

Three Levels in the Theory and Practice of Public Administration*

Fred W. Riggs

I am certainly happy to be back in Korea again. I am very grateful for the kind invitation and introduction that Dean Lee has given me. The topic was suggested by some comments that I heard during the recent EROPA conference in Kuala Lumpur so it is some recent thinking that is reflected in this talk that I am going to give you. I would like to start out by discussing the question: what is the relation between theory and practice in public administration? Of course this is a special case of the relation between theory and practice in many fields. I think there is a very great deal of misunderstanding, although this is certainly a very familiar topic which has been discussed, I am sure, by many people in lectures and essays. People often say that something is good in theory but not good in practice. What exactly is meant by such a saying? You often hear it said that university scholars are living in an ivory tower far away from the real world of practical reality. What is the relation between what is taught in the classroom in the university, including the GSPA and Seoul National University, and what goes on, you might say, across the street in government offices? Clearly the two are related because graduates of the school go into government service and government officials come into this school to take courses, so there must be some relation between them, or there would not be this continuous interaction between the theorists in the university and the practitioners in the government offices. Yet, there is this strong feeling that the university is living in the ivory tower of academia far removed from the harsh realities of everyday administration. Another example of this view of the divorce between theory and practice is found in the advice which I frequently hear to bring practitioners from

* This is the text of a lecture which the author was invited to deliver at the Graduate School of Public Administration, SNU on July 3, 1968 as part of the Yulkok Lectures on Development Policy. This serial lecture program is geared toward a decennial symposium of the GSPA in spring 1969.

** The author is Professor, University of Hawaii and Chairman of Comparative Administrative Group, American Society for Public Administration.

Government into the classroom to teach and that no teacher can be a good teacher of public administration until he has had a good deal of experience in government. I am not refuting this statement and Dean Lee himself is a good example of the practitioner-scholar who has both academic and practical experience. But I do think that the idea is often overworked, at least, from my point of view as a scholar who has never been a government official, although I think that I have had a lot of experience with people in government. I think you have here a question of different levels of analysis. The level of analysis that is relevant for people engaged in everyday work of administration may be different from the level which is involved in a university's classroom. Let me just comment on these three expressions.

Let us take the first one. It is good in theory but not good in practice. I think that everyone who engages in practice has a theory of what he is doing. If you ask him why you are doing what you are doing he will probably give you a theory. If you say this is a realistic theory that explains what you are doing, he will probably say, yes this is what I do everyday, it is a realistic theory. Now it seems to me that the problem here is not that a practitioner does not have theory; in fact, everyone who acts, acts in relation to some theory because the word theory has no content; it simply means a statement about some kind of relationship between variables and if one tries to explain anything it tends to become a theory. The more generalized the statement, the more theoretical it is. In that sense the most theoretical theories are the most abstract, because they try to cover the largest number of cases. But the individual case, the individual day-to-day anecdote or experience is not a theory. But when someone tries to generalize about what happens everyday and put that into a general rule it becomes a theory of some kind. So, the point that I am trying to make is that it is never a question that it is good in theory and not good in practice. If the theory is not good in practice then it is not a good theory. The point is that it is a bad theory which is bad in practice. If it is a good theory, it is good in practice. That is the definition of a good theory, a good theory is a theory that works. The point that I am trying to make is that you do not get away from theory by saying that well, it is o.k. in theory but not in practice. If it is not good in practice then it is not good in theory. This, I think is the difficulty with much academic instruction. It is not that it is too theoretical, it is simply that it is bad theoretical. Bad theory will not give you any good practice. The fact that it does not work is because it is bad theory, not because it is theory. If you had good theory it would be good in practice. Now much of what is called theory, of course, prescriptive theory. That is the

theory that tells you what to do, but it tells you what to do in a very abstract way without specifying the conditions under which the prescription is useful. You can think of some of the most practical programs of administrative reform which were prescribed and guided in very practical theories. I can think of the UN Handbook which expounded some standard and techniques in public administration. This is known as the theory. It tells you what is the ideal type of administrative behavior but it does not tell you exactly under what conditions you can introduce these standards and techniques that are proposed in the UN Handbook. In that sense I think that it is bad theory or that it is only partial theory. Not that the ideals in the Handbook are bad ideals but the ideals are not related to particular situations where they are relevant. If you want good theory you have to explain not only what you should do but under what conditions you can do and this is where the ecological approach comes in. You will have to see my interest in the word ecology. All that the word ecology means is to understand the relations between the environment and what is practicable, what is possible. Much administrative reform and useful improvement efforts fail because it does not consider the limitations of what is possible. It is like starting to build a house that costs \$100,000 when you had only \$25,000. You might get the foundations laid but then you find you could not put the top up because your money had run out. So it would be a bad decision to launch on a program for which the resources were inadequate. The ecological theory teaches you to examine what are the conditions, the environment and the culture, the political system, the economic system, and the psychological characteristics of the people who are in the social system; what are the characteristics of all of these environmental, non-administrative features which set limits on what is possible. Then administrative decision-making becomes far more relevant and useful because you can make choices and other alternatives, all of which are real alternatives. A good theory, even a prescriptive theory must take the empirical fact in the situation into account in developing a set of statements about what should be done. Now that is enough comment on this article on the relation between theory and practice.

Let me spend more of my time discussing the other one, the academic ivory tower. What is the relation between the university and the world of administration? In asking that question I would like to refer to the statement that I heard in Kuala Lumpur which I would like to elaborate on. This was an analogy drawn between the study of administration and administrative reform and the problem of learning to drive a car and to improve the performance of a

car. It was pointed out what you needed to know in order to be a good driver was quite different from what you needed to know in order to maintain a car so that it would perform well. I think the analogy here in administration is very easy to see. It is one thing to know how to operate in an office under a given set of rules and regulations and program objectives. If you have an established on-going program, let us say the Post Office, one of the best established government agencies, it is the goal of the Post Office to deliver the mail speedily, on time, without losing it. So it is fairly clear what is to be done. There is a great, strong, self-finding end. The public wants to mail letters and receive them. In other words, all these conditions of the operations of the Post Office are pretty well established. Under these conditions the job of a special postmaster and a mail clerk and all the other employees of a Post Office is fairly clear. To learn to be a good Post Office employee is not too difficult a job and large numbers of people can be trained to be good administrators of the postal service. But suppose you run into difficulty. Even in the Post Office, the modern communications revolution in a country like the United States, for example, is now flooding the Post Office with vast quantities of mail which they find themselves unable to process speedily and efficiently. They are searching very hard to find new methods. For example, can a machine be used to sort mail instead of the human hand and eyes? Can a computer be put to work in the handling and processing of mail? This involves obviously a set of skills which are not to be found in the average postmaster and mail clerk. Yet, clearly the need for analysts to study better ways of handling the mail does not mean that we no longer need to train people to handle the mail in a routine way. In fact, until the machine has been introduced, the group handling the mail will have to continue to rely on older methods of processing the mail because the mail must really go on continuously—the mail deliveries—even during the process of transformation of the system of handling the mail from an older system to a new one.

I would like to expand the metaphor by saying that it is not only two stages that should be distinguished but three—three levels. I can use the automobile to illustrate the three levels and I think it will help us to see the relationship of training programs and the work of the university. The first use of a car is that of the driver which I have already mentioned. But the second use I think needs to be elaborated on a bit further. If you take a mechanic who is in a garage, who repairs a car; this is a second level. At this level you can imagine a mechanic who does not know how to drive a car. But it would not bother you if you asked him: do you know the difference between a carburetor and a cylinder. You have to analyze

the various parts of the car to recognize something is not working well to fix it. That is a skill that is very different from the skill of driving the car. But there is a third level involved in governing the automobile which goes beyond the skills of the mechanic. You might bring in the car, and he would look at it and say, well, I am afraid I cannot fix the car, what you need is a different kind of a car. With that kind of a car—you have an old Model T Ford—you need a modern V-8 Ford. The mechanic cannot convert the Model T Ford into a modern V-8 engine. This job of transformation of the pattern or model of a car can only be done by design engineers who working for a company which manufactures cars.

In other words, at one level you are interested in driving the car, at the second level in maintaining the existing car, and at the third level in changing from one kind of a car to another, inventing a new kind of a car. Here I think we will see the relation between theory and practice. If you went to a classroom conducted for engineers who are trying to study how to design new cars and you wanted to learn to be a car driver, you would say, well, that theory is completely irrelevant, it doesn't tell me a thing about driving a car. In the same way, I think the field of public administration, if you are interested in being a day-to-day administrator in an existing structure of government you need to learn certain skills and large numbers of people must learn these skills, just as large numbers of people must learn to be drivers of cars. But, if you want to maintain the existing machinery of government and improve its operation, then you need a different type of person, for example the O & M Specialist on reorganization, the systems design specialist. These are people who will accept the existing structure of government overall. They are not much concerned about the policies of the political, social, and economic system but they are concerned with improving the workings of the government by redesigning systems within the existing structure of government, to make it work better. They are like the auto-mechanic who takes the existing car, whatever it is, and tries to make it work better by repairing defective parts or by re-adjusting the mechanisms in that car. The third level which is like that of the engineering design is essentially that of the person who says yes but maybe the whole system of government that we have needs to be overhauled. Maybe if we could change the economic system, or the political system, or the social system in some way, or the educational system, then some far reaching changes would be introduced in government which would improve our administrative practice. And you might say that this is really not an appropriate subject for public admini-

stration, it belongs outside the field. The problem is the same as the one faced in economics. When the economist begins to talk about economic development they are thinking at the second level, the mechanic's level. They are thinking in terms of the standard components of the economy as seen in the western world or in the market system. Capital, labor, land, the resource base on which the capital and labor work. Modern economists who have lived in economically developing countries begin to realize that there are a whole set of institutions on which the economy rests. It is these institutions that are missing or defective in some way. Any standard formula of a market model does not work. And so economic development theorists have more and more begun to talk about the infrastructure. Most people now know what the word infrastructure means, the non-economic components of the economy. It is those things such as education, for example, or a highway system, the development of banking facilities. It is the whole range of social, political, institutional structures which are necessary for the good operation of the economic system. Then you might say, well this study of infrastructure for economic growth requires economics. I think the economist interested in development would have done very well to say. The economist cannot draw the line between the economy and the infrastructure and refute the studies of infrastructure because it is not part of the economy.

I think the same thing holds for public administration. You cannot content yourselves with studies of administrative behavior if the infrastructure of administration is what blocks good administrative performance. We must, in other words, examine what are the non-administrative elements which determine administrative behavior and then see whether or not we can change some of those elements which do not allow administrative behavior to improve. But the analysis at this level is like the analysis for the engineering for a new automobile. Most people in public administration will not want to have this kind of analysis. They will consider it very theoretical. Just as the mechanic who wants to repair the car will consider engineering studies as irrelevant and too theoretical. The mechanic who wants to repair a car will think that the theory of repair is very important and he will be surprised on the part of the driver when the auto driver tells him I do not care to know how the car works; I just want to know if I turn the ignition key, will it start.; if I press on the accelerator, will it go and with a few simple details, such as by turning the steering wheel, will the car change directions; as soon as I have mastered these few operating principles of driving a car, I am all set to go out on the highway. You might say: well, suppose your car breaks down and

you are out in the middle of nowhere and there is no garage nearby. You ought to at least know a few simple things so that when you pull the hood up on your car you don't see only a complete mystery inside. You might have some idea of some repairs that you could make. There is a difference in the stage of development in the automobile industry that is relevant here. I think that in some ways we in the West were rather fortunate because our first experience with cars was with very primitive cars. The Model T Ford was a very primitive car compared to a modern automobile, so primitive that the average driver of a Model could also take the Model T apart and put it together again. It was very important in the early days of the auto industry when there were very few garages and very few spare parts. If anything happened to the car you had to go over it and do something to make it work again. In other words, the first two levels were confused in the early stages of the automobile industry. It was necessary that they be confused because there was not an institutionalized difference between the levels in the environment. Today, most car owners, including me, when they find something wrong with their cars, are just baffled. I have no idea what to do. All I can do is to look for the nearest garage. We are at such a stage of industrial development that usually we can find a garage that is not far away. Then I turn to the experts and mechanics and I say: could you find out what is wrong and fix the car? I am content to let them handle the problem and not try to handle it myself. I think that in poor countries which lack the resource base for large numbers of garages for repair facilities and especially if they have cars from different countries so that the standardized automobile may be French, British, Dutch, or American you have a much greater problem of maintenance and a smaller resource base on which to build the maintenance facilities. The challenge to the car mechanic is much greater and the problem of a driver if the car breaks down is far more baffling. It has sometimes seemed to me to be far more rational, though I am sure it is not very politic, to suggest that countries that are beginning to industrialize should only have one kind of very simple car. It would make it much simpler to keep the cars going if they all had some simple type of car until the facilities for maintaining more complicated cars had been introduced. It is true that you can buy the most modern type of complicated car from abroad even if you do not have the resources and machinery to keep it in good repair, the spare parts and qualified mechanic. I am afraid that analogy also applies to some of our administrative reformers.

One of the papers we heard at Kuala Lumpur, Dean Lee will recall, is the study of the introduction of a machinery of administration to the Philippines from the State of

California called WAPCO. WAPCO means wage and position classification organization. WAPCO was set up almost without change, or with very little change, because it was considered one of the most advanced systems of position classification in the United States although it was a state system and not a Federal system. The California system was introduced with some changes, but not many changes, into the Government of the Philippines. But in many respects, and I would not try to discuss many of the technical reasons why this wage and position classification scheme made it difficult for the Philippines to innovate in the new government agencies. The result was that some development programs that are being launched in the Philippines, required very strong pressure to be exerted upon the Congress to exempt the agencies from the application of WAPCO. This WAPCO is the most advanced type of position classification scheme. You would then expect it to support development, not to hamper it. But the Philippines experience is, and the most sophisticated students of public administration in the Philippines agree, if you refuse to exempt any agency from WAPCO you could not expect it to be a pioneer, development agency. For one thing it simply imposes a wage freeze on salaries at very strict levels in the interests of equal pay for equal work across the board throughout the government in such a way that no agency could compete, say, even with outside employers to get well qualified people under the WAPCO ceiling. The result is that if you want to get good personnel you must pay more than the WAPCO ceiling; you must therefore be exempted from WAPCO. So the most advanced technology in administrative reform blocked development in the Philippines rather than enhancing it. Now some kind of different type of classification scheme for public personnel should have been developed in the Philippines but the personnel who introduced it were, I think, trained at the second level but not at the third level. That is, they had knowledge how to introduce the new scheme, some of them had had experience in operating such a scheme in California. So they had experience at the first level. When they tried to move that scheme to a new country, they were operating at the second level. They did not have, at that time—this was ten or fifteen years ago—any one who had thought about the problems of engineering design at the third level. The result was that there was no one qualified to say to the Philippine Government that these are the conditions under which a scheme like that of California would help you and these are the kinds of rules that you have to invent for a new type of personnel system which is different from the system in California. That is the the problem of engineering design at the administrative level which requires a

completely different kind of person.

Let me conclude my remarks by asking what are the types of training programs which are needed for these three levels of theory related to administrative practice? The first level, how to be a driver, how to be a day-to-day operator, is essentially the job of in-service training. So I think that if you are training people, on-the-job, in a government career at various stages you can progressively train them to take higher and higher responsibilities on a day-to-day basis through the in-service training program. This can be relatively simple at local levels and as much as possible can be given by various departments of government but some in-service training can be centralized through an agency such as your COTI (Central Officials Training Institute). What about the second level? The second level trains people much less in numbers, a much more select group. They are essentially being trained to say: let us accept the existing structure of government, whatever it is. But within that structure of government, within that society, within that educational system, accepting all these environmental limits, just like a mechanic accepts a car, as is given, what can be done to improve performance? I am not going to do the day-to-day work but I am going to change the operations within that structure. This is the man that will become a very good O & M expert, a systems analyst in the government, or a management specialist. He will try to design a better way of carrying out a job in government within the existing structure. Now I think the MPA program is excellently designed for this purpose. That is, you need a man with a good college education, a good university degree and in addition to that some specialized training on the theory of public administration, of administrative change, efficiency, and performance of the generalized type, not to carry any particular job but to be ready to go into the government service and there to be assigned to various offices and departments to jobs in which he will try to change and improve the operations of existing system. The O & M is one of the most specialized kinds of units of this kind of activity. The Bureau of the Budget is a very fine center for people with this kind of training. In fact, in the American experience, the MPA's from Syracuse which was the first school to develop this kind of training, went very heavily into the U.S. Bureau of the Budget. There they had a very great impact on improved administrative performance within the U.S. Federal Government. I think that this MPA program still did not grow to the third level of theory which is the level of engineering design. How do we understand and examine the whole structure of the society, of the political system, the economy and this aspect of administration? Here it may be that the best way to improve

administration may be completely outside the government. Changes in the school system, changes in the way the market system operates, changes in the tax structure as they affect peoples' reactions to government, changes in the voting system as it affects the political structure, and changes in private associations which affect the pressures that are brought to bear upon government for its performance. Now the best training I think for this level is at the Ph. D. level. Here is where the university appears to be most abstract and ivory towered. When I say abstract and ivory towered, not because it has useless theory, but because the theory at this level is not concerned with day-to-day operations, including administrative performance within the existing structure of government, but it goes to a much broader range of questions which involve the whole structure of society and politics and their relation to government performance.

My concluding observation then is that it is not a question of which is the most desirable kind of theory. Obviously all is desirable. If you ask how many people should take them, obviously large numbers should take the first level, much smaller numbers the second level, and even fewer the third level. The third level is very decisive in my judgement and practical because with true understanding at the third level you can begin to get control of some of the decisive levels of change which can change the character and structure of the whole society and thereby indirectly affect administrative performance. So in this sense it is very much a part of the advanced study of public administration. Those are the three levels in the theory and practice of public administration.