

# The Role of Records in Administration<sup>1</sup>

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## I

IN ANY organization governed by the principle of responsibility, both planning and action must be a matter of record. This is axiomatic. Unless there is a way of reconstructing the genesis of past deliberations and determinations, responsibility may exist in name but is not insured in fact. Resort to memory and its unconscious distortions would not be a reliable method of producing a picture of what actually took place. Recollection may falter, or one man's memory may contradict another's. Only by preservation of a satisfactory record of the events and considerations that led up to a given decision can those sharing in it be made to answer for their actions. A complete record is the most objective reporter, and hence the most effective means of exacting responsibility. This is also attested by the fact that the simplest maneuver to escape responsibility has always been the manipulation or even destruction of the record.

To put it differently, one of the essentials of responsible administration is transparency of the administrative process in terms of both what is going on today and what has gone on before. In the realm of government, the requirement of transparency relates to political as well as managerial needs. Let us first examine the political aspect.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of democracy is its insistence that public business be conducted along the lines of public preference and under the eyes of the public. The implications of this principle are manifest in every part of the machinery of representative government—unimpeded public debate of political issues; presentation to the voter of alternative proposals advanced by different parties; free elections held periodically; supremacy of lawmaking vested in popular assemblies; and accountability of the executive branch. Each part, indispensable in forming the whole, serves as a guaranty that the people's

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Friday, October 25, 1946.

common affairs remain its own in a real sense. As a corollary, all phases in the pursuit of public purposes must be illuminated by public knowledge of means and ends.

This is particularly true in securing accountability of the executive branch. In the first place, in order to obtain accountability it is necessary to devise proper channels of legislative inquiry. Some such channels are provided in the hearings of appropriation committees, special investigations undertaken by the lawmaking branch, and additional reporting obligations imposed upon various governmental agencies. Few would contend that these traditional channels are wholly adequate, considering the chief executive's broad responsibility for the program and the operations of the administrative organization as a whole. But it is obvious that without at least a minimum of reasonably well-understood procedures for drawing specific information from governmental officials, the legislature would be unable to hold them accountable for the exercise of their authority.

Equally important is a second factor—the basis of the information they are called upon to furnish. It would amount to a defeat of legislative inquiry should they be free to make up their stories as they saw fit. If they could not be pinned down to incontrovertible facts, their explanations would be of little value. Thus the state of administrative records is of vast significance to the efficacy of democratic control.

Transparency of the administrative process is also a managerial necessity. Management, public or private, is hamstrung in the discharge of its executive functions when it lacks the data that supply the foundation for intelligent judgments. The firmness of its hold on all elements of the organization depends primarily on its knowledge of what is going on within the total structure of cooperative effort. This is in part a matter of internal communication, in part a matter of accuracy in reporting. As the foundation of informed executive direction, the record system is an integral factor in competent management.

Beyond knowing what is going on, where weaknesses show up in the scheme of operations, and where in the administrative approach new problems emerge that invite special attention, management is also called upon to chart the course of institutional policy, to determine program priorities, and to infuse a unity of purpose into the whole organization. This brings in focus the creative aspect of responsibility—active and imaginative pursuit of the public interest. Policy planning and program development employ today a variety of specialized staff services, from research and statistics to budgeting and scheduling. In order to succeed in its tasks, each such service, and the executive it serves, must have ready access to all of the resources of the organization. There are few problems in the area of policy and program that

can be disposed of without reference to related studies and investigations undertaken earlier. Policy and precedent records, and pertinent bodies of working papers as well, play a vital role in achieving coherence and comprehensiveness of administrative planning.

While the appreciation of sound record management in the political and administrative context is not as common as it ought to be, the considerations here summarized are anything but novel. More than a generation ago, the Taft Commission on Economy and Efficiency prefaced a technical memorandum on the handling of correspondence with some observations on basic needs to be met. The commission identified the need for "certainty" in getting at pertinent record material; the need for "obtaining all the papers relating to a particular subject"—that is, completeness of the record; the need for "rapidity" of access; and such secondary needs as that for adequacy of cross referencing.<sup>2</sup> In broader sweep, concern with the subject recurs in a celebrated British report published in 1918, that of the Machinery of Government Committee under the chairmanship of Viscount Haldane. The committee, whose membership included the late Beatrice Webb, proposed that the administrative body make better provision for "the organized acquisition of facts and information, and for the systematic application of thought, as preliminary to the settlement of policy and its subsequent administration."<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, the committee pointed out that a department head "must have at his disposal, and under his control, an organization sufficient to provide him with a general survey of existing knowledge on any subject within his sphere, with tables of statistics and comments upon such tables which will keep in touch with the progress of any work that can be expressed in this form, and with reports upon questions affecting the department's work which require scientific knowledge in their preparation. What is needed in these cases is a competent, swift, and self-contained inquiry for the purpose of enabling a particular Minister to deal with a specific administrative problem."<sup>4</sup> These remarks not only indicate the place of documentation in the administrative process, but also outline some of the main functions of a fully developed record reference service.

So much for the relation between record administration on the one hand and democratic control and resourceful management on the other. There is still another angle which, though obvious, deserves at least

<sup>2</sup> President's Commission on Economy and Efficiency, *Memorandum of Conclusions . . . in the Matter of Handling and Filing Correspondence*, Circular No. 21 (Washington, 1912), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Reconstruction, *Report of the Machinery of Government Committee*, (London, 1918), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

passing mention. An organization whose records are in bad condition, throws a heavy burden of inconvenience on the public it attempts to serve. This is true of any kind of enterprise, whether public or private—a bank, an insurance company, or a government agency.

As one illustration, the letters-to-the-editor section of the *Economist* the other day carried a complaint, apparently not free from bias, in which an aroused personnel chief of a commercial firm in England sharply censured the central department in charge of the employment exchanges. He felt that employers would not look with much confidence on the exchanges "until the Ministry's Dickensian record systems and office organizations are changed to something more in keeping with the present age."<sup>5</sup> In the day of the service state, with government administering a large volume of business for the direct benefit of the ordinary citizen, this line of thought is fraught with implications for public management.

## II

Once it is understood to what an extent the transparency of the administrative process is the result of documentation and its use, it is easy to see how consequential the effects of unsatisfactory records can be. The chief defects can perhaps be brought under four headings. The first is paucity of record material. The second is its disorganization. The third is its excessive abundance. And the fourth is a peculiar combination of all three of these—more widespread than it ought to be.

Paucity of record may be traceable to different causes. One such cause is deeply rooted in the kind of amateur administration that flourished in bygone days, exemplified by the local overseer of the poor under the old prescription whose accounts were "in his head." The growth of larger-scale operating processes, even in the county and township, has carried with it a considerable degree of formalization and specificity in the development of records. Yet the remnants of earlier habits are still with us, especially in the often haphazard documentation of transactions that do not fall into established routines or procedures.

As a consequence, while the record pattern for the great mass of recurring operations, in the main of passing interest, leaves little untold, almost the opposite may be true of the documentation of staff work and policy planning. Here the story too frequently reduces itself to an accumulation of such memoranda as were exchanged between individual participants. These memoranda in many instances are only the bricks and straws that go into the making of the finished product. Just what went on at informal conferences on different levels of

<sup>5</sup> *Economist*, Vol. 151, No. 5383 (Oct. 26, 1946), p. 663.

authority may not get written up, and signed or initialed "memory aids" may either be unknown or not be entered in the files. Thus the gaps may withhold more information than is contained in the papers on hand.

Another contributing factor is the reluctance of policy-determining officials, especially political appointees who come and go, to allow all of the evidence of their own activity to become part of their agency's record system. Many of them show great fondness for "personal files," and do not hesitate to take these along upon their departure from office. It is, of course, quite natural for such officials to devote some of their time to political business of a personal nature, which may have little or no bearing on their administrative responsibility. But the segregation of subject matter generally tends to reflect a rather broad view of what is personal, and in the more extreme cases can lead to a disruption of the agency's policy documentation. Moreover, the example set by the top command is likely to encourage imitation by other members of the hierarchy, with corresponding spread of the ill effects.

Paucity of record sharply restricts the institutional memory of the agency, putting the agency in the course of the years in the same intolerable situation in which a witness finds himself when time and again he "can't remember." Disorganization of record material produces similar results, with the additional embarrassment of a lingering realization that the evidence of prior thought or action is somewhere in the files but cannot be brought together on short notice. In the past, such disorganization was usually the consequence of neglect. The striking rise of record management in our day has done much to change the picture, but as yet the change is far from being complete.

Despite impressive improvements in the systematic treatment of the principal bodies of records, exempted areas are by no means unknown. Aside from record material arbitrarily designated as personal, there are also groups of files that remain attached to particular ranking officers because these files meet their individual needs. The same exempted status is sometimes claimed successfully for the working papers that accrue in the activity of various departmental committees, or in that of advisory boards occupying a comparatively independent position. When important record collections remain outside the jurisdiction of those in charge of the agency's files, a degree of disorganization inevitably ensues.

No less serious is the disorganization that goes back to lack of care or forethought in building up emerging records at the point of their origin. Inadequacies left uncorrected at the initial stage are generally beyond repair, save for time-consuming and costly review and rearrangement at a later time. Attention to record development at the

source is plainly a responsibility of management. One may suspect that the accelerated expansion of American public administration during the twentieth century, together with the marked shift of gravity toward line operations, has something to do with the belated awakening of managerial interest in record-making and record-keeping.

Disorganized files are as informative as the incoherent remarks of a man out of his mind. Excessive abundance of record material has the effect of three people talking at the same time. "Big democracy"<sup>6</sup>—like big business—is a mass producer of records. The volume of continuous accumulation is imposing. The annual rate has been estimated to run to one million cubic feet for the federal government alone.<sup>7</sup> It can hardly occasion surprise that record officers have become increasingly preoccupied with disposal procedures.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, mere quantity of files is in itself never a defect of a record system, provided that control facilities measure up to the magnitude of the problem. As a matter of fact, however, the magnitude of the problem for some time has outrun the scope of the control machinery. This in turn has necessarily affected the quality of record work, not the least by diverting effort from making more serviceable the less massive but more important file groups that relate to policy planning and staff studies. When the pressure of accumulating records continues to overtax the available facilities for their organization, an agency may eventually reach the point of giving up trying to find its way through the mountain of paper.

Each of the three defects—paucity, disorganization, and excessive abundance—may show up simultaneously in one and the same record system, though in different areas. Whether appearing singly or in combination, these inadequacies usually impress themselves upon the working methods of the entire organization. At worst, it will be widely taken for granted that "you can't get the thing you are looking for," and that it is best "just to forget about it." This is the philosophy of administration on the spur of the moment. Its path is marked by bungling and confusion.

### III

Although by now a specialization of recognized standing, record management cannot cease to exert itself in the elaboration and refinement of its working methods. Much room is left for the application of an experimental approach to problems new and old. This holds particular promise in two directions: the fuller development of record refer-

<sup>6</sup> The phrase is Paul H. Appleby's; see his *Big Democracy* (New York, 1945).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. William J. Wilson, "Analysis of Government Records: An Emerging Profession," *Library Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (1946), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> This emphasis runs through much of the paper cited in note 7.



ence, and the definition, in reasonably precise terms, of simple standards to guide staff and operating officials, including first-line supervisors at the base of the administrative structure, in making their contribution to the process of documentation. Both tasks are likely to dominate the agenda of progress during the next decade.

It is no longer necessary to argue the case for record reference as a function implicit in record administration. In the business of policy planning, there is continuing need for reconsidering the basis of an agency's general marching orders; for reviewing the way these marching orders were arrived at; and for evolving desirable adjustments in the route of advance in full awareness of the thinking that went into preceding decisions. No administrator, in the exercise of his executive responsibilities, can afford to keep himself aloof from the sequence of steps that brought him to the point from which he looks into the future. On countless occasions, he and his assistants must go back to the rationale that underlies existing policy. This rationale finds clearest expression in the records of the agency.

The staff divisions working in support of directive authority share the administrator's interest. In the conduct of their assignments, large or small, they are frequently compelled to return to previous study projects in order to draw upon data or findings. It should also be borne in mind that the range of record reference is not confined to the highest level of the hierarchy. Line officials and staff teams at lower levels of the organization depend on the same kind of reference service.

This is not the place to outline in any degree of detail the potentialities of such reference work. Suffice it to emphasize one point. Record reference, in order to do a complete job, must be geared into policy planning or staff studies at an early stage. The job calls for more than furnishing promptly such files as are specifically called for. It must include identification of record material of possible significance in connection with the request received. This entails knowledge of the character of the problem under examination.

Little attention has been given thus far to aiding staff and line personnel in extending proper care to records in the production stage. This, too, is a subject that warrants thorough analysis. It is clear that great obstacles arise in the subsequent utilization of record material when the initial construction of files is left to personal ingenuity and preference. Moreover, questions of broader importance every so often emerge in the course of recurrent transactions which in themselves are of no enduring interest. Systematic treatment of documentation must begin at the point where the record accrues. There is room for much improvement by providing specific guidance to those who put papers together as an incidental aspect of their work.

Viewed in the framework of modern management, record administration is not a technical service that can be permitted to withdraw into its own specialization. Documentation and its use shade everywhere into staff activities and line operations. Record officers must therefore seek to ally themselves with each of the main phases of the administrative process. They must develop a partnership with other specialized services, especially organization and methods work. Such matters as communication facilities, procedure analysis, report control, and form design are closely related to record management. Cooperation in these areas will have beneficial effects for all concerned. Perhaps record officers should display more initiative than they hitherto have in evolving productive relationships with those staff units that devote themselves to raising the general level of management. This is one way of promoting a better appreciation throughout the organization of what record administration can contribute to good management.

To sum up, in order to be truly responsible, administration must be adequately informed, above all about itself. Effective management requires coherence of administrative planning and executive control. Both in turn depend in large part on a sound system of records, logically organized, stripped of useless paper, and readily accessible throughout the organization.

Coherence in administration can be achieved only when there is sufficiently frequent resort to the record of operations and the reasoning underneath those decisions that govern policy. Record officers are called upon to furnish a reference service to line and staff officials comparable to that rendered the scholar by the library. Development of such reference service will further raise the sights of record management.

As modern administration is necessarily a complicated process, so record management is a complex and highly technical activity. Yet those in charge of records have an important part in helping the administrator attain the purposes of responsible management. Together with other staff services available to the government executive, record officers can help him to exercise his functions with insight and wisdom. They are the custodians of the evidence of their agency's thought and action.