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Working Paper 90-31
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A CURIOUS LIFE
The Pursuit of an Understanding of Public Administration

James W. Fesler

My identification with public administration came late, the result of a narrowing of my doctoral dissertation topic and the requirements of my first academic job. But my fascination with governmental affairs started when I was six or seven years old and living in Palo Alto. World War I was being waged and my brother, considerably my senior, was in the Army "over there." In our Palo Alto bungalow I staged magic lantern shows, which always ended patriotically with a picture of President Wilson backed by an American flag. With the war’s end I followed news of the Versailles Peace Conference and had my own views of the four Allied protagonists. It must be confessed, too, that I had a childish fascination with the panoply and pomp of "the crowned heads" of Europe.

A few years later, at Fairfax High School in Hollywood, my major extracurricular activity was debating and oratory. The debates I recall were about compulsory ROTC and Mexican expropriation of subsoil oil deposits claimed by American oil companies (oddly my "side" always conformed to my convictions—against ROTC and for expropriation). In oratorical contests my subject was "Abraham Lincoln and the Constitution." Lincoln was my hero and I read everything I could find about him; a large engraving of him hangs in my study today. My graduation address was on "Education for Service."

My parents separated when I was five years old and I lived with my mother in California through my grammar and high school years. My father lived in Duluth, Minnesota, my native city. My mother encouraged my interest in public affairs and my passion for reading (I read aloud to her
My only political science course was on Comparative Government under David Prescott Barrows. It might have turned me off of political science as I received a B when I thought I'd earned an A; that grade probably resulted from my devoting much of the final examination to criticizing the unfairness of the large essay question, while only briefly answering it. One of my most stimulating, and unsettling, courses was on the history of philosophy. Each week we read a different philosopher—Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Descartes, and others—and each week I became a convert, only to have the next lecture and next philosopher disabuse me.

Again I was on debate teams, first as a Freshman arguing for recognition of Soviet Russia (one teammate was later secretary of the Communist Party of California!), and then as a sophomore arguing that advertising had done more harm than good; here, too, my debating positions conformed to my convictions.

Though English had been a favorite subject in high school, two term courses eliminated it as a possible college major. In one my papers, no doubt prosaic, received lower grades than my neighbor's, which had a flowery style that was beyond my taste—and capacity. More significantly, the other course fixed my alienation from the approach that decades later was to be labeled "public choice." The young teacher insistently held that all human actions are selfish (using the classic case of someone's saving a drowning person). That warred with my deep convictions, which embraced altruism, but I was brushed off as naive. A secondary effect of this experience was that I never chose deliberate provocation (i.e., posing as a committed advocate of a proposition I in fact disbelieved) as a technique in my own teaching. And a tertiary effect was that I remained through life unclear as to why English
But what was I to do with my life? I talked with William Anderson and he referred me to a psychology professor who had me self-administer (and calculate the outcome of) the Strong occupational-guidance questionnaire. I came out A as a lawyer (my father, his brother, and my brother were lawyers), B as a journalist, and C as a teacher. So I became a teacher. The choice was not so perverse as that sounds. The campus YMCA director had asked me to lead an extra-curricular seminar on disarmament, which I did. This was my first teaching experience, and I enjoyed it. Despite the course materials supplied by disarmament-advocating organizations (and my weekly reading of the *New Republic* and *The Nation*) we concluded that armaments are but a symptom of deeper causes that need to be addressed.

With Anderson's advice I wrote to the Harvard, Columbia, and Chicago graduate schools. Harvard and Chicago offered me tuition scholarships and, with Anderson's counsel, I chose Harvard. I might have discovered public administration earlier had I chosen Chicago where Charles Merriam, Leonard White, and Marshall Dimock were. And I might have had a different history had my high regard for Allan Saunders led me to follow him to Claremont, an option I seriously considered.

My first direct exposure to comparative government was in the summer of 1932 when the uncle whose namesake I was gave me the "grand tour" of Europe as a graduation present. This comprised a week or so each in London, Paris, Geneva (where the Disarmament Conference was concluding), Munich, and Berlin (where I heard Hitler address his followers in the Sportspalast), plus a summer session at the University of Marburg. I was convinced that this was the only time in my life that I would be outside North America; as things turned out I was wrong. Benjamin Lippincott, one of my Minnesota teachers, was in London for the summer and took me
My dissertation led me into the field of public administration despite my slender background in course work. For my tutorials under Elliott and Friedrich I had prepared substantial papers on regional decentralization in France and Great Britain. I proposed a dissertation in comparative government that would revise those papers and add the American story. The result was to be a study of administrative regionalism in France, Britain, and the United States. But I discovered that, while there were rich official and scholarly literatures on French and British regionalism, there was virtually nothing on American administrative regions. So my topic shifted to filling the gap and became “Federal Administrative Regions” in the United States. Regionalism, field administration, decentralization, and eventually federalism would remain foci of my professional life, though at the time I had no idea that I was embarking on such a continuing line of inquiry.

In 1934-35 I was fortunate enough to have a Brookings Institution research fellowship for work on my dissertation. Brookings was a wonderful place to be in that exciting New Deal time; that is despite the fact that most of the Brookings staff were conservative and, so, anti-New Deal. The Fellows lived and ate at Brookings (a half block from the White House) and had the counsel of staff members on their doctoral projects. Laurence Schmeckebier was my principal advisor, and a fine one; Lewis Meriam was also of aid. I completed my dissertation that year, having naively read the Harvard Graduate School catalogue. It said that graduate students “normally” spend their first two years in course work and complete their dissertations in the third year. So I did! I had not learned that “normally” is a word of art in catalogues.

My dissertation advisor at Harvard was initially Arthur Holcombe, but he took a year’s leave. W. Y. Elliott became my advisor, though effectively so
Committee not only further typed me as specializing in matters of regionalism (going beyond administrative arrangements); it also located me in the small set of persons interested in national, regional, and state planning, the latter was reinforced soon by participation in meetings sponsored by the National Planning Association, in which Luther Gulick was a prime mover. Both regionalism and planning were at the time high on the agenda of the social sciences.

With my work on my chapters of the regionalism committee's report completed, the National Resources Committee tapped me for other work. One was drafting the NRC's publication on state planning, based on reports from the various state planning boards. Another was a study, "The Loan of Expert Personnel Among Federal Agencies," which mostly involved analysis of the many obstructive rulings on the subject by Comptroller General McCarl. This study seemed to appeal to Charles E. Merriam, a member of the NRC, and he had it reproduced and distributed widely in the Executive Branch.

By mid-summer of 1935 I had had no inquiries about a teaching post, and I was very uneasy. The summer's absence of offers may have been because no-one at Harvard regarded me as "his" disciple, as indeed was the case. Eventually, thanks to George C. S. Benson, who had been an instructor at Harvard, Ralph Bunche, chairman of the Howard University political science department, conferred with me at his home and offered a part-time teaching job which I accepted (the other part of my time would continue to be with the National Resources Committee). Soon thereafter William Whatley Pierson, dean of the University of North Carolina graduate school and chairman of the political science department, asked me to lunch in Washington and offered me an assistant professorship. The post needed filling because of the death of its intended incumbent. Bunche generously released
American Regionalism, so he took a kindly interest in my welfare as a fellow student of regionalism. Among my undergraduate students in 1935-41 were Alexander Heard, Louis Harris, and Terry Sanford, all destined for distinguished careers.

In some ways I was a misfit in the department's faculty and, indeed, in the general faculty. Most of my colleagues were "locals" rather than "cosmopolitans." That is, they looked forward to staying at Chapel Hill through their careers and so had little incentive to reach a larger scholarly audience through publication. Perhaps because I had lived in so many regions—the Far West, the Middle West, New England, Washington, and now the South—or perhaps for other reasons, I conceived of the profession and my career aspirations as national. So when two close friends on the Law School faculty tried to persuade me to enroll in the School, I, having been steadily in school from kindergarten to my Ph.D. and enjoying teaching, I gave their proposal little thought. I had found my niche.

In the Spring of 1936, still in my first year of teaching, I received a telegram from Louis Brownlow, asking me to serve that summer on the staff of the President's Committee on Administrative Management. Much flattered, I accepted and went to a New York meeting of the committee and its staff. Once moved to Washington after term's end, I primarily worked on a study of executive management of the federal field service; this involved interviews with field officials in several cities and with TVA officials. After completing that study I prepared a short one on interagency coordination in Washington. Inclusion of my field-service study in the Committee's published Report with Special Studies was a major boost for a junior political scientist.

Service with the Committee also enlarged my set of friends and acquaintances in the public administration community. Arthur W. Macmahon
invited me to revise the dissertation for publication. I revised it and sent it to Friedrich, who referred it, as he had similar manuscripts, to an able protegé, Frederick M. Watkins. The manuscript, Watkins reported, was more nearly ready for publication than the other manuscripts he'd reviewed, but he suggested some changes. By that time I was on the Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, which I interpreted as a full commitment of my year to the regulatory agency study. So I believed I could not in good conscience take time out for the changes proposed by Watkins. And that was the end of that—and a mistake. However, I did publish several articles on administrative regions, including one in the first volume of the *Public Administration Review*.

Another attack of undue purity occurred when I completed the book manuscript on the independence of state regulatory agencies. I submitted it to the University of North Carolina Press, whose director agreed to publish it if I would provide a subsidy of a few hundred dollars. This I thought demeaning and savoring of a vanity press, so I declined. Thanks to Charles Ascher the manuscript was published by the Public Administration Service as a two-column, 72-page pamphlet. But a pamphlet is not a book, and so it received limited attention in the profession.

In 1940-41 the Department of Agriculture designated some academics as regional advisors on public administration, and Leonard D. White had me named as the advisor for the Southeast region. I was mainly called on by the Soil Conservation Service, some of whose field establishments I visited. I recall especially the enthusiasm of SCS officials over the introduction from the Orient of the kudzu vine, then believed a major preventive of soil erosion. That it turned out to be a pest, spreading uncontrollably, may have planted my suspicion that innovation per se is not always to be hailed, that
to precise use of the English language, a devotion I had associated only with academics and others who write for a living.

Though I was executive secretary of various committees, my most mind-expanding service was with the Planning Committee whose members were Robert R. Nathan (chairman), Thomas C. Blaisdell, and Fred Searls. Among its staff members were Simon Kuznets, later a Nobelist, and Charles J. Hitch, later president of the University of California. The committee's main contribution was its masterly analysis of the misfit of the armed forces' claimed requirements with the American economy's production capacity. Earlier, in my first month with OPM, I had relied on the recent assurance by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that under no conceivable circumstances would the United States lose access to the rubber supply of Southeast Asia; in 1942 I was less inclined to accept the Armed Services' predictive capacity or the accuracy of their stated requirements. The latter revealed a perverse "reverse effect" of hierarchy. The requirements estimated by a subordinate supply unit tended to be enlarged at each higher level, as an officer could be blamed for losing the war by asking for too little; asking for too much was prudent. The result was an unrealistic total set of "requirements," undisciplined by resources' scarcity.

Despite some staffing with academics, able civil servants, and rising young lawyers, the War Production Board mainly consisted of businessmen. This has always left me confused as to what my WPB experience taught me. Here, undoubtedly, was a government agency, but here, too, was an organization dominated by men who identified with their particular industries and brought with them the business world's concepts and behavioral patterns. Trying to strike the balance now, I believe that the primary lesson was the success with which the government agency...
their informal contacts; it also ignored our opportunity to interview officials. So the job got done.

To justify to myself my diversion of energies to a historical project while the war was still on, I inaugurated a number of special studies of the development of particular fields of WPB policy and administration. These monographs were intended to orient new officials in their fields so that, among other gains, the errors of their predecessors would not be repeated. With substantial turnover of personnel in the WPB 'new' ideas commonly were advanced without awareness that they were old, and failed, ideas.

The archives of the WPB were in the Historical Records Section, a part of my Branch. On my initiative our archivists and I shocked the archival community by effecting drastic innovations in how agency historical records are maintained. The object was to make policy-level documents on each topic accessible to researchers without need to guess which offices' files were relevant and without poring through trivial letters in those files. This, of course, also facilitated our work on the WPB's overall analytical history, which was published after the war, as were several other agency histories.

One of the regularly missed opportunities in the field of public administration, it seems to me, is the mining of specialized, but related, studies to establish such common findings as they reveal (along with exceptions to them). This I felt was a loss in the case of war agency histories (which, of course, had meaning for peacetime administration), a loss I later found paralleled in the failure of scholars to compare and draw conclusions from the administratively relevant findings of the many monographs on particular developing countries.

Meanwhile, my involvement in the academic side of the profession deepened. In 1944 Leonard D. White was president of the American Political
salary and the other offers I'd considered. One wonders about roads not taken but I have never regretted the choice I made.

My departmental courses again focused on Public Administration, Recent National Policy, and American Government. The fresh and stimulating task was to teach a course on Government Planning in the professional planning curriculum of the newly established Department of City and Regional Planning. As was true on all campuses, returned veterans were serious students and a joy to teach. This was especially true at the graduate level, where veterans sought Ph.D.s, not just M.A.s, which had been the goal of most Chapel Hill graduate students before the war.

My outside activities multiplied. I chaired the Social Science Research Council's Committee on Government Records and Research, was the one-man program committee for the 1946 meeting of the American Society for Public Administration and served a term on its council, and chaired the 1948 nominating committee of the American Political Science Association. James K. Pollock, a member of the First Hoover Commission on Reorganization of the Executive Branch, had me appointed as a consultant on the Commission's study of federal field administration, which had been farmed out to a private firm; my highly critical commentary on the report may account for its never being published. The experience made me skeptical of "contracting out." As the firm had no staff qualified for the study, it recruited one, which included some civil servants on leave-of-absence.

One day in 1947, the previously scheduled lecturer having dropped out, Roscoe Martin invited me to deliver one of the University of Alabama's annual series of lectures on public administration. He suggested "Area and Administration" as my topic, and I agreed. Because of the shortness of notice,
necessary chores. Disabused of my expectation that the grass grew greener on the other side of the fence, I returned to Chapel Hill in 1950 planning to spend the rest of my life there. Ignoring the example of the Catholic Church and the British Empire when their completion, respectively, of St. Peter's and Whitehall marked a change in their fortunes (downward in those cases), we invested money in major improvements of our house, knowing that it was to be our long-time residence. But our plans were soon changed.

In 1950-51 I was often in Washington doing consulting with the White House (on President Truman's proposal of a history program on federal agencies' role in the Korean War), with the Office of the Secretary of the Interior (on field coordination), and with the new Economic Stabilization Agency (where Emmette Redford had asked me to advise on field administration). While at my desk in the Executive Office Building (for the White House assignment) I received a call from V.O. Key, Jr., then in his second year as chairman of the Yale political science department. He said the Yale Administration wanted my advice on strengthening of the department. I responded that advice was needed and I'd be willing to visit provided Yale's request was not a "cover" for considering my joining the faculty, in which, I said, I had no interest. This qualification may seem odd, but it substituted candor for a long-cherished hope that I would get an Ivy League offer—so I could turn it down. That hope and intended response stemmed from a Midwesterner's bias against what seemed precious, inbred, and self-congratulatory institutions that preferred students from private preparatory schools to those from public schools.

V.O. Key, it turned out, was leaving Yale for Harvard. So both the chairmanship and his chair, the Alfred Cowles professorship of government, were becoming vacant. As I learned on my visit, my name had indeed
abashedly replied, "I am a political scientist," especially when one colleague said, "I am a philosopher," and an astronomer chimed in, "I am a celestial mechanic."

My efforts as chairman were directed to rebuilding a department demoralized by mass departures of senior staff and riven by conflict. We were remarkably fortunate in attracting able people in all fields of the discipline. Our public administration group was very strong—partly, I think, because we always treated it as an integral component of political science rather than as a vocational training program. The department drew a singularly fine collection of graduate students, many of whom went on to become stars in the profession. Many of them took public administration as a major or minor field.

Three asides may be in order. First, the field of public administration had high standing in political science during the latter 1930s and all the 1940s, which, not coincidentally, were periods of positive government under Roosevelt and Truman. This, as we well know, was not to last. Students of the 1950s earned the appellation, "the silent generation," reflected in part in a lack of commitment to issues of public affairs. Second, and related to the field's high status in those earlier periods, and perhaps to its waning, a surprising proportion of talented political scientists started out in public administration and then moved to other fields. David B. Truman's published dissertation was on administrative decentralization. Robert A. Dahl held an administrative internship in Washington, his early articles were on public administration, and in a notable book with Charles E. Lindblom he dealt with bureaucracy, among other systems. V.O. Key's published dissertation was on federal grants-in-aid to the states. Herman C. Pritchett's first book was on the TVA and subtitled "A Study in Public Administration." Third, when "the
textbook; V.O. Key was responsible for recommending that Alfred Knopf contract with us for preparation and publication of the book.

But I did not abandon my more established field of study. I published two articles published in 1957. One, an appraisal of the Second Hoover Commission reports was commissioned by Harvey Mansfield, editor of the *American Political Science Review* (I learned that irony is not perceived by all as such; my count of the number of recommendations and the Commission's average cost for each was sometimes cited as praise). The other article, commissioned by Roscoe Martin, was on the national government's organization for water resources administration; though now dated, this has been one of my favorites. Its tracing of the critical importance and changing views of what the "organizing idea" should be had potential resonance beyond the particular policy field. Natural resources was a field attracting many students of public policy and administration in the 1950s. For them and me it planted early skepticism of benefit/cost analysis (as in appraisal of competing water resource projects), quantitative formulas (as in the farm price-parity index), and clientele, grass-roots decision-making (as in agricultural referenda and farmer committees).

Still, my appetite for comparative studies, whetted by my time in Africa and Vietnam, was sharpened by involvement in the Comparative Administration Group of the American Society for Public Administration which was headed by Fred W. Riggs. In 1957 I sought a foundation grant for a comparative examination of European countries' field administration, a major focus of which would be the development over time of the field systems (though history had long been unfashionable in political science). I discovered, as others have, the difficulty of fitting one's own plans to a foundation's current strategies. My plans called for studies of Britain, France, Germany,
contributed to my education. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s I was also much involved in the Inter-University Case Program, directed successively by Harold Stein and Edwin A. Bock.

Nevertheless, through the early 1960s, I continued to pursue both old and new research interests. Field administration and decentralization were one focus, with a comparative-administration article on the political role of field administration, and two comprehensive treatments of political and administrative decentralization. One was a paper, "Approaches to the Understanding of Decentralization," for the 1964 Geneva meeting of the International Political Science Association (initially presented in 1963 to an IPSA group at Nuffield College, Oxford), which then appeared as a journal article. The other was the article, "Centralization and Decentralization," for the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. I also published an article on the case method in political science, updated my 1957 article on national water resources administration, and edited the state and local government textbook, based on the papers prepared earlier for the American Assembly. And I kept a hand in the practice of administration as a member of the United Nations working group on decentralization for national development and the governing board of Mayor Richard C. Lee's New Haven Redevelopment Agency.

My work on comparative field administration took me to London and Paris on a sabbatical in 1964-65. In London W.A. Robson, whom I'd known when he was a visiting professor at Chapel Hill, was exceedingly helpful, as was the Royal Institute of Public Administration, through which I arranged rewarding interviews with British officials on their ministries' field administration. An invitation to lead a faculty seminar at the University of Manchester introduced me to Brian Chapman, Richard Rose, and William J.
most of their other courses did not). The balance of my time was devoted to drafting chapters of my public administration textbook. The experience was frustrating, for by the time the last chapter was drafted the earlier ones had lost their currency and the process had to be repeated, it seemed, \textit{ad infinitum}. The job never would have been done if Douglas Yates, a colleague whom I had earlier advised on his dissertation, had not almost daily insisted that what I'd drafted had merit and must be promptly completed and sent to the publisher.

Nevertheless, I accepted two other tasks. They were too close to my lifelong interests for me to decline. One was a lecture on how to relate area and function, given in a series on "the new federalism" at the Federal Executive Institute. The other was a paper presented at the 50th anniversary of Syracuse University's Maxwell School. The format, set by Frederick C. Mosher, called for each paper to treat the development of public administration thought and education in a particular time period. Mine was 1946 to 1960, and I chose to focus on the relation of public administration to the social sciences. Surprisingly, but perhaps because the period had been a high point in my own life, I found the task not only engrossing but easily and quickly done.

That was fortunate because in 1976 Connecticut's Governor Ella Grasso appointed me to the four-member Committee on the Structure of State Government, chaired by John Filer. Though committee colleagues and staff were admirable, I once again found that the often scorned principles of public administration were all we had to guide us, the critics having failed to provide an alternative model. Too, I was reminded that principle often yields to pragmatic considerations (as when we proposed that certain floating boards and commissions be brought into relevant departments "for
Administrative State, both on the higher public service in Europe, presented a paper for the 50th anniversary of the Brownlow Committee report (later published), and delivered the John Gaus lecture for APSA, "The State and Its Study" (also published). All my interests and reflections seemed to come together in this period. So I enlisted Donald F. Kettl (my last Ph.D. advisee) as co-author of a major revision of my 1980 public administration textbook; it appeared in 1990 as The Politics of the Administrative Process. Our collaboration was a happy and stimulating one and the book, we hoped, not just a summing up but a look to the future.

Looking back, it seems to me that I have had a curious life. That is true in two senses of the word. I have been curious about what we don't know and about what we think we know that isn't so. This has kept me in an inquiring and skeptical mode, and it has made me puzzle over how to put salt on the tail of truth. I shall return to this shortly.

My professional life has been curious in another way: It has been a succession of happy accidents and lucky timing. Recall that my entry into the public administration field was not grounded in graduate courses but in three chance events in 1934-36—the shift of dissertation topic from comparative regionalism to American field-service patterns, the Chapel Hill appointment prompted by the death of the original recruit for the public administration field, and Brownlow's recruitment of me to the staff of the President's Committee on Administrative Management. After that came career steps in which chance played a significant part. The President's Committee job in the first year after my Ph.D. led to my Rockefeller fellowship for work associated with Robert E. Cushman and probably to my recruitment by Herbert Emmerich for the War Production Board. Roscoe Martin turned to me for the area-and-administration lectures because the scheduled lecturer (on
against fashions and passions, at least while waiting for rhetoric to be supported by factual evidence, which often did not come. This often put me out of phase with major movements—Planning-Programming-Budgeting, Zero-Based Budgeting, the Human Relations school, the "New Public Administration," and clientele decision-making, among others.

An empirical, descriptive approach is, of course, only a start toward understanding. To move beyond it I gradually embraced and then merged three emphases: analysis, synthesis, and comparison. An analytic approach was my earliest style, one consciously chosen as an approach to the understanding, if not the solving, of problems (the conflict between functional and areal patterns of field administration could be understood, but apparently not solved, by me or by administrators). It prompted my choice of "analytic history" as the rubric for both the War Production Board history and the study of development of European field administration. The empirical and analytical approaches together seem to have warred against prescription. Writing the conclusions of my books and articles was often difficult for me; I preferred that readers draw their own conclusions. It is the case that I have found many a first-rate scholar's book weakened by its final chapter.

Synthesis came later, most markedly in textbooks on state and local government and on public administration, but also in a number of articles from the 1960s on. Aside from being handicapped by its adjective, "synthetic," this approach seems not in high favor. It is not original research, as it draws instead on other scholars' publications. But it seems to me important to try to make sense of things in general and to take stock of how far the scholarly community has brought us and what needs still to be done.

My choice of a comparative approach extends over a longer period, starting with interagency differences in field organization, moving to
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