"Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It" by James Q. Wilson: A Critique by a Few Bureaucrats

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Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It by James Q. Wilson: A Critique by a few Bureaucrats

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This critique was prepared as part of an Executive Development Seminar at the Oak Ridge OPM Training Facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in March 1990. It was prepared by a small study group of bureaucrats then working for the following government agencies: DOD/DMA, DOI, DOD/Army; DOT/Coast Guard; EPA/OTS; DOD/ASD; DOD/OIG; and EPA/OD. It was edited by Jack Winder (EPA). The views presented in this article do not necessarily represent the agencies for whom the authors worked.

Critique

Noted author and former Harvard professor James Q. Wilson draws upon over 25 years of teaching and research on government organizations to assemble this 430-page treatise on how bureaucracies and bureaucrats work. Wilson relies heavily on doctoral dissertations and graduate seminar papers for anecdotal information to support most of his theories and conclusions.

Professor Wilson attempts to explain the behavior of government agencies through a broad array of lenses: organizations, front-line workers ("operators"), managers, executives, and "contextual" institutions (the Congress, the President, and the courts). In each of the major sections of the book, Wilson attempts to weave a ragged thread that ties some agency-specific anecdotes to some observations about why bureaucrats do what they do, with organizational theory thrown in. At the outset, the author claims that he will not follow the traditional, academic approach of "top-down" analysis which focuses on structure, purpose, and organization. Instead, he proposes that he will present a "bottom-up" look at government—a review of what bureaucrats do.

Wilson's first lens—"organization"—is a vehicle he uses to look at three different bureaucratic institutions: (1) the German army during World War II, a Texas prison, and an Atlanta high school. The author notes that at one stage of the life of each of these organizations, although clearly not at all stages, the organization was successful. It appears that Wilson believes that these successes were due both to good organizations and to strong leaders. Wilson leaves us, however, with the following bleak conclusion: "If organization matters, there is no best way..." (p. 25).

In part II, the author takes a few steps in the shoes of the line worker—the "operator." Vague comments about, and examples of, workers' values, cultures, work context, and missions shed very little light on what bureaucrats do and why.

Part III—called "Manager"—is one of the most negative and disjointed sections of this text. Wilson focuses primarily on the constraints that most government managers face in their daily work. "Managers in public agencies have only a few incentives with which to induce operators to comply with agency rules, and the use of these incentives is highly constrained...," Wilson concludes (p. 174). Surely there is something more positive to be said about the roles and rewards of managers in the public sector.

A few rays of light appear in part IV of *Bureaucracy*—a look at the work of "government executives." Here, Wilson more clearly and objectively describes some of the more tangible concerns of executives, such as turf and autonomy. The author defines and illustrates some types of successful executive strategies: Casper Weinberger—"advocate" and "budget cutter"; Robert McNamara—"decision-maker"; and John Dunlop—"negotiator." Wilson concludes this section with the following positive observation:

> Executives that not only maintain their organizations, but transform them to do more than merely acquire constituency support; they project a compelling vision of the tasks, culture, and importance of their agencies (p. 217).

There is no question that government agencies are strongly impacted by the Congress, the president (our boss), and the courts. Wilson clouds this issue a bit, however, by calling the next section of the book "Context." He suggests that Congress tries to contain the bureaucracy but has given up day-to-day control. Wilson notes that the president tries to exercise control through his White House staff and other means, but he too has lost control because bureaucracies can "go around him." Wilson claims that the courts, on the other hand, have assumed more control over the bureaucracy by their increasing willingness to intervene in the discretionary decisions made by bureaucrats. The chapter on "the courts" does include a few gems. However, the author shares little wisdom other than to suggest that federal workers should try to be a little more aware of these three institutions that heavily impact our work and mission.

Professor Wilson winds up this monumental task of analyzing the bureaucracy with a potentially inspiring section he calls "change" (part VI). He falls far short of inspiration, however, as he continues to complain about inefficiency and excessive size of government agencies, and he suggests that instead we follow more marketplace practices. Wilson broadly endorses the private sector as follows:

> The greater efficiency of private suppliers of most public services seems to be chiefly the result of three factors: lower labor costs, more effective management, and greater competition (p. 351).

The book is tenuous, negative, inconclusive, and is poorly organized. There is no relationship, for example, between part I (organizations—armies, schools, and prisons) and the rest of the book. It is filled with esoteric, academic jargon, which obfuscates rather than enlightens. For example, we read (and reread) the following:

> Since conjecture is, after all, conjectural, experience inevitably will play a large and proper role in guiding his [army general's] plans (p. 43).

The book is not likely to be of benefit to practicing bureaucrats. It often presents a string of little examples of agency problems and issues, but there is no clear theme or line of conclusions drawn from these experiences.

This book also lacks a sense of reality, and it lacks a sense of optimism. It purports to be a book about "what government agencies do and why they do it." However, it is written by a man who has never done it. Wilson's only experience in the government is "as a naval officer for three years and as a part-time advisor to or a member of various presidential commissions" (p. xi).

In conclusion, we share the author's warning in his Preface:

> Though what follows is not very theoretical, neither is it very practical. If you read this book, you will not learn very much—if anything—about how to run a government agency...(p. xii).

On page 28, Wilson offers yet another chance to go no further—a course which we recommend:

> Readers who want to get immediately to the "bottom line" can spare themselves the hundreds of pages that follow and turn immediately to *Federalist Paper* number 51, written two centuries ago by James Madison.

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