Preview Questions

1. To what morality tales do various stakeholders appeal in advancing their case for or against reforms in the Fire Department of New York (FDNY)?
2. What are some examples of stakeholders applying the rational actor model (RAM) in *The Fires*?
3. Where would the policy changes sought by O’Hagan fall on Lowi’s policy typology?
4. Where would the policy changes sought by Lindsay fall on Lowi’s policy typology?
5. What is an example of BHAGs (big, hairy, audacious goals)?
6. What is an example of incrementalism?
7. What is an example of policy in intention?
8. What is an example of policy in implementation?
9. What is an example of policy in experience?

Reading Summary

Chapter 1 - The War Years

* During the 1970s, building renovators often did not comply with requirements to obtain permits and report building modifications to the local government.
* The building department and the fire department did not have the time or manpower to inspect buildings or enforce building codes.
* Column-style construction was the primary cause of collapse.
  + Truss construction reduces the risk of collapse.
* During the 1970s, fires decimated many neighborhoods that were previously vibrant.
* Death from fires doubled to more than 300 annually but that number only included those who died immediately after the fire, not those who died in the hospital a few days laters.
* Firemen were dying at an unprecedented rate.
* Housing department had proposed a policy of planned shrinkage to close hospitals as well as fire, police, and subway stations in neighborhoods that had been affected by significant fire destruction.
* According to some, the city encouraged the fire destruction with all of the budget cuts.
  + “The city got rid of a million and a half undesirables.”
* Budget cuts cost more money than they saved.
  + Lost rest estate taxes
  + Temporary housing accommodations for fire victims
  + Lost businesses and jobs
  + Extra injuries, disabilities, and widows’ pensions
  + Overtime pay
* Other impacts of budget cuts
  + Delayed responses
  + Increase in fire-related deaths
  + Oppressive conditions for those who lived in the buildings that survived in their neighborhoods
* Unofficial policy
  + Reduced number of personnel on an engine
  + Denial of sick leave
  + Fewer fire companies dispatched to fires
  + Waiting until after shift change to dispatch engines to fires
* Potemkin village initiative cost the city the same amount as keeping open a year up to four of the fire stations that were closed.
* Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) was a state authority that managed the finances of the city and was run by investment bankers and unelected political power brokers.
  + Blamed minorities for driving the city into bankruptcy by using too many public services
* General explanation for the rash of fires is arson-for-profit
  + Insurance payouts
  + Welfare programs for fire victims
* Rot at the top morality tale
  + Liberal argument 🡪 greedy landlords, corrupt businesses, lax government agencies destroyed neighborhoods for profit
  + Conservative argument 🡪 well-intentioned welfare and public housing programs created perverse incentives for ghetto arson
* Arson was not the major cause of fire damage
  + Generally less than 1 percent of fires attributed to arson
  + About 7 percent of fires attributed to arson at the peak
  + Earlier wave of conventional fires in poor neighborhoods that were preventable
* **COMMENT**: Disagree with the framing of “paternalistic liberalism” as the cause of the fiscal crisis and fire department cuts because of government being controlled by educated elites and numbers-crunching technocrats.
  + Could argue that minimalistic conservatism caused the fiscal crisis and fire department cuts by emphasizing efficiency as the primary metric for gauging policy success, taking measures to eliminate what they believed was corrupt government, and cutting back on building regulations to spur the economy at the expense of safety.

Chapter 2 - The Fireman and the Reformer

* John Lindsay seemed to view the government as the problem
  + Stringent ethics rules on Congress
  + Blocked bills that he believed infringed civil liberties
  + Supported President Johnson’s social agenda, which simply means he likely wasn’t a racist or very bigoted
* Civil Service Commission established in 1883 and began requiring tests for civil service jobs in 1894 to minimize the Tweed-style patronage
  + Essentially policy in implementation
  + Reduce the level of discretion of street-level bureaucrats
  + Institutional culture and the tradition of appointing the person with the highest civil service test score to the chief of department position enforced by the unions effectively nullified the fire commissioner’s official discretion of appointing one of the top three scorers.
* Tammany exemplified the branch approach to decision-making.
* Educated reformers favored the root approach to decision-making.
* Tammany-Reform rivalry had a cycle of about 15 to 20 years
* Reformers didn’t have the intelligence infrastructure of Tammany
  + Ward bosses, precinct captains, civil servants, street organizers
* Spread of management science accompanied the rise of Progressivism
* **COMMENT**: It’s not the Liberalism or Progressivism invariably leads to corruption and Conservatism and Libertarianism don’t; it’s that overly concentrated power, whether liberal, progressive, conservative, or libertarian tends to lead to corruption. Only the nature of the corruption changes.
* John Lindsay’s message was essentially the conservative framing of the “Rot at the Top” morality tale.
  + Government is the problem
    - insensitive to its failings
    - arrogant in its power
    - contemptuous of challenge
  + Lindsay was only “liberal” in his social views towards race and equality.

Chapter 3 - The Hangman’s Trap

* Fire commissioners appointed by the mayor and typically do NOT have firefighting experience
* Flawed organizational structure magnified the political rivalry between the fire commissioner and chief of department.
  + Staff chiefs officially reported to chief of department but were appointed by fire commissioner.
* According to former New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, fires are a leading indicator of a society’s health.
* “…in the calls for action following a crisis, those with a plan rise to prominence.”
* John O’Hagan implemented standard operating procedures for FDNY.
  + Essentially established System 1 Thinking for the institution.
  + Most fire chiefs didn’t have the mental capacity to rely on System 2 Thinking for every new fire crisis.
* “…competence saves more lives than creativity…”
* O’Hagan planted the seeds of power by creating an alliance network:
  + Indoctrinating and training young like-minded officers and positioning them throughout the department.
  + Establishing groups of engineers who could advise him and provide data to support his positions in disagreements over budgets and technical matters.
* O’Hagan’s vision for reforming the fire department was essentially a BHAG (big, hairy, audacious goal).
  + Produced improvements orders of magnitude in scale
  + **COMMENT**: It’s not that rationality is bad, it’s that over-reliance on rationality is bad. There’s an appropriate amount of water that is healthy for you but if you drink too much water it can kill you.