



December 4, 2019

Why American civil servants matter

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

American civil servants have long been maligned as slow moving and unthinking creatures of bureaucracy. The criticism has gotten even more pointed in recent years, as Republicans and President Trump have begun denouncing them as the “deep state,” adopting a derogatory term from Turkey that has justified that country sliding to an effective dictatorship.

As the impeachment hearings have shown, however, civil servants can operate as a backbone to the federal government, providing advice and expertise that spans political turnover. Perhaps more importantly, the development of a strong civil service law has helped combat corruption. A look at history shows the civil service was a hard-fought innovation that prevented the United States from continuing down a dangerous path.

It is almost entirely forgotten today, but civil service reform was once the big political issue, one that led to the assassination of a president. The election of Andrew Jackson started a focus on the value of patronage for political parties, with Senator William Marcy using the famous phrase “to the victor go the spoils.” But after the end of the Civil War, with a more dynamic economy and the federal government a larger player within the business sphere, political patronage only grew in importance. Patronage had become the way parties were funded. Many government employees were expected to kick back a percentage of their salary to their party.

Both parties had been focused on the subject, but with the Republicans dominating the presidency, it was a critical focus for them. In the 1872 election, the reconstruction efforts and the attacks on it by unrepentant southerners received some attention. However, the reform of government employment and merit employment was arguably the big question. The Republicans under Ulysses Grant were focused on reaping the value of their victories, but there was an internal split as New York Herald Tribune editor Horace Greeley ran as the reform candidate. The Democrats did not even put up a candidate, and they instead backed Greeley, who lost to the supremely popular Civil War victor and has the distinction of being the only presidential candidate who passed between Election Day and the Electoral College vote, forcing the odd voting in the Electoral College.

These events did not end the battle over what became known as civil service reform. The 1880 convention saw a bitter split in the Republican Party. Grant, backed by the group supporting patronage known as the Stalwarts, was denied an opportunity for a third term. Instead, House Minority Leader James Garfield, who was part of the group supporting reform known as the Half Breeds, was the Republican nominee. On the ticket with him, as a sop to the Stalwarts, was Chester Arthur, who was viewed as in the pocket of the Stalwart leader, Senator Roscoe Conkling.

Garfield did not have much of a chance to establish a system of reform. A disappointed and likely insane Stalwart supporter, Charles Guiteau, shot Garfield less than four months in office. After doctors botched his care, Garfield died. Arthur replaced him and many thought civil service reform would disappear. But Arthur proved to be a transformative president, one who rose to the job. He permanently broke with his mentor Conkling, who had foolishly resigned from the Senate in protest of civil service policies under Garfield, and pushed the legislation to enact civil service reform.

That reform jump started the process of creating a professional class of civil servants who did not look to enrich themselves in the position, as has happened in many other countries. In the developing world, the use of patronage systems and the inability to form a full respected class of civil servants has been seen as one of the reasons for the challenges they face in improving conditions. Patronage and the need to hold onto positions in the government simply to enrich supporters are blamed for intensified crises and exacerbating tensions. The patronage hires cannot be trusted to choose public good over benefits to the party. Civil service is not a panacea for all ills. It has its own problems of potential sluggishness and internal capture but has proved a far better option than the alternatives.

While the modern counterparts in the Republican Party today might not respect the civil service, and while the allies of President Trump denigrate them as the “deep state,” we have seen the wisdom of moving away from the patronage system that would prevent qualified government officials from giving important advice and blowing the whistle when necessary.

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