

PUBLIC SERVICE: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

1994 Commencement Address

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Congratulations to you graduates, and your families and friends for their support during the years you have spent in pursuit of public administration knowledge and skills while earning your graduate degrees and enhancing your professional opportunities in public service.

Many of you know that the novel Ben Hur was written by Lew Wallace. You may not know this novel was written while Lew Wallace was a United States Territorial Governor for New Mexico from 1878 to 1881. Some allege that Lew Wallace wasn't much of a Governor, but was a hell'uva writer. Relevant to today's events, it was Governor Lew Wallace who wrote: *"Every calculation based on experience elsewhere fails in New Mexico."*

And I believe it was Mexican Territorial Governor Manuel Armijo who, about 1846, opined: *"Poor little New Mexico, so far from Heaven, so close to Texas."*

You will continue to learn that the statements or practices of both of these Governors still have relevance to the field of public service practice in New Mexico. If you don't already know it, you will also learn that the legislative process in New Mexico is firmly rooted in the traditional pork system which was practiced and perfected by Governor Manuel Armijo almost 150 years ago!

I encourage each of you to choose, or continue, a career in the public sector. The work is reimbursed inadequately, is varied, can be challenging, and is frequently useful to society. There **can** be remarkable opportunities to make your marks and do something constructive and noteworthy. Or, depending on your own abilities, positions, and ambitions (or lack thereof), you may find disillusionment in public service. However, disillusionment may also be experienced in the private sector. You will find that both the public and private sectors present many elements of the **good**, the **bad**, and the **ugly**.

You are now super-saturated with knowledge of public administration theory and principles, ready to fill key, responsible, administrative positions in public sector organizations. But your educations have only begun, as there are many things you will learn as you engage in public service practice and attain increasing leadership responsibilities.

You will learn of incompetence, greed, administrative and organizational stupidity and inflexibility, as well as turf protection not in the public's best interest. But these ills are also found in the private sector.

You will learn that public policy and budgets are seldom the result of any rational public administration model, but are more commonly the results of raw political power, frequently exercised to help insure the continued re-election of some incumbent elected official who knows that he or she will reap electoral rewards from constituents.

You will learn that the public sector, like the private sector, has too many who protect the status quo, and don't wish to rock the boat or make any waves.

You will learn that those with ideas and enthusiasm to work hard and improve services may be ostracized by the status quo elements.

You will learn that many employees in any organization passively ignore the dictates of top management, knowing that they will still be feeding at the public trough when top management is changed by the broom of another new governor or mayor.

You will learn that many of your fellow employees demonstrate better recall of the phone numbers of their personal attorneys than their knowledge and understanding of their public service responsibilities, and that they know more about their perceived "rights" than their professional obligations.

You will learn that many in the public sector want to be considered professionals and reimbursed accordingly, but behave more like hourly employees when it comes to work performance and insuring that the job gets done regardless of the additional time and effort required.

You will learn that many individuals are promoted to positions beyond their levels of competence in accordance with the Peter Principle.

You will learn that many public servants feel that government owes them employment regardless of their abilities or lack thereof. Experience suggests they may be correct in this belief, as they always manage to feed at the public trough in some position no matter who is in power.

You will learn that every organization is subsidizing numerous incompetent employees who should have been dismissed, but remain in some position because management has not taken appropriate dismissal action, or has found it impossible to remove the incompetents for any of a number of reasons.

You will learn that in the public sector as is in the private sector there is a significant paucity of vision and leadership, as many in the work force are more interested in job security and longevity than the difficult and controversial measures essential to improve public services.

As you rise to positions of leadership and offer testimony to legislative and other policy bodies, you will learn that many legislators use state employees as political targets at which to direct their political differences with any incumbent governor. The same pattern prevails for

relationships between department heads, councilors and mayors at the local level.

You will learn that expensive programs and requirements are frequently developed **before** the perceived problem to be solved is properly assessed, and that many groups appear to have solutions already designed just waiting for the rumor of a problem.

You will learn that a large percentage of public employees seem to believe that working hours begin as they leave their homes, rather than when they arrive at the work place ready to begin.

You will learn that many officials believe that any problem can be solved by throwing money at it.

You will learn that some expensive programs simply exacerbate the problem that is supposed to be solved.

You will learn that program evaluation is a rarity, and is threatening to many involved in administering programs that should be evaluated and possibly changed or abolished.

You will learn that a program in motion tends to remain in motion in a straight line unless impeded by an equal and opposite force and that such equal and opposite forces are seldom generated.

You will learn that the fiscal beneficiaries of some services are beginning to outnumber those who pay the taxes to support such activities.

You will learn that the knowledge and skills of many personnel are sadly antiquated, that all personnel need periodic re-training to keep current, and that government simply cannot afford **not** to invest in continuing in-service training.

You will learn that many personnel have become "root bound" in their positions and should be periodically "re-potted" to revitalize their potentials.

You will learn that many editors and reporters believe they can sell more papers by constantly criticizing public agencies and officials. They seldom praise anyone in the public sector for all the things that are working well. They frequently make one wonder why he or she chose a public service career, and the media contribute substantially to the public's opinion of public employees.

In technical and scientific matters, you will learn that there is frequently a gulf of difference between public hysteria and scientific opinion. But in a democracy, it is public opinion that determines public priorities.

You will learn that, in general, public agencies and personnel do a poor job of **informing** the

public, and **communicating risk** and relative risk.

You will learn that there is little or no relationship between the work to be done and the size of the staff to which it may be assigned, and that the number of personnel and the quality of work to be accomplished are not related.

You will learn that public employees are perceived to be public property, and they must be chary in their public actions and pronouncements.

You will learn that effective practice in the public sector has different complexities and requires different knowledge, skills and abilities than practice in the private sector. Anyone who alleges that government can be managed like a business is displaying ignorance.

The foregoing are only examples and are based on education I have received in a long career of public service. Further, these few examples are only the tip of the iceberg. But in one way or another, most of these ills are found in **any** large organization.

I was privileged to practice in the field of public service for 38 years. Despite the foregoing examples, I would serve again given the youth and opportunity. I am proud of my accomplishments, but I also learned from my many failures and mistakes. I have no hesitancy encouraging careers in public service. Opportunities for success and recognition abound for every bad or ugly practice or shortcoming such as those I have mentioned.

As you engage in the cause of public service, I wish to note **one** observation, and **three** principles for your edification. The **observation** is that:

Virtually all of the principals and most of the practices of administration are well known to children by the time they enter junior high school, learned as they participated in games and were programmed to respond to bells and whistles before concepts and ideas. Almost any concept of administration that is reduced to plain English elicits the response, "Oh yeah, I knew that." Everyone knows these things because they have already been administered.

The three **principles** I wish to communicate delineate the characteristics of a good administrator. They are:

1. The good administrator is **lovable**. Staff will customarily do their tasks for money, but they only knock themselves out for love.
2. The good administrator is **ruthless**. A commonplace observation is that the administrator must be prepared to sell his grandmother into slavery if this will further the mission of the organization. Because people who are both lovable and ruthless are relatively rare, good administrators are not common.
3. The good administrator is **independently wealthy**. The administrator who is unduly concerned over a mortgage or educating his or her children is usually in no position to hang tough when his supervisor's stupidity becomes intolerable. In business and

industry, the stock option helps. In government, the protection afforded by a personnel system **may** be preferable to **no** system. In academia, tenure **may** be preferable to **no** system.

I encourage you to bury the notion that managers in the public sector are inferior. We should recognize that government **will** respond to good administrative practices. We should recognize that being a competent professional manager does not depend on mastering a particular technical system, but is based on applying the work of management in the areas of planning, organizing, leading and controlling.

I encourage you to seek out the most competent, initiate professional relationships, seek mentors, and be constantly inquisitive. As you earn positions of influence and leadership, devote time and effort to mentoring others. Propose improvements, involve others in the community, and develop linkages with other public and private sector interests. Ignore gossip, as it is titillating in the short run, demoralizing in the long run, and takes away from positive endeavors. Set goals, dream big, and ask "why not." Maintain an exemplary standard of ethics. Begin with the end in your sights. And, above all, maintain your sense of humor!

I encourage each of you to adopt a personal career mission of **enhancing** the good, and **reducing** the bad and the ugly wherever you apply your professional talents. Remember that every problem provides an opportunity for improvement in the public service. And remember that **choices** between the status quo and progress are **yours**.

The future of public service is bright for those who have the necessary enthusiasm, vision, knowledge, skills, and who demonstrate leadership. Leadership on the road to improved public service is not an easy route. Leadership requires **time**, leadership requires **commitment**, and leadership requires **energy**. There are many potholes in the course of providing effective, priority services. The journey requires vision and steadfastness of purpose, as it is beset by difficult pressures, tempting comfortable detours, political surprises, and frequently offers no short term gratification or pay-off. There are no rest stops along the way.

The faculty of the School of Public Administration wishes each of you a constructive, ethical, and productive journey as you provide leadership in the realm of public service.