| BOOK REVIEWS

Unmasking Administrative Evil—(Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998)
by Guy B. Adams and Danny L. Balfour

Reviewed by Alasdair Roberts
Woodrow Wilson Center
Unmasking Administrative Evil attempts to warn us about the capacity of public institutions to cause pain and suffering. It acknowledges, but does not focus on, the fact that technological advances have given contemporary governments an unprecedented capacity to do harm. Instead, the authors emphasize the increasing propensity of governments to use available technologies for harmful purposes. They believe that this trend is attributable to the inability of public institutions to recognize or account for the ethical considerations associated with the use of harmful technologies. Because of these defects in our public institutions, it is argued, we live in an era in which a "new and frightening form of evil"—what the authors call "administrative evil"—has become ubiquitous (pages xx and xxix).

Public institutions are said to have several characteristics that make them prone to ethical lapses. Role differentiation within bureaucracies makes it more difficult for officials to appreciate the consequences of their actions and dilutes their sense of responsibility for those consequences. Similarly, routinization of tasks dulls sensitivity to ethical problems. Organizations are also said to be dominated by a culture of "technical rationality" and a "scientific-analytic mindset" which discourage consideration of normative questions and rationalize harmful conduct as a price to be paid for the achievement of larger goals. In fact, one of the most important attributes of *administrative* evil is said to be the complete unawareness of officials that ethical questions are raised by their conduct. Indeed, the authors argue, officials may have a positive belief that they are doing good.

Direct all correspondence to: A. Roberts, Queen's University, School of Policy Studies, Ontario, Canada; <roberta@policy.queensu.ca>

The claim that modern bureaucracies can do great harm, and be grossly indifferent to the harm they do, is not a new one. Students of totalitarian regimes—whether fascistic or communistic—have made similar arguments for years. Even in the advanced democracies, the myths of the heartless bureaucrat and the ruthless technocrat are entrenched in popular culture. As a consequence, the value of this work must rest mainly on its ability to substantiate the argument—that is, to show that widely-held suspicions about the deficiencies of our public institutions are well-founded.

To make their argument, the authors discuss three cases. The first examines the role of the German bureaucracy in planning and executing the Holocaust. The discussion rejects the idea that the bureaucracy served merely as an instrument of the Nazi leadership, and argues for "the centrality of public administrators as perpetrators of the Holocaust" (pages 9 and 54). It is argued that public administrators were driven to this role because modern organizational structures made them especially prone to gross ethical lapses.

A strong defense of this position would require a more careful review of previous studies about the role of German bureaucrats in promoting and implementing the Final Solution. It might also require more careful consideration of the behavior of citizens and non-governmental organizations. If, for example, bureaucrats were no more indifferent to ethical considerations than priests, journalists, or shopkeepers, an argument about the corrosive effects of modern bureaucracy would be hard to sustain. The question of how far "ordinary Germans" were complicitous in the Holocaust is, of course, hotly contested. Daniel Goldhagen argues that:

> The Holocaust was the defining aspect of Nazism, but not only of Nazism. It was also the defining feature of German society. . . . The program's first parts . . . were carried out in the open, under approving eyes, and with the complicity of virtually all sectors of German society, from the legal, medical, and teaching professions, to the churches, both Catholic and Protestant, to the gamut of economic, social, and cultural groups and associations. Hundreds of thousands of Germans contributed to the genocide . . . . [M]illions knew of the mass slaughters (Goldhagen, 1996: 8).

Goldhagen's critics argue that he overstates the case (See Shandley, 1998). But if he is right, our willingness to accept an argument about the pivotal role of German bureaucrats, or about the uniqueness of their disregard for ethical considerations, will be diminished. The issue deserves further consideration than it has received here.

Critics might also wonder about the relevance of this story to a contemporary audience. Adams and Balfour are convinced that it is relevant: the performance of the German bureaucracy, they argue, "requires that we seriously call into question the adequacy of the ethical foundations of modern public administration" (page 54; see also pages 71 and 169). This is a long stretch, and there are at least two

reasons why we should be skeptical about it. The first is the radical change in attitudes about the protection of basic human rights that has occurred since World War II, in large part because of our experience with the Nazi atrocities. The second may be an increased willingness on the part of public servants to engage in whistle-blowing and other forms of administrative resistance against policies which they consider to be ill-advised. The authors argue that contemporary leaders—and presumably unelected officials as well—"have little memory of their history" (page 139). Where the Holocaust is concerned, this may be overstated. The lessons of the Holocaust continue to shape our foreign policy, and few public servants believe that "only following orders" is an adequate defense for complicity in human rights abuses.

The authors' second case brings the problem of administrative evil closer to home. It examines the American government's decision, at the end of World War II, to bring Wernher von Braun and other German scientists to the United States and give them leading roles in the American missile and space programs. The authors' complaint is straightforward. Von Braun and several of his colleagues were war criminals. (Actually, the authors say that the scientists had "engaged in activities for which other Germans were convicted of war crimes" (pages xxvi and 7)—a roundabout way of making the same point.) American officials committed an administrative evil by importing these scientists despite a formal policy banning the entry of war criminals, and committed a further evil by building the American space program on their talents.

This analysis reveals a basic flaw in the authors' conceptualization of administrative evil: the unwillingness to countenance the possibility that some harms might be justified in the pursuit of a greater good. Evil, they argue, comprises "those instances in which humans knowingly and deliberately inflict pain and suffering on other human beings" (page xix). By this definition, the pilot who kills non-combatants while attacking a military facility commits an evil; so does the social worker who takes a child from his mother, and the surgeon who performs an emergency surgery. The notion that the pilot, the social worker, and the surgeon might have good reasons for their actions is not taken into account. In fact, the authors recognize that there are justifications for harmful conduct, but worry about the slippery slope that might be created if the possibility of justifications is openly acknowledged. They attempt to skirt the issue by arguing that participants in administrative evils do not think about justifications in the first place:

> The problem of dirty hands has always had within it a subtle temptation, which has at times led to great evil in human history. . . . The arrogant flaw of dirty hands, however, is different altogether from administrative evil. . . . Administrative evil is different in part because the culture of technical rationality tends to drive the consideration of ethics out of the picture altogether, much less the rational calculation of how much good legitimately can be traded off against evil. Because administrative evil is masked,

> we typically do not see ethics in this situation at all, which means we do not even see
> a choice about which we might calculate degrees of good (page xxiii).

The authors take this approach when considering the specific case of von Braun and his colleagues. The main point, they say, is that American officials did not undertake any calculation of harms and benefits. These officials were "simply unconcerned" about war crimes, the authors argue, or were so obsessed with national security goals that they were "blinded to larger issues that mattered a great deal" (pages xxvii and 105). And if they did make a calculation, they got the weighting of harms and benefits completely wrong:

> Arguably, we could have done without the Germans altogether. For example, there was
> a budding group of rocketeers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California. Granted,
> they were years behind the Germans, but would it really have mattered in the greater
> scheme of things if the moon landing occurred in 1974 or 1979? (page 159).

Two important criticisms can be made of this analysis. The first is that it impossible to reach the conclusion that officials "were simply unconcerned" without more extensive research into internal deliberations by American officials about the Germans' role in missile and space programs. The second is that officials probably weren't blind or inattentive to the ethical questions involved. The Germans' role was publicly debated throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. When Columbia Pictures released its 1960 biography of von Braun, *I Aim At The Stars*, the comedian Mort Sahl joked that the subtitle should be, *But Sometimes I Hit London*. In 1963, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* caricatured von Braun as a unreformed fascist. And in his popular 1965 album *That Was The Year That Was*, Tom Lehrer sang:

> Gather round while I sing you of Wernher von Braun
> A man whose allegiance
> Is ruled by expedience
> Call him a Nazi, he won't even frown
> "Ha, Nazi schmazi," says Wernher von Braun
> Don't say that he's hypocritical
> Say rather that he's apolitical
> "Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down
> That's not my department," says Wernher von Braun
> Some have harsh words for this man of renown
> But some think our attitude
> Should be one of gratitude
> Like the widows and cripples in old London town
> Who owe their large pensions to Wernher von Braun (Lehrer, 1990).

The purported evil being done within the space program was hardly "masked." The truth is more likely that millions of Americans knew of von Braun's past and had decided to live with it. Reaching the moon by 1969 was never the most

important thing; the real issue was the threat of attack from the Soviet Union, and the need to close the missile gap. We may think, in retrospect, that the threat was overestimated. But this is a different and smaller complaint about the quality of reasoning by American officials.

The authors' analysis of the third case—which describes the events leading to the 1986 Challenger disaster—also has significant difficulties. Two explanations for the disaster are given serious consideration. The first is the emergence of a closed and defensive organizational culture within the Marshall Space Flight Center, which is said to have blocked appropriate consideration of early warnings about safety problems with the Challenger shuttle. Adams and Balfour trace the emergence of the culture back to the days when Marshall was run by von Braun. Von Braun, the authors claim, had a "narcissistic" approach to management, which led him to "control events and people in order to allay anxiety" (pages 126–127). Marshall shortly evolved into a "Teutonic empire" that stifled dissenting voices (page 124). The authors' second explanation focuses on a phone call that is alleged to have been made by President Reagan to top NASA officials, pressing for a quick launch despite safety concerns (pages 120–121). If such a call had been made, lower level officials would simply have been "obeying duly constituted authority"—that is, just following orders, heedless of the evil they were about to commit.

However, there is no strong evidence that such a phone call was made. In fact, the Presidential Commission which investigated the disaster found no evidence of pressure from the White House for an early launch. Diane Vaughan, whose more extensive study of the disaster was published in 1996, considers it "unlikely" that such pressure was exerted (Vaughan, 1996: 13). Vaughan also gives a more thorough view of the ways in which internal procedures increased the probability of a eventual disaster. In fact, Vaughan's account may provide stronger support for an argument about the deficiencies of contemporary bureaucracies than does Adams and Balfour's account, which focuses more heavily on the psychological profiles of key NASA managers such as von Braun. Adams and Balfour also seem hesitant to place too much weight on their argument, finally conceding that it may not be reasonable to conclude that von Braun and his team bore responsibility for the Challenge failure (page 133).

One of the best ways of fighting administrative evil, Adams and Balfour conclude, is to promote "a historical consciousness that is aware of the fearsome potential for evil on the part of the state and its agents," and undertake "critical, historically based studies" of the circumstances in which administrative evil has flourished (pages xxix and 51). This is sensible advice. But it must be remembered that historical research often requires a slow review of archival sources, caution in interpretation, and a willingness to forego the benefits of hindsight when making judgements about the conduct of individuals. To some extent the difficulties with this volume arise because of inattention to these prerequisites. It

might also be useful to focus on cases that are closer in time and geography. If, as the authors say, administrative evil is ubiquitous, this is not a significant obstacle to further research.

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