Public Administration and American History: A Century of Professionalism

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It is always at some risk to the professional equivalent of life and limb that historians enter the territory of another discipline. This is particularly true in these Bicentennial days when, as guests at a variety of feasts, we are supposed to provide a rather puzzling mixture of amusement and comfort in the form of sometimes not so subtle assurances that there really is something to celebrate. At the bare minimum, of course, there is always survival; but it isn't easy to make much of a party out of that. For over a decade now historians have been picking at the American past in search of evidences of sin—omission, commission, it makes little difference as long as it is sin. Since we are dealing with human history, it's of course not hard to find. Still, people in search of its past can afford moments of generosity now and again.

Public administration, along with many of the social sciences, has recently taken a renewed interest in its own history, not simply in the history of administration, but in the history of the development of the discipline itself. The distinction between the history of practices long associated with the process of government and the history of the modern professionalization of those practices is a difficult and complex one, but an important, perhaps even essential distinction to make. Human beings were governed by one another long before government became a field to be studied. The emergence of schools to train governors is part of that process by which all professions open access to the disciplines upon which they rest by making the knowledge and skill available outside a strictly limited group. While the process is slow and need not be called democratic, its openness depends ultimately on the fact that it is the knowledge which defines the identity of the group, not heredity or membership in a class however much those factors may influence selection. This is only to say that while professionalism is not a democratic process—indeed the hierarchies of knowledge and judgment it is intended to reflect are the essence of elitism—the development of modern democracy would be impossible without professionalism.

From the perspective of American history, the professionalization of public administration was a key step in the acknowledgment of the dilemma industrial modernization posed for Americans committed to precepts of their revolution, their formative constitutional years, and, ultimately, the nationalism they saw confirmed in their Civil War. Administration became the way of coping with political problems without actually solving them, a process its defenders labeled pragmatic, or pluralist, but which its critics saw as muddling—and worse. The definition of the field, however, depended upon mediating the relation between an administrative elitism devoted to protecting a science of government and a faith in popular democracy which protected an extraordinary range of political practices. That the social sciences were always in the process of striving to be more scientific and the politics always under pressure to be more democratic often exacerbated differences and threats. The social science disci-

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plines contained internal disputes serious enough to sustain competing factions the public rarely ever saw. But so did the professional structure of the political system with its so-called “two-party norm.” The rhetoric of nationalism had to sound notes all could recognize, and if the sound became unintelligible at times, the reasons should have been clearer than they often seemed to be.

The emergence of the field of modern public administration followed almost two decades of post-Civil War history historians don’t particularly enjoy describing. The transformation of the field after 1936 followed another crisis in American national identity, one which historians have been able to deal with thus far only by separating the decade of the ’20s from the drama of the New Deal. All in all, historians have tended to take the history of public administration in terms which satisfied the practicing ideologues of the field, and those terms are clear: that it was essentially a methodological field posing no threat to the traditional political structure and its relation to the American conception of democracy; that it was a user of social science rather than a formulator of it. These principles were clear enough, if one asked the questions the right way, and if one bypassed some of the issues historians tended to raise in other, non-administrative contexts.¹

Some of these issues can at least be suggested by a rather different survey of the last century. Among them are the following. Historically speaking American public administration is an effort to bring together two quite different European traditions, one whose impact first came from Victorian England, the other from Europe, beginning in the late ’90s and extending well into the Fascist years. The latter is exceedingly hard to talk about to a generation which knew something about the horrors of the late phase and is still not inclined to think objectively about the problems Fascism arose to combat; but it needs doing.

Another issue is this, and it is related. American government has depended upon a homemade elite which does the same thing elites do anywhere in the world, except raise the issue of elitism and democratic theory. Critics of American government and social theory do so from time to time, but proponents of American political structure have not been able to do so with impunity. Again, it’s another point worth raising.²

Finally, the New Deal model of social reform was essentially a domestic model built on a conscious rejection of internationalism, not only by so-called “isolationists” but by New Dealers who remembered Wilson with deep affection and respect but knew they could not afford his internationalist politics—and intellectually did not choose to. America’s internationalism raised a whole new set of issues which did very little to change the dependence on the New Deal model, at least through the Johnson Administration when it collapsed. It might be useful to see what questions that raises.

The three issues are very much intertwined, through they may not seem so at this stage. A review of some of the history might make matters a bit clearer.

History Woven into History

As a conscious pursuit of a distinct identity, public administration has a history which extends back only a little over a century, and even that requires some stretching of the term. Historians of the field have tended to look to Woodrow Wilson’s “The Study of Administration” as the opening statement.³ The year was 1887, the threshold of an era participants and historians would soon be calling “progressive.” Nonetheless, if one looks for the major characteristics which define Wilson and his generation of reform politician-intellectuals as a group distinct from the professionals in politics who actually ran the country’s political machinery, the starting point can be pushed back almost two decades. It began in an awareness among the younger offspring of the older national elite that the popular democracy of the Jacksonian era contained some serious problems for a nation moving towards industrialization, urbanization, the potential of international power, and recovery from the profound emotional trauma of a civil war. Henry Adams and his brothers were examples, along with the Roosevelts, and, by the ’90s, those among the new wealthy who committed themselves to the standards and the politics of the older elites. Their concerns were clear as early as the ’70s as the essays Henry Adams and Henry Cabot Lodge contributed to the North American Review make clear. In the first days of the Grant Administration that military leader was viewed as the effective executive who could cut through the partisan and corrupt inefficiencies of the war and post-war governments. His lack of political experience was to be his greatest asset. His popular acclaim would enable him to take a reluctant and self-serving Congress the way he had
taken Richmond.4

Adams vented his anger on gold policy in the
Greenback years, on the vacillations of the Su-
preme Court, and, finally, on the leadership he had
looked to so hopefully, establishing, with the
systematic analysis later critics would try to
develop, an attack on the ignorance, the voracious
self-interest, and the blind inattention of the
public to what his generation of intellectuals knew
of Jacksonian democracy. While later com-
mentators on Adams would see in his histories a
sometimes petulant protection of the Adams
family reputation—after all, John Quincy Adams’
political defeat had heralded the opening of the
Jacksonian era—one can find in all of his writings
the elements which gave the American view of
public administration its characteristic shape. The
elements themselves are all derived from identifi-
able British and European ideas of the period. Their
distinctively American character arises from the
fact that they are all projected against a back-
ground of commitment to popular democracy
which could be critical of Jacksonian political
reform—usually in the form of dramatic overstate-
ment of Jackson’s use of “rotation in office” as
“spoils”—without touching a fundamental faith in
the intuitive rightness, indeed the ultimate
majesty, of American public opinion. The public
could be misguided, misinformed, even mistaken;
but never again, after the election of Andrew
Jackson, could it be acknowledged the “great
beast” many in Alexander Hamilton’s generation
considered it to be. Nor could one look to a
relationship between class differentiation and
political power as the safeguard against public
error. The American adoption of systematic
methods of management being developed in Great
Britain and Germany had to take place in a
political environment, the democratic rhetoric of
which could always render the very concept of
management suspect.

The commitment to the democratic process is
the most profound commitment Americans make
and the most irrational in the sense that examina-
tion of the realities of American history over two
centuries show real limitations in its actual prac-
tice. At the same time, systematic analysis of the
realities of American life in our scientific age
indicates that there are increasing areas of
specialization where public will just doesn’t
operate as effectively as trained judgment. The
history of the Anglo-American concern with the
administration of popular government contains
many efforts to apply scientific method to the
execution of popular will, as well as to the
determination of it. Utilitarianism and the Bentha-
mite calculus paralleled the emerging Jack-
sonianism and sought to provide systematic
methods of measuring and managing public needs
and popular demands. Later proponents of pro-
gramming and budgeting might point to such
concerns with some admiration, assuming that
they ever found it useful to point to a past far
forgotten in the world of modern computation.

At the same time, that same Anglo-American
tradition supported the broadening of the power
and the responsibility of a governing elite trained
to manage the state but not through the authority
of traditional aristocratic rules, at least not quite.
Queen Victoria herself became the living symbol
of the paradox, a dowdy middle-class matriarch
who jealously guarded the majesty of her position,
ruling through a government of commoners for
whom she always seemed to have more affection
that respect. American Victorians emulated an
intense responsibility to the betterment of the life
of the community without moving one step away
from the often tasteless acquisitiveness which
marked their drive to own the trappings of an
aristocracy they could achieve in no other way.

Thus, two distinct and at times conflicting
interests marked the development of American
administrative theory. One emphasized method
and was characterized by a search for precise
technical systems for identifying problems and
seeking their solutions. The other emphasized the
need for a continuously expanding elite to provide
not only knowledge for but a moral attitude
toward social management. The methodological
interest always flirted with radicalisms of various
kinds, avoiding them ultimately by denying that
methods had to have ideological content. From
the development of pragmatism as a philosophy to
the industrial theories of Frederick Winslow
Taylor, American methodologues argued the in-
herent democracy of things that worked precisely,
that provided the goods and services they were
supposed to provide, that satisfied the public’s
expression of desire. If Americans had trouble
coping with their concepts of elitism, they could
find temporary resolution in a mythology of
success that certified not only education freely
provided as the key to mobility, but moral
characteristics and capacities for special insight so
widely distributed in American society that they
could be found everywhere—in midwestern small
towns, in urban slums, as well as in old New England banking families—even if everyone could not be expected to have them in equal degree. Democratic elitism—if that term is not too contradictory—means that the characteristics necessary to the preservation of the genuinely charismatic elements of an effective elite are distributed randomly throughout American society, if not by congressional district, and can be depended upon to provide leadership in all regions and in all economic classes.

While any shorthand attempt to define conceptions of administrative leadership derived from these interests is going to be shorthand indeed, there are some crucial elements which American Victorians seemed able to define. They sought an intense commitment to public good totally disassociated from partisan politics, thereby recognizing a problem they did not always wish to discuss: that political methods and effective government were not always compatible. How leaders elected by a partisan system were going to achieve freedom from it led them first to ideas of cabinet government and responsible parties, then to an almost perverse admiration for Grover Cleveland and his suicidal fights with his own party. They sought an almost mystical capacity to serve the course of history, a physical strength beyond the ordinary, and decisiveness. Wilson continuously used British models in his writing. Theodore Roosevelt shifted between British and German, with terms like "stock" to sound a recurring racial definition of a complex of North European leaders who did not let commitments to popular will stand in the way of what they conceived to be right.5

The recent use of the term "macho" to describe a super-masculine behavior tends to assume that the idea was more or less a product of the Kennedy era. While Joseph P. Kennedy's rearing of his children obviously encouraged such directions, the basic method derived from a late Victorian attitude towards leadership. If one had overcome an injury or a disease, usually in the form of a precarious childhood, so much the better. Courage usually meant the willingness to sacrifice one's interests for one's ideals. One of the clearest statements of the leadership ethos can be found in Woodrow Wilson's Leaders of Men, appropriately a graduation address of the early '90s. It leaves no doubt about the author's sense of the nature of power and the methods of its exercise. It extols incisive choice, the management of one's fellow-men as pawns in one's battles for principle. It denigrates as poetic the overconcern with alternatives and solicitude for the views of others.6

Historians of the last decade have found many of that generation's approaches to power distasteful, even deceitful. Their view of themselves as, in their phrase, "the best men" often excluded, explicitly and at times brutally, those of other ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. The universities they funded and managed for the training of new elites also sought to formalize their prejudices through admissions policies, the operation of social organizations, and the selection of faculty. A society such as ours which continues to depend upon its offspring for leadership can still be shocked at the evidences of ethnic slur in private conversation, while historians puzzle at what to do with such attitudes, say, in the private statements of a Kennedy or a Stevenson. Yet, when such statements appeared on White House tapes, many people seemed genuinely shocked.7

Channelled through the same elite educational system which also produced many in their administrative staffs, they would mark themselves by being gentlemen and getting "C's" while those destined for their future service worked for "A's," some of them gentlemen, to be sure, but many of them well out of the upper or inner society. The system changed somewhat in the 1960s with a relative democratization of such institutions, funded by philanthropic and government scholarship funds; and the era ended with open enrollment. We now cope with the problems we have raised.

It is perhaps worth remarking on some of the significant changes we now see. A sophisticated sense of the nature of personality and its relation to politics, combined with a cynicism emphasized by the remarkable liberalization of disclosure of private behavior of public leaders makes it difficult to search for special intuitions and extraordinary courage—a term strangely out of fashion now—among those whose intellectual distinction has not already been demonstrated. This is as true of our view of past leaders as it is of present and future ones. A recent television portrayal of Franklin Roosevelt does a remarkable job of presenting its audience with a question it assiduously avoids even asking: how a pompous young man who allowed himself to reap the benefits of his position as pawn between his mother and his wife ever got to be a great President.

If we are at a new stage in our understanding of

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the relation between leadership and administration, we ought to understand it better than we do. It is possible that our development of techniques for advertising personality and creating images through public relations has brought our traditional methods of establishing and using leaders to a crisis we have only dimly perceived. The administrative era with which I am most familiar—that of the period between 1920 and 1950—assumed that Americans would continue to draw their leadership from roughly the same urban elites they had known all of their lives, that that elite would be expanded by a process of co-optation they had helped to perfect in the universities and professional organizations they had worked to develop. Administration would serve that elite; but it would not dominate it or replace it let alone provide it a moral base. And it would certainly not create it. We might well ask ourselves whether we have begun to do some of these things without quite realizing it.

The internationalism of the leadership elite was essential to their approach to administrative service; even those who led us as anti-internationalists and isolationists were men and women who had spent significant portions of their lives abroad. Robert McCormick and Robert Taft, for example, may well have reflected sentiments of mid-westerners who knew London, Paris, and Berlin only as they described it; but both men had had ample opportunity to travel abroad and to take the places their social status reserved for them in the pre-jet age international set. From early in the 19th century the dependence of American economic development on foreign sources of capital encouraged the growth of an internationalist class of Americans who travelled back and forth and even established residences in European capitals. Since higher education, particularly technical education, was far more advanced in Europe than in the United States until the end of the 19th century, Americans widely differing in class origin spent crucial episodes of their lives abroad. Did the Boston urban upper class want a park? They used the travels of their friends to examine European parks and their management. Did Civil War veterans need some public support to sustain them in their illnesses and old age? The head of the Sanitary Commission delegated a study of European veterans programs to a friend travelling abroad. Until well into the 20th century a standard format for studies of municipal revenues and taxation, welfare and social security, opened with a survey of foreign plans. The information was gradually more academic, but the funding remained in many cases the same philanthropic sources.

Although the textbook record strongly emphasizes the German influence on administrative practice and theory—and it was certainly important—the British may have had more persistent impact at a greater variety of levels. American students of British government, A. Lawrence Lowell and Woodrow Wilson being the most prominent, looked to the applicability of British cabinet forms and party practices. British observers, of whom James Bryce was the most prominent and perhaps the most widely influential, toured America, advising on governmental reforms, colonial management, and educational innovations. Mrs. E. H. Harriman’s interest in establishing a school for public service had strong overtones of a real concern: how to create a professional civil service for Americans to follow the British models. Great Britain had long been the experience civil service reformers looked to. A transplanted English journalist, E. L. Godkin, was one of the leaders of the American movement, as was the German-born Carl Schurz.

The British influence took a variety of forms and held within it a range of ideological commitments from conservative elitism to Fabian socialism, but with what can be considered a common core of belief in participatory democracy, public opinion, and leadership held responsible to judgment from outside the ruling government. British society trained its leaders in government, economics, and the literature shaping public opinion in an educational system which assured common discourse, even in the midst of doctrinal division. American counterparts observed British reform in the Jacksonian era, examined the medical and military calamities of the Crimean War and the crises of colonial management in Africa and India with a near-professional concern underscored and often infiltrated by lurid tales in fiction and the popular press—the latter a distinction with painfully little difference. One of the things which probably made British propaganda so influential on World War I public opinion in the United States was the fact that it followed routes of access to the American public well travelled by generations of England-watchers in the American press.

One element which distinguishes the British influence from the German is its base in political
debate as the standard by which all administrative policy and practice should be measured. Continental political thought in the 19th century moved much more easily to positions which identified debate with partisan deadlock and sought various versions of single party certification of decisive administration as the new route to industrial democracy. Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy was the most sophisticated statement of democratic cynicism; but Moise Ostrowgorski, Vilfredo Pareto, and ultimately Lenin all came to similar conclusions. In some respects the British refusal to take social science seriously helped protect the Burkean faith in a historical process which felt democratic, even when persistent instances of its failure to be democratic could be pointed to. Whig history with its explicit progressivism helped. At the same time, however, American social scientists of the new generation were being trained at Berlin, Vienna, and Heidelberg, not at Oxford or Cambridge. The German influence was viewed by some of its adherents as an antidote or corrective to the British influence, or at the very least a modernization of it.

At the risk of echoing the propaganda rhetoric of World War I, one still needs to point out the degree to which American Progressives in the years prior to the outbreak of that war saw the German administrative experience as a more efficient and successful approach to the problems of relating the need for democratic involvement in government to the demands of a technological-industrial society. The German experience emphasized specialized management, not only in the General Staff concept utilized by the German Army, but in the role of the Burgomeister in German urban government and the complex of bureaucratic system being developed for scientific institutions. Herbert Croly's influential Promise of American Life pointed this out in 1909, extending the very systematic suggestions of Alfred Thayer Mahan's military theories to the problem of what might be called comparative imperialism. Americans seeking to establish an imperial role for the United States had engaged in various romantic versions of the same thing ever since Washington Irving. The decline of the Spanish Empire had been a subject for American historical writing long before the Spanish American War, as the writings of William Hickley Prescott and John Lathrop Motley testify. By 1909 the view that Great Britain and France were in the process of joining Spain in the inevitable process of decline, that the United States was the obvious successor, but that Germany was threatening to be the pioneer in developing the method, was clear. World War I was not even a shadow on the historical horizon and the reorganizations of the War Department had been underway for almost a decade. By 1906, Theodore Roosevelt was ready to celebrate with enthusiasm the selection of his teacher, John W. Burgess, for the first chair in American studies at the University of Berlin, and the choice was appropriate. Until his death in 1931, Burgess, usually considered the father of American political science—a designation which really ought to go to the German emigre, Francis Lieber—retained his commitment to Germany as the logical, historical ally of the United States in world affairs, not Great Britain.

That the German experience raised questions of industrialism and democracy far more seriously than the British had raised them almost a century earlier tended to be lost as an issue after 1933 and the rise of Hitler to power. Mercifully, Burgess had not lived to see the consequences of the historical development, but former students of his, Charles Beard and Harry Elmer Barnes, did what they could to adjust their thinking to the growing reality. One did not have to approve of German Fascism, but neither did one have to rescue the British Empire from the consequences of history and certainly not for the second time. That their arguments did not appear very attractive in a world under threat from a psychopath is more understandable than the real historical conundrum they were honestly trying to understand.

It is obvious that a historical emphasis on the European roots of American administrative ideas is not going to be attractive to a profession so diligently in search of its identity as American public administration seems to be today. The logical question to ask, certainly, is whether one can point to distinctive American sources. They are there, certainly, but again, the problem is complicated by the fact that they have been less interesting to recent administrative historians than they might have been. If American social scientists have until recently tended to conceal the international roots of their ideas, they have had an equally curious tendency to be disturbed by their domestic sources as well. Specifically, scientific management, generally referred to as Taylorism, has long been acknowledged abroad as America's major contribution to administrative theory. When Colonel Urwick traced the origins of the Presi-
dent's Committee on Administrative Management as they appeared to him, he had no difficulty tracing a line back to Babbage in England, and then in America to Frederick Winslow Taylor, Mary Parker Follett, and then Gullick, Merriam, and Brownlow. I first saw the Urwick book while I was working on a study of the Brownlow Committee. Louis Brownlow lent me his copy. It pleased him because Urwick saw the Brownlow Committee as the culmination of the American administrative science movement; but the line of antecedents Urwick saw did not please him. From Urwick's point of view, the center of the committee was the position represented by Gullick. For Gullick, much more than had the others, rested his administrative science on the industrial tradition Urwick admired. I saw the division at the time, and organized my work in order to take account of it. But I did not recognize its significance. If, as I thought the case, Brownlow and Merriam had won out over Gullick and the industrial management school of thought in the United States, the victory was much briefer than it seemed to me at the time, and, in the long run, a much more serious problem than I had thought. World War II and the years since have all given to budget planning and management the role the industrial ideologues sought, even beyond any of the compromises Gullick had worked so effectively to provide. For Gullick, I now believe, reflected far more accurately than seemed to be the case in 1936 the line federal administrative developments were going to take in the post-New Deal era, although he would ultimately become one of the most articulate critics of the primary role business management came to play in post-World War II government. The primacy of economic planning over social and political management, the emphasis upon employment as the route to national well being and the only route capable of providing the federal government with a politically safe program, all matters with which Brownlow and Merriam would have agreed but which they would have considered secondary to issues of public welfare and popular political commitment, became the dominant mode of attack on public problems. There has been a growing question in my mind as to how true to the real commitments of the Brownlow study the professional attachment to the report really was and how much that attachment rested primarily on an affection for the men who produced it and the professional identity they gave to the field of administration.

There is a larger problem which undergirds these issues. Although many historians continue to support the view that the New Deal was a fundamentally successful reform movement, not only in its own time but for its influence on the history which followed, it is possible to argue that despite its many successes in its day, the New Deal was remarkably effective in building barriers to further reform, many of which have still not been breached. To a certain extent all reform movements can be said to institutionalize the opposition they defeat, to give it a continuing structure for sustaining its hostilities in the "new era" produced by the reform. The existence of scorched earth policies, massive tribal relocations, even genocidal atrocities, all point to efforts to avoid this effect in more primitive aspects of revolutionary change. American reform movements, committed to democratic compromise, have all tended to institutionalize defeated oppositions in the administrative structures the reforms succeed in creating. The result is often to sustain in the new administrative structure, at a level of acceptably reduced hostility, the old opposition, and to give that opposition a lifeline to continuity.

In the case of the New Deal and public administration, the institutionalized oppositions consist of three separate communities: (1) The new business-industrial technicians, no longer the old free enterprisers their rhetoric still intones but now a group of specialists who recognize the necessity of government involvement in business policies their predecessors had trouble even acknowledging; (2) the social science academicians, no longer the objective non-partisan researchers and theorists their professions still describe in their professional histories but now groups of upward mobile interests seeking power through government or foundation grants in support of public policy change; and (3) the growing groups of public service professionals, the American bureaucracy, no longer the Civil Service servants of power and democratic authority, looking for methods to fulfill responsibilities defined by the public through politics or the experts through science, but now scientists themselves, fulfilling the demands of interests defined by their own growing expertise. As the above quick analysis is intended to suggest, the oppositions are still there. As anyone at the University of Chicago has to know, there are still free enterprise theorists actively engaged in presenting their arguments, just as there are genuinely objective, non-partisan
social scientists and public servants committed to finding the most effective means of doing what the public wants done in accordance with the most scientifically acceptable practices. But the level of impacted opposition is high and growing higher.

Even that level of opposition may be one of the American contributions, the consequence of an unintended amalgam of the British belief in the ultimate efficacy of politics and the continental faith in the ultimate truths of science. For I firmly believe that the genius of the turn-of-the-century American debate over the relation between industry and democracy is its unique awareness of the need to compromise points of view Americans alone were debating in a form we need to understand better than we do.

Leaders and Leadership

Two American thinkers presented the oppositions in their most original form: Frederick Winslow Taylor and Thorstein Veblen. Neither of the two positions stands effectively alone: witness the relative isolation in which the two figures are held in their respective literatures. Taylor established a theory of utopian industrialism which depended so completely on the demands of the object being produced for its own most efficient production that human intervention threatened to become a form of worship, or at least of self-perfection, so that the aims of the industrial system could be effectively concentrated on the productive process itself. Only in some of the art the movement generated—Chaplin's Modern Times is still one of the best examples—could the real complexity be suggested. Fascism utilized a similar concern for the revolutionary social character of industrialization to produce a system in which the state became the great work of art. Taylor's theory makes the system of production the great work of art. The objects produced need not be works of art; but the process of producing them becomes the highest form of art, to the extent that it is based on the total commitment of all engaged in the process to the effectiveness of the process of production.

Veblen's theory, by contrast, depended upon a concern for the productive individual, his motives as producer and consumer, and the system generated by his productive activity. Interestingly enough, both Taylor and Veblen saw the role of engineers and engineering in the development of an American contribution to the new industrialism; Taylor because the engineer alone could provide technical innovation to the system, Veblen because he could provide the system its moral sensitivity. Both Taylor and Veblen saw money or attitudes towards money as the chief potential defect. For Taylor there was always at least an implied danger that profit rather than efficiency of the system would inhibit the necessary scientific innovation.

For Veblen the substitution of money for intelligent purpose would have the same effect. "Instinct for Workmanship" stood at the center of Veblen's beliefs: that production could become as gratifying a process as consumption for those who could afford it. What Veblen's analysis depended upon for its ideal outcome was for the engineer to exercise his mind, to use his intellect to achieve the ends of the system, not to allow the organization of the system to dominate his conception of purpose. Veblen's most critical attacks on the failures of his ideal came in his The Higher Learning in America (1918), in which he saw more clearly than anyone since has seen the dangers in an academia so devoted to support of the system that it became its instrument rather than its guide, and in The Engineers and the Price System (1921), in which he provided his most cogent and complex attack on the leaders of the industrial system itself.

Taylor, unfortunately, did not live to see the adoptions of his thought on the scale which followed World War I, spurred in this country at least by efforts to apply his theories in war production. But the social Taylorism which followed the war and which inspired many of the followers of Herbert Hoover, as well as Hoover himself, brought to its fullest, perhaps, a belief in the necessity of organization and efficient belief in the operation of an industrial system. E.A. Filene, Henry S. Dennison, Owen D. Young, and many of the leading industrialists of the '20s all carried a new sense of organization and industrial democracy, varied though its forms might be, which can be found in the work of Taylor and his followers. American Taylorists like Frank Gilbreth advised new European governments. Others travelled to China and Japan, continuing a line of American advice to other nations on the efficiencies of industrial organization and administrative change.

At the same time, the Taylor influence had its other side. It was possible to adopt time and motion studies without seeing the utopian claims.
of the system, even without wishing to. Stopwatch oversight could become just as oppressive, and even more effective, as the sweatshop techniques out of which they had arisen. Efficiency-oriented school boards and other public service institutions could find in Taylorism the answer to older economic questions not necessarily concerned with quality of education. The depression attack on industrial organization and the support given that attack by some of the first-term chaos of the New Deal marked the beginning of a new institutionalized opposition between industrialism and public service, an opposition which, after the rhetoric of the 1936 campaign, became the mark of the New Deal. The new policy-making academics, most of whom had previously identified themselves as Progressive Republicans, switched in large numbers to the Democratic Party.

Within a decade the names of both Taylor and Veblen ceased to be intoned by the former followers of either one. The internationalism of American social thought in World War II introduced a new vocabulary, even for discussion of familiar ideas and problems. The changes which followed World War II were dramatic, although in the ahistorical atmosphere of American social science they went unnoticed as changes. The European migrations of the war years had enriched the rapidly developing social science. Weberian bureaucratic theory moved in directions which made some of the concerns of the previous leaders seem old-fashioned, if not irrelevant. It was hard to see Veblen as a systematic economist or sociologist in the new environment. John Dewey, whose book, The Public and Its Problems (1927), had been a major influence on American public administration, was hard to take seriously as a philosopher against a background which now included the empiricists of the Vienna Circle.

Dwight Waldo’s The Administrative State: A Study of the Political Theory of American Public Administration (1948) and Albert Lepawsky’s Administration: The Art and Science of Organization and Management (1949) stood almost alone in outlining the American history of administrative thought, crediting the engineers and the pragmatists for their contribution; but it was, historically speaking, a futile endeavor. The American concept of national government moved to internationalism even before it had begun to solve its national problems. To the extent that domestic administrative interests reflected that new concern, they benefited by spin-off. If general interest in the administration of state and local government declined, if political analysts found throwbacks to traditional partisan leadership at the local level more attractive than proponents of administrative science were likely to find them, it was part of an era which continued the questioning of administrative reform begun even before the war. The thorough examination of city manager government undertaken by Stone, Price, and Stone had at least implied some of the serious questions, even though they had steadfastly refused to suggest that one could validly wonder if the more than 25 years of experiment had really proved what it set out to prove. When Edward Banfield’s criticisms began to appear, even those most angered by them must have sensed in them the characteristics of a nightmare so realistic that one’s only salvation is the possibility that one might still awaken from it.

Still, his critical reaction was in some respects an extreme form of a set of attitudes one can only today see culminating in a new realism in politicians of all party persuasions.

To the post-New Deal younger generation, Franklin Roosevelt’s pragmatism seemed to prove that a hard line politician sensitive to realities was preferable to a technician searching after the mechanisms of efficient control. Among historians a similar drive appeared in the 1950s as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the latter one of the most clearly branded idealists of the history of the presidency, were redefined as pragmatists in politics. Consensus theorists and exponents of the end of ideology extolled the new pragmatism in various forms.

Concern with the psychological dimensions of leadership coupled with a growing interest in the effective manipulation of public attitudes towards leaders produced a collection of beliefs summed up in the reiterated emphasis upon “style” and a subtle but inevitable separation between the actual management of government and the control of public perception of that management, a disturbing disjunction ultimately given the name “credibility gap” but often without explicit recognition of the fact that leadership had direct responsibility for the management of both sides of the equation. Despite the fact that recent historians engaged in criticizing the consequences of this process seem committed to finding its origins in the Truman Administration and the necessity of developing a rhetorical stance for the Cold War, it is probably clearest in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson
Administrations, by comparison with which the Truman years seem an era of blunt, unmanipulative candor. Truman had relatively little difficulty relating what he believed to be the case to the actions he took in dealing with the issues he faced. Indeed, there were many around him who would have been willing to settle for a good bit more subterfuge and misdirection.

We now know that Eisenhower went into office convinced that it was necessary for him to maintain a non-partisan image, to utilize the consensual aura of his personality to give the appearance of being above politics. This advice did not come to him from Madison Avenue but from responsible social science advisers objectively analyzing the content of his mail. The clumsy circumlocutions of his press conferences, the apparent reversals of opinion with his cabinet officers, all were planned to free him from too strong an identity with controversies likely to damage essential public affection. Criticism of him as “non-political” was accurate only to the extent that it spoke to his impatience with traditional partisan politics. But his management of public relations politics was second only to that of Franklin Roosevelt, whose comparatively amateurish and instinctive use of the same techniques was no longer possible with the growth of the media politics Roosevelt had done so much to generate. More than any other President, Roosevelt had organized the Washington press as a vital arm of presidential policy making in the establishment of consensual politics. Eisenhower effectively systematized the process for his administration.10

If Eisenhower was the first to begin to use systematically the scientific and expert apparatus his predecessors had worked with as amateurs, he was also the first to recognize and point out the dangers in what he was doing. The famous “military-industrial complex” warning from his farewell speech is rarely ever quoted fully. For Eisenhower did not stop with industrialists, engineers, technicians, and generals. He went on to warn against the new generation of academics and university specialists, to point out that specialization at all reaches of government had become a threat to political judgment and public control. That President Eisenhower was saying these things as his responsibilities for presidential management were ending, that President-elect Kennedy was preparing to sweep out the lecture halls of Harvard, and that the public was fully prepared to admire him for doing it, to feel more secure in the new intellectualism, suggests something more complex about the relation between intuition and intellect than we may even yet be prepared to understand. As someone who lived through the Eisenhower Administrations voting the only straight Democratic tickets I had voted either before or since, I can still say that we need to understand the nature and method of his leadership a good deal better than we do.

Paradoxes and Ironies, Puzzles and Dilemmas

It is obviously difficult to try to draw effective conclusions from the tour I have tried to supply through a century of administrative history; but I think it worth the try. For the end of consensual politics, if one describes the past decade in those terms, is obviously painful and serious. The writers of the consensual era all sought in their various versions—and I would include what is called pluralism now among them—some concept of general truth which was distinct from the particular truths held by groups of interests or experts in various fields. The problem is, of course, at least as old as Rousseau, or Madison in the 10th Federalist; but that may be interesting or comforting without being very helpful. In any case, consensual politics in all of its forms assumed that general truths were public truths, capable of being revealed to the public in a very special sense because the public already held them without being altogether conscious of them.

These truths also expressed a consistent body of opinion without fundamental contradiction or irresolvable conflict. Consensual politics also rests on the belief that these truths were created in the public mind over the last two centuries by historical perception of the American experience, not by the manipulative designs of any elite. The fusion of elites has been to manage the relation between public truths and the daily processes of life and to do it in ways which are consistent with those truths. These are simply points which every generation of Americans has believed, and which every generation of Americans has seen undergo threat from the practices of American life, the persistence of conflict, and the periodic resurgences of public and private irrationality. The beliefs have continued to hold, sometimes less securely than at others, and for some groups of Americans not very well at all; but they have held. While beliefs that are held without proof are
ordinarily referred to as dogma, Americans have not enjoyed the use of a term so associated with the suppression of debate. Nonetheless, consensus is dogma, and like all dogma it may be socially useful even when it is intellectually in doubt.

Historically speaking, the most effective attacks on dogma come from two extremes: from intellectual elites who become impatient with the lack of proof and seek to explore and experiment with alternatives, and from genuinely intuitive geniuses who sense the ineffectiveness of a given proposition even though they may themselves believe it and who therefore seek alternative courses of action to lead either to revisions of beliefs or in any case resolution of conflict created by dogma. The latter attack is the hardest for intellectuals to understand and leads to such unanswerable historical questions as what Lincoln really thought about blacks or what Franklin Roosevelt really thought about fiscal policy. Both men believed the dogmas of their day with regard to both, and both men took actions which violated their beliefs knowing that their actions might seriously damage or even destroy the beliefs. Yet neither man seemed capable of providing anything approaching a systematic alternative. With all of the evidence available, it is still no easier to figure out what Lincoln would have done about Reconstruction than what Roosevelt would have done about post-war relations with the Soviet Union. In both cases, the intellectual alternatives can be made reasonably clear; but that doesn’t help much.

We seem disinclined to talk about intuitive genius these days, possibly because the concept is unfashionable, but probably because we don’t see any in front of us at the moment. Intellectual elites tend to be skeptical about such things, despite the fact that, once convinced, they drop to their knees with surprising alacrity. It is also the case that we are now accustomed to being heavily bombarded by professional image makers hired by or for the various claimants. More important, perhaps, it is both the virtue and the defect of intellectual elites that they seek to escape from the dilemma posed by the necessity of recurrent greatness. The processes of professionalization in all fields have sought to avoid the wastefulness of ignorance, wrong guesses, and impulsive imagination, and to routinize behavior to make it more effective. One need only trace the evolution of the aviator from Charles Lindbergh to the modern managerial system which guides a passenger plane from stop to stop to realize how much is gained by the systematization of the profession. At the same time when catastrophes occur, the tendency is to blame the dead pilot in the face of professional exposition which seeks to blame faulty machinery or regulation. Even then, the next step is likely to be a search for a technical device capable of removing the necessity for judgment. Where purely mechanical systems are concerned, that may be the best way, although predicting those areas in which judgment might be faulty and correcting for them in advance might be better still. But the analogies to public affairs do not hold up. There is no machinery for governing, no technical system administrators can devise, which cannot be used to conceal the error it was intended to protect against. The chief defect of professionalism in all fields is the tendency of the profession to insist upon its own standard of judgment, its certification, and its own forms of punishment, and to become increasingly protective of its membership against external criticism. The present national struggle over malpractice insurance seems to be one of the uglier consequences of generations of professional protectionism.

It is perhaps the leading paradox of our age that all of the approaches to social system built up over the last century—whether one calls them social science, public administration, or industrial management—are in a state of crisis. Much of the foregoing discussion has been intended to suggest some of the distinctively American characteristics of that crisis, chief among them a real difficulty in acknowledging the compromises Americans have made with the continuing problems of relating effective management to popular democracy. A recent article by yet another English observer of American government, Henry Fairlie, laments the tendency he sees in the United States today to turn against government, to withdraw from the traditions of responsible power demonstrated by Franklin Roosevelt. “If democracy is to survive at all,” he writes, “this is the demonstration that is needed; and it can come only from America. Anyone who thinks that I am exaggerating,” he continues, “should take a close look at Britain and Western Europe, before he lets his eyes travel east to contemplate the awful spectacle as the night falls on India.”

Ever since Tocqueville, foreign observers have looked at the fragility of American democracy with envy and with fear, recognizing that, like the miraculous spider's web, its strength lay as much in the weight it could support as in the stubborn-
ness with which its periodically broken strands could be repaired. Yet, one had to learn to rely on a capacity to rebuild which often totally denied that the breaks had ever occurred, insisting that the web had been seamless all along. Historians have joined in the weaving of a nationalist tapestry designed to support the process of progress. American social science has traditionally established itself on an anti-historical base, emphasizing the pragmatic tradition of American reform as a tradition paradoxically without a past. William F. Ogburn used to put it well when he complained about the tendency of introductory courses in sociology to begin with a history of the field, a practice he likened to beginning chemistry courses with a survey of alchemy.

The recent historical awakening has been just as bizarre, as historians in all fields, like a band of crazy Penelopes, now race to unravel their work in the full glare of noon. We are embracing our past in a mood of irony and recrimination which is both disturbing and justifiable, although justification is sometimes hard to see. After all, if we believe that the truth is a liberation, then the true past should somehow provide us with something useful. One example will perhaps illustrate the dilemma for historians and analysts of the presidency; that is, the tendency of Presidents under attack to reach for the mantle of Lincoln, an oddly recurring phenomenon with some profound significance. Lyndon Johnson tried it out in the late days of his administration as he sought historical support for the decisions which haunted his conscience. That may have been a painful search for a Texan; but then he had watched Harry Truman's use of Lincolniana. Richard Nixon used a Lincoln bust as a prop for one of his crucial television speeches in the last days of Watergate. A recent photograph of President Ford distributed over the wire services shows him in the throes of composition of his State of the Union message with the shadow of a Lincoln statue framing the presentation of his effort.

Lincoln revivals may appeal to Presidents threatened with public martyrdom more than they do to the aroused public, and possibly more than they do to historians of the Lincoln presidency. In terms of administrative history, the Lincoln presidency is perhaps the one crucial episode most neglected by serious administrative analysis. It is possibly a good bit more embarrassing as a model of the presidency than those Presidents who reach for it for support seem to know. No presidency since Lincoln's has managed to reach such levels of unconstitutionality. Lincoln took steps to solidify the war confrontation without calling Congress into session or waiting for its regular date of assembly. He spent money from the Treasury without proper authorization. No presidential encroachment on the rights of citizens has yet touched Lincoln's watermark: the suspension of habeas corpus; and Lincoln's use of military force to assure his re-election in 1864 makes the hanky-panky of CREEP appear even more childish. One could add to the list by searching for the constitutional status of the Emancipation Proclamation; but that would be piling Pelion on Ossa. The breaking of idols is an ancient pastime, and people who lean on statues without looking first to see what's holding them up probably get what they deserve. But the problem is there. History contains many justifications of extra-legal behavior by public officials and the ground is always the same: that their sense of national need required it.

The point to be made is a simple one and a very disturbing one. The fundamental principle of that political pragmatism we admire in a Lincoln or a Roosevelt is that legal principles cannot stand in the way of action required by compassion, circumstances deemed emergency, or that individual perception of right we call either genius or villainy, depending upon our point of view. In American history such qualities have tended to surface in an elite we also assume we do not have. The idea of administration as a service to such individuals and to the democratic public is based on a belief that those individuals are a more accurate reflection of the public, its needs as well as its desires, than any administrative professional would be likely to be. If the events of the last ten years in American government have called those precepts into question for the first time in historical memory, they have also raised a nagging series of doubts, all of which surround one unasked question: does that decade reflect some aberration we must correct so that we can return to a reliable past, or does it indicate changes in the nature of democratic government so profound that nothing short of basic new insights can adjust us to the new realities?

It might be useful to look back to another period when many Americans were asking the same question. The best year to pick would be 1931. The seriousness of the depression was already clear, but the possibility of change and the
perception of cause too far away and too unsure to be of much comfort. Two leading intellectual influences of the era, Charles Beard and John Dewey, were both troubled by what they saw as the need for fundamental change. Suspicious of Marxism and frightened by Fascism, they nonetheless joined many of their ideologically uncommitted contemporaries in seeing the positive side of events in Italy and the Soviet Union where one could see evidence of coping, however much one may have questioned some of the methods.

Both men were destined to become critics of the New Deal as their first enthusiasms cooled. Roosevelt’s internationalism became the focus of Beard’s hostility, although he had already become disenchanted by the spottiness of New Deal reform. Dewey’s criticisms were earlier and more systematic. Both men were ultimately either ignored by or attacked by the liberal community which now turned completely to the New Deal, not simply as the congeries of political compromise its leading architects knew it to be, but as the model for future reform, the archtypical instance of the triumph of intuitive political genius over systematic analysis and planning.

The dilemma, I think, is clear. From a historical perspective, American democracy contains at its center a hard populist core American historians have for so long associated with either a defunct agrarian idealism or a modern red-neck (in urban terms “hard-hat”) fundamentalist ignorance that they fail to see its presence at all levels of American thought. The revelation in the recent Adlai Stevenson biography that our generation’s most intellectual politician was not much of a reader, that he preferred the company of people to the privacy of books, should come as no shock to historians who discarded Woodrow Wilson’s scholarship so long ago they are no longer even embarrassed by their own ignorance of it. The great American politician is not an egghead except in a very special sense. He provides the shell into which generations of intellectuals struggle to blow their yolkts. It is ultimately his political intuitions which mark him as great, not the illusion of his mind, though we work to create that illusion in an image we scarcely understand and for which we will retain only limited respect. But such matters point to only half the problem.

We are also members of an intellectualized, technologized society which is increasingly being administered rather than governed. More and more of what was once government, in the sense of being the product of a process of public decision making in various delegated forms, is now given over to the processes of adhering to decisions made long ago, on grounds now unclear, reinterpreted by a judicial process no one understands precisely, and managed by executives who are puzzled about their actual responsibilities and sometimes even disrespectful of those which are clear to them. To call the process democratic in any traditional sense is possibly misrepresentation. The problem is complicated by the introduction into our technology of a methodology for creating the illusion of intuition through a process familiar enough to the Jacksonians and the image of log-cabin politics, but far more sophisticated and effective in its modern adaptation, and possibly far more dangerous, given the fact that it relies on a projection of the promise that there are solutions available for all problems, that the solutions, no matter how complex, are capable of reduction to simple actions, and that experts are present who know what the solutions and the required actions are. From such a point of view, the ideal leader is someone who can sustain popular confidence through techniques of illusion which effectively conceal from public view the experts frantically searching for solutions. One is reminded of that memorable scene from the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy and her companions catch their glimpse of the wizard behind the curtain, managing the wheels and manipulating the steam clouds which create the awesome but sustaining image of the magician. If you recall, Dorothy’s words to him, “you are a very bad man,” then you must also recall his reply: “Oh, no, my dear; I’m really a very good man; but I’m a very bad Wizard. . . .”

That was in 1900; and while only a few writers have suggested the political satire Baum was toying with, the story continues to entertain the young as few political leaders entertain them. For the 20th century concept of democratic government contains within it a recurring nightmare which holds an extraordinary appeal for the young, the scientifically inclined intellectual, the overly ambitious politician, and the novelist in search of a plot: that democracy is an illusion, at times a dangerous one, and that the sooner we come to understand that, the better off we will be. To deny that takes a faith that transcends political reality as we have known it, or at least as many analysts and observers are describing it today. But putting the argument in that form, however familiar it may be from centuries of political thought, may not be
the most useful form for our purposes. For American political history is committed to democracy in ways no other modern society has ever been, and in one special sense. There are no historical alternatives to be appealed to as fundamentalist past except democracy itself. The choice is not, therefore, between democracy and some other form, but between good democracy or bad democracy, effective democracy or bumbling democracy. The only thing historians and critics have been discovering about American society in recent years is that we have had both.

There is, nonetheless, a growing fear, and it may be justified. It also involves the role which public administration has played in the process of change over the last century, and it is crucial. For one thing, if as some social theorists have argued, a people under stress will return for support to some fundamentalist conception of its past, then we need to know what those useful conceptions are for Americans today, and, just as importantly, whether they have changed. If one compares the conception of that past today with its counterpart in the ’20s and ’30s, one can see significant differences. Americans 40 years ago still had recollections of small, cohesive communities, however romanticized they may have become, as well as of religious associations, extended family relationships cross-country, and local family elites whose successful contributions to community welfare they admired and to whom they could look for leadership in crisis. Much of this, to repeat, was romanticized; but one only has to look at a book like Ida Tarbell’s biography of Owen D. Young to see the elements: small town boy who becomes not only wealthy, but wealthy by virtue of his new technical knowledge.12 Tarbell was not recanting her earlier attack on Standard Oil so much as she was trying to distinguish leadership in the manipulation of wealth and property from leadership in responsible management of new ideals and new resources. Young was a new public man, nationally and internationally, cast in the old mold of the local leader.

The breaking of the pattern moved apace. Louis Brownlow used to refer to what he called “The care and feeding of fat cats” as a necessary process in his years as an administrator in local government. He meant the training of the local wealthy to their responsibilities in local management, but he also implied, whether he knew it or not, an element of transformation the older elite had not required, with sensitive administrators the essential manipulators of the process. At the same time, sociological interest in the neighborhood, indeed the entire developing field of urban sociology, contained strong overtones of that retained past: the small community in the big city as a continuing support of an older morality.

In every field, most prominently of course in public education, it became the responsibility of administrators to aid in that transfer of values from the older communities, the families and churches and little schools of the small towns, to the new urban complexes, and to do it systematically if possible. Civics courses were designed with mayor-for-a-day play participation involved. Lucy Sprague Mitchell launched a campaign to re-write the stories and poems children would learn to read, to replace the McGuffey-style parables with realistic pictures of daily life, embodying the same morality and training.13 The assumption was that the values were sturdy, that the transfer to administrative responsibility of the communal training of the older generation was a matter primarily of imaginative mechanics. When Louis Brownlow opened his second volume of memoirs with the Pope couplet, “For forms of government let fools contest; what’s best administer’d is best,” he was resting his case on a fundamental belief that everything he had described in volume one, the tales of his own upbringing, demonstrated an unshakable democracy which was, if not natural, then certainly the product of very real historical processes his forebears had witnessed.

It is not sufficient to ask whether or not the field of public administration has fulfilled any of that promise over the 25 years since those volumes began to appear, unless we are simply looking for another whip to lay on our backs in the current mood of self-punishment. Indeed, what this essay has been trying to describe are historical changes too basic to be attributed to mistaken judgments or maladministration. Nationalism has not been easy on American society, and would not in any case have been easy even had we been left to undergo it at our own pace, as we were, relatively speaking, for our first century of nationhood. The last century of nationalism has had to take place under the pressures of an internationalism we could not avoid, no matter how much we tried to, and which we could not engage in with any useful sense of our own experience. This is not to argue that isolationism was a good thing, as Beard had suggested very shrewdly, but that historical circumstances do not always provide the best
choices. The United States could no more have avoided its internationalization than it could have avoided its industrialization, however appealing the romantic past may have seemed. Mobility aided in the destruction of the old localisms and created problems for which even the older administrative values provided little help. Localism and regionalism had supported a racism administrators could overlook as part of their responsibility for avoiding political confrontation, for example. Changing conditions made that increasingly difficult to sustain.

More important, the professionalization of administration created national interests among administrative specialists themselves, separating them from the local attachments their predecessors had understood so well. Specialization itself did not provide an alternate value structure, a problem which professionalization has posed for American society as a whole. Professionalization has meant nationalization in American life. And nationalism, as I have said, poses problems.

Chief among those problems is the possibility that the only usable substitute we have found for the old local-regional morality is an individualism which may be a good deal more rugged than its earlier proponents bargained for. Herbert Hoover talked about rugged individualism as the basis of community, not the substitute for it. Hobbes recognized that individualist anarchy threatened order, not just efficient order but the order necessary for the sustaining of community life. If individualism becomes the popular American fundamentalism without any of the supportive community responsibility it had in its earlier form, then we are in serious trouble indeed. And if, as I have suggested, the generation which really knew and depended upon that communal sense of order thought that it was bequeathing that sense to the administrative generation it worked to create, then we have a gap we ought seriously to examine. As a field of study and training, public administration has a responsibility for sustaining a remarkable legacy. In an era of increasing bureaucratization when administrative bureaucracy itself appears the easiest enemy, that examination may provide us with our best hope.

Notes

1. A recent historical survey that embodies many of these points can be found in the essays edited by Frederick C. Mosher. *American Public Administration: Past, Present, Future* (Univ., Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1975).
4. See the essays reprinted in *The Great Secession Winter of 1860-61 and other Essays*, 1958, particularly the ones titled “The Session.”
13. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, *Here and Now Story Book, two-to-seven-year-olds*, 1921. Ms. Mitchell, the wife of economist Wesley Clair Mitchell, was one of the leading practitioners in the field. Her double biography of herself and her husband, *Two Lives, 1953*, is an unrecognized classic.