

## **Thomas Woodrow Wilson’s Contributions to Administrative Thought and Its Critique**

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**Abstract:** The intellectual root of public administration as a distinct field of study can be traced to the pioneering contributions made by Thomas Woodrow Wilson in the 1880s. It started with the publication of Wilson’s “The Study of Administration in 1887 in the Political Science Quarterly. Wilson’s famous essay and the discussion it generated were of unparalleled importance to the development of public administration as a distinct field of study. In spite of its popularity and wide acceptance, Wilson’s idea has a number of serious limitations for which it has been criticized by a number of Scholars. Prominent among these scholars were Max Weber, Susan Barrett and Colin Fudge. After careful analysis, we confidently concluded that the development of public administration as a distinct discipline of study was Wilson’s ideas. The objective of this paper therefore was to carefully analyzed Wilson’s contribution to administrative thought and its criticisms.

**Keywords:** Public administration; T.W. Wilson; contributions to administrative thought; critics

### **Introduction**

The intellectual roots of public administration as a distinct field of study can be traced to the pioneering contributions made by Thomas Woodrow Wilson in the 1880s. The efforts to subjected public administration to theoretical and academic discussions was given a big boost by the publication of Wilson’s famous essay entitled, “The Study of Administration” in the Political Science Quarterly in 1887 in the USA. In this essay, Wilson who later became the president of the United States argued that administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics and as such should be studied as a distinct discipline. This essay and discussions it generated was of unparalleled importance to the development of public administration as distinct discipline of study. It is not much of a surprise therefore that Waldo (1953: 67) called Thomas Woodrow Wilson “the founding father of public administration as a discipline”.

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Wilson's famous essay on the study of administration is considered important because of the following features:

- i. The study outlined the history of the study of administration.
- ii. The study established that administration was a comparatively new development in political science.
- iii. The study indicated the methods which can be employed to study administration.
- iv. The study forcibly presented the necessity and value of the study of administration.

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#### **About Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924)**

Wilson was born on December 28, 1856 in Virginia USA., T.W. Wilson was brought up in a humble but disciplined home where the fear of God was held supreme. His father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson was a theologian and a church pastor who left no stone unturned to ensure that T.W. Wilson was brought up in a disciplined manner. With an early matured mind arising from keen interest in the intense piety and intellectual companionship of his father, T.W. Wilson made remarkable progress in the development of his intellect early in life.

In his academic pursuits, T.W. Wilson studied politics, government and law. He graduated from the college of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1879. In December 1882, Wilson setup law practice with a partner. He could not have a successful law practice because of his political views which he was not prepared to compromise. His repugnance to purely commercial practice also hindered his law practice. He later gave up law and enrolled at the graduate school of the Johns Hopkins University where he was awarded the Ph.D. degree in June 1886. In 1888 he was invited to Wesleyan University as professor of history and political economy. He held this position until 1902. From 1902 to 1910, he was President of the Princeton University. He was also at a time president of the American Political Science

Association and was obviously one of the most influential early figures in the intellectual cross - fire in Political Science and Public Administration. In 1910, he was elected the governor of New Jersey and in 1913 he became the president of the United States of America, a position he held until 1921 (Shafritz, 1988). He died on February 3, 1924, hardly three years after it ceased to be president of the United States of America.

### **Wilson's Contributions to Administrative Thoughts**

Thomas Woodrow Wilson has contributed immensely to the realm of administrative thoughts. This is evident from his ideas and writings. His contributions was discussed under the following headings:

#### **2. Emergence of the Study of Administration**

According to Nnamdi, Offiong and Tonwe (2009: 35), “the ideas of Wilson in the sphere of the study of administration are significant. According to Wilson, the study of administration develop as a consequence of the increasing complexities of societies, growing functions of the state and growth of governments on democratic lines. This ever growing array all functions raised the question as to how and in what direction these functions should be performed. To this, Wilson suggested that there was a need to reform the government and the reforms should be in the administrative field. To Wilson, the objectives of the administrative study is to discover what government can properly and successfully do and how it can do these things with the utmost possible efficiency and the least possible cost, either in terms of money or of energy. Another objective is to rescue the execution method from the costliness and confusion of empirical experiment and placed them upon the foundations laid deep on stable principles”.

To Thomas Woodrow Wilson, administration is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action; the operative and the most variable side of the government. But this government in action did not provoke the students of politics and therefore, no one who wrote systematically about administration as an important branch of the science of government. Before the 19th century, political scientists were busy writing about the constitution, nature of states, essence and seat of sovereignty, etc. They are mostly concerned with the problems of democracy and monarchy. The question always was who should make the law and what should that

law be. The questions as to how the law should be administered with equity speed and without friction was put aside as practical details which clerk could look after. Wilson attributed the neglect of the study of administration to one important reason. Before 19th century, populations were of manageable numbers, and therefore, the functions of government and their administration were very simple. But, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, complexity of trade and commerce, emergence of giant corporations, problems of personnel management, etc., assumed tremendous proportions and the once simple functions of government, had almost in all cases become more complex, difficult and multiplying. The problem which consequently emerged was how these functions should be performed by the government and according to Wilson, the answer to this question lies in giving due importance to the study of administration (Waldo, 1953).

### **3. Administrative Science**

Wilson believes that administration is eminently a science. This was made clear when he said that the science of administration is the latest fruits of the study of the science of politics. Later, in one of his essays, he says that, we are having now what we never had before, a science of administration. Wilson was critical about the fact that not much scientific method was to be discerned in American administrative process. As a matter of fact, he felt there were no clear concepts of what constitutes good administration.

According to him, this was so because administrative science was first developed in Europe by French and German academics. Consequently, administration developed to meet the requirements of compact States and centralized forms of European governments. The reason for growth of administration on European soil, according to Wilson is two-fold. First, as government in European countries where independent of popular assent, there was more government and secondly, the desire to keep government a monopoly made the monopolists interested in discovering the least irritating means of governing. He further opines that if one wants to use the concepts of European administrative science in other countries, including America, one has to radically change its aims, thoughts and principles (Waldo, 1995).

One reason for the slow progress in the Science of Administration in America according to Wilson was the existence of popular sovereignty. Wilson felt that, it was more difficult to organize administration in a democracy than in the monarchy. He strongly believed that unless a nation stop stinking with the constitution, it will

be very difficult to concentrate on the administration. He wanted the debates on constitutional principles to be set aside as they are of little practical consequences and that, one should try to systematically analyze and understand the science of administration. Wilson aptly observed that it is more difficult to run a constitution than to frame one.

#### **4. Subject Matter of Public Administration**

After discussing in detailed, the history of the study of administration and the difficulties in its study, Wilson discusses its subject matter and characteristics. According to him, public administration is a detailed and systematic execution of public law. Every particular application of general law is an act of administration. Illustrating this point, he says that the broad plans of governmental actions are not administrative, though the detailed execution of such plans is administrative. The distinction according to him is between general plans and administrative means. Thus, the study of administration philosophical viewed, according to Wilson is closely connected with the study of proper distribution of constitutional authority (Herbert, 1957; Nnamdi *et al.*, 2009).

#### **5. Public Opinion and Administration**

Thomas Woodrow Wilson also examined the relationship between administration and public opinion. Why Wilson felt that it was more difficult to organize administration in a democracy than in a monarchy, is because in a democracy, the government has to be continuously responsive to the multitudinous monarch Called public opinion. Whenever public opinion is a governing principle of government, administrative reforms will always be slow because of compromises. Wilson was primarily concerned with what part of public opinion should play a part in the conduct of administration. According to him, public opinion takes the place of an authoritative critic. He further deposits that the problem is to make public opinion efficient, while at the same times ensuring that it is not meddlesome. He concedes that, through public criticism, the detail of administration is a clumsy nuisance, yet as a mechanism for superintending policy, it is not only beneficial but it is altogether indispensable. Thus, he felt that administrative study should find the best means of giving public opinion this control and at the same time, should shut it from all interference in administration (Nnamdi *et al.*, 2009).

## **6. Politics and Administration**

Thomas Woodrow Wilson also examines the relationship between politics and administration. His views on this subject, however do not appear to be very clear. At some point, he explained that both are interdependent and interrelated; while at other points he posits that both are separate. In 1891, He penned that no topic in the study of government can stand by itself-least of all perhaps is administration, whose part it is to mirror the principles of government in operation. Thus, administration cannot be divorced from its connection with the other branches of public law without being distorted and robbed of its true significance. He further noted that the administrative foundations are those deep and permanent principles of politics. From these statements, it was evident that Wilson was aware of the interdependence between politics and administration, why trying to carve out the field of public administration.

At other points, however, Wilson argues that politics and administration as separate field of studies. He felt that administration is outside the sphere of politics. According to him, administrative questions are not political questions. He further posits that politics is the special province of the statesmen and administration is that of the technical officials. Later on, he holds that, bureaucracy can only exist where the whole service of the state is removed from the common political life of the people, its chiefs as well as its rank and file. Its motives, its objective, its politics, its standards, must be bureaucratic. Thus, in this sense, he tries to establish a distinction between politics and administration (Waldo, 1955).

It appears from the foregoing that Wilson was inconsistent in regards to the question of inseparability and the separation of administration from politics. However, Riggs (1964) says that, for Wilson, politics and administration are not only closely intertwined but administrative actions are scarcely conceivable except as the implementation of general politics formulated by political means. Thus, Wilson was under no illusion that administrative development could take place in the political vacuum. But there are also scholars who argued that to Wilson, the Field of administration is the field of business and is removed from the hurry and strife of politics. Buechner (1968) for instance argues that the basic premise of Wilson's arguments was that the affairs of public administration were similar to those of private administration. To him, the importance of Wilson's arguments lies in his assertion that the study of public administration should be akin to the central

concerns of business administration, namely, the values of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

### **7. Indispensability of Bureaucracy**

Wilson advocated the indispensability of having a technically schooled (trained) civil service. He felt that a civil service based on merit was necessary to organize democracy and will help in correcting the political abuses of the spoils system that was so apparent then. Although, Wilson believes that administrators were in principle not involved in the political process, he was strongly against the creation of bureaucratic elite not subject to democratic control (Waldo, 1955). Wilson felt that the civil service reforms which was done in progress in America, was only a prelude to fuller administrative reform in a moral preparation for what is to follow. These reforms which were intended to make the service unpartisan open the way for making administration business like. Thus, Wilson, as Nicholas (1992) has observed, facilitated the expansion of an ethical sense of public duty beyond the conceptual confines of public service and into the entire intellectual terrain of public administration. Therefore, Wilson was of the opinion that it was possible and necessary for individual to rise above the constraints of a lifeless machine. For him, political leadership is a limited type of activity of political leader asserts his ideas within the bureaucratic system. This orientation in Wilson's view will ensure a democratic and efficient America.

### **8. Comparative Method of Study of Administration**

Wilson finally examines the method best suited for the study of administration. He rejected the philosophical method and emphasizes the historical and comparative methods. He posits that, nowhere else in the whole field of politics, can one use this method more safely than in the province of administration. Without comparative studies in government, Wilson asserted that, we cannot rid ourselves of the misconception that administration stands on different basis in democratic and other States. He further posits that one can never learn the weaknesses, virtue or peculiarities of any system without comparing systems with each other. Allaying the fears that comparative method may result to the import of foreign systems; he asserts that, if I see a murderous fellow sharpening his knife cleverly, I can borrow his way

of sharpening the knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it.

Thus, Wilson felt that, one can learn from European autocracies, their more efficient administrative methods without importing their autocratic spirit and ends. He further posits that it is necessary to do so if democracy is to be able to meet the challenge of chaos from within and of force from without. On the essential aspect of export of administrative technology from one country to another, there are divergent interpretations of Wilson's thinking. Riggs (1964) for example, believes that Wilson gave his highest loyalty to democratic government and would never have approved of export of administrative technology of non-democratic nations or countries. He would have recommended that we first concentrate on political development, in the sense of promoting democratic reforms as a prelude to administrative reorganization.

Therefore, Riggs felt that, Wilson was quite aware of the political context of administrative reforms and reorganization. However, Heady (1962) thinks otherwise. He affirms that Wilson's essay seems to assume that there is no restriction on the availability of administrative technology for export and his attention in giving exclusively to the question of the circumstances under which it should be imported.

### **Wilson's Contributions to Administrative Thoughts: A Critique**

Barrett and Fudge (1981) posits that Wilson was quite aware that public administration was basically political in nature and he clearly stated this point in his article. In actual fact, Wilson also seems ambivalent about what public administration really is. He failed to amplify what the study of public administration actually entails, what the proper relationship should be between the administrative and political realms or whether or not administrative study could ever become an abstract science akin to the natural science (Tumbo, 2018). For some of his critics, Thomas Woodrow Wilson should at best be remembered as an American politician who made it to the highest office in the United States and definitely not a man of fascinating ideas in the realm of administrative thoughts. For Weber (1947); Barrett and Fudge (1981), Wilson was an eminent American statesman and politician and not an eminent administrative thinker.

They argue that Wilson was not articulate in the presentation of his ideas. When one critically examines Wilson's much writing about phenomenal essay "The Study of Administration", one remains uncertain about its actual substances. Wilson likens administration to business methods, instituting a civil service and a problem of



distributing constitutional authority which is indeed exasperating to any careful reader. In the opening paragraph of the essay, he maintains that the objective of administrative study is to discover what government can properly and successfully do. But the essay is devoted largely to the argument on the separation of politics and administration, which according to Waldo (1955), is a serious inconsistency. This as we noted earlier, made scholars to later interpret Wilson's ideas in different ways. Also the study of administration as Wilson himself put it, is too general, too broad and too vague. Wilson was ambivalent of many issues and he raised more questions than providing answers.

### **Conclusion**

The above criticisms, however, do not undermine the significance of Thomas Woodrow Wilson's contributions to administrative thought. Judged from the standpoint of the development of public administration in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; his famous essay can certainly be termed as pioneering. Through his most distinguished essay, Wilson not only introduced the idea of administration but also launched public administration as a generic course. Not only this, doctrine after doctrine which has been accepted in public administration as valid was first clearly enunciated by Wilson in his famous essay. Based on the evidence presented in this paper, we confidently concluded that the development of public administration as a distinct discipline of study was Wilson's ideas.

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