

## *War Administration*

WARTIME NECESSITIES only make normal governmental necessities more vivid and less controversial. In quiet, peaceful times those necessities can and should be tempered more to common popular expectations. During such periods not only should the exercise of governmental authority be less extensive, but it should be slower, should grow out of more discussion, and should be applied with greater restraint and circumspection. Wartime urgency simply magnifies the necessity for swift and powerful public action. Many of the things a government must do to organize the nation for victory may be and are similar to things it does in normal times. But there is this great difference: when the country is at war, everybody understands that the business of the government is to govern.

In a nation at war governmental activity is enormously expanded. The nature of government is not much changed, but its scope is enormously enlarged. What was necessary before, to do big things through big organization, remains necessary; the demand for men capable of organizing and managing big undertakings suddenly becomes acute. The ability of administrators to operate on their proper levels becomes positively imperative. Talent for co-ordinating matters of inherent and far-flung complexity is needed more than ever before. The ability under confused and changing circumstances to discern the public interest coupled with the determination to sustain it—these become priceless as it becomes clear that saving the country is the only sure means of saving anything. The government must govern with a sure hand when its ability to make decisions and to enforce them becomes as essential to us as the air we breathe.

Nor, in a democracy, does government become any less political in wartime. The political climate will change and so will popular expectations. But what the nation can do and what the nation does are

no whit less determined by popular sentiments than they were before. The ability to sense those sentiments and to work in the atmosphere created by them, however, now become supremely important because of the importance and the urgency of winning the war, which is, until victory, the main business of government.

*Parallels in Civilian-Military Administration*

War does not contribute directly to increased popular understanding of public administration. Yet it almost seems as though it should, for military administration is understood by the public much better than other branches of public administration. It may be helpful, therefore, to discuss public administration in Army terms.

The War Department's wartime job is of such tremendous size and scope as to resemble in some ways the peacetime job of the whole government. Yet its task has definitely departmental limitations. Army supply needs cannot be treated without regard for other aspects of the manpower problem. Army transport, similarly, is just one part of a total transportation problem. Military activity itself must be subject to political activity as in the pre-invasion arrangements in North Africa, the deposition of Mussolini, and negotiations and arrangements with Spain and Turkey, not to mention the intricate task of handling continuous relationships with Britain, Russia, China, Mexico, Brazil, and other Allies.

The public has a general understanding of this complexity. They do not hold General Marshall closely responsible for the acts of a particular colonel. The parents of Private John Doe may be very unhappy about the attitudes and conduct of John's commanding officer or regimental head, but they are not inclined to blame General Marshall, or even to write to him about it. They are even less inclined to blame "the government" and to feel that the colonel, the Army, and the government are one and the same. Citizens may be aware of many instances of poor utilization of the abilities of Army officers and men—that is, of poor placement. Still they do not hold either General Marshall or the War Department or "the government" strictly to account. They know that there must be colonels in the Army, that there are thousands of them, that their abilities and qualities vary widely, and that they cannot be produced automatically to meet pre-

cise specifications; that while there is much discipline in the Army, each officer has an individual area of discretion, and that ideal placement of men according to special qualifications is an intricate and slow business at the very best. Consequently the public judges the Army by general results and judges its officers as parts of a total organization. The public sees Army administration as a system, as a way of utilizing many men and resources, or—as I prefer to phrase it—as a way of getting an organized product.

There are thousands of administrators in the Army working in systematic ways trying to improve the functioning of the organization. Rules and procedures are set up to minimize the bad effects of unsuitable officers and to supply able officers with whatever resources they may lack as individuals.

From the standpoint of administration, civil organization and management are fully comparable with Army organization and management and should be judged in the same way. An Army captain gets a good deal of respect. Yet no civil governmental official dealing with the public will, as a rule, have less rank or less competence. In every governmental department of size there are hundreds of officials in peacetime who should be regarded as having the rank of colonel or higher. In the Department of Agriculture in 1940 there were two or three hundred of a rank equivalent to those of brigadier or major general. It is fortunate that they are not uniformed, that the public does not defer to them in the way the public does to military officers. They are and should be civil officers. But the administrative system in which they function should be appraised and understood more nearly in the way in which our citizenry appraise and understand Army administration.

#### *Unique Features in War Administration*

War administration has the handicaps that new or suddenly expanded organizations always have—a difficulty that I have referred to earlier. It is unavoidable. Hundreds of thousands of new persons have to be brought into a strange environment to do things they have not done before. Efficient management of new agencies, comparable to ordinary governmental efficiency, is therefore wholly impossible. What has happened in civilian war administration is of a

piece with what has happened—but is accepted—in American business: namely, that, with huge increases in the volume of work and the necessity of relying on new and untrained personnel, it is to be expected that the laundry will often be late (and sometimes lost); that information clerks will occasionally be slow, or snippy, or uninformed; that, in general, service will not be up to prewar standards.

Nor would it be possible or practicable to minimize these difficulties very much by maintaining in peacetime much larger organizations with the thought that they then could start out in high gear if a war emergency should come. For organizations that are not actually able to function petrify or rot. War agencies do not deal with stable factors, much less with problems that can be readily anticipated. They are obliged to deal with innumerable unpredictable factors, some of which have a way of changing with dazzling speed. Experience and logic demonstrate that only the aggressor can plan well and organize well for war in advance, and that in time events will make such preparations obsolete. Apparently the best preparation the nonaggressor can make is to ensure that there will be this margin of time.

The salient facts regarding war administration, then, are these: (1) its infinitely greater complexity beyond that of the prewar period; (2) its completely governmental or public-interest character; (3) the necessity for huge and quick expansion of organization and personnel, entailing a severe drag on efficiency; (4) the speed with which the situations it must meet change; and (5) its political nature—that is, its dependence on popular thought and sentiment.

The handicaps and obstacles to high efficiency in civilian war administration are many and serious: the difficulties of making greatly expanded or huge new organizations function like older agencies in terms of operating efficiency; the difficulties of getting required new personnel (who for the most part have to be recruited outside of government) to make the great adjustment to a governmental function and to a completely public-interest attitude; the difficulties of organizing and managing enterprises of unprecedented size and complexity; and the difficulties inherent in promptly redirecting the energies of big organizations to new objectives when and as changes occur in the course of the war.

This means in sum that the difficulty in war administration is that war agencies and personnel are not sufficiently governmental. They are not sufficiently bureaucratic because, in the nature of things, they have not had time to develop proper and adequate red tape or to select and sift their personnel so as to bring to the top the men who combine the intellectual power, administrative skill, and political sagacity needed to manage the immense and complex responsibilities entrusted to them.

Another difficulty lies in the fact that, in a democracy,<sup>6</sup> even if ultimate administrative needs could be fully foreseen, the administrative structure could not be set up full-blown at the beginning. By and large, administrative structure can develop only as rapidly as the people and their representatives realize the enormousness of what their government needs to safeguard their welfare.

#### *Criticism Often Irrelevant*

Some time ago one of the most reputable of Washington's correspondents commented about wartime administration in a way that is all too common. He began by saying:

"Without doubt the largest obstacle to the American war effort is the cumbersome, sluggish bureaucracy here at Washington. It is a disease which afflicts so many after they get into government service. At first they try, then gradually they succumb to the ball and chain of bureaucratic methods and must slow down to the snail's pace at which the machine moves."

After this sweeping indictment came this example:

"An ambassador of one of the United Nations writes himself a patriotic speech and as a courtesy turns it over to one of the government agencies just to be sure he is in line with policy. He is in line all right, but his speech is censored in several irrelevant details, through a purely mechanical application of rules which in this instance makes no sense whatever. The ambassador described the size of the German force which attacked his country in the early part of the war—many, many months ago. It was ancient history. The Germans probably have forgotten what they used in that campaign but they could look it up if they were interested any longer, which is not likely. Nobody but a historian would care. Yet the detail was stricken out."

It happens that this incident, as it is reported, is not in the remotest way an example of the offense charged in the general indictment. This is not a story of delay, red tape, confusion, passing the buck, or organizational complexity. It is simply a story of the decision—probably a wrong decision—of an individual official. Wrong decisions are made in all organizations, governmental and other. In somebody's judgment, nearly every decision is wrong. This particular one might well have been argued on its merits as a decision. For since we have bureaucracy and red tape, it was subject to appeal. But the difficulties of appeal were not cited as the thing to be criticized—only the decision of a single official which somebody else believed to be wrong!

Thereafter the commentator went on to note and applaud what for some peculiar reason he seemed to think was a basic contrast:

“An American, representing American interests, tells me there is only one office in town where he can get a prompt yes or no answer. That is from the organization run by Sec. Ickes. You may not like some of the things Sec. Ickes says, but he can make decisions, which seems to be an increasingly rare thing around here.”

There may be a formal contrast here since another man and decisions are involved. But here the making of individual decisions is upheld whereas in the first instance the same action was denounced. Neither instance had any direct relevance to the question of bureaucracy, which was the subject of the column. It related solely and exclusively to the merits of the kinds of decisions different individuals make.

Administration is, of all fields, the one of which Washington correspondents ordinarily know least. It does not have much news interest when dealt with seriously, but, unfortunately, it has a good deal of news interest to a Don Quixote who likes to tilt at the devilish windmills of bureaucracy and red tape.

The correspondent I have quoted is a highly intelligent person. He would be among the first to denounce a criticism of a public policy consisting of names and epithets thrown at the particular individuals who happened to head the agency responsible for the policy. Yet, like many other commentators, he often tends to discuss administration

in terms of epithets. Swearing at the government is a right, and one which has its values. But it is certainly the least useful way for those to employ their energies who are potentially capable of helping the public understand and appreciate the exceedingly intricate and difficult problems of civilian war administration.

*Understanding the Difficulties*

Complexity is the outstanding factor in the management of our national war effort. Take the function of the Office of War Information. To formulate and effectuate "information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort, and of the war policies, activities and aims of the Government" is a policy to which no one objects. Applying the policy is what is difficult. To do it perfectly would involve knowing a vast deal of what the Army knows, as a total organization, and of what the State Department knows, and the Navy and the Foreign Economic Administration and several other organizations. OWI cannot and does not pretend to know what the staff of all these agencies know. It must, therefore, use caution and check appropriately with these various organizations. Yet no one general in the Army can know all that the Army knows that would have a bearing on the matters on which OWI might want clearance; he simply could not imagine all of the possibilities. But everybody in the Army cannot be consulted; it would mean endless delay and a great diversion of energy needed elsewhere. Therefore the general does a reasonable job of checking and analyzing the questions presented to him and then plays safe by being a little bit extra-*cautious*. A similar process goes on in other agencies. The Office of War Information then decides what should be released and what not. It is a sensible and a necessary process. Inevitably there are numerous instances of delay and confusion, of stupidity and ignorance, and of excessive caution. But, despite these faults, the nation is helped by the program far more than it is hindered.

In some fields of war management the complexity of the problem involved is indescribable. The decisions on the volume of grapefruit to be canned affects in some measure the number of ships that can

be built, the number of men that should be inducted into the armed service, the supply of fence available for expansion of hog production, the number of dehydration plants that can be built—and countless other things. To bring all these factors into focus, relating all the items to each other and translating them into specific functions and responsibilities on the various levels and the various segments of management, to do it quickly and to make prompt adjustments as and when conditions change—this is the job that the war has brought us. This is what is involved in a war of total resources. It is a job that can be and is being done. Happily it is not a job that must be performed to perfection. However, it must be done better than the Nazis and the Japs manage their corresponding job. Assuredly it will be.

After complexity, the outstanding feature of the task of administering the war is the newness of the job, the necessary newness of the agencies carrying on the job, and the newness of the personnel charged with managing the job. Two or three of the agencies—the War and Navy Departments, for example—were old and well established when the first attack came, but the sudden and enormous growth of both of these departments puts them, in terms of administration, in a situation not much different from that of the agencies wholly new. They have to rely largely on new personnel unacquainted with government, unacquainted with any organization of comparable size, unacquainted with their regulations and procedures, and unacquainted with most of the elements in the military situation.

Reference was made earlier to the American industrialist who said that his plant employing three hundred was far less efficient than his plant employing thousands, owing to the fact that the small plant was new whereas the big one was old. Given a second new plant employing a thousand, of the same age as the smaller plant, it would have been less efficient. Public administration must bow to the same law. Huge new government departments simply cannot be highly efficient. The problem is first to make them as efficient as possible and then steadily to increase their efficiency.

Related to the fact of newness, in explanation of the problem of achieving efficiency in war administration, are the nature and weight of the burden which has to be carried by top executives. Anyone ex-



perienced in organization and administration knows that there is a vast difference between establishing a big organization and assuming the direction of a big organization already successfully functioning. It is not easy to judge the capacity of a new president coming into the headship of a great and going corporation. He may ride on the organization rather than contribute to it, and it may take months and years to ascertain the facts. In or out of government, a good going organization may operate rather effectively for a time with a mediocre head, provided, of course, he does nothing to damage the organization. But to start a big organization in government, or enormously to expand a small one, puts a vastly different and an inescapable burden on the top man. In business many new organizations are based on new ideas, and a new idea may be so superior as to confer on the firm advantages that enable it to thrive without superior organization or management. So it is that some men who have not been gifted with a general capacity for creating new organizations have nevertheless been credited with having created successful new organizations. But be that as it may, there was before the war almost no field of material of demonstrated ability to create large governmental organizations of the kind required for war management. Nor could the lack of an adequate supply of such organizing genius have been nullified by a decision to establish numerous small organizations instead of the large ones projected. The job of relating the countless activities of many small organizations *is* the problem of big organization.

Yet not all of the difficulties in war administration inhere in the fact of complexity, or of huge new organizations or of old organizations greatly expanded. The conversion of older agencies from peacetime to wartime functioning has also entailed certain difficulties. Some older organizations which have not undergone great expansion are functioning now much less efficiently than they did a few years ago. Under successive leaders, or under the same leader grown old or used up, all organizations have their ups and downs, their better and their worse periods. Mediocre leaders become tragic figures when the requirements of leadership grow heavy. Changes of personnel in top positions, even though they do not ensure improvement, are a necessary part of the effort for administrative adequacy. New top

men tend to be like new bureaus: they have policy drive even though at first they show inferior administrative competence. By trying hard they can succeed in time in getting administrative control without making administrative wreckage. They can gain the refinements of administrative competence while giving their organization needed policy stimulation. War does not automatically create men equal to big jobs; our success in war administration lies in the fact that able men can learn how to carry great responsibilities.

Though the critics may continue to talk of the tendency of the new personnel and new organizations to "succumb to bureaucracy and red tape," the problem of mastering the complexity, newness, and size involved in war management is the problem of organizing new personnel into an effective bureaucracy. In part this requires devising for it an adequate amount of the proper kind of red tape. As the personnel is sifted and seasoned and as the organizations establish and improve their procedures, they develop a superior brand of red tape and evolve into a superior bureaucracy. Gradually the American people discover that theirs is a V-lined war administration.