

Observations and Fodder for the 2018 Minnowbrook Conference

Kirk Emerson

In Barbara Tuchman's 1984 *The March of Folly* (as Jon Meacham of the *New York Times* reminded us last spring), she wrote of the importance of truth seeking, especially in troubled times. Referring back to Machiavelli's advice to his prince while observing the Vietnam debacle and its precursors, she wrote, "what government needs is great askers."

I think that is what the field of public administration should be about. We should be the field of great askers. We should know how to ask the right questions. We should be thinking deeply about what the right questions are to be asked during these troubling times and their aftermath. We should be preparing public managers to ask the right questions in their work, of their bosses, of their staff, and of the public they serve (and listening to answers). We should be training PA scholars how to ask the right questions in their research and how best to answer them. As leaders in the field, we should be asking the right questions of those in power within the bureaucracy and of our political leaders. We should be asking the right questions of the citizenry and its organized interest groups.

Following Tuchman, then, what are the right questions to be asking at this Minnowbrook Conference? I think those questions that have been teed up for us by the planning committee are excellent. To me, the first set of questions are the most important. Without clarifying the nature and role of the administrative state in these challenging times, we can't easily move to refine or expand the boundaries for the field or consider guiding its future research trajectory.

It would be easy for us to jump right in and start answering all of these questions. Believe me, I have just put aside several pages of premature solutions and half-baked concluding themes. But I think at least at the outset, we should think about what it takes to become "great askers" and what a "right question" requires.

I have one reflection to make on some of the questions raised that pose choices and juxtapositions between objective and normative, between science and vision, between global and local scales, large forces and micro-behaviors, for example. I would encourage us to consider whether these are "right questions" or false choices. Can we not be both or all? Do we not need both? Can our field not acknowledge these tensions and embrace them? Could we not approach this in a more integrative manner, becoming the field that lies between the opposites, embraces both shores (as William Blake would observe of human nature)?

We were told not to write a concept paper that would be submitted to any old conference. So with that challenge, I will turn to a question that plagues many of us for personal and professional reasons drawing on our own experience with the administrative state and past turbulent times. The question is: Will the system hold? Is the administrative state being undermined to the point where the system cannot be resilient enough to deliver democratic values? If so, why? If not, why not and is there a path forward? Here I speak of the US context, but there are of course parallels in other parts of the world. You will also have to forgive or at least overlook my blatantly partisan portrayal below.

I came of age during the Vietnam War, marching on Washington, distrusting cops, disrespecting the President, scared my brother's lottery number would be too low, not paying the war tax embedded in our phone bills. And of course, sex, drugs and rock n roll and all that did to challenge established norms. Then Watergate and the complete breakdown in my confidence in government (generalized from the Johnson Nixon presidencies to the entire federal government, if not government in general) and an awareness of a deeply polarized country. Until the Pentagon Papers were released and the Senate Watergate hearings began which galvanized the country and the world. Democracy was on display. There was a system that in the end could stand against abuse and criminality and uphold democratically established laws. Things changed. Eventually, my faith in government, in democratic governance, was restored. I ended up working in local government, then later at the federal level.

Not quite half a century later, we face another fractured republic, some would say that began with the divisions over Vietnam. And a demagogic leader with no knowledge or respect for history and democracy and no appreciation for the implications of his decision on the future of our country, or the world for that matter. An irresponsible leader, aided and abetted by other short-sighted opportunists, self-aggrandizing and competing media camps, and the new tools of social media to amplify fear mongering and distorting of facts. And to add to the perfect storm, a woefully ignorant public.

Can and will the system prevail today as it did in the 1970s? I think that is a useful question to be asking. What would make the system less resilient today? How have conditions changed? What are our strengths and how can the administrative state affirm its role and contribution to a future functioning democracy? What's the long game here? What are the alternative scenarios likely to play out? There are better and worstcase scenarios here, neither likely to occur in full.

My personal pessimistic self paints a dire landscape of a fast-approaching fascist state. The new Supreme Court denies personal liberties, the right to privacy, habeas corpus, sanctions jerrymandering, elections tampering, etc. The attorney general is fired. Rosenstein is fired. Mueller is fired and his investigation delegitimized and impounded. Elections continue to be undermined. No Democratic presidential candidate emerges strong enough to take on Trump and his Russian disrupters. There is no one to stand and say this time- Trump, have you no shame? And no president or influential Republic leader who can be shamed. And no public who cares about shame. So, we go to war, the button gets pushed, etc. etc. Pretty dramatic.

My more professional optimistic self says the system will hold as it did in the 70s. This is a test, A much needed test. Upright leaders will stand up and stand their ground in both parties. The rule of law will prevail. The congressional hearings will unfold to the appropriate effect. People will speak and be heard and political polarization will subside. Trump will go down either through impeachment, election, or self-destruction. And the administrative state will have an opportunity to strengthen its ethical obligations, its professional commitments, and its democratic responsiveness. Indeed, it will be the lynchpin for democratic recovery and reform. So how do we now prepare the field for this responsibility?