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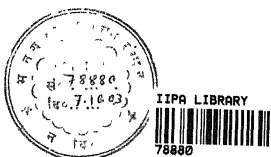
A L F R E D A . K N O P F

**BIG  
DEMOCRACY**

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**PAUL H. APPLEBY**



**A L F R E D A K N O P F**  
*New York • 1945*

DEDICATION

Recently, after years of ill health and several acute periods of organic trouble, there retired from the Department of Agriculture a fine public servant I knew him well, but he was not widely known in Washington, and certainly known but little to the nation. On retiring he wrote: "I have been only a small part of the Department of Agriculture, but the Department of Agriculture has been a great part of me." Throughout the country there are scores of thousands of able civil servants performing their duties with high devotion to the interest of a public almost unaware of them. The government is a great part of them. I am sure they would like this inscription shared in just this way:

TO  
JOHN CITIZEN  
AND  
BILL BUREAUCRAT

Through twelve years in government my respect and affection for both of them have grown steadily.



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FIRST EDITION

— P R E F A C E —

IN TWELVE YEARS of governmental service there have come to me thousands of letters. One that I remember most vividly was written in pencil, on rough tablet paper, and badly spelled. It began "Dear Mr. Germnt." As I read it, I kept glancing back at the salutation, wondering why that letter had come to my desk, wondering who Mr. Germnt was. When I had finished the letter—the outpouring of a tale of woe from a simple, colored Southern tenant farmer—and had glanced back once more at the salutation, I looked at the envelope in which it had come. It was addressed:

*U. S. Germnt,  
Waslungton, D. C.*

That humble farmer was simply looking to the U. S. government as a friendly source of assistance and a proper place to present his troubles for consideration. Personifying the government was the only way he knew of asking for help from the big democracy we have become.

I could not at the time I received that letter, and I cannot now, pose as "Mr. Germnt." Yet I have had an extraordinary opportunity to see government operate.

During the next decade few things will be more important than the way in which our people and our officials approach the job of reconciling the necessities of big government with the values of democracy in an industrial civilization. The issue inheres in the war itself—it is a struggle of big governments that are pitiless in their disregard of humanity against big governments that are dedicated above all to the welfare of persons and peoples.

So it is that I have responded to the urgings of some of my friends to try to put on paper something of what I have learned as a result of my experience. It will not have the widespread interest that might attach to a more factual, more historical, or more anecdotal recital. The book consists much less in what I have seen and experienced than in what I have come to think as a result. Nor does it present in full and rounded view the problem of government as I

now see it. What I have rather tried to do is to emphasize certain considerations regarding contemporary democracy which other writers have either minimized or missed altogether. In so doing I lay myself open to those who will wish to charge me with being the world's most bureaucratic bureaucrat. Yet I have no more vested interest in the government than any other citizen.

Even among the best-informed citizens there is little understanding of modern government. Perhaps no one would assert that he understands America except in the sense of knowing certain aspects of the nation's life. One may know one's community, one's state, one may read much and travel widely through the country, and still feel humble about one's grasp of what makes this nation what it is. The organized government comprehends in some way, it impinges upon and is affected by, practically everything that exists or moves in our society. It involves policies and actions of immense complexity. Its fullest possible understanding requires the wisdom of the anthropologist, the historian, the economist, the sociologist, the political scientist, the farmer, the laborer, the merchant, the industrialist, the banker, the politician, the philosopher, and many more.

What we normally get in discussions of government is much less. We get a repetition of shibboleths. We get debates. The newspapers give us daily snapshots of government, not panoramas. Nor do the snapshots run together present a panorama. They are chosen for dramatic or spot interest, not for completeness and perspective. Correspondents at the Dumbarton Oaks conference told State Department officials: "We are not interested when you agree, we want to know when you disagree." That approach and its limitations are implicit in newspaper conventions. Press competition for advance news leads to such a high percentage of speculative news that at times I suspect the people of knowing more about what their government did not do than they know about what it did.

Similarly, the more serious and scholarly discussions of governmental administration usually concern procedures, mechanics, and operational detail; they reflect the method of microscopic examination and analysis. Or they turn the microscope from one small organizational unit to another and present us with an analysis of many trees without providing any views of the governmental forest.

The only value of public discussions of the procedural-analysis variety is in creating a greater willingness on the part of citizens and Congress to appropriate funds for the employment of adequate staffs having to do with that kind of management. In every organization opportunity always exists to develop and use more efficient procedures. But there is even now within government more wisdom about such things, in the governmental setting, than there is outside of government. The public has and needs no more basis for judging such matters than it has need of a basis for judging the mechanics and procedures of General Motors or General Foods. The broader aspect of this problem—organization—also is chiefly a problem for specialists. A popular or pressure-group demand for the consolidation of two departments would have no more validity than would a popular demand to consolidate the Bethlehem Steel and Firestone Rubber companies.

Efficiency specialists have an important place in government, but no efficiency engineer will ever solve the principal problems of government. Other specialists can make important contributions to the general improvement of government, but those specialists will be social scientists and administrators rather than efficiency engineers.

The problems of greatest magnitude and difficulty are extremely broad problems, their character is such that they cannot be solved by breaking them into small parts and then analyzing, measuring, and improving each part. The nature of the problem must first be seen and understood. Many of the problems have to do with the whole being of the Congress and the Executive—indeed, of the nation itself. Some of the principal problems exist in tradition and in popular and official attitudes. Surely the problem of how a President may better manage the executive branch is not by half a problem of administrative management in the usual, rather narrow sense of that phrase. The same is true of the problem of managing a Cabinet department. If the ablest administrative management specialists in the country should be substituted for the President and his Cabinet, popular satisfaction with the government would diminish greatly. The reason is simple: over-all, true efficiency would decline. Specialists in administrative management fully realize this

truth. Yet of course there should be many more administrative management specialists in high posts than there are today.

Persons who are not outstanding musicians may make valuable and intensive studies of piano construction, of tone quality, or of harmonic combinations. It would still remain for musicians to make use of the information. And it would be absurd to advise a young person to learn to play all of the orchestral instruments as a certain and simple way of qualifying for the post of conductor.

The principal problems of government are to be solved, relatively and progressively, by the combined efforts of scholars, specialists, administrators, politicians, and the public. It is the whole contribution of the executive branch I have in mind when I think of "public administration." This book is intended to have something to do with public administration. It aims to do three things, to present one general impression of government, of the situation within which it functions, and of some of the general ways by which it functions; to comment on various proposals illustrative of possible improvements; and to give some suggestion of relative values in the public consideration of modern government.

Laws are practical and dynamic expressions of what Justice Holmes called "the felt necessities of the time." Government is the active effort to satisfy, for the people, those felt necessities. All discussions of government in our big democracy should be based on a recognition that that is its central role. Let us hope that they will run less and less in terms of "the government" as something separate and more and more in terms of "our government"—the greatest single resource of the American people.

— A C K N O W L E D G M E N T —

Much of what is set down here was first formulated as a series of lectures given in the fall of 1942 at Iowa State College. I am indebted to many persons for suggestions, but most of all to Dr. John A. Vieg for editorial assistance.

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