

BOOK REVIEWS

Aberbach, Joel D., and Bert A. Rockman. *In the Web of Politics: Three Decades of the U.S. Federal Executive*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2000. Pp. x, 230. \$42.95 hardbound, \$17.95 softbound.

In the Web of Politics: Three Decades of the U.S. Federal Executive takes a hard look at the federal executive, providing fresh evidence on who works within the bureaucracy and how well they represent the interests of their superiors. Drawing upon extensive interviews of political executives and career civil servants conducted in three separate decades, Joel Aberbach and Bert Rockman issue a sort of "State of the Bureaucracy." And if they are right, much about it is salutary.

In spite of considerable bellyaching on the part of politicians and the media, Aberbach and Rockman observe that the morale and quality of bureaucrats remained undiminished between 1970 and 1992. Education levels within the federal executive remained relatively constant, and compared quite favorably with those of top corporate executives. The age and job experience of political executives and civil servants changed hardly at all during their period of study. And while job satisfaction rates declined slightly, the differences were less than alarming.

Though the image of an intransigent bureaucracy undermining policy initiatives continues to rangle political operatives, the reality again appears substantially more sanguine. Those who work within the federal executive seemed *more* responsive to political actors in 1992 than in 1970. Bureaucrats' party affiliations and ideological orientations better matched those of presidents, and contacts between bureaucrats and their various principals in the White House and Congress remained relatively constant. The conclusion? "By almost any reasonable standard, the U.S. bureaucracy appears to be an unusually flexible and responsive institution politically" (131).

To their credit, Aberbach and Rockman are interested in accomplishing more with this book than just dispelling common myths about bureaucratic ineptitude and indifference. Aberbach and Rockman want to say something important about the role of the bureaucracy within systems of separated powers, and the impact of politics on public administrators' efforts to revamp and revitalize the federal executive.

In this regard, the authors go to great lengths to dismantle what they call the "public-administration-politics dichotomy." Models of organization born in the management sciences, Aberbach and Rockman remind us, are not particularly helpful when thinking about the federal bureaucracy. Bureaucrats are less concerned with maximizing efficiency, streamlining operations, or minimizing waste than they are with determining how, and when, to exert power. And power, Aberbach and Rockman recognize, is fundamentally political.

Bureaucrats are put in an impossible position of having to appease multiple principals, each of whom issues separate, and often conflicting, demands. It is

little wonder, then, that inefficiencies predominate within the bureaucracy, or that policy outputs appear disjointed. How the bureaucracy is structured, and what bureaucrats do within it, reflect countless political calculations and compromises. One cannot understand the federal executive without first understanding the larger political environment that surrounds it.

Aberbach and Rockman effectively put the public administration field on notice. Efforts to reform the federal executive without accounting for politics, they contend, will ultimately end in failure. "Whatever the reasons for the problems of government, they are not fundamentally attributable to the bureaucracy, and therefore reform of the bureaucracy will not magically resolve problems that essentially originate from the outside" (176). No set of reorganization schemes or management techniques will change the basic fact that bureaucrats are charged with doing their political superiors' bidding. And as long as these superiors remain divided, the organization and operation of the federal executive will disappoint those who hold up private industry as the archetypal organizational design.

Unfortunately, most of these arguments go untested. Aberbach and Rockman might have examined how transitions from periods of divided to unified government or switches in presidential administrations translate into changes in bureaucratic design and operations. All of their interviews, however, were conducted during periods of divided government when a Republican president presided over the federal bureaucracy. The authors, therefore, are left trying to distinguish between the ideologies and leadership styles of Nixon, Reagan, and Bush to explain changes in the composition of the federal executive.

The intended audience of this book appears to consist of reformers of the federal bureaucracy. The evidence it presents means to reassure that things are hardly as catastrophic as reformers suggest; the purported "quiet crisis" of morale and the "noisy crisis" of responsiveness are largely illusory. And the book's theory serves as due warning that the lessons of the marketplace may not apply to the world of politics. In their zeal to enhance accountability or efficiency or responsiveness, Aberbach and Rockman seem to say, reformers may do more harm than good.

In this sense, theory and evidence complement one another. Each stands in defense of the status quo and tempers claims made by organizational reformers, the latest carrying the banner of "New Public Management." But as social scientists, if we take Aberbach and Rockman's theory and evidence seriously, it becomes quite difficult to reconcile each with the other. To the extent that political disagreements prevail within and between Congress and the president, then we should witness all kinds of problems within the bureaucracy—dissension, noncompliance, indecision. But Aberbach and Rockman do little to explore these matters. Instead, all of the evidence they present suggests that the bureaucracy remains quite strong and surprisingly responsive.

As a manual for bureaucratic reform, this book succeeds brilliantly. It presents important findings that challenge conventional wisdoms about the federal executive; and the pages are replete with insight into the confounding effects of politics on organizational behavior. But as an exercise in social science, this book

is less coherent. Its theory is rife with opportunities for testing, though none of the appropriate tests appear within its pages; and though its empirical findings may reassure critics, they stand in stark relief to a narrative about the extension of political conflict into the ranks of the federal bureaucracy.

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Fisher, Louis. *Congressional Abdication on War & Spending*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2000. Pp. ix, 220. \$34.95 hardbound, \$17.95 softbound.

Louis Fisher continues to share his knowledge of the intricate relationship between the executive and legislative branches in *Congressional Abdication on War & Spending*. In previous books, Fisher has examined separately the issues of presidential war powers and spending to better understand the changing powers of the president; but in this book, he examines these two notions together, providing a new explanation of why presidential power has gone beyond the Founders' intentions. Previous literature on presidential power has suggested that the president's power has grown since the second half of the 20th century because presidents willingly defy constitutional principles or take extraconstitutional measures. This book explains excessive presidential power in terms of a negligent Congress consistently ignoring its responsibilities. Fisher explains the occurrence of this imbalance in power as rooted in the faulty logic of the Framers who believed that each institution would stridently protect its own power. Aware of the struggles that would arise between the branches, the Framers simply felt the solution to this conflict would come in the form of ambitious men with the desire to protect each institution's powers as they were constitutionally granted. For Fisher, the evident imbalance occurs today because Congress fails to wage the necessary war against the executive to retain its powers.

In discussing the Framers' intentions, Fisher pulls his common understanding from debates of the Framers and those whose ideas informed them, such as the authors of the *Federalist Papers*, Montesquieu, and John Locke. After setting up the standard by which the constitutional struggles of our institutions should be measured, Fisher details the evolution of this political struggle over time. Starting from the founding he examines the war and spending powers together, but then approaches each topic separately while moving through American history. In issues of war powers, he explains how leaders from Washington to Jefferson to Lincoln all engaged in military actions; however, they did so, for the most part, while exercising great concern over where the line of presidential power fell. Following WWII and continuing today, he recognizes that political leaders hardly exhibit the same concern. Fisher examines the actions of Bush (I) and Clinton extensively, showing how each commander in chief made military decisions without concern for congressional support. In fact, both presidents often felt international support was crucial, but made little effort to secure congressional support.