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Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Reform, and Public Administration

LARRY WALKER

It is fast becoming fashionable today to bad-mouth the contributions of scholar-president Woodrow Wilson to American public administration. To be sure, everyone acknowledges that his 1887 essay, "The Study of Administration," published in *Political Science Quarterly*, was a significant starting point of some kind.¹ For example, Leonard D. White, the preeminent public-administration scholar of the pre-World War II era, wrote that "the study of administration . . . dates from the brilliant essay by Woodrow Wilson."² Dwight Waldo, arguably the most important public-administration scholar of the pre-World War II era, has referred to Wilson's essay as "*the* most important document in the development of the field."³ As Robert T. Golembiewski has put it, "Virtually everyone agrees that Woodrow Wilson's 'The Study of Administration' constitutes the birth certificate of the modern study of public administration."⁴

One could offer a long list of such accolades. Nevertheless, Wilson's standing

¹ Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (June 1887): 197-222, reprinted in 56 (December 1941): 481-506.

² Leonard D. White, *Introduction to the Study of Public Administration*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 10.

³ Dwight Waldo, *The Enterprise of Public Administration: A Summary View* (Novato, Calif.: Chandler & Sharp, 1980), 67. (Emphasis in the original.)

⁴ Robert T. Golembiewski, "Ways in Which 'The Study of Administration' Confounds the Study of Administration" in J. Rabin and J. S. Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration: Woodrow Wilson and American Public Administration* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1984), 235-247, at 235.

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is shaky today. For one thing, the accolades are not so full of praise as they first appear; some of the accolade-givers have hedged their praise through careful wording.⁵ A second less-than-praiseful approach is to recognize “The Study of Administration” as the first publication of its kind but to deny that it has had any influence on subsequent developments. Paul Van Riper is the most forceful exponent of this approach.⁶ Third and last, some commentators recognize Wilson as having a significant causal influence on twentieth-century development, only to condemn the effects and, therefore, the cause. Of these, the most outspoken is public-choice exponent Vincent Ostrom, who has argued that “the Wilsonian theory of administration was no less than a counter-revolutionary doctrine,” that is, one that nullified the democratic gains of the American revolution.⁷

In sum, modern-day public administrationists (that is, the *academic* public administration people)—not to mention the public administrators who obtain their opinions on such matters from the scholars—are in a state of confusion and disagreement concerning Woodrow Wilson’s role in the history of public administration. We modern-day practitioners and scholars should know about our roots; or else we cannot understand where we are today and where we should be. Furthermore, in an age of few heroes, we need especially to know about those in our collective past who are worthy of honor. To contribute to these ends, I offer this assessment of Woodrow Wilson: *There is a great deal to admire about Wilson and there are ample grounds on which to credit him with formative influence in the founding and shaping of modern public administration.*

In arriving at this opinion, I have differed from many other commentators: I have not focused on the politics-administration dichotomy. A focus on the famous dichotomy is typical of most twentieth-century attention to Woodrow Wilson. For example, a recent volume of original essays written in honor of the centennial of “The Study of Administration” is entitled—what else?—*Politics and Administration*.⁸ Attention to the dichotomy is understandable, given its importance both to public administrators (as underpinning of their claims to autonomy from elected officials) and to public administrationists (as underpinning of their claims to autonomy from political science). The fact of the matter, however, is that Wilson

⁵ Lynton K. Caldwell, “Public Administration and the Universities: A Half-Century of Development,” *Public Administration Review* 25 (Winter 1965): 52–60, at 53; James D. Carroll and Alfred M. Zuck, “‘The Study of Administration’ Revisited,” a Report on the Centennial Agendas Project of the American Society of Public Administration (Washington, D.C.: ASPA, 1983), 3.

⁶ Paul P. Van Riper, “The American Administrative State: Wilson and the Founders—An Unorthodox View,” *Public Administration Review* 43 (November/December 1983): 477–490; and Van Riper, “The Politics-Administration Dichotomy: Concept or Reality?” in Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 203–218. Also see Dwight Waldo, *The Administrative State: A Study of the Political Theory of American Public Administration* (New York: Ronald 1948), 26n.

⁷ Vincent Ostrom, *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration*, rev. ed. (University: University of Alabama Press, 1974), 133. Also see Golembiewski, “Ways in Which”; and Ronald Seidelman with the assistance of Edward J. Harpham, *Disenchanted Realists: Political Science and the American Crisis, 1884–1984* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1985).

⁸ Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*.

never sought to erect a strong wall between politics and administration. Even in the “Study,” he acknowledged that administration must be subjected to the public will, as expressed through the elected officials; in his broader efforts on administration – in books, lectures, and public speeches – he showed clearly that he recognized the ultimately subordinate role of administration within democratic government.

In his lectures and writings after 1887, Wilson backtracked considerably from the stronger dichotomistic expressions in the 1887 essay, as Robert T. Miewald has noted.⁹ In his earlier *Congressional Government* (1885), Wilson already had admired the parliamentary system, with its close relationship between the legislative and the executive branches, and had deplored the “unnatural divorcement of legislation and administration.”¹⁰ In later years, he stressed in his lectures the policy-making (hence, political) role of the administrator, not a clear, sharp separation of politics and administration. This development in Wilson’s later thought has been neatly detailed by Miewald and, therefore, need not be repeated here; but we may note Miewald’s conclusion – “it is clear that he [Wilson] was favorably disposed toward what would now be called ‘participatory administration’.”¹¹ Other writers, too, have recognized that Wilson was not guilty of making the sharp differentiation between politics and administration (or, as Frederick C. Mosher has better put it, “policy-politics and administration”), which has been attributed to him by critics.¹² Among these other writers are Phillip Cooper, Vinton Fisher, and Dwight Waldo.¹³

In short, I do not intend to assess Wilson in terms of the politics-administration dichotomy. Having escaped the confine of that narrow focus, we shall see that both as Progressive President and as reform-minded scholar, Wilson influenced the future of American public administration in large and good ways.

WILSON’S INFLUENCE AS PROGRESSIVE PRESIDENT

The Progressive Era

I turn first to an examination of Wilson’s influence as President of the United

⁹ Robert D. Miewald, “The Origins of Wilson’s Thoughts: The German Tradition and the Organic State,” in Rabin & Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 17–30.

¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in Congressional Politics* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1885), 214.

¹¹ Miewald, “Origins of Wilson’s Thoughts,” 26.

¹² Frederick C. Mosher, *Democracy and the Public Service* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 4.

¹³ Phillip J. Cooper, “The Wilsonian Dichotomy in Administrative Law” in Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 79–94; Vinton Fisher, “Leadership Responsibility: The Development of Shared Public Purpose—Woodrow Wilson’s Task for Public Administrators” in Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 133–146; Dwight Waldo, “The Perdurability of the Politics-Administration Dichotomy: Woodrow Wilson and the Identity Crisis in Public Administration” in Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 219–234.

States (1913–1921). Woodrow Wilson was both a product of the Progressive era and a leading actor in it. To appreciate his influence, particularly as President, one must appreciate the significance of the Progressive era.

In general, authorities agree that there have been two great epochs of American political history and that the Progressive era was the Great Divide between the two. The Progressive movement of that era was multifaceted and is not easily described, but at its core was a belief that government could be used in a positive way to achieve “progress” for the collective human condition. Progressivism was a rebellion against limited government and the individualism of nineteenth-century liberalism. It accepted collectivism, the welfare of the community as a whole, as a positive value. It advocated forceful use of the powers of government in order to achieve advances in the collective public welfare, and it advocated the improvement of public administration in order that progressive policies might be carried out effectively.

Wilson’s Progressive Presidency

Wilson’s presidency is universally recognized as a time of great accomplishment for the Progressive movement. Woodrow Wilson came to the presidency as a convert to Progressivism. Arthur S. Link, leading Wilson historian-biographer, tells us that Wilson began as a conservative and that he converted to Progressivism in 1901.¹⁴ A good argument can be made that there had always been a strong streak of Progressivism, of what we nowadays call liberalism, in Wilson’s attitude toward government. He had always believed in the creative, active state. The reforms proposed in *Congressional Government*, after all, were designed to render the government more capable of effective action. Wilson had always been a nationalist, never a Jeffersonian. He did not hesitate to call himself a progressive or a radical, Marshall Dimock tells us, although always careful to define the terms in his own way.¹⁵

Wilson himself was largely responsible for the Progressive accomplishments of his presidency. He was no passive on-looker to the policy-making process; rather, he practiced with vigor the Progressive principle of strong executive leadership. As a scholar, Wilson had preached the virtues of forceful executive leadership; as President, he practiced that which he had preached – buoyed, no doubt, by the example provided by President Theodore Roosevelt.¹⁶ Henry Turner has put it well:

¹⁴ Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Road to the White House* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947), 24, 34.

¹⁵ Marshall E. Dimock, “Wilson the Domestic Reformer” in Earl Latham, ed. for the American Political Science Association, *The Philosophies and Policies of Woodrow Wilson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 242.

¹⁶ Henry A. Turner, “Woodrow Wilson: Exponent of Executive Leadership,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 4 (March 1951): 97–115.

As President of the United States, Wilson . . . came near to achieving for the Presidency the power and influence that he believed permanently desirable. . . . He exerted influence at every stage of the legislative process. He planned the legislative programs. He and his assistants took an active part in drafting bills. After bills were introduced, he used various means to secure their adoption. . . . For six years Wilson led and controlled Congress in a manner without precedent.¹⁷

Specific legislation proposed and pushed through by Wilson included the Federal Reserve Act of 1913, the Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914, the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, the National Defense Act of 1916, the Shipping Act of 1916, the Federal Transportation Act of 1920, and the Federal Water Power Act of 1920. Each of these measures produced expansion of national-government control over areas not regulated by the national government when Wilson took office in 1913. Through such legislation, the domestic role of the national government was greatly enlarged; and numerous commissions, boards, administrations, and public corporations were created – for example, the Federal Trade Commission, the Tariff Commission, the Federal Power Commission, the United States Shipping Board, and the Federal Reserve System.¹⁸

President Wilson also contributed in ways “subtle, but significant” to transformation of the national revenue system, as has been revealed by Thomas Lynch and Maurice Rahimi.¹⁹ As governor and presidential candidate, he had championed the Sixteenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, which authorized federal taxation of income. As President, he secured passage of the tariff-reducing Underwood-Simmins bill of 1913 and initiated use of a progressive income tax, thereby shifting the national government from reliance on tariff revenues to reliance on the progressive income tax. Wilson saw the shift as one that relieved indirect taxation on poor people and imposed higher taxes on those better able to bear the burden.²⁰ Thus, he contributed to the establishment of a national revenue system, which provided both a surer source of federal income and a fairer distribution of the tax burden.

Another notable dimension of Wilson’s presidential program consisted of his domestic-assistance policies. The number of federal programs of annual grants to state governments was doubled during Wilson’s presidency from five to ten.²¹ The first published mention of an “embryonic system” of federal grants-in-aid was made in the last year of Wilson’s presidency.²² Increase in the total volume

¹⁷ Henry A. Turner, “Woodrow Wilson as Administrator,” *Public Administration Review* 16 (Autumn 1956): 249–257, at 252.

¹⁸ For a more detailed summary view, see Dimock, “Wilson the Domestic Reformer.”

¹⁹ Thomas D. Lynch and Maurice H. Rahimi, “Woodrow Wilson and the Revolution in Public Budgeting” in Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 95–102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

²¹ Larry Walker and Jeremy F. Plant, “Woodrow Wilson and the Federal System” in Rabin and Bowman, eds., *Politics and Administration*, 119–132.

²² Paul H. Douglas, “The Development of a System of Federal Grants-in-aid,” *Political Science Quarterly* 35 (June/December 1920): 255–271, 522–544.

of grants-in-aid during Wilson's presidency was significant, and the pattern of grant-in-aid expansion set in the Wilson years was one Progressive-era feature that did *not* disappear in the "return to normalcy" that followed.²³

Grant-in aid administration in Wilson's presidency also was noteworthy for its *centralizing* character. Wilson and his men chose to adopt administrative arrangements that established close national-government supervision of program implementation by the states and that restricted the ability of generalist state officials to control the federally-supported programs. These administrative arrangements were the most significant feature of the grant programs established by the Wilson administration.²⁴

In sum, Wilson as President had a great influence on American public administration. Through his Progressive, pro-government policies, he contributed to great growth in the functions and powers of the national government, to major increases in the number of national administrative agencies, and to the establishment of national-government controls over the states through grants-in-aid administration. The significance of Wilson's presidency has been much documented and needs no extensive elaboration here; it needs only to be noted that the policies he brought about had significant consequences for public administration, not only at the national level but the state level also.

WILSON'S INFLUENCE AS REFORM SCHOLAR

I now come to the less consensual part of the assessment of Wilson's influence on modern public administration — namely, the assessment of his influence as a scholar. Wilson influenced subsequent administration, not through any single concept (such as the politics-administration dichotomy), but through the totality of his scholarly efforts. Through these efforts he made major contributions to the political-reform movement of his day and to the emergence of academic public administration; through both of these dimensions of change, he had a significant effect on public administration in the twentieth century.

Corruption and Reform

The triumphs of Jeffersonian democracy in 1800 and Jacksonian democracy in 1828 created systems of government that came to be seen as incompetent, corrupt, and, ultimately, undemocratic. A movement for governmental reform began to take shape prior to the Civil War. Reform was shunted aside, of course, by the struggles of Vicksburg, Shiloh, and Gettysburg. After the war, advocates of re-

²³ J. P. Clark, *The Rise of a New Federalism: Federal-State Cooperation in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 139.

²⁴ Douglas, "Development of a System," esp. at 256. This subject has been reviewed by Walker and Plant, "Woodrow Wilson."

form began to speak out again, most notably Henry Adams. The reformers were concerned about all levels of government—local, state, and national—for the defects of popular government were evident everywhere in the post-Civil War era.

The egalitarian drive which spurred and rationalized the spoils system proved decreasingly effective as a guarantor of popular direction and control of administration. . . . We had effectively . . . transferred governmental power from one group (the gentry) to another (the politicians); in the process, we suffered a considerable degradation of public office and widespread corruption.²⁵

This corruption was particularly noted in the cities. “To reform-minded members of the middle class . . . mass democracy ran reckless through the large cities. . . .”²⁶ The evils were party “rings,” universal manhood suffrage, patronage, fraud, and incompetence. Consequently, as Mosher says, “The American efficiency movement began and gained its momentum at the local rather than the national level. Its first targets were the cities.”²⁷ Therefore, “The real origins of public administration lay in the cities. . . . The cities were where most government was, where most action was, where most problems were, [and] where the services of public administrators could most dramatically be made more effective, more honest, and less costly.”²⁸

The cities were not the sole focus of reformer attention, of course; national government was also seen as corrupted. Van Riper comments as follows:

The Jacksonians and Radical Republicans have not often been joined together for analysis, but the regimes had much in common. Politically, the result was what many of the Founding Fathers had feared, the dominance of a demagogic majoritarianism which, driven by an intense concern for power in its later stages, pandered to our worst instincts through the spoils system and an unbridled opening up of natural resources to exploitation. . . . The lengths to which both centralization and decentralization, the former at the national level and the other in state and local governments, could be manipulated by an unrestrained and corrupt but organizationally powerful party system were so clearly demonstrated that the backlash brought about a major reorientation of government both politically and, important here, administratively.²⁹

After the Civil War, reform efforts resumed quickly at the national level. Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois succeeded in 1871 in attaching to an appropriation bill a rider that gave liberal power over personnel to the president, whereupon in that same year President Ulysses S. Grant created the first Civil Service Commission, which survived for four years before dying from lack of appropriations

²⁵ Mosher, *Democracy and Public Service*, 63.

²⁶ Martin J. Schiesl, *The Politics of Efficiency: Municipal Administration and Reform in America, 1800–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 6.

²⁷ Mosher, *Democracy and Public Service*, 72.

²⁸ Frederick C. Mosher, “Introduction: The American Setting” in F. C. Mosher, *American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1975), 1–10, at 8.

²⁹ Van Riper, “American Administrative State,” 480.

and presidential interest.³⁰ National civil-service reform was a major issue in the late 1870s and early 1880s, and it culminated in the passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, which established the federal civil-service system.

The post-Civil War reform movement was fundamentally concerned with the morality and rightness of government, not with its efficiency. “The primary issue was moral,” “the cleansing and promotion of democracy,” says Waldo.³¹ Mosher explains of the reform movement that “its essence was *moral*.”³² These overriding moral concerns with purification more than with efficiency are documented thoroughly by Schiesl and by Van Riper.³³

The reform movement was multifaced in its approaches to reform. Waldo notes four separate “movements” with a public-administration emphasis, which he terms the personnel (or civil-service) movement, the administrative training movement, the research movement, and the reorganization movement.³⁴ There were other reform-movement dimensions, too — for example, that having to do with electoral-system reform (promoting nonpartisan elections, the short ballot, and other ideas) and that having to do with reform of financial practices (including budgeting and purchasing).

Congressional Government

In this maelstrom of reform activity, Woodrow Wilson “quickly became a widely respected authority on political reforms on all levels of government.”³⁵ With the publication of *Congressional Government* in 1885, Wilson received nationwide recognition, not just as a scholar, but as an advocate of reform. With respect to the national government, Wilson’s *Congressional Government* was nothing less than *the most radical prescription for change (read, “reform”) to be written since 1789*.

In general, the university social scientists of that day were reform-minded; the social-science disciplines, which first emerged in that era, were inspired by and were products of the social-reform movements of the day. That era preceded the ascendancy of behavioralism and logical positivism; political scientists were respected public commentators on social problems, and many — perhaps most — of them were active participants in reform organizations.

Wilson’s bent for reform, then, was merely typical of leading academicians of his day. His initial performance with *Congressional Government (CG)*, however, was quite *uncommon* because of his relative youthfulness and because of the originality and audacity of his thinking. *CG* brought national prominence to Wilson

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Waldo, *Administrative State*, 28.

³² Mosher, *Democracy and Public Service*, 65.

³³ Schiesl, *Politics of Efficiency*; Paul P. Van Riper, *History of the United States Civil Service* (Evanston, Ill: Row Peterson, 1958).

³⁴ Waldo, *Administrative State*, chap. 2.

³⁵ Schiesl, *Politics of Efficiency*, 15.

before age 30, while he still was a graduate student. It may be said without exaggeration that *CG* was *the* best critical analysis of the American national government written in the nineteenth century and, therefore, that it was *the* most important nineteenth-century document of that portion of the reform movement directed toward the national government.

The fundamental fact that accounts for the significance of *CG* is that, as incredible as it may seem, it was the *first* published analysis of how the national-government policy-making system really worked. Until that day, every scholarly volume on the national government had approached it in terms of a formalist or literary approach; it was for the young Wilson, ninety-eight years after the writing of the Constitution, to write the first *realistic* analysis of how the government created by the Constitution actually worked. Wilson was never a behavioralist — and never approved of the behavioral approach to political science — but he may be said to have been the first “realist” in the study of American national government.³⁶

The significance attributed to *CG* at its publication is represented by the following reviews:

Even if Mr. Wilson’s book were of indifferent merit . . . it would, nevertheless, mark an era in our political writing by reason of its method. It is the first critical analysis of the mechanism of our . . . Constitution that has been published.

Albert Shaw, *The Dial*, March 1885³⁷

It is an altogether unique book—a book standing apart by itself, and constituting an entirely new departure in our political writing.

Louisville Courier-Journal, 20 March 1885³⁸

To state without qualification that the modest volume entitled “Congressional Government” . . . contains the best critical writing on the American constitution which has appeared since the “Federalist” papers, may seem extravagant; but it is true, and the book will mark an era in our political writing.

Minneapolis Daily Tribune, 15 February 1885³⁹

We have no hesitation in saying that this is one of the most important books, dealing with political subjects, which have ever issued from the American press.

Nation, 12 February 1885⁴⁰

“*The Study of Administration*”

Two years later in 1887, “*The Study of Administration*” was published in the *Political Science Quarterly*, which according to Somit and Tanenhaus, was “the major

³⁶ John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1983), 50.

³⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 54 vols., Arthur S. Link, ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966–1985), IV, 309.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 405.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, 284.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

journal of political science.”⁴¹ The background of this publication was not auspicious. In early 1885, Wilson had attended a “seminar on Administration” taught by Richard T. Ely, political economy instructor at Johns Hopkins University.⁴² It was a typical course of the time, comparative in method and focused primarily on the best known national and municipal administrative systems of Europe (France and Prussia), with comparisons of British and American practices. The collected *Wilson Papers* contain a summary by Wilson of one particular session of the seminar:

Dr. Ely read a paper upon Administration. . . . In his paper, Dr. Ely dwelt upon the importance of administrative study; upon the special necessity for it in this country, in view of the fact that our administration is the worst in the world; and upon the strange apathy which has hitherto reigned in the U.S. with regard to questions of this nature.⁴³

Later in that year, Wilson wrote to his future wife that he intended to make administration a focus of his studies, and in the next several months he wrote three essays dealing with the subject.⁴⁴

In October 1886, Wilson—then in his first year as a faculty member at Bryn Mawr—received an invitation to speak on the subject of “his administrative studies” to the Cornell University Historical and Political Science Association. Having only three weeks’ notice, Wilson patched together a speech by combining the three essays. Only one week after the 3 November 1886 presentation at Cornell, Wilson received a request that the speech be submitted for publication. It was published subsequently, with revision of only a single two-paragraph passage.

In short, the “Study” was not a finished product. In reporting to his Johns Hopkins professor, H. B. Adams, on the Cornell presentation, Wilson wrote that it probably had cost him any prospect of a position at Cornell;⁴⁵ and he warned the *Political Science Quarterly* editor, Edwin R. A. Seligman, that he considered the piece unworthy of publication.⁴⁶ Published it was, though, and well received, at that. Its reception was due to its qualities both as a scholarly piece of political-science work and as a reform document.

The “Study” as Political Science. The “Study” was for Wilson another precedent-setting triumph of creative scholarship. True, it had flaws of logic, of fact, of organization, and of literary style. True, by today’s standards the “Study” hardly counts as “science” at all. But the facts of that day were that, first, it was the first published essay by a university scholar on the subject of public administration; second, it was the first professional publication to identify administration as part of the

⁴¹ Albert Somit and Joseph Tanenhaus, *The Development of American Political Science* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1967), 44–45.

⁴² Wilson, *Papers*, III, 345.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, IV, 303.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 407.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, V, 387–388.

solution to the governmental problems of the day; and third, it was the first proposal by a university educator for two new roles for higher education – developing a “science of administration” and providing specialized vocational education for public administrators. In addition, it may have been the first political-science publication to put efficiency on a par with morality as an objective to be promoted by political scientists and, in the future, by public administrationists.

Wilson “blazed a major new trail in the study of government – inquiry into how legislation was carried out after being passed.”⁴⁷ “Woodrow Wilson aggressively asserted the claims of a new field of political study and an innovative science of administration as a means of effecting political reforms.” Therefore, continue Ronald Seidelman and Edward Harpham, “the need for a science of administration was adopted as the conventional wisdom of political science.”⁴⁸ The editors of the *Wilson Papers* say with reference to the “Study” that “Wilson expanded what were then the frontiers of his discipline. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he redrew the boundaries of the field to include the hitherto uncharted terrain of administration in the United States.”⁴⁹

The effect of the essay on Wilson’s contemporaries was substantial. A. S. Link and his staff of editors of the *Wilson Papers* – the definitive commentators on Wilson – say that the essay’s publication “immediately established Wilson’s reputation in the subject.”⁵⁰ It was because of the essay, they say, that in 1887 Wilson was hired as a visiting “lecturer on Administration” at Johns Hopkins. (The initial contract for a three-year series of courses was repeated twice, for nine years in all.) Two years later, in 1889, Herbert Baxter Adams predicted to a Johns Hopkins class that Wilson would be among those Hopkins graduates who would contribute “great improvement” to the society, with Wilson’s contribution being in the area of “reform in administration.”⁵¹

Wilson was not the first person to lecture on administration: a course in comparative administrative law was offered at Columbia in 1882; Frank J. Goodnow began lecturing on American administrative law at Columbia sometime between 1883 and 1887; and Richard T. Ely had taught the seminar in administration at Hopkins in 1885.⁵² Nor was Wilson the first to wear a title such as Lecturer on Administration: Edmund J. James was Professor of Public Finance and Administration at the University of Pennsylvania as early as 1885, it appears, and possibly as early as 1883; and Goodnow was titled Adjunct Professor of History and Administrative Law at Columbia in 1887.⁵³ But in teaching an annual graduate-level

⁴⁷ Cooper, *Warrior and Priest*, 52.

⁴⁸ Seidelman and Harpham, *Disenchanted Realists*, 55.

⁴⁹ Wilson, *Papers*, VI, 483.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 482.

⁵¹ Cited in Turner, “Woodrow Wilson as Administrator,” 249.

⁵² On the 1882 course at Columbia, see Anna Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities, 1636–1900*, William Anderson, ed. (New York: Octagon Books, 1969, originally published by Appleton-Century, 1939), 181.

⁵³ Wilson, *Papers*, V, 25; Haddow, *Political Science*, 251; Charles G. Haines and Marshall E. Di-

course on administration for nine consecutive years at Johns Hopkins, while simultaneously teaching the subject at Bryn Mawr, then at Wesleyan, then at Princeton, Wilson certainly was one of the leading teachers of administration in the nation.

In fact, Wilson, James, and Columbia's Frank Goodnow were the three leading public administrationists of the 1880s and 1890s, it appears. James was an early professor of administration; a successful teacher, apparently—he eventually went to the highly prestigious University of Chicago as professor of public administration—but not a successful author.⁵⁴ Wilson knew him and mentioned him in letters occasionally in the mid-1880s, referring to him once in 1886 as “my friend, E.J. James.”⁵⁵

Goodnow joined the Columbia faculty in 1883, and he taught a course on American administrative law there. Between 1893 and 1900 he published four books on municipal government and public administration.⁵⁶ With these works, Goodnow's star rose to the point that he was selected as first president of the American Political Science Association in 1904. Other volumes followed. (One finds no evidence in Wilson's *Papers* of a friendship between Goodnow and Wilson, and virtually no mention of Goodnow in Wilson's extensive correspondence of the day. Could it be that they were unfriendly rivals?)

Of the three, James may have been the first in point of time, but he achieved the least prominence. Wilson gained prominence first with the essay and sustained it with the prestigious appointment at Johns Hopkins. It appears that administration was being taught at only four schools at any one time in those days, and that for nine years Wilson was the teacher at two of the four (at Johns Hopkins and, consecutively, at Bryn Mawr, Wesleyan, and Princeton). In the 1890s, however, Wilson's interests proved to be too broad for him to maintain the status of first among public administrationists; he next wrote *The State* (1889), the first comparative-government textbook; then a history, *Division and Reunion, 1829–1889* (1893); then a five-volume *History of the American People*, published in 1901.⁵⁷ By that time Wilson was established as both a leading historian and a leading political scientist, but he had forfeited any claim to prominence as a specialist in public administration. That, combined with Goodnow's publications beginning

mock, eds., *Essays on the Law and Practice of Governmental Administration*, a volume in honor of Frank Johnson Goodnow, President Emeritus, The Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935; reprinted, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), viii.

⁵⁴ On James's 1896 appointment, see Haddow, *Political Science*, 251.

⁵⁵ Wilson, *Papers*, V, 412, 427.

⁵⁶ Frank J. Goodnow, *Comparative Administrative Law* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893); *Municipal Home Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1895); *Municipal Problems* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1898); and *Politics and Administration: A Study in Government* (New York: Macmillan, 1900).

⁵⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of History and Practical Politics: A Sketch of Institutional History and Administration* (Boston: Heath, 1889); *Division and Reunion, 1829–1889* (New York: Longman-Green, 1893); and *History of the American People*, 5 vols. (New York: Harper, 1901).

in 1893, ultimately gave the honor of leading public administrationist of their generation to Goodnow. Nevertheless, Wilson was briefly the most prominent commentator on public administration of his day, and he remained a highly influential teacher and public lecturer on the subject.

It should be understood, in order that one might have a complete appreciation of the historical record, that James, Goodnow, and Wilson were pathbreakers in the teaching of administration. In her definitive history, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities: 1636–1900* (1939), Anna Haddow notes only one precedent for the teaching on administration by these three men in the 1880s.⁵⁸ In 1779, at the insistence of Thomas Jefferson, the College of William and Mary established a professorship of Law and Police, with George Wythe as the first incumbent. In Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century dictionary, "police" is defined as "the regulation and government of a city or county, so far as regards its inhabitants." Historian Herbert Baxter Adams of Johns Hopkins University commented in 1887 that "police" was "much the same as the modern science of administration, which is just beginning anew to creep into our university courses." The College of William and Mary adopted a Bachelor of Laws degree in 1792, which required an additional year of study beyond the three years required by the Bachelor of Arts degree. The courses taught in the additional year were "civil History" and "Municipal Law and Police." Haddow implies that this requirement was still in effect a quarter-century later in 1817. Meanwhile, the three-year B.A. program was heavy with the study of government through courses in "moral philosophy," "natural and national law," and "government and political economy."⁵⁹

No other American college made such overt provision for teaching of administration in the eighteenth century, or in the early or middle nineteenth century either, for that matter. Governmental subjects were dealt with under various headings—moral philosophy, political economy, the law of nature and nations; civil polity, law, history, and political philosophy. Even the term political science was used here and there as early as 1800.⁶⁰ How much of that which we now classify as administration was included under these early headings is not terribly clear; surely there was some such teaching, especially under "political economy," which grew stronger as the nineteenth century progressed.

After the Civil War, the colleges, now generally fashioning themselves as universities, made more systematic provision for political science; but little evidence of administration appears in the curricula. For example, at Harvard University a new curriculum in government was developed in the 1870s by Assistant Professor of History Henry Adams. The four course titles do not suggest much attention to administration, and none of the courses dealt solely or even primarily with administration.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Haddow, *Political Science*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 60, 73, 70, and 93.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

In short, with the exception of George Wythe and his successors at the College of William and Mary, the threesome of James, Goodnow, and Wilson were America's first public administrationists. As one of them, Wilson is deserving of praise as an original practitioner of academic teaching on administration. (Richard Ely, Wilson's instructor at Johns Hopkins University, I do not include here, in that, so far as I know, he taught only the one brief course in 1885. A professor of political economy, he did not count administration among his major interests. Years later, at the University of Wisconsin, he was prominent as an expert on taxation.) In addition, Wilson was the first academician to publish on the topic of administration, and his essay contained some noteworthy ideas. Says Waldo, sixty years later, "much of it seems so modern it could have been written yesterday."⁶² It is appropriate, then, to give the "Study" high marks as political science.

The "Study" as Reform Document. The "Study" was more than political science; it also was a reform document of significant value to the reform movement of the day. In fact, it is likely that the *Political Science Quarterly* editor snapped it up, despite its technical defects, because of its apparent relevance and value to reform.

The "Study" is quite obviously about reform. That fact is clearly suggested by Wilson in the essay's first paragraph, in which he suggests that administrative study must obtain answers to certain questions in order that civil-service reform might be accomplished. Wilson justifies his call for a science of administration in terms that clearly evoke the reform sentiments of the day:

This is why there should be a science of administration which shall seek to straighten the paths of government, to make its business less unbusinesslike, to strengthen and purify its organization, and to crown its duties with dutifulness. This is one reason why there is such a science.⁶³

As a reform document, the "Study" ranks as an early published expression of reform sentiment. Both Waldo and Van Riper identify only one earlier scholarly piece (scholarly in tone, but written by a wealthy lawyer-reformer rather than an academic person) promoting civil-service reform.⁶⁴ This was a report on the British civil service prepared for President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1879 by Dorman B. Eaton, an outstanding reform leader, and published in greatly amplified form three years later.⁶⁵ It may be noted in the *Papers* that in 1885 Wilson obtained a copy of the volume containing this essay.⁶⁶

Richard Stillman explains that "[l]ike the other mugwump reformers of the 1880s . . . Wilson was caught up in the pressing issues of the day," of which civil-service

⁶² Waldo, *Administrative State*, 26n.

⁶³ Wilson, "Study of Administration," 485, 1941 reprint.

⁶⁴ Waldo, *Administrative State*; Van Riper, "American Administrative State."

⁶⁵ Dorman B. Eaton, "Civil Administration" in J. J. Lalor, ed., *Cyclopedia of Political Science*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1882), I, 473-475.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Papers*, V, 6-7.

reform certainly was one.⁶⁷ Alan Altshuler writes of Wilson that “[h]e wrote, moreover, as a partisan in a *political* movement: that for reform of the nineteenth century spoils system and substitution of a civil service merit system in its place.”⁶⁸ Wilson had already pointed out the abuses and irresponsibility of the legislative branch in his *Congressional Government*, but there he had offered no remedy. In the “Study,” some eighteen months later, he attempts to offer remedies — namely, a science of administration and the training of men for public service. The essay has many defects from a technical standpoint, but such defects were less important to the reformist audience of the day. As Stillman has said:

One might speculate that a clear definition [of the study of administration] was not Wilson’s major intention in his essay. Rather what was more important to him and to his mugwump audience was finding an appropriate ideology to justify their efforts to strengthen the executive branch, centralize authority, and check congressional irresponsibility.⁶⁹

The Extent of Wilson’s Influence

Much has been said about Wilson’s stature as a reform advocate and as a writer and teacher of public administration. But the entire story has not really been told. Even before his election as governor of New Jersey, Wilson was a truly prominent person, both as an academician and as a reform advocate. In earlier years, he was one of the nation’s most respected college lecturers; later, he was “the best-known college president in America.”⁷⁰ He was a member and officer of the National Civil Service Reform League.⁷¹ He was a member of the National Short Ballot Organization.⁷² He was a well-known and admired public speaker on reform topics, and he spoke at prominent reform meetings; for example, he and Theodore Roosevelt were speakers at a municipal reform meeting in Baltimore in 1896.⁷³ His college teaching had a strong reform flavor to it, no doubt. (Wilson’s entire first-year lecture series at Johns Hopkins in 1898 was on municipal administration, in compliance with Adams’s request that Wilson give his course “a municipal tendency with reference to reform work in this city.”)⁷⁴ Wilson regularly wrote

⁶⁷ Richard J. Stillman, II, “Woodrow Wilson and the Study of Administration: A New Look at an Old Essay,” *The American Political Science Review* 67 (June 1973): 582–591, at 585.

⁶⁸ Alan A. Altshuler, “The Study of American Public Administration” in Alan A. Altshuler and Norman C. Thomas, eds., *The Politics of the Federal Bureaucracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 2nd ed.), 2–17, at 3.

⁶⁹ Stillman, “Woodrow Wilson,” 587.

⁷⁰ Cooper, *Warrior and Priest*, 66.

⁷¹ Mosher, *Democracy and Public Service*, 68, says that he served as League president, while Turner, “Woodrow Wilson as Administrator,” 254, says that he served as vice-president.

⁷² Schiesl, *Politics of Efficiency*, 172.

⁷³ Cooper, *Warrior and Priest*, 60.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Papers*, V, 652.

editorial essays on reform topics for newspaper publication. His later public speeches and writings were full of affirmations of his faith in the common man, which lent to Wilson's popularity as a public speaker.⁷⁵

As an academician, Wilson was active in the academic movements of the day. He was among the founders of the American Economic Association in 1883. When, twenty years later, the American Political Science Association was formed in 1903, he was chosen as one of its initial officers (first vice-president), which he declined; in 1910 he did serve the association as its eighth president. In a day when academic boundaries were less rigid than today, Wilson was active in various areas. He "allied himself with the vanguard of the new social science movement" and was a leader of the movement to establish separate departments of political science, economics, sociology, and public administration.⁷⁶ Through such efforts he promoted and facilitated academic trends that have had major effects on the organization of universities and on the content of the social sciences.

As an academician, Wilson promoted a new approach of realism in the study of politics and exemplified it in his political-science works (*CG*, the "Study," *The State*, and, in 1908, *Constitutional Government in the United States*).⁷⁷ *Congressional Government*, as previously noted, was the first realistic analysis of how American national government worked. *The State* was the original comparative-government text and has been judged by one critic to be one of the three most important books on general political science of the era.⁷⁸ In addition to practicing realism himself, Wilson urged other political scientists to do the same. For example, in a second published essay in 1887, "Of the Study of Politics," Wilson urged that the student go beyond the law and become acquainted with the life of the state. He who reads constitutions with lawyers as guides, he wrote, "risks knowing the anatomy, but not the biology of the state."⁷⁹ Through both word and example, then, Wilson promoted a dramatic revolution in political study.

Of Wilson's own political-science endeavors, J. M. Cooper delivers this judgment:

The work he produced made him the finest American political scientist of the period of his academic career, from the mid-1880s to 1910. . . . Only with work of such different men as Charles E. Merriam and Harold Lasswell would American political scientists begin to operate on Wilson's level of inquiry. . . . His true successor . . . was Walter Lippmann.⁸⁰

Of Wilson's influence on the development of the discipline of political science, Seidelman and Harpham offer this judgment:

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Seidelman and Harpham, *Disenchanted Realists*, 45.

⁷⁷ Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908).

⁷⁸ Vernon L. Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1920* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1930), vol. 3, 119.

⁷⁹ Woodrow Wilson, "Of the Study of Politics," *New Princeton Review* 3 (March 1887): 188-199.

⁸⁰ Cooper, *Warrior and Priest*, 54.

Woodrow Wilson aggressively asserted the claims of a new field of political study and an innovative science of administration as a means of effecting political reforms. The need for a science of administration was adopted as the conventional wisdom of political science. Without question, Wilson catalyzed the professional development of political science. . . . The professional organizations and language of the American science of politics carried on Wilson's concerns.⁸¹

Seidelman and Harpham also offer the conclusion that "through his call for an administrative science, Wilson helped to legitimate the role of professional research organizations, the political science discipline, and the transformation of American universities."⁸²

CONCLUSION

I could go on. For example, there could be a section on Wilson as political theorist. (The "Study" is recognized by some commentators as, for better or worse, a major work in American political theory.)⁸³ I hope that impressed upon the reader by now is a respect for Woodrow Wilson as a Progressive President, as a political scientist, as a reform advocate, and as an early public administrationist. If one appreciates all these points, he or she will understand, without further argument, that Woodrow Wilson has had a large influence on twentieth-century American public administration. One simply could not be all that he was and do all that he did without having such an influence.

Those who wish to argue that Wilson has had no influence on modern public administration simply have suffered either from insufficient facts (particularly a problem prior to the publication of Wilson's *Papers*, beginning in 1968) or from tunnel vision. In the case of tunnel vision, there is a focus on the politics-administration dichotomy and on overt linkages between Wilson's 1887 essay and subsequent public-administrationist literature. But Wilson's influence on twentieth-century public administration has occurred *least of all* through his direct influence on academic public-administration theory. There has been some of that, yes; but more importantly there have been the influence of his Progressive presidency; his influence as an academician, on and through the reform movement of his day; his influence on the transformation of the social sciences as separate, discrete fields of enquiry; his role in the transformation of the universities; and his role in the orientation of political science to realism rather than to constitutional formalism. Through *all* of these avenues, Wilson has affected American political science and public administration of today.

⁸¹ Seidelman and Harpham, *Disenchanted Realists*, 55.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸³ Mosher, *Democracy and Public Service*; Seidelman and Harpham, *Disenchanted Realists*; Ostrom, *Intellectual Crisis*; and Douglas Yates, *Bureaucratic Democracy: The Search for Democracy and Efficiency in American Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).