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Responsibility in Public Administration Ethics

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Abstract

The principle that public administrators act in a responsible manner has been fundamental to the development of the field of public administration

as a profession and scholarly discipline since its inception. Administrative responsibility is seen as the glue that connects administrative ethics to the more general questions regarding the proper role and behavior of unelected officials in a democratic system. In the past two decades, explicit and implicit considerations of responsibility continue to be significant factors in the continuing evolution of public sector ethics, thereby providing a normative and descriptive base upon which more specific topics, such as corruption, integrity of governance, public values, and social equity, can be examined in a balanced manner.

Q Keywords: [accountability](#) [administrative responsibility](#) [democratic governance](#)
[ethical governance](#)

In this article

[< Previous article](#)

[View issue table of contents](#)

[Next article >](#)

Defining the way in which administrative officials act in a responsible manner has been arguably the single most fundamental question faced by the field of public administration (Mosher, 1982, pp. 8–9). From lacking grounding in the Constitution, and subject to intense debate over the role of unelected professionals in a democratic system, public administration in the United States has wrestled with the meaning of responsibility since the founding of the field. Has the riddle of responsible administration been solved in a democratic system, or has a definition of responsibility been found that informs research and practice in a way that is both practical and intellectually satisfying? Should rational solutions or morality and ethics be considered as the foundation for responsible administration? Is it possible to find a

workable balance between the external demands of politics and organization and internal demands to act in ways that are justified by morality and ethics? In this article, administrative responsibility will be seen as an ongoing challenge to link the broader field of public administration with the subfield of administrative ethics in the changing context of contemporary administrative action. Whereas in traditional public administration the debate was seen largely in terms of strict accountability to elected officials versus a more balanced view incorporating professional perspectives as well as top-down obedience, the subject of administrative responsibility in recent decades has been more often framed as a need to balance the rational approach with the subjective, the institutional perspective with that of the individual.

Why does administrative responsibility remain an elusive and problematic topic? First, a number of critical contextual factors have rendered the meaning and significance of administrative responsibility increasingly problematic for scholars and practitioners of public sector ethics. These factors include at least the following considerations:

- Growing distrust of the “administrative state” and the role of career and appointed public administrators in democratic governance;
- Since September 11, 2001 and the Global War on Terrorism, the growing power of the state in balancing personal liberty with the concern for security;
- The enhanced internationalization of research and writing on public sector ethics, with greater emphasis on comparative research and

corruption in national contexts;

- Changing patterns of service delivery in most developed nations, with *governance* being the prevailing paradigm, in which private for-profit and non-profit organizations play significant roles in policy formation and execution;
- Changes in the way we communicate, as individuals and organizations, with the growing use of the Internet and social media sites; and
- In the United States, continuing politicization of the administrative organs of the state, especially of the national government, as a way of limiting the power of the career bureaucracy to exercise discretionary judgments and influence the course of public policies.

Second, and the major focus of this article, has been the ongoing inability of the field of public administration to resolve the riddle of responsible administrative action. Is it obedience to external orders? Is it the behavior of rational professionals exercising expertise and discretion? Is it individuals balancing the demands of obedience with personal responsibility to follow their moral compass? Do earlier writings still provide the basis of our understanding of responsibility, or are they being (or should they be) redefined in light of changes in governance approaches?

The discussion begins by reviewing the development of the concept of administrative responsibility prior to the mid-1990s, with special consideration of how public sector ethicists adopted the concept to provide a major theoretical foundation for administrative ethics. It then considers

questions of the role that responsibility has played in the last 20 years: Is it still basic to the overall idea of ethical governance? Is it a major topic in its own right, or assumed or implicit in discussions of other research issues? Has progress been made in determining the proper balance between internalized ethical standards and external constraints on individual public officials? What are the likely future directions such discussions of responsibility may lead?

ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSIBILITY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The development of the idea of responsibility in public administration falls into three distinct periods. Early public administration, predicated on a strict politics/administration dichotomy, considered administration an exercise in neutral competence, with little opportunity (or justification) for administrators to exercise professional judgment and discretion. In the 1930s, a new generation of public administration scholars and practitioners challenged the traditional notions as unrealistic and perhaps inferior to a more professional public service empowered to exercise discretion in the application of public policy, and to have a greater voice in the formulation of policy. In part, this was based on a realistic sense of how a complex governmental system must reasonably function. Legislators lacked the competence to formulate specific rules to govern all the decisions required to implement complex public policies. Some discretionary judgment must be left to administrators to enable the system to function.

A second factor was the growing professionalization of the field in the 1920s and 1930s. New graduate programs in public administration and professional associations provided specialized expertise and a sense of public service obligations to the growing numbers and types of career public officials. Responsibility in such a view was related to the balancing act required of professionals in democratic public service: to weigh the need for compliance with orders from above with an internalized set of standards for providing the best service to the citizenry.

Leading the efforts to formulate this new approach to public service was a group of younger scholars anxious to put aside what they considered the sterility of the first period. In part, this was a reaction to what they saw as both descriptively accurate, as government grew in scope and complexity, and as desirable, as a way to ensure that the public interest was best served. Key to this thinking was the idea that the distinction between policymaking and policy implementation was not an accurate depiction of how government actually functioned.

Included in this group were two emerging American scholars, John Gaus (Gaus, 1936) and Marshall Dimock, and a German émigré, Carl Friedrich. It was Friedrich who laid out the most systematic assessment of what this new sort of responsibility would entail, beginning in a study of Swiss public administration in 1932 and following up with a discussion of the evolving nature of responsibility in the United States three years later. Key to Friedrich's view of responsibility was that it cannot be seen strictly in policy-neutral compliance, or in legalistic notions of accountability, but in what he termed "functional responsibility"—adherence to professional standards

based on objectivity and detachment. Although responsibility resided in individual public servants exercising thoughtful discretion, Friedrich also noted that responsibility was corporate: that is, individual officials should not be held personally liable for their actions but ultimate responsibility resides in the organization for which they work (Friedrich, 1935, pp. 45–46).

This framework provided Friedrich with a balanced albeit rational view of responsibility compared with the straightforward, compliance-based approach of the first era of public administration.

The responsible administrator in Friedrich's view was not only empowered to make discretionary decisions based on his expertise, but was also bound to the citizenry through the requirement of what he called "publicity," in which there is a requirement that the official "educate the public by making available his findings as a responsible administrator of existing legislation" (Friedrich, 1935, p. 54). In a follow-up essay in 1940, he summed this up succinctly: "the responsible administrator is one who is responsive to these two dominant factors: technical knowledge and popular sentiment" (Friedrich, 1940, p. 12).

Friedrich's notion of responsible administrative conduct was strongly debated by Herman Finer in 1940–41, as war raged in Europe and the United States debated how to deal with the international situation (Jackson, 2009). Finer defended the traditional compliance-based approach and contrasted it with his characterization of Friedrich's idea of responsibility. To Finer, responsibility was "an arrangement of correction and punishment even up to dismissal both of politicians and officials," while Friedrich "believes in reliance

upon responsibility, largely unsanctioned, except by deference or loyalty to professional standards” (Finer, 1941, p. 335).

Despite the role that the new journal sponsored by the American Society for Public Administration, *Public Administration Review*, had played in bringing the concept of responsibility to the attention of the field, the topic of ethical and responsible administration was given only sparse attention for the next several decades (Bruce, 2001). After the give-and-take with Finer, Friedrich moved steadily away from topics central to the field of public administration to considerations of constitutional government and federalism.

Nevertheless, his formulation of responsible administration resonated with scholars in public administration, who by the late 1940s had for the most part abandoned the idea that policymaking and administration could be separated, and for whom administrative discretion was an accepted reality. Friedrich’s ethic was one of reason and objectivity, not based on moral theory but on adherence to free expression of reasoned argumentation in a constitutional democracy (Friedrich, 1946). In his words, “the capacity for reasoned elaboration provides the clue to the problem of why discretion is both indispensable and manageable in all political and legal systems” (Friedrich, 1958).

Political scientist Herbert Spiro (Spiro, 1969) attempted to find a balance between the compliance-based school of thought and the school rooted in professional judgment, while eschewing an overtly ethics-based approach to responsibility. While arguing that “more has been said and written about administrative responsibility than about any other governmental aspect of the problem” (p. 83), Spiro continued to rely mostly upon institutional

arrangements and not individual ethical reasoning, arguing that “honesty ... is not as important as the manner in which institutions and processes structure political responsibility and thereby facilitate responsible conduct on the part of individuals” (p. 87).

Responsibility, in short, remained a concept steeped in ideas of rationality, discretionary judgment, professional expertise, and structured deliberation and dialogue. Writing in 1960, J. Roland Pennock characterized it as “the exercise of judgment and discretion in light of careful analysis and conscientious weighing of values” (Pennock, 1960, p. 27). But in these words lay the basis for a third era of writers in public administration to ponder what constitutes responsible administration when “values” are not clear; when it is not evident that “conscientious weighing of values” will produce consensus on shared meanings, and when “careful analysis” may involve methods of inquiry and decision-making other than a strict adherence to rationalism and objective truth. Responsibility thus provided the emerging field of administrative ethics with both a foundation on which to build—the acceptance of rationality and discretionary judgment as the essence of modern administration—and a set of questions to explore how best a morally responsible individual should act on behalf of the public interest in a democratic society.

RESPONSIBILITY, DEMOCRACY, AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION ETHICS

By the early 1970s, it was clear that the field of public administration had entered a new era, in which traditional emphases on efficiency and effectiveness and formal accountability were being challenged by a new generation of scholars and practitioners concerned with social justice, moral reasoning, greater collaboration between administrators and citizens, and a more critical analysis of the role of the administrative state in society. The technical approach to public administration education was evolving into a more balanced approach, in which normative questions of ethics, critical social theory, social equity, and democratic governance began to emerge in M.P.A. curricula and academic writings. In this setting, responsibility became a critical link between old and new. In the words of one of the most influential of the new group of public administration writers, Terry Cooper, “responsibility is the key concept in developing an ethic for the administrative role” (Cooper, 1990, p. 58). Like Friedrich and others, Cooper envisioned a balance between what he termed objective and subjective responsibility: “Objective responsibility has to do with expectations imposed from outside ourselves, while subjective responsibility concerns those things for which we feel a responsibility” (p. 59). But unlike the objective rationalism of past notions of responsibility, Cooper added ethical reasoning as a necessary basis for responsible action, stating that “unless a course of action can be adequately explained on ethical grounds, it is not a responsible act” (p. 62). Thus, “the full meaning of responsibility requires ethical as well as practical accountability” (p. 62).

Cooper shared with other public administration ethicists a common dilemma: how to balance the need for individual public administrators to

exercise moral reasoning and judgment with the broader need to act in ways consistent with democratic values and processes without become “self-serving” (Cooper, 1990, p. 124).

John Burke (1986) laid the emphasis on democratic theory, by arguing for “a democratically grounded conception of responsibility derived not just from formal rules, regulations, and laws but from a broader understanding of the bureaucrats’ place within a more encompassing set of political institutions and processes” (p. 39).

Kathryn Denhardt (1988) shifted the balance more toward individual moral reasoning as the basis for responsibility, by arguing, “individual responsibility rests on the premise that no outside authority or structure can give *a priori* justification for any course of action; instead the individual must take responsibility for determining whether such a justification exists” (p. 112).

The balance between objective and subjective responsibility is shifted heavily toward the latter: “Too much emphasis being placed on the responsibilities of the position, or the responsibilities of the administrator to others, will detract from the importance of individual responsibility as the foundation of administrative ethics” (p. 115).

Harold Gortner (1991) addressed the problem of definitional vagueness of responsibility as an impediment to its application to public administration, by arguing, “No agreement could be reached among any large group as to a universally proper way to view issues; therefore, it was impossible to scientifically examine ethical responsibility” (p. 20). Definitional lack of clarity, however, was no excuse for public administrators to avoid acting in a

responsible manner. In his words, "Public servants, in order to be truly responsive, must be able to balance public desires with the knowledge, standards, and values of society and their professions in order to achieve the long-term goals of society" (p. 41).

Philip Jos (1990) reviewed the development of the concept of administrative responsibility within the field of public administration, and concluded that the problem was the "sometimes desperate search for an intelligible and reliable 'public', one that provides an unambiguous source of guidance and an unimpeachable defense against critics of discretionary authority" (p. 229). The goal should be to "assist the administrator in acknowledging and assessing the various claims on his or her loyalty" (p. 230), claims that may be based on organizational hierarchy, interest groups, professional codes, elected officials, and public sentiment (p. 239). In short, balance is needed in light of a clear consensus of what constitutes good policies and actions. Jos's viewpoint provided a broader sense of what such a consensus must entail, not simply a balance between internal and external sources of demands on the administrator.

What most writers on responsibility in the 1980s and 1990s saw as a need to find the optimal balance between external and internal standards of conduct was to Michael Harmon (1995) instead a "paradox." In perhaps the most original and comprehensive treatment of the topic of responsibility since that of Friedrich, Harmon exposed the rationalistic nature of both the Finer and Friedrich schools, by calling the former "hard core" rationalists and the latter "soft core." Included in the soft-core group were most, if not all, of the public administration writers trying to find a balance between strict obedience-

based responsibility and professional discretion and judgment, including Cooper and Burke in this group. In using H. Richard Niebuhr's conception of paradox as "man the maker"—exercising moral authority—with "man the answerer"—basing his behavior on external authority, Harmon analyzed the three core meanings of responsibility: agency, accountability, and obligation. In each meaning of the term, he found rationalistic approaches inadequate in providing opportunity for administrators to relate the objective and subjective, the external and inner worlds of personal responsibility. Rationality was both the basis of modern social organization and the source of the problem by providing a false sense of objective truth external to true interactions between administrators and the public, and in dealing with the irreducible uncertainty of administrative action.

Despite Harmon's warning, the soft-core rationalists following Friedrich's approach remained the dominant voice in public administration. By the late 1990s, the prevailing view was that responsible administration required a balance between compliance with overhead controls and individual moral reasoning. Discretion on the part of administrators was accepted as inevitable, given the nature of complex modern policy formation and execution. With the establishment of the Section on Ethics of ASPA and the inauguration of a journal sponsored in part by the section, *Public Integrity*, a new era was ushered in, characterized by scholarship in more detail on aspects of ethical governance. The growing interest in ethical governance worldwide and the increased communications and collaborations among scholars and practitioners internationally enriched the field and offered insights.

GOVERNANCE AND RESPONSIBLE ADMINISTRATION

The institution in 1997 of a journal, *Public Integrity*, devoted to examining issues of ethical governance profoundly changed the nature of scholarship in the field of public ethics. Whereas before ethics scholarship was heavily weighted toward monographs and multi-authored volumes, the new journal allowed scholars and the occasional practicing professional to examine issues in a detailed topical nature. The timing of the journal also coincided with major changes in the interchange of ideas in the field, with greater internationalization and comparative research, and with the need to react to major changes in governance patterns and the institutionalization of a wave of ethics laws, professional codes, and other external compliance-based approaches. The context changed dramatically, pushing the balance wheel of responsible administration away from the internally based sense of responsibility envisioned by writers in the 1980s and early 1990s and toward a need to deal with the stricter sense of accountability to rules and laws emerging in practice.

A major theme of the post-1997 literature was to examine administrative ethics in light of changes in the way in which developed societies governed themselves (Campbell, 2000; Chapman, 2000). The paradigm became known as “governance,” defined by Van Doeveren (2011) as “a process of decision-making in which sovereignty is dispersed among governmental and non-governmental actors who together participate in a political decision-making process that cannot be controlled from the center” (p. 302). In such a

decentralized setting, managers exercise discretion but are “held responsible for carrying out a defined set of duties or tasks, and for conforming with rules and standards applicable to their posts” (Van Doeveren, 2011, p. 307). How the responsible public official balances the relationship of internal and external controls continued to define administrative responsibility under new governance arrangements became a major research focus.

Huberts and Six (2012) used the term “integrity systems” to characterize approaches that aim at more than the suppression of corruption. Using the city of Amsterdam, The Netherlands as an example, they found: “In Amsterdam, integrity is seen as professional responsibility: taking responsibility combined with willingness to give account of one’s actions. In other words, professional responsibility means that local government officials and civil service personnel should individually and as a group be able to make morally just decisions in their daily work. This also entails that the city, as employer, has a responsibility to remove temptations and to chart and control possible risks of integrity breaches as much as possible” (p. 159). They continue by noting the need to balance internal and external checks and balances, values-based and compliance-based strategies (p. 165).

In examining the approach to integrity of governance in Canada, Glor and Greene (2003) saw “a shared ethics of integrity” rooted in a balance between codes to protect the public and public servants, obligations to act in an impartial manner, and an internalization of the idea of a trustee/fiduciary responsibility on the part of public leaders and administrators. They note, “taken together, impartiality, a trustee relationship, and accountability create integrity of administration” (p. 53).

While many writers were sanguine about the ability to balance external rules with morally based standards, O'Reilly (2011) took a critical position regarding the fashion of adopting more rule-based standards of conduct. Finding that "moral standards have been replaced with rule-based systems of ethics," (p. 372), he continued to argue for responsibility based on moral standards, by arguing: "an ethics-based approach imposes responsibility upon administrators that may unnerve some. No list of procedures would offer a refuge from the ramifications of bad decisions. A related cost would be imposed upon supervisors. Under such a system, supervisors would evaluate and either commend or sanction the decisions. This is a more difficult task than evaluating whether someone has complied with a list of procedures" (p. 381).

Niewenburg (2003) saw *virtue* as a way of balancing the largely rational and scientific/professional approach to responsibility with one based on "a pattern of acting, feeling, and thinking" (p. 30). Virtue is not an abstract or idealistic notion. Rather "the point of virtue is not to replace forms of practical thinking, but to shape and direct" (p. 26): "The inculcation of virtue is not about *founding* a morality, but about acquiring practical dispositions which manifest the morality of the relevant community or profession" (p. 22). The ability to understand virtue and act in a virtuous manner helps both to guide administrators in normal day-to-day administration and to deal with critical situations that require extraordinary action and, as noted below, the possibility of ethically directed dissent.

Another stream of literature enriching the discussion of administrative responsibility is public values. Public values assume a plurality of normative

principles that relate to governance, and have found expression in a number of disciplines, including political science, economics, and jurisprudence, in addition to public administration. They often include such values as the need for accountability, commitment to social equity, fairness and impartiality, and procedural due process. Research on public values was examined by de Graaf and van der Wal (2017) to see if they can serve as a guiding concept for ethical administration. As a fairly recent addition to the discussion of administrative responsibility, public values research in their opinion is based on the idea that “public values may be viewed as inherently moral concepts—important qualities and standards that have a certain weight in the choice of public action and decision-making” (p. 197). Sorting out and weighing possible public values in decisions reflect another way of examining responsible behavior. However, as the authors note, “perhaps unsurprisingly—public values studies in public administration are much more about the values of governance itself; outside public administration, public values are seldom about (the process of) administration” (p. 209). Notwithstanding this shortcoming, however, public values have largely supplanted ethics in the accrediting of graduate education in the field, and so further scholarship on the topic will have a major bearing on how the field defines responsible professional behavior.

Writers advocating social equity as the primary purpose of governance base ideas of responsible administration on adherence to a set of values—for example, fairness, benevolence (Frederickson, 1991), ending discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, commitment to equality (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). Social equity forms “the moral imperative of

the field” of public administration (Guy & Chandless, 2012, p. S12).

Responsible administration is predicated on introducing policies and actions that further these goals, which are largely unchallenged on ethical grounds but need to be interpreted in light of the context of administrative action.

The responsible administrator is an agent of change, using discretion as needed to achieve values that may or may not be explicitly charged by higher authority. Closely related is the concept of New Public Service, advanced by Janet and Robert Denhardt, which advocates a direct relationship between administrators and the citizens they serve (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007).

Bertelli and Lynn (2003) utilized an argument similar to a values-based approach in their highly influential work on managerial responsibility. In agreement with the prevailing notion that discretion is inevitable without clear guidance by “the intent of positive law” (p. 261), they held that “the public manager must exercise judgment as to what the public interest and professionalism require” (p. 261), because “in all but the most routine tasks, there is no one right answer to the problems that administrators must deal with. They must strike a balance among competing interests, values, and interpretations of fact” (p. 262). The values to be weighed and balanced are judgment, accountability, balance, and rationality. Ethical reasoning *per se* is not identified as a means of striking the needed balance, but it is implicit in the balancing process of the responsible manager.

RESPONSIBILITY IN DARK TIMES

Responsible administration, even under the changes in governance patterns, is still seen by the writers cited to this point as feasible, with the emphasis continuing to be the need to have a sense of moral autonomy and ethical literacy to bring to the work of administration. They recognize the changing nature of governance and the need to define administrative responsibility in the context of new patterns of policy formation and implementation. But what if the context is fatally flawed, such that responsibility is defined not as how to act ethically in a system that has positive values, strong institutions, and integrity of governance? What if the responsible administrator is one who is forced to dissent? If so, what does this say to the balancing of acceptance of one's role in administration and one's moral reasoning and ethical behavior? Three strands of critical literature in the post-1997 era have addressed these concerns: the focus on administrative evil, whistle-blowing and guerrilla actions, and an expanded and highly sophisticated view of political and administrative corruption.

Guy Adams and Danny Balfour introduced the idea of administrative evil as a comprehensive critique of discretionary administration. Writing in *Public Integrity* in 2011, Adams (2011) summarized the problem in this manner:

The problem of administrative evil is that the theory and practice of professional ethics, including public service or governmental ethics, does not necessarily keep people from engaging in actions that reasonable persons would agree—usually well after the fact—warrant the rubric of evil. (p. 275)

Like Harmon, Adams sees technical reasoning as the basis of the problem.

Evil is “masked” by the language and structures of technical rationality. Adams’s argument that rationality may be the root of the problem, and not the solution as posited by Friedrich and others, clearly emphasized personal moral judgment over external demands for organizational conformity and accountability.

Responsible administration was traditionally seen as right action related to policy formation and implementation: doing the job of public administration. However, writers critical of the ethical state of administration posited another aspect of responsible behavior: refusing to accept the presence of corrupt, incompetent, unprofessional, or unethical conduct, and bringing attention to the relevant guiding authorities or the media and the public. Responsibility was as much about dissent as about exercising discretion in implementing laws and regulations. The literature on responsible dissent focused on whistle-blowers and, in the most extreme example, guerrilla action to fight against elites engaged in actions that are corrupt or violate the pledge to serve the public interest (O’Leary, [2006](#)).

The prevalence of institutionalized political corruption in many if not most nations worldwide and the accompanying need for external controls to force compliance with ethical standards was another impediment to responsible administration (Andersson, [2017](#); Heidenheimer & Johnston, [2002](#); Johnston, [2005](#), [2010](#); Stevulak & Brown, [2011](#)). Corruption bears on responsibility in administration in two ways: fighting the more explicit forms of corruption affects the balance between external and internal bases of responsibility; and the subtle forms of corruption in a developed system, such as that of the United States, influence policy and administration in ways that require

administrators to go beyond legal definitions of corruption to defend democratic values against the undue influences of money, access, privilege, and power (Johnston, 2005).

Essential as safeguards against corrupt behavior are, they have, as Stevulak and Brown (2011) asserted, tended to emphasize compliance with rules rather than to foster a balance between rule-based and internalized standards of conduct. As the authors note, such approaches “have proven essential in activating ethics, but ultimately they have not been sufficient” (p. 99) to produce a fully responsible approach to administration.

Matthew Wilt (2011) reached a similar conclusion. In calling for what he termed a “forensic” approach to public ethics, Wilt asserted, “scholars and practitioners need to adopt an intellectual and professional posture characterized by alertness to otherwise elusive patterns of deception and fraud. They must look beyond this or that incident or scandal, and search for patterns indicative of enduring efforts by powerful actors to systematically game democratic institutions and control the national policy agenda” (p. 248) —in short, to act in a responsible manner, given a likelihood that administrators will be first-hand witnesses to subtly corrupt behavior of the sort that Johnston (2005) identified.

CONCLUSION

Where has the ongoing quest for definitional clarity for the concept of responsibility in administration taken us? Are we in agreement on its

meaning and importance? In the words of Bertelli and Lynn (2003), "The doctrine of managerial responsibility is a shining thread in the literature of public administration and management" (p. 259). Is such glowing praise justified? Certainly, the responsible behavior of administrators in balancing compliance with policy direction from above with professionally and ethically based ideas of justice, fairness, and competence has allowed public administration in democratic systems to function effectively under conditions of great uncertainty, ambiguity, and rapid change. The field of administrative ethics has contributed to the development of responsible public officials who can balance the competing demands of their roles and act in a manner that serves both the collective good and justice to individual citizens (Bertelli & Lynn, 2003, p. 259). However much public administration can congratulate itself on this achievement, nonetheless, it must face some harsh realities concerning the future prospects for responsible administration.

First, concepts of administrative ethics and responsibility are incomplete regarding the role of politically appointed executive branch officials in the United States (and increasingly, other developed systems) and, more generally, the manner in which politics and professional administration are linked. Political appointees are an ever more diverse group, some with the high level of expertise and public service awareness of the sort envisioned by Friedrich and others who have advocated allowing discretion based on professional standards. Others, however, lack a strong appreciation of the need to make decisions based on objectivity, evidence, and a strong sense of the long-term public interest. Most critical is the need to develop a trust-

based working relationship with the professionals in the organizations they lead. Writing in the first year of the Trump administration, it is apparent that the White House's attack on the so-called administrative state and directives to agencies prohibiting the free discussion of issues such as climate change, voter fraud, and foreign meddling in elections is intended to curtail the discretion of agencies and the professional workforce. Appointment of individuals with a history of opposition to policies implemented by the agency they head sends a chilling message to career employees and threatens to disrupt the consistent and predictable approach that creates trust and confidence in their work. This apparent lack of professional competence and knowledge in the work of the agency or department heightens anxiety and fosters resistance to overhead direction. This is exacerbated by sharply reduced budgets and personnel shortages, which add to the levels of stress encountered by professional administrators. For the scientist at EPA or the park ranger in a national park or the career diplomat in a diminished State Department, the disparity between external demands for accountability and the scientific or professional demands for excellence pose unprecedented challenges to balance the demands of agency, accountability, and obligation to act responsibly, using Harmon's terms.

Second, new and evolving patterns of governance alter and often attenuate lines of accountability and responsibility, changing the context of administration in ways that make traditional approaches incomplete or outdated. Core principles, such as democratic responsibility, need to be constantly evaluated in the context of administrative activity. The 20-year

record of *Public Integrity* reflects the importance of having a journal in which scholars and practitioners can test theoretical assumptions and add to the theoretical and empirical bases of knowledge on topics of public sector ethics.

Third, the resurgence of interest in formal rules against corruption, conflicts of interest, and illegality may crowd out the aspirational approach to public sector ethics based on moral reasoning and virtuous behavior. In the United States, codification of ethics in both state-based compliance approaches and professional standards and codes of conduct has been steadily on the rise. However, if the goal of such efforts is to produce more responsible administration, strict compliance-based approaches may miss the mark by assuming that limiting discretion and judgment is the essence of good policy. Furthermore, the continuing decline of trust in government suggests that such activities are no panacea for the growing cynicism and distrust of the public sector. In the United States, there continues to be what James Steinberg refers to as “pervasive demonization of government and government service” (2012, p. 176).

The past two decades have witnessed a remarkable expansion of the field of public sector ethics research and writing. Core principles, such as transparency, accountability, moral reasoning, standards of conduct, social equity, corruption, and responsibility, have been the basis of increasingly sophisticated analyses. The field has internationalized through both single-country and comparative research and professional collaboration on ethical governance. However, the robust nature of the field of public sector ethics has not contributed to a lessening of the downward trend of trust and

support of public administrators and the role of administrative agencies in society. In this regard, as it was for the pioneers in fashioning the field of public administration, administrative responsibility remains the link between balancing the collective good and the ethical standards of individuals, between administration remaining outside the everyday life of the public and in being a collaborative partner in achieving social goals. To return to the architect of the concept of administrative responsibility, Carl Friedrich, the foundation of responsible governance requires constant vigilance and reasoned judgment:

As long as we can maintain a measure of authority, that is to say, as long as those who wield power recognize their responsibility for discretionary acts in the sense of an obligation to retain the regard for the potentiality of reasoned elaboration, a constitutional order can be maintained. Once this regard is lost—and it may be lost by man at large no longer accepting reason as a guide—the night of meaningless violence is upon us. (Friedrich, 1958, p. 48)

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