Thomas Woodrow Wilson
(1856-1924)

Introduction:

Thomas Woodrow Wilson’s contribution to administrative thought is phenomenal as he laid down the intellectual roots of public administration as an independent discipline by releasing it from the clutches of Political Science. He considered politics and administration as separate processes and tried conceptually to distinguish between the two areas of study. He has also emphasized the significance of administration in the wake of ever increasing number and nature of activities in a democratic polity. Further, he has appreciated the significance of public opinion in administration. Considering administration as a science, he advocated comparative method for its study so as to enable one to learn from the experiences of others. The principles of administration enunciated and issues raised by him have become matter of debate and discussion for times to come.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the module are:

1. to know and understand the main administrative ideas of Thomas Woodrow Wilson.
2. to appreciate the contribution of Woodrow Wilson to Administrative Thought.
3. to make an objective assessment of the contribution of Woodrow Wilson to the discipline of Public Administration as a field of enquiry.

Key Words:

Science: Branch of knowledge
Dichotomy: Division into two
Evolution: Gradual growth
Sovereignty: Supreme power
Monarchy: A form of government where the head of the state is king or monarch
Thomas Woodrow Wilson, the President of U.S.A. and recipient of noble prize, is regarded as the founder of the discipline of Public Administration. His famous essay “The Study of Administration” (1887) is hailed as a ‘significant trail-blazing effort’ because through this he stressed the need for the scientific study of administration. To Waldo, Woodrow Wilson’s essay is “the most important document in the development of public administration.”

Woodrow Wilson was born on December 28, 1856 in Virginia in U.S.A. He got education in politics, administration and law. In 1879, he received graduation degree from Princeton University. After graduation, Wilson joined the law school of University of Virginia for a short period. It is interesting to note that when he was in his graduation at Johns Hopkins University, he wrote his first book entitled “Congressional Government”, in which he proved his metal. The book published in 1885 was considered for doctoral thesis by the Johns Hopkins University and in the very next year he was awarded the Ph.D. Degree in history and political science.

Wilson started his career as a law practitioner in 1882 in Atlanta. Subsequently, he shifted to teaching profession and worked at Bryn Mawr College for Women (1885-1888) and Wesleyan University (1888-1890). In 1890 he became Professor of Jurisprudence and Political Economy at Princeton University and continued on this position for about a decade. He remained the President of the Princeton University from 1902 to 1910. During his tenure, the university became a centre of excellence due to the dynamic role played by him. He was elected President of the American Political Science Association in 1911. He remained the Governor of New Jersey from 1911 to 1913. Wilson occupied the supreme post as the President of U.S.A. in 1913 when the clouds of war were hovering over Europe and continued to this position till 1921. He died in 1924 creating a vacuum in the discipline of public administration.

Woodrow Wilson was deeply influenced by the contemporary events. It was a time when in the U.S.A. spoils system had degenerated itself and its abuse at political level was an open secret. Feeling deeply concerned about this sorry state of affairs, he wanted to reform the system and to him effective reform lay in the study of administration. Further, responding to the spirit of the reform movement, he proposed that administration should be separated from political and policy concerns. Wilson’s political philosophy was mainly influenced by Edmund Burke while Walter Bagehot attracted his attention towards administration and comparative government. However, the credit for evoking Wilson’s interest in administrative studies goes to Richard T. Ely of Johns Hopkins University. In Ely’s own words,” When I talked of the importance of administration, I felt that I struck a spark and kindled a fire on Wilson.”

Woodrow Wilson, besides being Professor of Political Science, was also an administrative scholar, an educationist, a historian, a reformer, a statesman and a prolific writer. His main works are Congressional Government (1885); The State (1889); Division and Reunion 1829-1889 (1893); An Old Master and Other Political Essays (1893); Mere Literature and other Essays (1896); George Washington (1896); A History
However, Woodrow Wilson came to prominence when he contributed his essay on the “Study of Administration” in 1887 in which he traced the history of the study as a new development in political science, outlined its significance and suggested the ways and means to carry it out. The essay before it was published in Political Science Quarterly was presented before Historical and Political Science Association at its meeting held in Ithaca, New York. It was considered and evaluated as one of the best essays written on administration, though Wilson himself did not consider it worthy of publication. It began to be seriously studied by scholars of administration. Louis Brownlow, an eminent scholar, while praising this essay observed: “In that one essay he laid down as a program of study which, everyone...who is interested in either the art or science of public administration, would do well to read again and again and to heed.” Likewise, Henry W. Bragden, another scholar, considered it as a mine of wisdom.

Science of Administration

At the very outset of his essay, Wilson clarified the concept of administration. To him, ‘administration is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action; it is the executive, the operative, the most visible side of government, and it is of course as old as government itself.’ However, this concept of administration has not received the early attention of political scholars as is clear from his observation that ‘no one wrote systematically of administration as a branch of the science of government until the present century....all the political writers whom we now read had thought, argued dogmatized only about the constitution of government, about the nature of the state, the essence and seat of sovereignty, popular power and kingly prerogative; about the greatest meanings lying at the heart of government, and the high ends set before the purpose of government by man’s nature and man’s aims’. To them, the fundamental question was always; who shall make law, and what shall that law be? The other question, how law should be administered, with enlightenment, with equity, with speed, and without friction, was put aside as practical detail. In brief, the issue in early times was almost altogether about the constitution of government; and consequently that was what engrossed man’s thought. The reasons attributed for this state of affairs, according to Wilson, were simple nature of government functions, simple system of public revenues and public debts, simple sorts of property, manageable number of populations and predominance to possession of power than its exercise.

However, according to Wilson, nowadays the functions of government are becoming more complex and difficult as he said that ‘there is scarcely a single duty of government which was once simple which is not now complex.’ Besides, these functions are vastly multiplying in number. In brief, ‘the idea of the state and the consequent ideal of its duty are undergoing noteworthy changes and to him the ‘idea of the state is the conscience of administration.’ Seeing every day new things which the state ought to do, the next thing is to see clearly how it ought to do them. Thus in the changed scenario
Wilson felt the need and significance of the science of administration. He explained that this is the reason why administrative tasks have nowadays to be so studiously and systematically adjusted to carefully tested standards of policy. However, moving cautiously he observed ‘the weightier debates of constitutional principle are even yet by no means concluded; but they are no longer of more immediate practical moment than questions of administration.’ In this regard he aptly remarked that ‘it is getting to be harder to run a constitution, than to frame one’.

Evolution of the Study of Administration

While tracing the evolution of the science of administration, Wilson lamented that this science can hardly be discerned in the administrative practices of U.S.A. mainly due to the poisonous atmosphere of city government, the crooked secrets of state administration, the confusion, and corruption. He attributed twofold reasons for its first receiving attention in Europe rather than in England or the United States, where government has long been a common franchise: first, that in Europe, just because government was independent of popular assent, there was more governing to be done; and second, that the desire to keep government a monopoly made the monopolists interested in discovering the least irritating means of governing.

Judging by the constitutional histories of the chief nations of the modern world, Wilson classified these in to broadly three periods of growth. The first of these periods is that of absolute rulers; the second is that in which constitutions are framed to do away with absolute rulers and substitute popular control, and in which administration is neglected for these higher concerns; and the third is that in which the sovereign people undertake to develop administration under this new Constitution which has brought them into power. Elaborating this point Wilson said that those governments (Prussia and France) are now in lead in administrative practices which had rulers still absolute but also enlightened when those modern days of political illumination came in which it was made evident to all but the blind that government are properly only the servants of the governed. In such governments administration has been organized to sub serve the general weal with the simplicity and effectiveness. Conversely, among those nations (England and U.S.A.) which entered upon a season of constitution-making and popular reform before administration had received the impress of liberal principles, administrative improvement has been tardy and half done. He rightly pointed out that ‘English and American political history has been a history, not of administrative development, but of legislative oversight—not of progress in governmental organization, but of advance in law-making and political criticism.’ But now it is a time when administrative study and creation are imperatively necessary to the well being of our government.

According to Wilson, it is a time (the third period) when the people have to develop administration in accordance with the constitutions they won for themselves in a previous period of struggle with absolute power. Undoubtedly, it would be a better proposition as compared to any European country. However, he lamented that the people are not prepared for the tasks of the new period. To him, the main hurdle in the way of
achieving this cardinal objective is the concept of popular sovereignty. In this regard he aptly remarked that, ‘it is harder for democracy to organize administration than for monarchy’. Elaborating this point further he said, ‘an individual sovereign will adopt a simple plan and carry it out directly; he will have but one opinion, and he will embody that one opinion in one command. But this other sovereign, the people, will have a score of differing opinions. They can agree upon nothing simple; advance must be made through comprises, by a compounding of differences...’ Thus wherever regard for public opinion is a first principle of government, practical reforms must be slow and all reforms must be full of comprises. Notwithstanding, this hard reality and the difficulties involved, he unequivocally advocated for the study of administration independent from politics.

Dichotomy between Politics and Administration

Wilson argued that the field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study. It is a part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are a part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product. Likewise, at another place he observed that ‘administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions. Although politics sets the tasks for administration, it should not be suffered to manipulate its offices.’ To Wilson, this is a distinction of high authority. In support of this proposition, he even quoted Bluntschli, an eminent German writer who said: Politics is state activity “in things great and universal,” while “administration, on the other hand,” is “the activity of the state in individual and small things. Politics is thus the special province of the statesman, administration of the technical official.” Wilson referred to another distinction between administration and politics—the distinction between constitutional and administrative questions, between those government adjustments which are essential to constitutional principles and those which are merely instrumental to the possibly changing purposes of a wisely adapting convenience.

However, there is ambiguity and confusion with regard to Wilson’s views regarding dichotomy between politics and administration when he stated that ‘no lines of demarcation, setting apart administrative from non-administrative functions, can be run between this and that department....A great deal of administration goes about incognito to most of the world, being confounded now with political “management,” and again with constitutional principles.’ This confusion was perhaps due to his ideas regarding liberty. ‘Liberty’, he said, ‘cannot live apart from constitutional principle; and no administration, however, perfect and liberal its methods, can give men more than a poor counterfeit of liberty if it rest upon illiberal principles of government.’ Notwithstanding this, he was very much clear that there is a distinction between constitutional law and administrative functions and there can be a definite criterion suggesting this distinction. Wilson aptly remarked that: ‘Public administration is detailed and systematic execution of public law. Every particular application of general law is an act of administration. The assessment and raising of taxes, for instance, the hanging of a criminal, the transportation and the delivery of the mails, the equipment and the recruiting of the army and navy, etc., are all
obviously acts of administration; but the general laws which direct these things to be done are as obviously outside of and above administration. The broad plans of governmental action are not administrative; the detailed execution of such plans is administrative.’

Wilson was of the strong view that there is one point at which administrative studies trench on constitutional ground and that is the distribution of constitutional authority, an integral part of the study of administration. To him, if administrative study can discover the best principles upon which to base such distribution, it would have been a great service to constitutional study. According to Wilson, this sort of exercise is of utmost importance under a democratic system where officials serve many masters. There is no denying the fact that all sovereigns are suspicious of their servants and the sovereign people is no exception to this rule. But the fundamental question is how to ally this suspicion? Wilson’s answer to this is that ‘if that suspicion could be clarified into wise vigilance, it would be altogether salutary; if that vigilance could be aided by the unmistakable placing of responsibility, it would be altogether beneficent.’

Public Opinion and Administration

Wilson, thus, raised a pertinent question—the proper relations between public opinion and administration or in other words what part shall public opinion take in the conduct of administration? He seemed to be quite forthcoming by replying that ‘public opinion shall play the part of authoritative critic.’ But at the same time he was conscious of the fact that it is not an easy proposition particularly in U.S.A. where public opinion is meddlesome. It is clear from his observation that ‘in those countries in which public opinion has yet to be instructed in its privileges, yet to be accustomed to having its own way, this question as to the province of public opinion is much more readily soluble than in this country (U.S.A.), where public opinion is wide awake and quite intent upon having its own way anyhow.’ So he wanted to make public opinion efficient without suffering it to be meddlesome and for this he preferred administrative studies over universal political education. In Wilson’s own words, ‘the time will soon come when no college of respectability can afford to do without a well-filled chair of political science. But he education thus imparted will go but a certain length. It will multiply the number of intelligent critics of government, but it will create no competent body of administrators....It is an education which will equip legislators, perhaps, but not executive officials. If we are to improve public opinion, which is the motive power of the government, we must prepared better officials as the apparatus of government.’

Wilson was of the firm view that administration in the United States should be at all points sensitive to public opinion. But at the same time administrators must adhere to the policy of the government they serve and that policy should be the creation of statesmen, whose responsibility to public opinion will be direct and inevitable. He concluded by saying that civil service should be ‘cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by
Comparative Methods

After dealing with the subject matter and objects of the study of administration, Wilson also examined the best suitable method for it. He unequivocally favored comparative method when he said that ‘without comparative studies in government we cannot rid ourselves of the misconception that administration stands upon an essentially different basis in a democratic state from that on which it stands in a non-democratic state.’ It is only after such studies that one can appreciate the democratic set up in which all issues affecting the public welfare are debated and determined on majority basis.

Woodrow Wilson, further, observed that historical comparative method can more safely be used in the field of administration than anywhere in the whole gamut of politics as he rightly remarked: ‘Let it be noted that it is the distinction, already drawn, between administration and politics which makes the comparative method so safe in the field of administration.’ In this context, he also observed that ‘we can never learn either our own weakness or our own virtues by comparing ourselves with ourselves.’ While explaining this, he said, that all governments have a strong structural likeness regarding administrative functions especially when these are to be uniformly useful and efficient. At the same time all governments alike have the same legitimate ends of administration. Comparative studies of different systems help in finding the best method of good administration which can be adopted by others after necessary modifications. In Wilson’s own words, ‘we can borrow the science of administration with safety and profit if only we read all fundamental differences of condition into its essential tenets. We have only to filter it through our constitutions, only to put it over a slow fire of criticism and distil away its foreign gases.’

Wilson was aware of the fact that there is an apprehension in the minds of some of his countrymen that the studies of comparative methods might prove some European principles better than those of America. However, dispelling such fears he said that ‘our own politics must be the touchstone for all theories.’ Elaborating this point further, he observed that: ‘Our duty is, to supply the best possible life to a federal government, to systems within systems; to make town, city, country, state, and federal governments live with a like strength and an equally assured healthfulness, keeping each unquestionably its own masters and yet making all interdependent and cooperative, combining independence with mutual helpfulness.’ He asserted that if comparative studies help us in this endeavor, they will be worthy of undertaking.

A Critical Evaluation

Woodrow Wilson’s famous essay, “The Study of Administration” is generally regarded as the first theoretical piece on public administration. Despite its undoubted significance, the essay according to critics is ambiguous particularly with regard to his
stand on the politics-administration dichotomy. They point out that on the one hand, Wilson considered politics and administration as separate disciplines while on the other hand he based administrative principles on politics. According to them, he failed to amplify what the study of administration actually entailed, what was proper relationship between politics and administrative realms and whether or not administrative studies could become abstract science akin to natural sciences. In this regard Richard J. Stillman has pointed out that ‘in formulating his politics/administration dichotomy, Wilson apparently misinterpreted some of the German literature that he read on public administration.’ However, an objective assessment of his views regarding politics-administration dichotomy makes it amply clear that most of the criticisms leveled against Wilson are not fully true as he wanted to build up strong and practical machinery for providing effective and efficient services to the common masses. As such, he favored a balanced view regarding relations between politics and administration.

Further, Wilson’s views have been criticized on the ground of being inconsistent. In this regard Dwight Waldo has pointed out that he has tried to link administration to business methods, instituted a civil service and so on, which really confuse any careful reader of the subject. Moreover, he aimed at discovering what should properly and successfully, an administrator can do but actually he dealt with the separation and non-separation of politics and administration and even on this problem his views are not clear. He himself has noted that his study is ‘too general, too broad and too vague’ as he has raised too many questions and provided answer to too few.

Wilson is also criticized on the ground that his view lack originality. In this regard Daniel W. Martin has said that Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy of politics-administration dichotomy had been employed in Europe nearly a century earlier. The academic field of administration had matured in France between 1812 and 1859. What is more, no one including White, Dimock …identified Wilson as the founder of the study of administration. But this view does not very much hold good. The supporters of Wilson point out that it was his famous essay which gave birth to public administration as self-consciousness enquiry and made it as a recognized field of study. Judged from the standpoint of development of public administration in 19th century, his writings were stimulating. According to Allen Schick, through his most distinguished essay, Wilson not only introduced the idea of administration but also launched public administration as generic course.

In brief, notwithstanding certain amount of ambiguity and inconsistency in his views here and there, Wilson contribution to administrative thought is phenomenal as he laid down the intellectual roots of Public Administration as an independent discipline by releasing it from the clutches of Political Science. He has also emphasized the significance of administration in the wake of ever increasing number and nature of state activities in a democratic polity. Further, he appreciated the value of public opinion in administration. Considering administration as a science he advocated comparative method for its study so as to enable one to learn form the experiences of others. The principles of administration enunciated and the issues raised by him have become matter of debate and discussion for times to come.
Questions:

1. Make an objective assessment of the contribution of Woodrow Wilson to Administrative Thought.
2. ‘Woodrow Wilson’s contribution to Public Administration is phenomenal.’ In the light of this statement explain the administrative ideas of Woodrow Wilson.
3. Why Woodrow Wilson is regarded as ‘father of Public Administration’? Explain
4. On Politics-Administration dichotomy, Wilson may have erred in degree at least, but his discussion should be thoughtfully considered, for the final word has not yet been written as to the proper relation between these two components in the process of government. Discuss

Further Readings:


