

## Book Review:

# Donald F. Kettl, *Politics of the Administrative Process*

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The relationship between politics and administration probably constitutes the most long-standing issue within the intellectual history of public administration. The founding fathers of the U.S. public administration field like Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow strongly advocated the politics-administration dichotomy in the study of public administration. However, this orthodoxy didn't last very long. The great expansion of government functions, with heavy involvement of political operations in the administrative process during World War II and the post-war period, forced scholars to disclaim the feasibility of the orthodoxy, yet the shadow of orthodox public administration persists. The government reform activities around the world since the late 1980s and 1990s have been enthusiastic about the introduction of business management practices to improve government performance, implying another triumph of managerialism in the administrative process over politics. Indeed, despite the paradigm changes in U.S. public administration over the last 100 years (Lu, 2013), the tension between politics and administration continues puzzling the research and practice of public administration and the search for new answers.

It is under this context that Donald Kettl's updated seventh edition of *Politics of the Administrative Process* attempts to offer new insights on how to understand the dynamics between politics and administration. To Kettl, the study of public administration presumably involves two broad questions (Kettl, 2005). The politics or policy question specifies the role of government in governance, with accountability, equity, and other normative values as its core concern, and thus needs political operations to

achieve consensus. The administration or management question, on the other side, looks at the operations of government organizations and programs, embracing efficiency and effectiveness as its underlying logic. Literally, the answers to these two big questions cannot easily get along with each other. However, the key puzzle for public administration is that any government decisions and behaviors need to balance these two strands of incentives, making the administrative process both political and pragmatic. Successful public administration thus requires a delicate balance between politics and administration: the bureaucracy has not only to be effective and efficient, but also accountable to elected officials and citizens at large. This is never an easy job.

Kettl's book delineates how such a balance can be possibly achieved. It makes a clear contribution to the discussion of the fundamental questions in public administration: what government should do (politics question) and how best to do it (administration question). In particular, the book surveys various aspects of a government's administrative system in the context of political dynamics, with a strong emphasize on politics, accountability, and performance.

The book starts with a careful examination of one key concept in public administration—accountability—in Chapter 1 to set the stage for later discussions of government administration process. After that, the book consists of five parts. Part I explores what government does and what strategies and tactics government employs to accomplish its job. Through this discussion, Kettl introduces to readers the

meaning of public administration and the complexities associated with the study of public administration. Part II examines the structure of government organizations. It starts with the basics of organizational theories and then applies these theories to probe the issues and problems of government bureaucracies. This part ends up with a description of the waves of administrative reform efforts to improve government structures and performance. Part III addresses the role of people within government structures, with a focus on how to recruit and maintain a dynamic and productive workforce to help government materialize its functions. Part IV discusses how administrative agencies perform their functions and achieve their missions through decision making and implementation, including budgetary decisions. Part V wraps up the book with a deeper examination of the overarching themes of public administration – the interaction between politics, accountability, and performance. It returns to the important question of accountability and looks at such issues as regulations, separation of powers, and legislative oversight.

Throughout the chapters, the book offers an excellent balance between theories and practical realities, which makes it an accessible and comprehensive introduction for readers with different backgrounds. The book includes rich vignettes, examples, and data to give readers multiple and complementary learning opportunities. More importantly, each chapter features a number of case studies serving the theme of the chapter. Almost all these cases are up to date and from real-life stories, ranging from President Obama's health insurance program, to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan in 2016, to President Trump's election. Every case study ends with "Questions to Consider," inspiring critical analysis and extended discussion. Readers thus have chances to apply key points in the chapter to explore how these materials play out in the real world. In this way, readers come to realize that public administration is not just concepts and theories in the book, but real life around us.

Indeed, the book, now in its 7th edition, has a rich intellectual history of nearly 40 years. James W. Fesler, a great scholar in the field and Kettl's doctoral

advisor at Yale University, published his book *Public Administration: Theory and Practice* – the predecessor to *Politics of the Administrative Process* – in 1980. The first edition of *Politics of the Administrative Process* was published in 1991. Fesler and Kettl coauthored the book through its fourth edition in 2009 until Fesler passed away in 2005. Since the first edition of *Politics of the Administrative Process*, the book has shaped for decades how generations of students think about public administration and how public administration could better advance public values in democratic governance. As Kettl writes in this new edition, the book is not only a recognition of James Fesler's legacy, but, probably more importantly, "a call to focus our energy on making government work and restoring our confidence in it" (Kettl, 2017, xx). This call could not be more relevant to what we face in the current policy environment.

## REFERENCES

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