Waldo in the Light of Austerity and Federal Debt Crisis, Part 1

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Dwight Waldo wrote *The Enterprise of Public Administration* in 1979 looking back on a long and fruitful academic career, but also as a reflection about the future for public administration. Can a 30 year old book still be relevant? You bet.

Today, the public sector is increasingly facing fiscal challenges. Federal, state, and local governments throughout the country have major budget deficits followed by austerity measures that undermine the ability to deliver the good life of the future. In this day and age rereading Dwight Waldo’s *The Enterprise of Public Administration* is an intellectual exercise worth pursuing. Several of Dwight Waldo’s comments have been accurate and many of today’s issue—debt crisis, e-government, trust in government, and confidence in the future of the welfare systems—are discussed.

In the United States, modern societies are established on a foundation of economic growth, abundance, and consensus, but a new paradigm of scarcity, decay, and conflict is increasing pressure on public administration. This is a radical shift that Waldo foresaw. Waldo raised the question that if the central glue that holds society together is the expectation of more, what does that lead to? Waldo meant that if we build our society around a government that always delivers more services, benefits, and progress, what would happen if there were less in the future? Today, facing a large federal debt and an unprecedented federal deficit, we might have arrived at the point Waldo described when we no longer can promise more.

Throughout his career, Waldo presented a few principles that he used as a framework to explain, question, and discuss public administration and other scholars’ theories.

*The first principle suggests that*
there is conflict between bureaucracy and democracy that forces and obliges public servants to protect democratic values. Bureaucracy must consider not only administrative but democratic values and outcome. This also makes it impossible to run government fully as a business as businesses do not have to consider these values and norms.

Second, there is no dichotomy between politics and bureaucracy. The traditional separation between principal and agent was for Waldo theoretically interesting, but realistically impossible. In the contemporary political environment, it is obvious that the federal government is interwoven with politics, for better or worse, but it might be necessary. In an environment where budgets are reduced and projects abandoned it could be necessary, to avoid wasting money on projects and programs that are no have political support, to ensure political support early.

Third, Waldo noted that ruthless pursuit for efficiency must be offset with consideration of public access. Government efficiency can be excessive and harmful to the interests of the people. According to Waldo, if efficiency is the only consideration, then bureaucracy fails to serve the people. This is clearly visible in the dichotomy of e-government where the bureaucracy prefers administrative excellence and doing the bureaucratic work faster and more accurate online, meanwhile empowering citizens using a citizen-centric approach instead might increase administrative burden and costs.

Last, Waldo considered government to be more complex than business; therefore, it must be managed differently. The Constitution is a vital steering document for government, but it has limited implications in the daily life of a business. One example of government’s complexity is that far more stakeholders impact public administration in comparison to a business operation.

According to Waldo, bureaucracy was instrumental to implementing revolutionary technologies in modern societies. In 2006, over 50 percent of all adult Americans used government websites to inquire, be served, and interact with government. In 2010, 67 percent of all Americans online used governmental websites, which is a higher percentage than the number of Americans who engage in social media and social networking sites such as Facebook according to Pew Internet and American Life Project. The Internet
enlarged the public sphere and more vocal stakeholders increase complexity for public executives, especially in times of scarcity and re-allocation of public resources. Today’s online communities, which form a new civic society, are products of the Internet which can spill over to traditional peaceful activism that supports our democracy.

*Watch for Part 2 of this 2 part series next Monday, August 15, 2011.*

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