its abandonment.

and administration become an object of study in Political Science, and to a smaller extent in Sociology and Economics as well (Meier and O'Toole 2006a: 3-6). Notwithstanding the "relative paucity of political scientists interested in bureaucracy" there is a growing literature on the 'political control of the bureaucracy,' dating back to the 1980s (Meier and O'Toole 2006a: 23; cf. 2006b), but this literature has hardly any connections with the Public Administration literature about the dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> One reason for this is that the Political Science literature consists largely of empirical studies of political-administrative relations on the basis of formal (mostly principal-agent) theory (see section 5.2). Like the mainstream Public Administration research of political-administrative relations (section 5.3), this literature contains little theoretical reflection on the preliminary question of why modern governments have a distinction and separation between politics and administration in the first place. The dichotomy between politicians and administrators is taken for granted and not even mentioned as a discredited idea. In fact, the phrase 'politics-administration dichotomy' is very uncommon in the Political Science literature. The virtual monopoly of Public Administration in the literature about the dichotomy has created a regrettable one-sidedness in the treatment of the dichotomy from which this study has also suffered. In future research we should not only unlock some windows, as I have done here, but throw open doors or even remove walls toward a more self-conscious political-theoretical treatment of the dichotomy.

In particular, deeper reflection on the meaning of 'politics' is needed. Stene has noted that many critics of the dichotomy "are concerned with the definition of 'administration,' but they seem to ignore the several, and sometimes conflicting, meanings implied in the use of the word 'politics'" (1975: 83). This is a serious omission, he argues, because "either the defense or the denial of a distinction between politics and administration depends upon the definition of *politics*" obviously as much as on the definition of administration (1975: 89). Among the critics, Van Riper has pointedly made the same observation: "Part of the difficulty in coming to grips with the dichotomy is that almost no one has attempted to define politics carefully" (1987: 406). Now, in order to 'come to grips' with the dichotomy and to see its relevance, it is perhaps not necessary to agree on one single definition of politics (or administration, for that matter). Two extremes should be avoided, however. On the one hand, politics should not be defined too narrowly. Rohr has pointed to this danger when he argued that the American Progressives such as Wilson and Goodnow "arbitrarily confined the word politics

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Moe observes that "long after the politics-administration dichotomy was declared dead, it lived on in the bifurcated structure of the field—with bureaucratic politics in one way, bureaucratic organization in another, and no clear connection between the two" (1994: 18).

to elections” (2003: xix). Apart from the issue whether they really did this, it is clear that this conceptualization of politics would indeed be too narrow. Politics cannot be restricted to campaigning and partisan politics only (1989: 36). At the same time these aspects should not be excluded from our concept of politics either, as Rohr effectively does when he chooses to equate politics with policy-making (1989: 55 n.44; cf. Overeem 2005: 321). In either case the meaning of politics is confined too much. On the other side lurks the danger of adopting too wide an understanding of politics. This danger is particularly acute in the literature on the dichotomy. In *Ethics for Bureaucrats* (1989: 35-36), Rohr offers an argument that can be reconstructed as the following syllogism:

- 1) Politics can be defined variously as “the authoritative allocation of values” (Easton), as the determination of “who gets what, when, and how” (Laswell), or as “the process by which a civil society achieves its common good through the agency of the state” (Rohr himself);
- 2) Public administration is involved in all of these activities;
- 3) Therefore, public administration is involved in politics and can rightly be called political itself.

Although nothing seems wrong with the logical structure of this argument, it is misleading. Apart from the question whether the *minor* (2) applies in equal measure to all parts of public administration, the *maior* (1) in particular stretches the meaning of politics too far. Upon these definitions, not only civil servants, but also judges or teachers, or indeed almost everybody working in the public sector (and perhaps even outside it) would be involved in politics. What is needed is a concept of politics that is sufficiently substantial and at the same time sufficiently discerning to draw a meaningful contrast with administration.

This takes us back to the paradox that if we want to see why politics and administration should be separated in government we should specifically not separate political and administrative thought in academia. The solution to this paradox seems to lie in the constitutional approach presented in Chapter Six and Seven. To understand the politics-administration dichotomy as a constitutional principle compatible with the separation-of-powers doctrine and contributing to the promotion of constitutional values, it is not enough to draw on administrative thought only. Viewed exclusively from the standpoint of administrative theory, the dichotomy seems little more than a useful division of labor at best, but when it is also approached from the viewpoint of political and especially constitutional theory it can be recognized as an institution of great theoretical and practical relevance. Thus, adopting the constitutional approach allows us to accept Wilson’s claim that “administrative questions are not political questions,” and at



the same time to agree with Gaus and Waldo that “a theory of administration (...) is a theory of politics also”. In other words, there should be a dichotomy between politics and administration in government, but not a dichotomy between political and administrative thought in academia.

The realization that one’s position with regard to the dichotomy is closely related to one’s stance with regard to the academic independence of Public Administration is not new. Waldo already expressed it in his well-known closing line of *The Administrative State*:

“In any event, if abandonment of the politics-administration formula is taken seriously, if the demands of present world civilization upon public administration are met, administrative thought must establish a working relationship with every major province in the realm of human learning” (1948: 212).

Besides the fact that this sentence has been much quoted – sometimes even as a closing line – by students of Public Administration attempting to open up their field or elevate its status (e.g., Spicer 2005: 686; McCurdy and Rosenbloom 2006: 215), it has also had an interesting career in Waldo’s own writings. He used it again as a closing line in *The Study of Administration*, but that time the crucial phrase “if abandonment of the politics-administration formula is taken seriously” was left out (1968d: 70). It is tempting to interpret this deletion as an indication of Waldo’s emerging doubts about the abandonment of the dichotomy, but he has never explicitly stated his motives for the deletion and it may well have been unintentional.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, his later writings testify that he grew increasingly sympathetic to the dichotomy and also more conciliatory towards Political Science. In congruence with and as a continuation of his developing line of thinking, therefore, I may perhaps take the liberty to rephrase his famous closing line and use it as my own:

In any event, if abandonment of the politics-administration formula is *reconsidered and reversed*, if the demands of present world civilization upon public administration are met, administrative thought must establish a working relationship *with political thought more than any other* province in the realm of human learning.

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<sup>4</sup> In the Introduction to the second edition of *The Administrative State*, Waldo relates how to his embarrassment the editor of *The Study of Administration* had single-handedly deleted an introductory sentence and the quotation marks that were meant to indicate that the closing line was here used for the second time (1984: lviii). Perhaps he also deleted the crucial phrase.



