

Book Review

## Politics, Personality and Bureaucracy

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A review of Donald P. Warwick with Marvin Meade and Theodore Reed, *A Theory of Public Bureaucracy: Politics, Personality and Organization in the State Department* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 252 pp.

What does it take to reform or reorganize a bureaucracy? This book by Donald P. Warwick on *A Theory of Public Bureaucracy* provides an incisive, often dramatic, documentation of the attempts towards organizational reform in a federal department in the United States. Who were the actors, what were at stake, what happened, what went wrong and why? are some of the perplexing questions raised by Warwick in this study of the reform process at one level of the U.S. State Department. The central thrust of the book is on the interaction between the organization and its environment. Warwick's conceptual approach begins with a basic definition of an organization as "a set of explicitly coordinated and interdependent activities designed to achieve certain goals" (p. 61).

Constantly interacting with the environment, the organization receives inputs and feedback and affects the environment with its own inputs. The author uses "environment" as consisting of both remote elements (e.g., socio-cultural, ecological and technological) and proximate elements (e.g.,

other governmental institutions and interest groups). The latter elements are composed of (a) power setting or those who have the capacity or the potential to influence the organization; and (b) operating environment which is the set of conditions affecting the routine activities of the organization. These conditions are complexity, uncertainty, threat and dispersion.

Inputs from the environment are mainly communications or information. The author argues that a heavier volume of communications and centralization of message-handling contribute to giving importance to hierarchy and rules in the organization.

The organization or "organizational subsystem" is viewed as "separate from its environment" (p. 63). It includes (a) the internal environment which covers its unique character and atmosphere; and (b) the structure and processes which are the "patterned means by which inputs are converted into outputs" (p. 63). Among the variables here are decision-making, control and coordination, etc.

The book is a culmination of an eight-year study of the Administrative (Management) Area at the State Department. It began as a contracted

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study with the University of Michigan using complex statistical methods. However, the methodology was not included in this book because the author felt that "numbers became increasingly irrelevant to an understanding of the energies of bureaucracy in the State Department" (p. 219). For instance, Warwick observed that many of the problems in implementing the reform program in the department "were so obvious that survey data were superfluous" (p. 231). Among other research problems encountered were the reluctance of secretive respondents to answer interviews despite all the formal clearances and authorizations, the absence of benchmark data, and the resignation of the research proponent in the Department.

The most important innovation introduced at the State Department was a modified Management By Objectives (MBO) which was called Management By Objectives and Programs (MOP). It was an attempt to develop shorter lines of communications by the elimination of various levels of supervision and a shorter reporting line. Managers were also given more autonomy in running their own units. There was a policy of decentralizing responsibilities to the regional and functional bureaus. By the second year of implementation, it was obvious that MOP was bringing about problems of coordination, fragmentation of functions and confusion of responsibilities among the managers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The reader may wish to compare the fate of MOP with the fate of another innovation in the State Department, the PPB. See Allen Schick, "A Death in the Bureaucracy: The Demise of Federal PPB," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2 (March/April 1973).

Indeed, reforms were instituted, but the organization simply returned to its old ways of hierarchy, rules and controls. The reorganization process of 1965 only brought to the fore the "long standing cleavages, rivalries and tensions" (p. 24) within the Department. Moreover, external relations (with the White House, Congress, other executive departments, interest groups, etc.) had little impact on the fruition of reforms. No amount of formalized change (charts, memos, in-service training, among other mechanisms) could break down the strong and deep roots of hierarchy, traditions and rituals in the department. People became threatened, insecure, uncertain and ever befuddled by the wizardry of new management strategies. The reforms themselves were "hastily conceived," (p. 132) and made "without prior consultation or participation" (p. 43). People also resisted because of actual or perceived hostility from the external environment, e.g., an inquisitorial Congress. The goals, culture and internal structure of the department called for rebureaucratization. Ambiguous goals, absence of performance criteria, concern for job security, accountability and control, fear of intelligence security, and the nature of workload were among the reasons for the restoration of the old set-up and rules. Aside from this, the "sheer frequency" (p. 43) of organizational change complicated the process.

Warwick concludes that bureaucracy "responds to many interests other than administrative rationality" (p. 156). Specifically, Warwick notes that warring bureaucrats are unable to think seriously of the overall welfare of their agency, much less such abstractions as the "public interest" (p. 174).

### Significance

Warwick prefers a "qualitative, loosely documented, but broadly based interpretation of the central issues in public bureaucracy" (p. 237) to a cut-and-dried narrowly based statistical analysis. The author believes that the complexity of the State Department cannot be readily explained by such numeric variables as size, number of divisions and span of control. Compare this descriptive and anecdotal approach with Niskanen's highly mathematical approach in his *Bureaucracy and Representative Government*.<sup>2</sup> Of course Warwick does not completely reject quantification in studying organizations and in theory building about organizations. He maintains that descriptive case study could be wedded with quantification. The same argument of combining qualitative and quantitative techniques in policy analysis is being advocated by Donald Campbell, Ralph E. Strauch, and E.S. Quade.<sup>3</sup>

In one sense, Warwick exemplifies the new public administration movement in the study of bureaucracy. To

<sup>2</sup>William A. Niskanen, *Bureaucracy and Representative Government* (Chicago: Aldine/Atherton, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>Donald T. Campbell, "Qualitative Knowing in Action Research" (a Kurt Lewin Award Address, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Meeting with the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, September 1, 1974); Ralph E. Strauch, "A Critical Assessment of Quantitative Methodology As A Policy Analysis Tool" (a Kurt Lewin Award Address, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Meeting with the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, August 1974); and Edward S. Quade, *Analysis for Public Decisions* (New York: American Elsevier Publishing Company, Inc., 1975).

him reorganization based mainly on rationality a la Weber, Taylor, Gulick and Urwick is doomed to failure. Bureaucrats are people too. They also have sentiments, passions, desires, fears, insecurities and motivations for security and self-esteem as other people possess. Hence, to Warwick ". . . the development of more efficient, humane and effective public bureaucracy is best accomplished by human methods" (p. 214). The country (meaning the public and Congress) must therefore "cease beating the bureaucrats" (p. 215) and provide them with a less threatening environment. In another vein, Warwick writes that: "It is highly unlikely that large-scale efforts will be undertaken to reduce bureaucracy in the federal system" (p. 213). The complexities and difficulties of uprooting bureaucracy should persuade those who make lofty promises to think twice before leaping. One is instructed by Warwick that the source of the inflexible hierarchy and unbending rules of the bureaucracy is the suspicious, inhospitable and threatening public or the larger environment itself.

Two books come to mind after reading *A Theory of Public Bureaucracy*. Charles Perrow in his *Complex Organizations*<sup>4</sup> would hardly agree with Warwick's contentions because Perrow finds little empirical support for the human relations approach to bureaucracy. It is society that adapts to organizations which have the ability to define, create and shape their environment. Another perspective is offered by Michel Crozier in *The*

<sup>4</sup>Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972).

*Bureaucratic Phenomenon*.<sup>5</sup> Warwick is closer to Crozier who affirms that an organization does not correct its behavior: it will not adjust easily to change and will tend in fact to resist change. Like Crozier, Warwick contends that organizational change is a deeply felt crisis which any organization has to face. The organization faces and must confront change from within and without. Warwick sees that the State Department is deeply anchored to its traditions, habits, rules and hierarchy which inhibit change. Any proposal to innovate is perceived as an organizational crisis which must be responded to with the internal mechanisms for survival and protection. Furthermore, Warwick's book argues that it is not the presence or absence

of support for organizational reform that makes a difference between success and failure. The critical element is the intensity of support from key actors in the bureaucracy. Warwick also suggests the need to broaden organizational research, i.e., by putting a bureaucracy in context and not just limiting or isolating studies to one particular organization.

The author's style is crisp and clear and sprinkled with creatively coined phrases such as organizational ambrosia, garrison mentality and organizational tribalism. Certainly Warwick's approach is best suited to attract readers and communicate with the staff at the State Department. The book is pleasant to read and instructive of the pitfalls and lessons to be gained from undertaking and analyzing a planned organizational change.

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<sup>5</sup>Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964). P