Discipline and History: Political Science in the United States
James Farr and Raymond Seidelman, Editors
http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=9948
The University of Michigan Press, 1993

Political Science, Mid-Century

Leonard D. White

Exactly fifty days from today the first fifty years of the twentieth century will have expired. Many of you present this evening will witness the end of this troubled century and will greet the twenty-first at midnight, December 31, 1999. It is not my function tonight to wish you a happy return of this mid-century a half-century hence. Since I shall not be among the guests on that occasion, I may, however, express the hope that you may then praise the achievement of what political scientists of the first fifty years have left undone.

Toward the end of his long life one of the first and most respectable members of our profession, James Madison, wrote to a friend, "Much may be expected from the progress and diffusion of political science. . . ." While the first half of the twentieth century certainly has left much undone, we may perhaps claim that political scientists have justified Madison's faith in substantial degree. It is with some gratification that we can measure our present resources against those that our predecessors in 1900 possessed, and, if we must assess our work with due modesty, as we should, we may nevertheless assert that we have made a contribution to the Republic.

The resources of political scientists are measured first in terms of manpower and facilities, and second in terms of the intellectual structures that we establish as the foundations on which to penetrate deeper into the mysteries of man, the political animal. May we examine these matters in succession.

Our present resources in manpower are far beyond those that Frank J. Goodnow and his associates at Columbia could count as the nineteenth century came to an end. A rough calculation indicates that in 1900 there were in the United States not more than 100 men and women who would recognize themselves professionally as political scientists. Another rough calculation suggests that in 1950 there will be probably 4,000 men and women who are professional political scientists, practising the art in academic halls, govern-

---

"An Address Delivered before the Southern Political Science Association, November 11, 1949, Knoxville, Tennessee." Reprinted from *Journal of Politics* 12 (February 1950): 13–19. By permission of the University of Texas Press.

ment offices, and research institutes. This is the largest body of political scientists in the world.

In 1900 the subject matter of political science was recognized only in the larger endowed and state universities. Elsewhere it was a not too welcome camp follower of history, public law, or moral philosophy. By 1950 it had become a recognized member of the social science curriculum in almost every college and university in the country and was widely taught in the more progressive secondary schools.

In 1900 the political science teacher had indeed the immense asset of Bryce's *American Commonwealth,* but for the rest he was forced to take his students through such works as President Woolsey's *The State,* or Professor Burgess's *Political Science and Constitutional Law.* The hand of German scholarship was still heavy upon our "infant industry."

By 1950 American scholars had created a body of professional writing not only large in volume but penetrating in analysis. Our unsolved problem now is to find time to read what our colleagues write while we write what our colleagues ought to read. Our facilities of the written word are rich beyond measure, and have greatly expanded our horizons since 1900. In 1924 Charles E. Merriam published his *New Aspects of Politics,* reminding us that we were still one of the social sciences and that we advanced hand in hand with psychology, sociology, economics, statistics, and anthropology, not to mention history, law, ethics, and philosophy, our earlier associates. Others pushed forward ingenious types of statistical analysis; psychopathology was brought to bear on politics, and the administrative art came in for its first inspection.

Out of our own problems, which were certainly serious enough, we thus gradually began to build our own political science. Like good Americans we also began to organize. First we created the American Political Science Association in 1904, and later set up regional associations. The South led the way in 1929 by organizing the Southern Political Science Association, in whose eighteenth annual meeting we are participating. Nine more regional associations have since sprung into existence, and the attendance at their conferences often well exceeds the number I can remember in earlier years at the national meetings.

We also organized a number of associations based on our special fields. The international lawyers set up housekeeping in 1906 in the American Society of International Law. Many political scientists took an active part in the affairs of the National Municipal League, and in other associations designed to improve American government. The students and practitioners of public administration organized the American Society for Public Administration in 1939. Not content with a merely American pattern of organization, our political scientists moved across the seas, taking an active share in the affairs of the Institute of Pacific Relations, the International Union of Local Authorities, and the International Institute of the Administrative Sciences, to symbolize a

spacious participation by only three examples. Most recently, indeed only two months ago, our national president, Quincy Wright, participated in Paris in the formation of the International Political Science Association, and himself was elected chairman of the organizing committee.

It would be fruitless to follow political scientists into all their professional societies and all the "reform" groups through which they work. Suffice it to say that where good works are to be done on the body politic, there political scientists are to be found.

Looking backward over a half-century we cannot assert that we have fulfilled Edward Bellamy's prophecy of a well-organized world. We *can* switch on music from a distant source—one of Bellamy's lucky guesses—and fortunately we can switch off most of it. We are no nearer Bellamy's placid order now than when his hero began his long nap in 1887, and perhaps it is just as well. We have, however, improved our governmental machine and made it capable of achievement that would have been impossible in 1900. We have endowed it with standards of integrity and responsibility, lacking in 1900, of which we may be proud. Political scientists have had a special share in these affairs.

Political scientists took a major responsibility for the reconstruction of municipal government, the hottest of our governmental problems in the first decade of the century. They led the way in the reorganization of state governments in the second and third decades. They were influential in the drive for a short ballot and better election procedures. They were chiefly responsible for educating the American public to the necessity of a budget system. They began the long process of discussion that finally, with the powerful help of circumstances, reversed the historical direction of American foreign policy.

All this, and much more that could be added, demonstrates how mistaken is the old stereotype of the professor in his ivory tower, bent over an ancient parchment and occasionally wiping the dust from his steel-rimmed spectacles. American political scientists are participant-observers of the governmental scene—sometimes even more participants than observers. Wherever the political pot boils we can find a political scientist stirring the broth, or putting wood on the fire. At one moment, he or she may be spending a hot summer in Washington with congressmen and their committees; at another he or she may be speaking before the League of Women Voters, or activating a local chapter of the American Society for Public Administration. At another, he or she may be selling civil service reform to a governor or a legislative committee, and in the twinkling of an eye turn to the technical problems of a public employee retirement plan. We can find him or her talking to vice-presidents, senators, governors, representatives, county commissioners, mayors, school boards, employee organizations, and citizens, as well as to the students who still provide us with our principal constituents.

We ought not to underestimate our influence. We are often frustrated and

defeated on particular issues and on particular occasions. We are seldom defeated on major issues or in the long run. We have assets that perhaps no other group possesses in our status as staff assistants to the American people. We have trained capacity to forecast the morrow and to concentrate on what is important in the emerging future. We have means of communication among ourselves that are adequate to bind us into a homogeneous task force, with due recognition of our domestic differences. We are, organically speaking, immortal. We multiply ourselves over and over again tenfold, a hundredfold, as we send our graduates into the world of American citizens. Through them we project on the American scene not our various personal views on public issues, but capacity for analysis, character, and integrity, and a sense of responsibility for participation in the affairs of the world.

Our growing resources in manpower and facilities have thus borne much fruit. Can we claim as much progress in building a strong intellectual foundation for the field of knowledge for which we are responsible?

It can be argued that we have succeeded more amply in making an impress upon our times than we have in laying adequate foundations for our subject matter. When we examine our intellectual situation we may well become uneasy. Our intellectual substructure is feeble. On it we have erected an imposing, but very heterogeneous superstructure, the various parts of which we identify as international law, public law, political theory, parties, politics and propaganda, public opinion, public administration, comparative government, state government, municipal government, rural government, regional organization, valley authorities, public corporations, government and business, and so on at much length. What then is political science? Is it anything but a collective name descriptive of a large number of interesting matters that no other social scientists claim as their special territory? Has it a coherent central structure of its own?

At mid-century it is not easy to give a satisfactory answer to such questions. We are more vulnerable as members of a learned profession than our colleagues in economics, sociology, or anthropology, all of whom have established an accepted and reasonably satisfactory concept of the special aspects of human experience that they are concerned with.

The formula with which we started this century, that political science studies the state, merely tells us the object of our attention. The sociologists also study the state; so do the students of ethics and philosophy; and the economists often view it with alarm. Another formula, renewed and put to use during the last twenty years, asserts that the political scientist studies the phenomena of power. This proposition does set the stage for the formulation of hypotheses, for observation of a framework of related propositions that tend to give form to what still remains substantially formless. But political scientists are equally interested in the phenomena of cooperation, an aspect of

our public life that is of obvious importance, if often overlooked. Much hard thinking is required of us on this professional front.

Standing on the edge of the mid-century, political scientists can hardly refrain from speculating about their future tasks. The new generation of political scientists that may now properly prepare to greet the twenty-first century—just around the corner—may ask us what unfinished business they inherit. Everyone will make his own answer. There is always the unfinished business of perfecting the American system of democracy. There is always the unfinished business of advising our fellow citizens as best we can on their municipal, county, state, national, and international problems. There is always the major task of informing each oncoming generation of their democratic inheritance and their public responsibility.

As a political scientist I would propose four tasks which seem worthy of our mettle. One I have suggested: the better formulation of the intellectual foundations of our own subject matter. This task carries with it a broader one, in which many besides ourselves will participate—the formulation of a new philosophy for the new world which obviously lies before us; new in a special sense, new as never before, full of potential terror, but also full of unparalleled prospects for good.

A second task, now on our doorstep, is to reach a more profound understanding of political behavior, with help from the anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and the medical profession. We need some men and women holding doctor's degrees in political science and medicine, political science and psychology, political science and anthropology.

Third, we have a practical task of world education in the American way of life and in the spirit of American government, made in its image. We cannot and ought not impose our special democratic forms on other people; we can and ought to borrow something from the spirit and practice of our democratic sister nations as we learn from them while they become acquainted with us. But in a world that derives its understanding of America from the movies and newspaper headlines there is an enormous task of enlightenment in which we must carry a part.

Finally we need to take our share of the responsibility for lessening the tensions which harass the world and those who live upon it. National hostility, race conflict, economic strife are only three of many horsemen who ride us hard. As political scientists and as citizens we have a half-century of work ahead of us on this front alone.

To enumerate our problems is a ready and endless occupation. They are many and they are grave. Less easy is it to maintain perspective in the midst of perplexities. It is useful to recall that our age is not the only one that has groaned under its burdens. It is well to reassert that ancient American faith in our capacity to deal with whatever may lie before us. It is good, at mid-

century, to repeat the stout words written at a dark moment of Federalist history by one of the greatest of the Federalists, Alexander Hamilton: "I anticipate with you that this country will, erelong, assume an attitude correspondent with its great destinies—majestic, efficient, and operative of great things. A noble career lies before it."