The related fields of political science, public administration, and policy analysis sorely need a standard for evaluating the outcomes, management structures, and processes, programs, and policies. The appropriate standard for evaluation is the much-maligned and often forgotten concept of the public interest. We can assess the public interest by projecting and evaluating consequences in terms of agreed-upon values—values our common sense tells us rank highly in measuring the quality of people's lives. The agreed-upon consequences and the sometimes competing values must then be weighed in a structured and reasoned argument.

CONCEPTUAL NOTES ON THE PUBLIC INTEREST FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY ANALYSTS

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Public administration and political science have paid a heavy price for banishing self-conscious and critical evaluation as a central concern. The continuing acceptance of Simon's (1959) logical positivism has been costly. No discipline can really avoid evaluation. It must discriminate the important from the trivial and success from failure. If evaluations are made without publicly acknowledged and defended standards of judgment, evaluation becomes a matter of fad, fashion, and caprice. It has no possibility of an ongoing career of improvement by the conscious test of the results of standards in use. Standards are tools of thought and, like all tools, their effectiveness for human purposes is demonstrable in use. Like all tools, they are capable of improvement as use shows the need and the way, and with their improvement, they permit the improvement of the very purposes which they were designed to evaluate.

Evaluation, the determination of what is important, provides direction to both policy and research. By arriving at some consensus, a moving one,

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we agree on what is important both for policy and research and the latter becomes a more purposive, disciplined, cooperative endeavor as opposed to a matter of fad, fashion, and funding. For public administration and political science, the appropriate standard of evaluation would appear to be the public interest. This is the term in the language, in common discourse, and, despite their efforts to banish it, scholars find they cannot escape using it. It is one that we all come back to when we appraise public action.

The public interest is not some Platonic essence to be cognized nor some resultant of an appropriate procedure or aggregation of special interests. It is rather the recognition that, in Dewey's (1927) sense, publics do come into being as the result of interactions among private parties. Such interactions create consequences and these, in turn, give rise to a public with a shared interest in controlling those consequences. To control those consequences, the public establishes officials and institutions and, in doing so, Dewey said, gives rise to the state. He might have said, though it goes without saying, the public interest as well.

Dewey used the example of the private exaction of justice which leads to a blood feud. The feud then results in violence spilling over and affecting third parties, who respond by setting up officials and institutions to substitute public for private justice. In this, Dewey saw the rise of the state and he used this example to show why beginning with consequences is more fruitful than a search for origins. One can see the sequence which Dewey had in mind in the rise of a public concerned with air pollution, which then became increasingly aware of the harmful effects of transactions among private parties and finally supported the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency. At this level of analysis, the public interest is a matter of fact as well as of value. Consequences of private parties' actions create a public as that public discovers its shared concern with their effects and the need for their control. The public's shared concern with consequences is a public interest. Questions may arise as to whether the consequences are sufficiently important, their effects so severe, the affected public so extensive as to justify control. Is the subject appropriately a matter of public interest or should it properly remain in the private domain? The courts have wrestled with the distinction in considering when and what businesses may be considered to be "affected with a public interest."

The officials set up by the public to take action to control consequences that are a matter of public concern will try to frame policies to achieve the

desired result. Ostensibly, these policies are directed toward furthering the public interest in the control of the consequences; that is their mission. However, we are not entitled to assume that even if officials honestly believe that they have directed their policies to serve the public interest, they have, in fact, done so. They may well be mistaken. It is always appropriate to ask, no matter how legitimate the source and how great its authority, whether, in fact, a particular policy is in the public interest. The role of the critic is to develop and apply criteria to test the validity of the claim that a policy really serves the public interest. Official interests, the interest of the political executive, can be partial and self-serving rather than truly addressed to the public interest. Though they rarely do so, policy-forming institutions need to internalize the capacity for an objective critical role in the appraisal of their policies. From time to time, presidents ask themselves what will be the judgment of history on their policies, but this is far from the institutionalization of an ongoing effort to develop critical standards of policy evaluation. Schools of public administration like the law schools could play a valuable role in developing standards for the appraisal of policies and giving appropriate descriptive content to the public interest in the varied areas that policy must address.

It is now over 50 years since Herring (1936) wrote *Public Administration and the Public Interest* and the subject largely remains where he left it. Herring was concerned with the changeover from the night watchman state of laissez-faire to the positive state of the New Deal with its efflorescence of agencies and programs. He felt there was a need for some regulative principle to take the place of the market in shaping the activities in the public sector to the common good. That principle in common discourse could only be the public interest. Herring examined a large number of varied cases in bureaus of government departments and a number of regulatory agencies. He found a variety of factors that, in his judgment, impeded the realization of the public interest: inadequate representation of relevant interests, corruption, lack of expertise, lack of coordination, and others. But while he found factors that could plausibly be argued to hinder the realization of the public interest, he found no mechanism that would insure it. He hoped that such a structure might emerge, as it seemed essential for the well-being of the positive democratic state. Herring felt that standards giving content to the term public interest would have been of great help to administrators in the exercise of their vastly growing discretion, but neither legislatures nor courts seemed

willing or capable of giving the term much in the way of directive content. In fact, at times, Herring seemed to feel that any intersubjectively agreed content was impossible. At one point, he said, "The fact remains that representing the public interest is a matter of individual judgement. No objective standard is possible."

Those of us who sought to discover an administrative structure that would produce the public interest would have done well to have heeded the words of Dewey (1927) with respect to theories of the state:

> The wrong place to look, as we saw, is in the realm of alleged causal agency, of authorship, of forces which are supposed to produce a state by an intrinsic *vis genetrix*. . . . [When we seek the origin in such sources,] we shall then be driven, unless we have recourse to mysticism, to decide that the public is born in a myth and is sustained by superstition. (p. 37)

In 1960, Schubert reviewed the literature on the public interest and came to a conclusion that Dewey might have predicted. In his final chapter, Schubert wrote:

> It may be difficult for some readers to accept the conclusion that there is no public-interest theory worthy of the name and that the concept itself is significant primarily as a datum of politics. As such it may at times fulfill a 'hair shirt' function to borrow Soraui's felicitous phrase: it may also be nothing more than a label attached indiscriminatively to a miscellany of particular compromises of the moment. In either case the public interest neither adds to nor detracts from the theory and methods presently available for analyzing political behavior. (p. 223)

Schubert may well have been right in his evaluation of the utility of the literature he reviewed. Whether public administration or political science could do without an evaluatory standard is highly doubtful and lack of progress in the disciplines may not be unrelated to the absence of such a standard. The natural sciences only appear to escape this necessity by their ability to rely on well-developed bodies of theory to provide criteria of theoretical relevance and importance as standards of judgment.

Political science and public administration followed Simon (1959) in an uncritical acceptance of logical positivism and its denial of cognitive significance for evaluation, despite the fact that Hume (1888) warned us long ago against dichotomizing propositions of fact and value, maintaining that reason's only office was to serve as slave to the passions. The great name of Weber (1958) was also invoked in support of "value-free sciences," but this may well have been a misreading of Weber, who appears to have been arguing against the use of the classroom as a political

platform. Through ignoring philosophers like Hume and misreading scholars like Weber, a consensus on the inappropriateness of evaluation in political science emerged unchallenged. Truman (1951), a respected figure in the discipline, went as far as to urge the banishing of the term public interest from the subject's vocabulary.

Logical positivism, while remaining as a dominant, uncritically accepted position in political science, was not left unchallenged in philosophy. The rise of ordinary language philosophy represented a return to actual experience and a recognition that the developed usage of the language was not without good grounds and its practice worthy of respect and study. Flathman (1960) published an essay on the public interest as an appropriate part of the normative discourse of politics. He used ordinary language philosophy to argue persuasively that the concept public interest, far from being cognitively vacuous, could be, and in ordinary practice was, given useful practical meaning. Flathman was probably right in suggesting that political science, as a discipline desperately searching for respectability, fastened on a model of "hard science" that made impossible demands of the discipline. Long ago, Aristotle (in Barker, 1962) said that politics and ethics were practical subjects that were only susceptible of that degree of certainty of which the nature of the subject admitted, far less than demonstration. Indeed, if politics and ethics were subject to demonstration, there would be something to be said for the Soviet practice of psychiatry. Political science might well have become a more useful discipline had it taken medicine rather than physics as its model.

Flathman (1960) treated the public interest as a commendatory expression used in the evaluation of public policy. It is like the term "good" which, as he pointed out, can be applied to objects as disparate as fountain pens and cars. The force of "good" as used in the language constrains the reasons that could be given persuasively in justification for the assertion that this is a "good" fountain pen or that this is a "good" car. These reasons are quite other than what is involved in saying "I prefer chocolate to vanilla ice cream." One is not expected to give a reasoned argument in support of such a preference which is quite permissibly idiosyncratic. The reasons for evaluating a fountain pen or a car as "good" constitute the descriptive meaning of "good" as applied to the object in question. And as Flathman observed, what might be considered a "good" car in one year would no longer be considered a "good" car some years later, although for its time it would have been appropriately considered to be a "good"

car. Consumer-testing associations have developed the descriptive meaning of "good" as applicable to cars and other objects into standards of evaluation. While the force of "good" has the same meaning across the range of objects to which it is applied, the descriptive meaning of "good" has frequently led to the search for a Platonic essence; a like-blind alley has bemused the public interest.

If public interest is a term like "good" that is applied to public policy, how is its use justified? What reasons make its application to a particular public policy seem persuasive? Flathman argued that a reasoned justification for a public policy as being in the public interest can be made by seeing if the policy is susceptible of generalization, determining so far as possible the foreseeable consequences of its adoption and evaluating those consequences in terms of community values.

The bottom line is the evaluation of consequences in terms of agreed-on values. Generalization is a way of determining whether a policy serves the appropriate public. Thus the Department of Housing and Urban Development's program in Richard Lee's New Haven, which, according to Powledge (1970), consumed more money per capita than had ever been spent before or would ever be spent since, was a Potemkin village masquerading as a national urban policy. Generalization would have shown that as a national urban policy it was radically unaffordable and was (absent demonstrable means of replicating its supposedly desirable results at vastly reduced costs) in no way justifiable as an experiment whose results might have more general value. Generalizability is a test that the pork barrel cannot pass.

Weber (1958), in his essay on politics as a vocation, maintained that an objective concern with consequences is an essential part of responsible behavior. In a discussion of a proposed policy, Kissinger is reported to have said to an objector: "You say you do not know what it will do. Then why are you against it?" To which the retort might well have been: I have a pill. I do not know what it will do. Why don't you swallow it? The ability to project consequences is essential to the evaluation of policy. The projection of consequences requires a theory or theories which explain how the intervention strategies embodied in policy are expected to produce desired results. We need theory not only to justify our expectation of the desired results of policy but possible undesirable side effects of policy that properly evaluated may show the costs to be unacceptable. In their *Uses of History*, Neustadt and May (1986) recounted the Cuban

missile crisis as a policy success. It provided an excellent example of the need to evaluate both intended and potential unintended consequences.

Securing the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba as a policy designed to enhance the security of the United States could be regarded as clearly serving a public interest. But was it in the public interest? According to Neustadt and May, President Kennedy thought there was a one in three to a one in two possibility of war and a nuclear exchange. This risk was to be run for a change in the strategic balance that only Paul Nitze thought to be more than marginal. Neustadt and May said that the actors and journalists all considered the Cuban missile crisis a policy success. Given the humiliation of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, the public satisfaction over Khrushchev having to remove his missiles from Cuba left no doubt that for Kennedy, it was a striking and badly needed political policy success. But that so appalling a risk should have been taken on such slight military grounds argues that the political success was achieved at the expense of a responsible concern with the public interest.

It must be recognized that the interests of officials may diverge from the public interest. The management of Smith Brothers may be eminently satisfied with the company's bottom line but that does not prove the therapeutic efficacy of their cough drops. Schools of public administration need to do more than "smarten up" officials and prospective officials for career success. They need to criticize policies and the structures that lead to policies from the standpoint of whether or not those policies serve the public interest. Evaluation of the Cuban missile crisis as a policy success is evidence of a serious confusion between the political success of the responsible officials and the failure of the policy process to responsibly serve the public interest.

In the Cuban missile crisis, policy consequences were more or less accurately projected but the evaluation of the possible range of consequences leaves a great deal to be desired. It is plain to see, and one cannot help sympathizing with, the actors' sense of the political pressure under which they labored. Nonetheless, the role of the responsible critic, whether filled by a school of public administration or an analyst, is not only to insist that the risk run was too unacceptably high to have been in the public interest but to explore how the process could have been structured to give greater salience to the risks and to diminish the political compulsions. One aspect that stands out is the political fate of those who opposed the policy. They have gone with little honor even in the academy. Postmortems that have at long last begun have concentrated on commu-

nication failures and misunderstandings. While these are important topics, they have crowded out serious concern for the problem of how to prevent political pressure from replacing responsible risk assessment as the main factor controlling policy.

As Flathman (1960) urged, consequences need to be both projected and evaluated. He suggested the application of community values as an appropriate way to assess consequences. Another and likely quite similar device is to use the values that our common sense tells us rank among the most important dimensions measuring the quality of people's lives. On any list, among the most important would probably appear life, health, security, self-respect, the respect of others, jobs, income, education, housing, recreation, and quite possibly a number of others. The rank-order of these values may vary at times and places and for different people but all would be considered important by most people. The consequences that are projected to stem from a policy can be evaluated as they have their impact on some or all of these dimensions in the lives of the relevant public. The policy will be seen to have consequences that have favorable and unfavorable impacts on the critical dimensions of the lives of people making up the relevant public. To determine wherein the public interest lies, a balance has to be struck among frequently competing values. This balance is not subject to conclusive demonstration. Rather, it takes the form of a structured argument in which the agreed impacts of policy on the critical dimensions of the lives of the relevant public are weighted and what Toulmin (in Pitkin, 1967) called "good reasons" are given for maintaining that a particular policy serves the public interest.

The case of air pollution provides a good example of Dewey's (1927) explanation of how a public comes into being, discovers itself, and creates officials to control the consequences of the interaction among private parties that give rise to the consequences that the public wishes to have controlled. It took a long time, with ever-increasing agitation and scientific research, for a public to come into being that could impel politicians to create the Environmental Protection Agency. While that agency might seem to have a clear mission in the case of enforcing clean air, the specifics of a policy that would serve the public interest is by no means universally apparent and remains a matter of controversy.

Policy involves not just one but a number of public interests, and they conflict. The public has a strong interest in clean air as a matter of health. It also has an interest in jobs, utility costs, the cost of automobiles and trucks, and freedom of movement. Each one of these values has a public

for which it is a matter of major concern. None of the values can be treated as inconsequential and all the publics accept in varying degrees the importance of the values at issue. Probably no public would openly deny the overriding importance of health as a value and yet confronted with potential loss of jobs, high utility costs, and great inconvenience, publics concerned with these values may be willing to discount the value of health or to resist evidence as to how severely it is affected.

The public interest is clearly not capable of demonstration. But the process of weighing the competing values lends itself to reasoned argument. As evidence piles up as to the serious nature of the health impact, the more embracing public concerned with health and the general acceptance of the superior importance of health drives the discussion toward an increasing acceptance of the view that the public interest requires acceptance of necessary controls. How long the argument will take for the public to discover itself, if it will at all, is shown by the case of Los Angeles. The publics that concern themselves with health, employment, utilities, trucks, autos, and other interests that would be affected by air pollution control are not foreign to each other as so many mutually exclusive interests, but they can recognize that, in principle, they belong to a political community. Belonging to a political community involves a commitment to a politics of persuasion which can only be based, as Dewey argued, on the existence of shared values which members create and desire to sustain. To the extent the community exists, it has as its very raison d'être the quest for the common public interest in controlling consequences. The search for the public interest involves the public discovering itself by the recognition of an appropriate weighing of values and tradeoffs that will provide a policy that will serve the public interest in the attainment of its ends at acceptable cost to community members.

Herring (1936) saw as a major problem in the emerging New Deal the lack of coordination among agencies and programs which he felt threatened the realization of the overall common good. The problem of coordination is that, while often advocated, it is not a good in itself. It is idle to coordinate for coordination's sake. There needs to be a clearly envisioned outcome that results from the coordination. One has to start from desired consequences and work back to the means of their attainment, which may involve coordination of existing agencies or perhaps quite other measures. Lack of theory with which to project consequences is a barrier to the effort.

In a classic essay, Key (1978) deplored the lack of a budgetary theory:

> The thousands of little decisions made in budgetary agencies grow by accretion into formidable budgetary documents which from their sheer mass are often apt to overwhelm those with the power of final decision. We need to look carefully at the training and working assumptions of these officials to the end that the budget may most truly reflect the public interest. (p. 66)

It would seem that since the budget is the program of the country spelled out in dollars, we ought to have some way of evaluating the budget to determine whether the programs it contains reflect the public interest. However, we lack theoretical capacity to project the consequences of the program mix that makes up the budget. Lacking a capacity to project such consequences, we are reduced to piece-meal appraisal of particular programs and gut reactions that some are too large, too small, or in some way out of line. Uncertainty is a major argument for incrementalism, although incrementalism may build half-finished bridges and poorly funded programs that amount to wasteful tokenism. There is, however, a difference between an incrementalism that is genuinely experimental and which would further our ability to predict consequences and so their appraisal and a merely cautious inching out in the unknown.

As Wildavsky (1975) pointed out, where we do have theory, as in the case of macro-Keynesian fiscal theory, we can predict the consequences of budgetary magnitudes and hence are in a position to seriously address the public interest in those magnitudes. This is so much the case that he said the British treasury is far more interested in the magnitude of the budget than in its composition.

The bottom line of the appraisal of a policy's being in the public interest is its impact on the important dimensions of the lives of the individuals who make up the relevant public. Social science, particularly economics, has a bad habit of proceeding from abstraction to abstraction without ever pushing the inquiry to the observable dimensions of the lives of real people. Thus Peterson was content to talk about the good of the city as a whole without pressing to see whether the good of the city as a whole corresponded to the observable good of the people who make up the city. Aristotle's criticism of Plato is in point:

> It is impossible for the whole of a state to be happy unless most of its parts, or all, or at any rate some, are happy. The quality of being happy is not of the same order as the quality of being even. The quality of being even may exist in a whole without existing in either of its parts, the quality of being happy cannot. (in Barker, 1962, p. 54)

Herring (1936) believed that objective standards of the public interest were unattainable and that the public interest must remain a matter of individual judgment. Yet cases that he recounted in his book show that this need not be the case. He told how the Interstate Commerce Commission, seeking to further the public interest in railway safety, had the Master Car Builders Association collaborate with the railways to develop a standard for car couplings that would reduce the danger of accidents. Herring recounted how the pursuit of safety went on to explore the possibility of standards for block signals. He also told how the Pure Food and Drug Administration worked with the industry to develop a standard for tolerance in the variation of the strength of aspirin. These standards are clearly not just a matter of individual judgment and their test in use insures that they are as objective as in the nature of the case they can be. These examples illustrate the process by which the descriptive meaning of the public interest is worked out in a particular area of public concern.

Some people are badly put off when Office of Management and Budget economists attempt to give a value to people's lives when attempting to evaluate a standard of the public interest in the regulation of hazardous occupations, pollution, toxic chemicals, and like threats to human safety. Yet given scarce resources, choices have to be made and human life, much as we would like it to be, cannot be accorded infinite value. The choice for policy is the development, on one hand, of a consciously and conscientiously formed standard for which a reasoned justification can be given, or, on the other, the working of the forces of accident, the market, individual visibility, and momentary public sentiment. A little girl falls down a well, is spotlighted by television, and vast resources are mobilized for her rescue; a few whales are ice-bound, become similarly publicized, and evoke a similar response. It is probably as well that the public is not insensitive to such individual cases, but sensitivity to the publicized individual case obscures the immense statistic of unrecognized similar cases and our failure to allocate a similar amount of resources to them. Clearly, a response to all such unrecognized cases would be unaffordable. But by the particular act of charity, we fail to recognize the absence of a responsible policy dealing with the greater phenomenon of which the highly publicized case was but a part. Some states have felt fiscally compelled to limit their expenditures in costly medical procedures and this, in turn, has forced victims and their families to go on television and use other means to arouse public sympathy for their particular case. A standard of public policy to meet the public interest must pass the test of

generalizability and that requires meeting the test of affordability. The public has a need to discover itself and its public interest and that requires an honest confrontation with the scarcity of resources and opportunity costs, among which are not only health and income but life itself. Conscious public policy lifts the so-called social choices, in which mortality statistics are the workings of the forces of nature or the market, to the level of conscious human choice—the realm of moral responsibility.

Schools of law have a responsibility to assist in criticizing judicial decisions and suggesting changes in rules to improve legal practice and solve legal problems. Schools of public administration and policy analysis should be developing and criticizing standards that give descriptive meaning to the public interest in broad areas of public concern.

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