The connection between politics and administration arouses remarkably little interest in the United States. The presidency is considered more glamorous, Congress more intriguing, elections more exciting, and interest groups more troublesome. General levels of public interest can be gauged by the burst of indifference that usually greets the announcement of a new President's cabinet or rumors of a political appointee's resignation. Unless there is some White House "tie-in" or scandal (preferably both), news stories about presidential appointments are usually treated by the media as routine filler material.

This lack of interest in political administration is rarely found in other democratic countries, and it has not always prevailed in the United States. In most nations the ups and downs of political executives are taken as vital signs of the health of a government, indeed of its survival. In the United States, the nineteenth-century turmoil over one type of connection between politics and administration—party spoils—frequently overwhelmed any notion of presidential leadership. Anyone reading the history of those troubled decades is likely to be struck by the way in which political administration in Washington registered many of the deeper strains in American society at large. It is a curious switch that appointments to the bureaucracy should loom so large in the history of the nineteenth century, when the federal government did little, and be so completely discounted in the twentieth century, when government tries to do so much.

Political administration in Washington continues to register strains in American politics and society, although in ways more subtle than the nineteenth-century spoils scramble between Federalists and Democrats, Pro-and Anti-tariff forces, Nationalists and States Righters, and so on. Unlike many other countries, the United States has never created a high level, government-wide civil service. Neither has it been favored with a political structure that automatically produces a stock of experienced political manpower for top executive positions in government. How then does political administration in Washington work? More to the point, how might the expanding role of government be changing the connection between administration and politics?

Received opinion on this subject suggests that we already know the answers. Control is said to be vested in an informal but enduring series of "iron triangles" linking executive bureaus, congressional committees, and interest group clienteles with a stake in particular programs. A President or presidential appointee may occasionally try to muscle in, but few people doubt the capacity of these subgovernments to thwart outsiders in the long run.

Based largely on early studies of agricultural, water, and public works policies, the iron triangle concept is not so much wrong as it is disconcertingly incomplete.2 And the conventional view is especially inappropriate for understanding changes in politics and administration during recent years. Preoccupied with trying to find the few truly powerful actors, observers tend to overlook the power and influence that arise out of the configurations through which leading policy makers move and do business with each other. Looking for the closed circles of power, we tend to miss the fairly open networks of people that increasingly impinge upon government.

To do justice to the subject would require a major study of the Washington community and the combined inspiration of a Leonard White and a James Young. Tolerating a fair bit of injustice, one can sketch a few of the factors that seem to be at work. The first is growth in the sheer mass of government activity and associated expectations. The second is the peculiar, loose-jointed play of influence that is accompanying this growth. Related to these two is the third: the layering and specialization that have overtaken the government work force, not least the political leadership of the bureaucracy.

All of this vastly complicates the job of presidential appointees both in controlling their own actions and in managing the bureaucracy. But there is much more at stake than the troubles faced by people in government. There is the deeper problem of connecting what politicians, officials, and their fellow travelers are doing in Washington with what the public at large can understand and accept. It is on this point that political administration registers some of the larger strains of American politics and society, much as it did in the nineteenth century. For what it shows is a dissolving of organized politics and a politicizing of organizational life throughout the nation.

Government Growth in an Age of Improvement

Few people doubt that we live in a time of big government. During his few years in office, President Kennedy struggled to avoid becoming the first President with a $100 billion budget. Just seventeen years later, President Carter easily slipped into history as the first $500 billion President. Even in

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constant prices, the 1979 federal budget was about double that of 1960. The late 1950s and the entire 1960s witnessed a wave of federal initiatives in health, civil rights, education, housing, manpower, income maintenance, transportation, and urban affairs. To these, later years have added newer types of welfare concerns: consumer protection, the environment, cancer prevention, and energy, to name only a few. Whatever today’s conventional skepticism about the success of these programs, posterity will probably regard the last twenty-odd years as an extraordinarily ambitious, reform-minded period. The dominant feeling behind our age of improvement was best expressed by Adlai Stevenson in 1955 when he sensed a new willingness “to feel strongly, to be impatient, to want mightily to see that things are done better.”

However, we need to be clear concerning what it is that has gotten big in government. Our modern age of improvement has occurred with astonishingly little increase in the overall size of the federal executive establishment. Figure 5-1 traces changes in the raw materials of government: money, rules, and people from 1949 to 1977. The year 1955 represented a return to more normal times after the Korean conflict and may be taken as a reasonable baseline. Since that year national spending has risen sixfold in current dollars and has more than doubled in constant terms. Federal regulations (as indicated by pages in the Federal Register) have also sextupled. In the cases of both money and regulations, it was during the second Eisenhower administration that a new and expensive activism in public policy began to sweep through the national government. The landslide congressional victory by liberal Democrats in 1958, the challenge of Sputnik, the new stirrings of the civil rights movement, and other factors created a wave of government spending and regulation that has continued to roll ever since.

The force of this growth was felt at least as much in the Nixon-Ford years as in the earlier decade of New Frontier/Great Society programs under Democratic Presidents.

Yet federal employment grew hardly at all in comparison with spending and regulations (up by less than one-fifth since 1955). Despite widespread complaints about the size of government, the federal bureaucracy is entitled to join foreign aid as one of that small band of cases where close to zero-growth has been the norm for the last twenty-five years.

The paradox of expanding government and stable bureaucracy has two explanations. In purely budgetary terms, much of the increase in federal outlays has been due to higher costs of existing policies. It does not nec-

\footnote{Office of Management and Budget, The United States Budget in Brief, 1979 (Washington, D.C., 1979), p. 21.}
essarily require more bureaucrats to write larger checks. Such cost increases have been especially important in the area of income maintenance programs. Federal payments to individuals (social security, medical care, veterans' pensions, unemployment insurance, and public assistance) increased from $22 billion in 1960 to $167 billion in 1977, accounting for well over half of the total increase in federal domestic spending during those years. Much of this increase came not from adding new programs but from higher bills for existing programs, particularly social security. Thus at the end of 1977, when federal outlays were at $402 billion, President Carter proposed a $500 billion budget for fiscal year 1979. Of the $98 billion increase, about 90 percent was due to the higher cost of existing policies and only 10 percent to new spending recommended by the President. About one-quarter of the total cost increase was due simply to income security programs.

This sort of momentum in government obviously presents serious challenges to politicians in general and to politically appointed executives in particular. These are the people who tend to feel they have a mandate to “change things, shake up the bureaucracy” and who even in the best of circumstances have only a few years in which to do so. But there is a second and at least equally important explanation for the stability of the national bureaucracy in an era of increased policy interventionism. This factor creates even more profound problems for government leadership.

In the main, Washington has not attempted to change its policies by administering programs directly to the general population. It has therefore been able to avoid bureaucratic giantism. This is true in many programs classified as payments to individuals (for example, Medicare and Medicaid funds pass through large numbers of administrative middlemen), and it is especially true in several of the policy areas that have grown the fastest since the mid-fifties. One such area is investment and subsidies for the physical environment. Grants for mass transit, waste treatment plants, highways, and the like have tripled in real terms since 1960. Another area rich in indirect administration falls under the heading of social investment and services; spending for education, health care, employment training, urban development, and social services has risen more than tenfold since 1960. Rather than building and staffing its own administrative facilities for these programs, the federal government has preferred to act through intermediary organizations—state governments, city halls, third party payers, consultants, contractors, and many others. Administratively, the result is that what was true during the Eisenhower administration remains true today: despite huge increases in government programs, about the only time an ordinary citizen sees a federal bureaucrat is when his mail is delivered, his taxes are audited, or a trip to the local social security office becomes necessary (unless of course an FBI agent knocks on his door).

New policies associated with our modern age of improvement have tended to promote the idea of government by remote control. Political administration in Washington is heavily conditioned by an accumulation of methods for paying the bills and regulating the conduct of intermediary organizations. This pattern is consistent with a long tradition of fragmented and decentralized administration. Moreover, it offers important political and bureaucratic advantages. Spreading cash grants among various third party payers is an important way of building support for policies, translating otherwise indivisible collective goods into terms suitable for distributive politics. Rather than having to convince everyone of the value of a clean environment, government administrators can preside over a scramble for federal funds to subsidize construction of local sewage treatment plants. Likewise, in spending for health, manpower, transportation, and so on, the federal government has sidestepped the tremendously difficult task of creating a broad national consensus for its own administered activities. It has done so by counting on third parties to create the funds which the national government makes available to serve its purposes. Recently Charles Schultz has argued that Washington should make greater use of market incentives to meet public ends. Yet as far as fiscal relations in the political marketplace are concerned, a strong case could be made that in fact the federal government has done little else.

In terms of using intermediaries to administer the new mellioristic policies, the mushrooming of federal regulations has much in common with federal spending. Rather than having to work at building and policing its own delivery mechanisms, the Washington bureaucracy can use regulations and then rest content with telling other public and private bureaucracies what should be done. This has the added advantage of allowing federal policy makers to distribute not only funds but also much of the blame when things go wrong.

One might suppose that the executive establishment in Washington has put itself in an extremely uncomfortable position, retailing the promise of improved policies and wholesaling the administrative headaches connected with delivery. Unfortunately, life has not been so kind. People increasingly expect Washington to solve problems but not to get in anyone’s way in the
process. The result is that policy goals are piled on top of each other without generating any commitment to the administrative wherewithal to achieve them. Even in the depths of anti-Washington sentiment, the overwhelming majority of Americans agreed that the federal government should control inflation, prevent depressions, assure international peace, regulate private business, and also ensure that the poor are taken care of, the hungry fed, and every person assured a minimum standard of living. A comparably large majority also felt that the federal government was too "big and bureaucratic." As it turns out, therefore, the executive establishment in Washington tends to get the worst of both worlds—blamed for poor delivery by its public customers and besieged with bills from its middlemen.

Fraying at the Center

The strategy of responding to aspirations for improvement while maintaining a no-growth national administrative machine and relying on middlemen has succeeded in doing one thing. It has saved Washington policy makers from having to cope with what would otherwise have been an immense, nationwide bureaucracy. Yet far from simplifying operations, this "success" has vastly complicated the connection between administration and politics in Washington. Lacking their own electoral mandates, political administrators have always been in an ambivalent position in American government. Every ambitious new program, every clever innovation in indirect administration has merely deepened this ambivalence.

What is occurring at the national level is a peculiar "push-pull effect" on the relation between democratic politics and the executive establishment. On the one hand, government growth has pushed more and more policy concerns out of the federal government's own structure and into masses of intermediary, issue-conscious groups. On the other hand, the requirements for managing such a complex system are pulling government leadership further and further away from the nontechnical, non specialist understanding of the ordinary citizen and politician. It is worth looking more closely at how it is possible to be both politicizing organizational life and depoliticizing democratic leadership.

All Join In  During 1977-1978, Harvard University hired a Washington lobbyist and joined a loose group called Friends of D.N.A. in an effort to influence federal regulation of research into the creation of new forms of life. The same year, the former militant chairman of the Black Panther party, Bobby Seale, founded a new Washington organization to lobby for community-controlled poverty programs. And the president of the national machinery's union convened a National Energy Coalition composed of environmentalists, neighborhood organizers, and consumer advocates. Perhaps not coincidentally, forty-seven congressmen announced their retirement, citing as the major reason a lack of enjoyment in the job.

Trivial in their own right, these incidents suggest something deeper than the feeling (probably true) that exercising power is not as much fun as it used to be in the clubby days of Washington politics. As more and more puzzling, unfamiliar policy issues have been thrust on government, more and more fluid groups have been unexpectedly mobilized. As proliferating groups have claimed a stake and clamored for a place in the policy process, they have helped to diffuse the focus of political and administrative leadership.

What has happened at the subnational level of government is a striking illustration of this process. Much of the bureaucratic expansion that might otherwise have occurred nationally has taken place in state and local governments. Between 1955 and 1977 state and local public employment grew by more than two and one-half times, to 12 million people, while federal employment hovered at around 2.5 million. The increased interdependence of subnational and national bureaucracies has led to the growth of what Samuel H. Beer has termed the intergovernmental lobby. Those in Washington whose memories go back a generation or more can recall a time when it was something of an occasion for a governor to undertake a missiion to Washington. As Senator Moynihan (who was a junior aide to Governor Averell Harriman in the 1940s) put it, "You'd spend time planning how many shirts to take. Going to Washington was a very big deal." Today, not only do governors or mayors as groups have their own specialized staffs permanently stationed in Washington, but large state governments, major units within state governments, and individual cities frequently have their own Washington offices or hired representatives. In addition to umbrella organizations such as the National Governors' Conference, the Conference of State Governments, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the National Association of Counties, one finds the intergovernmental lobby peopled with representatives from groups such as the New York State Association of Counties, cities such as Detroit and Boston, major counties, various state water districts, boards of regents, and so on and on and on.


10Office of Management and Budget, Special Analyses, 1979 Budget, p. 33.


Similarly, an even larger number of private and semi-private organizations have grown up as important extensions of the new federal policies. One of the enduring legacies of every reform movement in the United States—whether it was the Progressives’ good government movement, Hoover’s attempts at engineering voluntarism, or FDR’s New Deal—has been to create new groups with a stake in the reformed processes and programs. So too our own age of improvement has encouraged a blossoming of policy participants and kibitzers. In this instance (and this differentiates it somewhat from earlier periods), virtually everyone has accepted the idea that the national government in Washington is the decisive arena and will continue to be so indefinitely.

Some groups are nurtured by the government’s own need for administrative help. For example, new neighborhood associations have been asked to take a major part in Washington’s urban and housing programs. Or when the Consumer Product Safety Commission sets new standards for extension cords, the National Electrical Manufacturers’ Association plays a major part in drawing up the new designs. Some groups are almost spontaneously called into being by what they can gain or lose from new federal policies or—perhaps just as often—the unforeseen consequences of these policies. For example, in the early 1970s Washington launched vigorous new efforts to promote grain exports. This generated not only new borrowing by farmers to expand production but also a new, militant farmers’ organization (American Agriculture) when prices later fell from their export-led highs.

A key factor in the proliferation of groups is the almost inevitable tendency of successfully enacted policies unwittingly to propagate hybrid interests. The area of health care is rich in examples. Far from solidifying the established medical interests, federal funding and regulation of health care since the mid-1960s have had diverse impacts and therefore have tended to fragment what was once a fairly monolithic system of medical representation. Public policy has not only uncovered but also helped to create diverging interests among hospital associations, insurance companies, medical schools, hospital equipment manufacturers, local health planning groups, preventive medicine advocates, nonteaching research centers, and many others. This does not necessarily mean that every group is in conflict with all of the others all of the time. The point is that even when government is not pursuing a deliberate strategy of divide and conquer, its activist policies greatly increase the incentives for groups to form around the differential effects of these policies, each refusing to allow any other group to speak in its name.

While nothing should necessarily be assumed about their political power, trade and professional associations offer a revealing pattern of growth. The number of such groups has grown sharply during three periods: during the First World War, the first half of the 1930s, and the Second World War. Since 1945 the total number has been continuously increasing, and in recent years more and more of these groups have found it useful to make their headquarters in Washington. During the 1970s the number of trade and professional associations headquartered in Washington surpassed that in New York for the first time, climbing to 1,800 organizations with 40,000 employees in 1977. Well over half of the nation’s largest associations (those with annual budgets of over $1 million) are now located in the Washington metropolitan area. This takes no account of the large number of consumer and other public interest groups that have sprouted all over the nation’s capital since the early 1960s.

Of course Americans’ love affair with interest groups is hardly a new phenomenon. From abolitionists to anarchists there has never been a lack of issue-conscious organizations; in the 1830s, Tocqueville described how the tariff question generated an early version of local farmers’ groups and a national lobbying association. Yet if the current situation is a mere outgrowth of old tendencies, it is in the same sense that a 16-lane spaghetti interchange is the mere elaboration of a country crossroads. With more public policies, more groups are being mobilized and there are more complex relationships among them. Since very few policies ever seem to drop off the public agenda as more are added, congestion among those interested in various issues grows, the chances for accidental collisions increase, and the interaction tends to take on a distinctive group-life of its own in the Washington community. One scene in a recent Jacques Tati film pictures a Paris traffic circle so dense with traffic that no one can get in or out; instead, drivers spend their time socializing with each other as they drive in endless circles. Group politics in Washington may be becoming such a merry-go-round.

How these changes influence the substance of public policy processes depends on what it is that the burgeoning numbers of participants want.

14A similar tendency for public involvement to divide private interests occurred with earlier health initiatives in other countries. See Arnold Heidenheimer, Hugh Heeco, and Carolyn Adams, Comparative Public Policy (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).
16For example, a statement issued by Ralph Nader on April 24, 1978, criticizing the Carter energy program included endorsements by the Natural Resources Defense Council Inc., Friends of the Earth Inc., the Environmental Policy Center, the Environmental Action Foundation, Environmentalists for Full Employment, the Wilderness Society, Consumer Action Now, the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund Inc., the National Parks and Conservation Association, and the National Consumers League.
Obviously their wants vary greatly, but to a large extent they are probably accurately reflected in the areas of greatest policy growth since the late 1950s—programs seeking social betterment in terms of civil rights, income, housing, environment, consumer protection, and so on—what I will simply refer to as “welfare policies.” The hallmark of these policies seems to reflect attitudes in the general public.\textsuperscript{18} What is wanted is not mere equal outcomes or unfair preferences. No, if there is a theme in the clamor of group politics and public policy, it is the idea of compensation. Compensation for what? For past racial wrongs, for current overcharging of consumers, for future environmental damage. The idea of compensatory policy—that the federal government should put things right—fits equally well for the groups representing the disadvantaged (special treatment is required for truly equal opportunity to prevail) and for those representing the advantaged (any market-imposed loss can be defined as a special hardship). The same holds for newer public interest groups (government action is required to redress the impact of selfish private interests). If middle-class parents have not saved enough for college costs they should be compensated with tuition tax credits. If public buildings are inaccessible to the physically handicapped, government regulations should change that. If farmers overinvest during good times, they should be granted redress from the consequences of their actions. The old American saying “there oughta be a law” had a negative connotation of preventing someone from getting away with something. Today the more prevalent feeling is “there oughta be a policy,” and the connotation of getting in on society’s compensations is decidedly positive.

In sum, new initiatives in federal funding and regulation have infused old and new organizations with a public policy dimension, especially when such groups are used as administrative middlemen and facilitators. Moreover, the growing body of compensatory interventions by government has helped create a climate of acceptance for ever more groups to insist that things be set right on their behalf. What matters is not so much that organizations are moving to Washington as that Washington’s policy problems are coming to occupy so many different facets of organizational life in the United States.

\textbf{Policy as an Intramural Activity} A second tendency cuts in a direction opposite to the widening group participation in public policy. Expanding welfare policies and Washington’s reliance on indirect administration have encouraged the development of specialized subcultures composed of highly knowledgeable policy-watchers. Some of these people have ad-


\textsuperscript{19}McKinsey and Company, Inc., “Strengthening Control of Grade Escalation” (Office of Management and Budget Archive; processed, June 1966).

the total number of personal and committee staff on the Hill has climbed from 4,300 to 11,000 and over 20,000 more persons service the legislature from institutional staff positions (the General Accounting Office, Congressional Budget Office, and so on). At the core of this blossoming congressional bureaucracy are bright, often remarkably young, technocrats who are almost indistinguishable from the analysts and subject matter specialists in the executive branch.

There are many straws in the wind to indicate the growing skill base of policy professionals in Washington. Executive search firms (so-called headhunters) have found a booming market in recent years, with many new firms being founded and prestigious New York organizations opening up Washington offices. One indicator of this movement, the amount of “professional opportunity” advertising in the press, now puts Washington on a par with Los Angeles and New York as an executive hunting ground for the private sector. The reason is clear. As government activities and regulations have grown, the value of policy specialists who understand the complex Washington environment has appreciated in the eyes of all of the private organizations with a stake in government activity. Another indicator is the mushrooming of new Washington law firms. Typically these firms are headed by former government officials and practice in substantive areas of law and policy that did not exist twenty years ago.

Again it is tempting to borrow a term from Professor Beer and to refer to these groups of policy specialists as constituting a “professional-bureaucratic complex.” Certainly there are many core groups with scientific or professional training which have carved out spheres of bureaucratic influence over health, highways, education, and so on. Likewise the familiar nexus of less professional, economic interests can still be found linking various parts of the Washington community. But the general arrangement that is emerging is somewhat different from the conventional image of iron triangles tying together executive bureaus, interest groups, and congressional committees in all-powerful alliances.

Unfortunately, our standard political conceptions of power and control are not very well suited to the loose-jointed play of influence that is emerging in political administration. We tend to look for one group exerting dominance over another, for subgovernments that are strongly insulated from other outside forces in the environment, for policies that get “produced” by a few “makers.” Seeing former government officials opening up law firms or joining a new trade association, we naturally think of ways in which they are trying to conquer and control particular pieces of government machinery.

Obviously questions of power are still important. But for a host of po-

course, political administrators do not execute but are involved in making highly important decisions on society's behalf, and they must mobilize policy intermediaries to deliver the goods. Knowing what is right becomes crucial dealing with those who are judged knowledgeable (or at least continuously with responsibility, issue networks seek influence commensurate with their some participants would like nothing better than complete power over the, their comes with being well informed. As the executive of one new group move, coming to minimize our surprises."

22 Whatever the participants' motivation, it is the issue network that ties together what would otherwise be the contradictory tendencies of, on the and, on the other, more narrow technocratic specialization in complex modern policies. Such networks need to be distinguished from three other more familiar terms used in connection with political administration. An issue defined by the network, some problem) of public policy. It is therefore more network is a shared-knowledge group having to do with some aspect (or, as well-defined than, first, a shared-attention group or "public"; those in the knowing of how one knows about policy and identifies its problems. But knowledge does not necessarily produce agreement. Issue networks may or may not, therefore, be mobilized into, second, a shared-action group (creating a coalition) or, third, a shared-belief group (becoming a conventional interest organization). Increasingly, it is through networks of people who regard each other as knowledgeable, or at least as needing to be answered, that public policy issues tend to be refined, evidence debated, and alternative options worked out—though rarely in any controlled, well-organized way. What does an issue network look like? It is difficult to say precisely, for at any given time only one part of a network may be active and through time the various connections may intensify or fade among the policy intermediaries and the executive and congressional bureaucracies. For example, there is no single health policy network but various sets of people knowledgeable and concerned about cost-control mechanisms, insurance techniques, nutritional programs, prepaid plans, and so on. At one time, those expert in designing a nationwide insurance system may seem to be operating in relative isolation, until it becomes clear that previous efforts to control costs have already created precedents that have to be accommodated in any new system, or that the issue of federal funding for abortions has laid land mines in the path of any workable plan.

The debate on energy policy is rich in examples of the kaleidoscopic interaction of changing issue networks. The Carter administration's initial proposal was worked out among experts who were closely tied in to conservation-minded networks. Soon it became clear that those concerned with macroeconomic policies had largely bypassed in the planning, last-minute amendments were made in the proposal presented to Congress, a fact that was not lost on the networks of leading economists and economic correspondents. Once congressional consideration began, it quickly became evident that attempts to define the energy debate in terms of a classic confrontation between big oil companies and consumer interests were doomed. More and more policy watchers joined the debate, bringing to it their own concerns and analyses: tax reformers, nuclear power specialists, civil rights groups interested in more jobs; the list soon grew beyond the wildest dreams of the original energy policy planners. The problem, it became clear, was that no one could quickly turn the many networks of knowledgeable people into a shared-action coalition, much less into a single, shared-attitude group believing it faced the moral equivalent of war. Or, if it was a war, it was a Vietnam-type quagmire.

It would be foolish to suggest that the clouds of issue networks that have accompanied expanding national policies are set to replace the more familiar politics of subgovernments in Washington. What they are doing is to overlay the once stable political reference points with new forces that complicate calculations, decrease predictability, and impose considerable strains on those charged with government leadership. The overlay of networks and issue politics not only confronts but also seeps down into the formerly well-established politics of particular policies and programs. Social security, which for a generation had been quietly managed by a small circle of insiders, becomes controversial and politicized. The Army Corps of Engineers, once the picturesque example of control by subgovernments, is dragged into the brawl on environmental politics. The once quiet "traffic safety establishment" finds its own safety permanently endangered by the consumer movement. Confrontation between networks and iron triangles in the Social and Rehabilitation Service, the disintegration of the mighty politics of the Public Health Service and its corps—the list could be extended into a chronicle of American national government during the last generation.23 The point is that a somewhat new and difficult dynamic is


being played out in the world of politics and administration. It is not what
has been feared for so long: that technocrats and other people in white coats
will expropriate the policy process. If there is to be any expropriation, it is
likely to be by the policy activists, those who care deeply about a set of is-
sses and are determined to shape the fabric of public policy accordingly.

The Technopols

The many new policy commitments of the last twenty years have
brought about a play of influence that is many-stranded and loose. Iron tri-
angles or other clear shapes may embrace some of the participants, but the
larger picture in any policy area is likely to be one involving many other
policy specialists. More than ever, policy making is becoming an intramural
activity among expert issue-watchers, their networks, and their networks of
networks. In this situation any neat distinction between the governmental
structure and its environment tends to break down.

Political administrators, like the bureaucracies they superintend, are
captured up in the trend toward issue specialization at the same time that re-
ponsibility is increasingly being dispersed among large numbers of policy
intermediaries. The specialization in question may have little to do with
purely professional training. Neither is it a matter of finding interest group
spokesmen placed in appointive positions. Instead of party politicians,
today’s political executives tend to be policy politicians, able to move
among the various networks, recognized as knowledgeable about the sub-
stance of issues concerning these networks, but not irrevocably identified
with highly controverisal positions. Their reputations among those “in the
know” make them available for presidential appointments. Their mush-
iness on the most sensitive issues makes them acceptable. Neither a craft
professional nor a gifted amateur, the modern recruit for political leadership
in the bureaucracy is a journeyman of issues.

Approximately 200 top presidential appointees are charged with su-
pervising the bureaucracy. These political executives include thirteen de-
partmental secretaries, some half a dozen nondepartmental officials who
are also in the cabinet, several dozen deputy secretaries or undersecretaries,
and many more commission chairmen, agency administrators, and office
directors. Below these men and women are another 500 politically ap-
pointed assistant secretaries, commissioners, deputies, and a host of other
officials. If all of these positions and those who hold them are unknown to
the public at large, there is nevertheless no mistaking the importance of the
work that they do. It is here, in the layers of public managers, that political
promise confronts administrative reality, or what passes for reality in Wash-
ington.

At first glance, generalization seems impossible. The political execu-
tive system in Washington has everything. Highly trained experts in medi-
cine, economics, and the natural sciences can be found in positions where
there is something like guild control over the criteria for a political ap-
pointment. But one can also find the most obvious patronage payoffs; obscure
commissions, along with cultural and inter-American affairs, are some of
the favorite dumping grounds. There are highly issue-oriented appoint-
ments, such as the sixty or so “consumer advocates” that the Ralph Nader
groups claimed were in the early Carter administration. And there are also
particular skill groups represented in appointments devoid of policy con-
tent (for example, about two-thirds of the top government public relations
positions were filled during 1977 with people from private media organiza-
tions). In recent years, the claims of women and minorities for executive po-
positions have added a further kind of positional patronage, where it is the
number of positions rather than any agreed policy agenda that is important.
After one year, about 11 percent of President Carter’s appointees were
women, mainly from established law firms, or what is sometimes referred
to as the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Old Boys’ Network.

How to make sense of this welter of political executives? Certainly
there is a subtlety in the arrangements by which top people become top
people and deal with each other. For the fact that is the issue networks
share information not only about policy problems but also about people.
Rarely are high political executives people who have an overriding identifi-
cation with a particular interest group or credentials as leading figures in a
profession. Rather they are people with recognized reputations in particular
areas of public policy. The fluid networks through which they move can
best be thought of as proto-bureaucracies. There are subordinate and super-
ordinate positions through which they climb from lesser to greater renown
and recognition, but these are not usually within the same organization. It
is indeed a world of large-scale bureaucracies but one interlaced with loose,
personal associations in which reputations are established by word of
mouth. The reputations in question depend little on what, in Weberian
terms, would be bureaucratically rational evaluations of objective perfor-
manence or on what the political scientist would see as the individual’s power
rating. Even less do reputations depend on opinions in the electorate at
large. What matters are the assessments of people like themselves concern-
ing how well, in the short term, the budding technopol is managing each of
his assignments in and at the fringes of government.

The Executive Leadership Problem

Washington has always relied on informal means of producing politi-
cal leaders in government. This is no less true now than in the days when
party spoils ruled presidential appointments. It is the informal mechanisms
that have changed. No doubt some of the increasing emphasis on educa-
tional credentials, professional specialization, and technical facility merely
reflects changes in society at large. But it is also important to recognize that
government activity has itself been changing the informal mechanisms that
produce political administrators. Accumulating policy commitments have
become crucial forces affecting the kind of executive leadership that
emerges. E. E. Schattschneider put it better when he observed that "new
policies create new politics."24

For many years now the list of issues on the public agenda has grown
more dense as new policy concerns have been added and few dropped. Ad-
ministratively, this has proliferated the number of policy intermediaries.
Politically, it has mobilized more and more groups of people who feel they
have a stake, a determined stake, in this or that issue of public policy. These
changes are in turn encouraging further specialization of the government's
work force and bureaucratic layering in its political leadership. However,
the term "political" needs to be used carefully. Modern officials responsible
for making the connection between politics and administration bear little
resemblance to the Party politicians who once filled patronage jobs. Rather,
today's political executive is likely to be a person knowledgeable about the
substance of particular issues and adept at moving among the networks of
people who are intensely concerned about them.

What are the implications for American government and politics? The
verdict cannot be one-sided, if only because political management of the
bureaucracy serves a number of diverse purposes. At least three important
advantages can be found in the emerging system.

First, the reliance on issue networks and policy politicians is obviously
consistent with some of the larger changes in society. Ordinary voters are
apparently less constrained by party identification and more attracted to an
issue-based style of politics. Party organizations are said to have fallen into
a state of decay and to have become less capable of supplying enough
highly qualified executive manpower. If government is committed to inter-
vening in more complex, specialized areas, it is useful to draw upon the ex-
erts and policy specialists for the public management of these programs.
Moreover, the congruence between an executive leadership and an elec-
torate that are both uninterested in party politics may help stabilize a
rapidly changing society. Since no one really knows how to solve the policy
puzzles, policy politicians have the important quality of being disposable
without any serious political ramifications (unless of course there are major
symbolic implications, as in President Nixon's firing of Attorney General
Elliot Richardson).

Within government, the operation of issue networks may have a sec-
ond advantage in that they link Congress and the executive branch in ways

24 E. E. Schattschneider, Politics, Pressures and the Tariff (Hamden: Archon, 1963), p. 288 (origi-
nally published 1935).

that political parties no longer can. For many years, reformers have sought
to revive the idea of party discipline as a means of spanning the distance
between the two branches and turning their natural competition to useful
purposes. But as the troubled dealings of recent Democratic Presidents with
their majorities in Congress have indicated, political parties tend to be a
weak bridge.

Meanwhile, the linkages of technocracy between the branches are in-
deliberately growing. The congressional bureaucracy that has blossomed in
Washington during the last generation is in many ways like the political bu-
reaucracy in the executive branch. In general, the new breed of congress-
ional staff is not a legislative crony or beneficiary of patronage favors.
Personal loyalty to the congressman is still paramount, but the new-style
legislative bureaucrat is likely to be someone skilled in dealing with certain
complex policy issues, possibly with credentials as a policy analyst, but cer-
tainly an expert in using other experts and their networks.

None of this means an absence of conflict between President and Con-
gress. Policy technicians in the two branches are still working for different
sets of clients with different interests. The point is that the growth of spe-
cialized policy networks tends to perform the same useful services that it
was once hoped a disciplined national party system would perform. Shar-
ing policy knowledge, the networks provide a minimum common frame-
work for political debate and decision in the two branches. For example, on
energy policy, regardless of one's position on gas deregulation or incentives
to producers, the policy technocracy has established a common language
for discussing the issues, a shared grammar for identifying the major points
of contention, a mutually familiar rhetoric of argumentation. Whether in
Congress or the executive branch or somewhere outside, the "movers and
shakers" in energy policy (as in health insurance, welfare reform, strategic
arms limitation, occupational safety, and a host of other policy areas) tend
to share an analytic repertoire for coping with the issues. Like experienced
party politicians of earlier times, policy politicians in the knowledge net-
works may not agree; but they understand each other's way of looking at
the world and arguing about policy choices.

A third advantage is the increased maneuvering room offered to poli-
tical executives by the loose-jointed play of influence. If appointees were
ambassadors from clearly defined interest groups and professions, or if pol-
cy were monopolized in iron triangles, then the chances for executive lead-
ership in the bureaucracy would be small. In fact, however, the proliferation
of administrative middlemen and networks of policy watchers offers new
strategic resources for public managers. These are mainly opportunities to
split and recombine the many sources of support and opposition that exist
on policy issues. Of course, there are limits on how far a political executive
can go in shopping for a constituency, but the general tendency over time
has been to extend those limits. A secretary of labor will obviously pay
close attention to what the AFL-CIO has to say, but there are many other
voices to hear, not only in the union movement but also minority groups in-
terested in jobs, state and local officials administering the department’s pro-
grams, consumer groups worried about wage-push inflation, employees
faced with unsafe working conditions, and so on. By the same token, for-
mer Secretary of Transportation William Coleman found new room for
maneuver on the problem of landings by supersonic planes when he opened
up the setpiece debate between pro- and anti-Concorde groups to a wider
play of influence through public hearings. Clearly the richness of issue poli-
tics demands a high degree of skill to contain expectations and manage the
natural dissatisfaction that comes from courting some groups rather than
others. But at least it is a game that can be affected by skill, rather than one
that is predetermined by immutable forces.

These three advantages are substantial. But before we embrace the
rule of policy politicians and their networks, it is worth considering the
threats they pose for American government. Issue networks may be good at
influencing policy, but can they govern? Should they?

The first and foremost problem is the old one of democratic legiti-
macy. Weaknesses in executive leadership below the level of the President
have never really been due to interest groups, party politics, or Congress.
The primary problem has always been the lack of any democratically based
power. Political executives get their popular mandate to do anything in the
bureaucracy secondhand, from either an elected chief executive or Con-
gress. The emerging system of political technocrats makes this democratic
weakness much more severe. The more closely political administrators be-
come identified with the various specialized policy networks, the farther
they become separated from the ordinary citizen. Political executives can
maneuver among the already mobilized issue networks and may occasion-
ally do a little mobilizing of their own. But this is not the same thing as cre-
ating a broad base of public understanding and support for national poli-
cies. The typical presidential appointee will travel to any number of
conferences, make speeches to the membership of one association after an-
other, but almost never will he or she have to see or listen to an ordinary
member of the public. The trouble is that only a small minority of citizens,
even of those who are seriously attentive to public affairs, are likely to be
mobilized in the various networks.25 Those who are not policy activists de-
pend on the ability of government institutions to act on their behalf.

If the problem were merely an information gap between policy ex-
erts and the bulk of the population, then more communication might help.

25An interesting recent case study showing the complexity of trying to generalize about who is
“mobilizable” is James N. Rosenau, Citizenship Between Elections (New York: The Free Press,
1974).

Yet instead of garnering support for policy choices, more communication
from the issue networks tends to produce an “everybody loves causes”
syndrome among ordinary citizens. Policy forensics among the networks
yield more experts making more sophisticated claims and counterclaims to
the point that the non-specialist becomes inclined to concede everything
and believe nothing that he hears. The ongoing debates on energy policy,
health crises, or arms limitation are rich in examples of public skepticism
about what “they,” the abstruse policy experts, are doing and saying. While
the highly knowledgeable have been playing a larger role in government,
the proportion of the general public concluding that those running the gov-

ernment don’t seem to know what they are doing has risen rather steadily.26
Likewise, the more government has tried to help, the more feelings of pub-
lc helplessness have grown.

No doubt many factors and events are linked to these changing public
attitudes. The point is that the increasing prominence of issue networks is
bound to aggravate problems of legitimacy and public disenchantment.
Policy activists have little desire to recognize an unpleasant fact: that their
influential systems for knowledgeable policy making tend to make democ-
rat ic politics more difficult. There are at least four reasons.

Complexity Democratic political competition is based on the idea of
trying to simplify complexity into a few, broadly intelligible choices. The
various issue networks, on the other hand, have a stake in searching out
complexity in what might seem simple. Those who deal with particular poli-
icy issues over the years recognize that policy objectives are usually vague
and results difficult to measure. Actions relevant to one policy goal can fre-
nently be shown to be inconsistent with others. To gain a reputation as a
knowledgeable participant, one must juggle all of these complexities and
demand that other technocrats in the issue networks do the same.

Consensus A major aim in democratic politics is, after open argu-
ment, to arrive at some workable consensus of views. Whether by trading
off one issue against another or by combining related issues, the goal is
agreement. Policy activists may commend this democratic purpose in the-
ory, but what their issue networks actually provide is a way of processing

26Since 1964 the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has asked the ques-
tion, “Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people, or
do you think that quite a few of them don’t seem to know what they are doing?” The propor-
tions choosing the latter view have been 28 percent (1964), 38 percent (1968), 45 percent (1970),
42 percent (1973), 47 percent (1979), and 52 percent (1979). For similar findings on public feel-
ings of lack of control over the policy process, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on In-
tergovernmental Relations of the Committee on Government Operations, Confidence and Con-
For a more complete discussion of recent trends see the two articles by Arthur H. Miller and
Jack Citrin in the American Political Science Review (September 1974).
dissension. The aim is good policy—the right outcome on the issue. Since what that means is disputable among knowledgeable people, the desire for agreement must often take second place to one's understanding of the issue. Trade-offs or combinations—say, right-to-life groups with nuclear-arms-control people; environmentalists and consumerists; civil liberties groups and anti-gun controllers represent a kind of impurity for many of the newly proliferating groups. In general there are few imperatives pushing for political consensus among the issue networks and many rewards for those who become practiced in the techniques of informed skepticism about different positions.

Confidence Democratic politics presumes a kind of psychological asymmetry between leaders and followers. Those competing for leadership positions are expected to be sure of themselves and of what is to be done, while those led are expected to have a certain amount of detachment and dubiety in choosing how to give their consent to be governed. Politicians are supposed to take credit for successes, to avoid any appearance of failure, and to fix blame clearly on their opponents; voters weigh these claims and come to tentative judgments, pending the next competition among the leaders.

The emerging policy networks tend to reverse the situation. Activists mobilized around the policy issues are the true believers. To survive, the newer breed of leaders, or policy politicians, must become well versed in the complex, highly disputed substance of the issues. A certain tentativeness comes naturally as ostensible leaders try to spread themselves across the issues. Taking credit shows a lack of understanding of how intricate policies work and may antagonize those who have really been zealously pushing the issue. Spreading blame threatens others in the established networks and may raise expectations that new leadership can guarantee a better policy result. Vagueness about what is to be done allows policy problems to be dealt with as they develop and in accord with the intensity of opinion among policy specialists at that time. None of this is likely to warm the average citizen's confidence in his leaders. The new breed of policy politicians are cool precisely because the issue networks are hot.

Closure Part of the genius of democratic politics is its ability to find a nonviolent decision-rule (by voting) for ending debate in favor of action. All the incentives in the policy technocracy work against such decisive closure. New studies and findings can always be brought to bear. The biggest rewards in these highly intellectual groups go to those who successfully challenge accepted wisdom. The networks thrive by continuously weighing alternative courses of action on particular policies, by suspending disbelief and accepting that something must be done.

For all of these reasons, what is good for policy making (in the sense of involving well-informed people and rigorous analysts) may be bad for democratic politics. The emerging policy technocracy tends, as Henry Aaron has said of social science research, to "corrode any simple faiths around which political coalitions ordinarily are built." Should we be content with simple faiths? Perhaps not; but the great danger is that the emerging world of issue politics and policy experts will turn John Stuart Mill's argument about the connection between liberty and popular government on its head. More informed argument about policy choices may produce more incomprehensibility. More policy intermediaries may widen participation among activists but deepen suspicions among unorganized nonspecialists. There may be more group involvement and liberal democratic legitimacy, more knowledge and more Know-Nothingism. Activists are likely to remain unsatisfied with, and nonactivists uncommitted to, what government is doing. Superficially this canceling of forces might seem to assure a conservative tilt away from new, expansionary government policies. However, in terms of undermining a democratic identification of ordinary citizens with their government, the tendencies are profoundly radical.

A second difficulty with the issue networks is the problem that they create for the President as ostensible chief of the executive establishment: The emerging policy technocracy puts presidential appointees outside of the chief executive's reach in a way that narrowly focused iron triangles rarely can. At the end of the day, constituents of these triangles can at least be bought off by giving them some of the material advantages that they crave. But for issue activists it is likely to be a question of policy choices that are right or wrong. In this situation, more analysis and staff expertise—far from helping—may only hinder the President in playing an independent political leadership role. The influence of the policy technicians and their networks permeates everything the White House may want to do. Without their expertise there are no option papers, no detailed data and elaborate assessments to stand up against the onslaught of the issue experts in Congress and outside. Of course a President can replace a political executive, but that is probably merely to substitute one incumbent of the relevant policy network for another.

It is, therefore, no accident that President Carter found himself with a cabinet almost none of whom were either his longstanding political backers or leaders of his party. Few if any of his personal retinue could have passed through the reputational screens of the networks to be named, for example, a secretary of labor or defense. Moreover, anyone known to be close to the President and placed in an operating position in the bureaucracy puts him-

self, and through him the President, in an extremely vulnerable position. Of the three cabinet members who were President Carter's own men, one, Andrew Young, was under extreme pressure to resign in the first several months. Another Carter associate, Bert Lance, was successfully forced to resign after six months, and the third, Griffin Bell, was given particularly tough treatment during his confirmation hearings and was being pressured to resign after only a year in office. The emerging system of political administration tends to produce executive arrangements in which the President's power stakes are on the line almost everywhere in terms of policy, whereas almost nowhere is anyone on the line for him personally.

Where does all this leave the President as a politician and as an executive of executives? In an impossible position. The problem of connecting politics and administration currently places any President in a classic no-win predicament. If he attempts to use personal loyalists as agency and department heads, he will be accused of politicizing the bureaucracy and will most likely put his executives in an untenable position for dealing with their organizations and the related networks. If he tries to create a countervailing source of policy expertise at the center, he will be accused of aggravating the Imperial Presidency and may hopelessly bureaucratize the White House's operations. If he relies on some ambitious idea of collective cabinet government and on departmental executives for leadership in the bureaucracy (as Carter did in his first term), then the President does more than risk abdicating his own leadership responsibilities as the only elected executive in the national government; he is bound to become a creature of the issue networks and the policy specialists. It would be pleasant to think that there is a neat way out of this dilemma, but there is not.

Finally, there are disturbing questions surrounding the accountability of a political technocracy. The real problem is not that policy specialists specialize but that, by the nature of public office, they must generalize. Whatever an influential political executive does is done with all the collective authority of government and in the name of the public at large. It is not difficult to imagine situations in which policies make excellent sense within the cloisters of the expert issue watchers and yet are nonsense or worse seen from the viewpoint of ordinary people, the kinds of people political executives rarely meet. Since political executives themselves never need to pass muster with the electorate, the main source of democratic accountability must lie with the President and Congress. Given the President's problems and Congress's own burgeoning bureaucratization of policy specialists, the prospects for a democratically responsible executive establishment are poor at best.

Perhaps we need not worry. A case could be made that all we are seeing is a temporary commotion stirred up by a generation of reformist policies. In time the policy process may reenter a period of detumescence as the new groups and networks subside into the familiar triangulations of power.

However, a stronger case can be made that the changes will endure. In the first place, sufficient policy-making forces have now converged in Washington that it is unlikely that we will see a return to the familiar cycle of federal quiescence and policy experimentation by state governments. The central government, surrounded by networks of policy specialists, probably now has the capacity for taking continual policy initiatives. In the second place, there seems to be no way of braking, much less reversing, policy expectations generated by the compensatory mentality. To cut back on commitments undertaken in the last generation would itself be a major act of redistribution and could be expected to yield even more turmoil in the policy process. Once it becomes accepted that relative rather than absolute deprivation is what matters, the crusaders can always be counted upon to be in business.

A third reason why our politics and administration may never be the same lies in the very fact that so many policies have already been accumulated. Having to make policy in an environment already crowded with public commitments and programs increases the odds of multiple, indirect impacts of one policy on another, of one perspective set in tension with another, of one group and then another being mobilized. This sort of complexity and unpredictability creates a hostile setting for any return to traditional interest group politics.

Imagine trying to govern in a situation where the short-term political resources you need are stacked around a changing series of discrete issues, and where people overseeing these issues have nothing to prevent their pressing claims beyond any resources that they can offer in return. Imagine too that the more they do so, the more you lose understanding and support from public backers who have the long-term resources that you need. Whipsawed between cynics and true believers, policy would always tend to evolve to levels of insulability. It is not easy for a society to politicize itself and at the same time depoliticize government leadership. But we in the United States may be managing to do just this.