

CONSIDER PUBLIC SERVICE

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With government under seemingly constant fire from so many quarters, it is a wonder that anyone with a choice would opt for a public-sector career. However, in spite of the scandals, administrative failures, and inefficiencies, I believe government tends to work pretty well, thanks to the millions of women and men who choose it for a career. As of 2012, there were 22 million public employees in the United States; 16 million of whom work in education.

For more than three decades, I devoted my work-life to public service. There was no single event that led me to a public-sector career, but a combination of experiences and the desire to make a difference in the lives of other people. The saying that a public servant “works for the people” sometimes gets lost in the day-to-day shuffle of paperwork and deliberations that are part of any government. Though I chose public service for the meaning and difference it could make, most of the positions I held were administrative or executive, but I looked for opportunities to add more meaning to my job.

The most enjoyable and rewarding period of my career was when I was on the adjunct faculty for a graduate program in public administration. I would open the first class of each semester with a question: “Why did you choose to pursue a public service career?” The answers from year to year had little variation. The most common answers were, “I want to make a difference in people’s lives” and “I

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want to get meaning out of my work.”

There were a number of other answers too, such as, “I couldn’t get into the MBA program,” or “I didn’t know what else to do.” Or, “I thought it would give me steady employment and good benefits.” Not surprisingly, no one said they did it to get rich.

Public servants do their jobs every day, mostly without any special recognition. They work so that people can have better lives, can live in a safe environment, can get help in times of need, and more. Though elected officials are in the public-policy spotlight, government couldn’t do its job without the unelected professionals who have chosen public service. Public-policy implementation would not happen. It is important to highlight the value and meaning of public service, so that it becomes a career choice for many of our best and brightest young people.

Everyone who enters government service has their own reason and story. For some, it’s just a job. For others, it’s a life mission. A close friend of mine who grew up in Massachusetts told me that he was influenced by the Kennedys, most of whom chose some form of public service. President John Kennedy’s inaugural quote, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,” was especially influential to many young people during the 1960s, and continues to inspire in the 21st century.

My earliest interest in government is traceable to a radio program. Growing up in the blue-collar city of Bridgeport, Connecticut, I was interested in politics from the time I was 11 years old. I used to fall asleep at night with a transistor radio under my pillow, listening to a political talk show on NBC broadcast from New York City. My family never traveled far, except the 60 miles from Bridgeport to the Bronx, where the rest of our family lived. The radio, for me, was the gateway to places I never went or people I never would be likely to meet. I didn’t feel deprived. I just thought that’s how life was. I was lucky to have this small radio and a supply of batteries to power it.

In high school, I became involved in political campaigns as a volunteer; most notably, the campaigns of Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff and, in college, the presidential campaign of

George McGovern. My real fascination was with foreign policy, and in college, that's pretty much what I studied, except for the required number of electives. In the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s, I began to study the origins of the Vietnam War, by looking into the history and politics of the region. This led to my participation in anti-war protests on campus. I was hardly what could be categorized as a "radical," but history and policy analysis told me that the U.S. and its allies had reneged on a promise that was made to Vietnam to support nationhood after World War II if the Vietnamese helped fight the Japanese. The Vietnamese held up their end of the bargain, but the U.S. and its allies did not, and chose to restore the French to rule their former colony. This decision was shaped, in large part, by the post-war distrust of Russia and its allies, and a fear that communism would spread to all of Asia and beyond. Cold War politics prevailed over Vietnamese statehood.

I became discouraged with the anti-war movement on campus as it fragmented and gave way to more radical groups that I did not agree with, whose agenda extended beyond ending the war. One day, I participated in the takeover of a building on campus where some students were trying to attend class. We used to take over buildings as a sign of protest. Some of the takeovers were more symbolic than others. This was the case with of the Reserve Officers' Training School (ROTC) building, which was occupied by student protesters and painted inside with larger-than-life cartoon characters, intended to create an image that countered the building's purpose as a training facility for the military that was conducting the war.

One day, I marched into the School of Engineering building with a group of protesters. The students in the engineering program were science-and-math-oriented, and generally not thought by us to be interested in politics. These were the students who wore small leather pouches that housed their slide rules (precursors to scientific calculators and personal computers). They thought that going to class was more important than ending the war, so we set out to disrupt their learning, and change their minds.

As we stood in the back of the room, shouting to interrupt the

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class, it struck me that, as much as I had a right to protest outside of the building, the students who wanted to go to class had that right as well. This, coupled with the radical fringe that began to take over the student movement on our campus, led me to leave the anti-war demonstration. I lowered my protest sign, turned around and exited the classroom, and then the building. Back in my dorm room with a six-pack of beer, I drank until I fell asleep. I remember removing an anti-war banner painted in red on a white sheet that I had hung outside of my dormitory window. It read, "Shatz Says End the War Now!" I was depressed.

The way that the war was handled made me more interested in becoming involved in government. Maybe in some small way, I could be an influence for better, more informed, decisions. I now realize there is a certain naïveté in this thinking, because government policy is often heavily influenced by politics, at the expense of pragmatic, rational assessments. This should be understood as a fact of life in a government-service career, not a deterrent for pursuing it.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, and knowing that the war could have been avoided, I began to think about a career in the Foreign Service. Though my interest in government began while listening to a radio talk show, I never seriously considered running for political office. In politics, you are always asking people for something (usually money), and I was never good at that. As a volunteer during one campaign, I was asked to be part of a phone bank to solicit donations. I pleaded with the campaign organizers to assign me to any other task. They obliged my request.

My desire to enter the Foreign Service changed during my senior year. A visiting professor, on leave from the Central Intelligence Agency, taught my American foreign-policy class and took an interest in me.

One day, the professor/CIA analyst asked me whether I had ever considered a career in public administration. I had to admit to him that I didn't know exactly what that was, since I had been so focused on foreign policy for over three years. Having gotten to know me a little bit over the course of the semester, he thought public adminis-

tration might be a good fit, where I could act out some of my desires to make government serve people better. He sent me to see a professor of Public Administration at the university, and we had a long talk. Though I had been thinking about public service as a career for a long time, I never thought of this service as being in the domestic United States. So this was all new to me.

Sometimes where you end up is more accidental than deliberate. I completed graduate school with a Master's in Public Administration, intent on working for a town or city government somewhere in New England. This level of government was closest to the people, and appealed to me. One of my professors encouraged our class to apply for one of two public administration internships in the country; the first was in Phoenix, Arizona, which had an excellent reputation for training its public administrators, and the other was the State of New York's Public Management Internship (PMI) Program. For a kid who grew up traveling no farther than from Bridgeport, Connecticut, to the Bronx and back, I decided that Phoenix might put my family (and me) into shock and despair. I applied to the State of New York program and, in March, I was called in for an interview at the World Trade Center in New York City. It was a strange format, because there were two of us in the room who were being interviewed simultaneously. We were both asked the same questions by a small panel of interviewers. My counterpart had several years of relevant work experience, and I had none. His answers were very direct and very New York-specific. Mine were a little more theoretical and somewhat general. I left discouraged, but since I wanted to work for local government anyway, I told myself it really didn't matter. Plus, I'd gotten to go to New York City and see the World Trade Center, which was a big deal for me.

A few weeks later, I got the call saying that I had been selected. It was a career path to a professional position within New York State government in Albany. I remember asking the person who called if they knew they were talking to Shatsoff, and not Shapiro, who was the other person being interviewed with me. The voice on the phone said it was Shatsoff they were looking for. I was in disbelief. I would

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have hired Shapiro.

My plan was to complete the two-year internship and then return to New England to pursue a career in local government. And where, exactly, was Albany anyway? I thought it must be someplace north of the Bronx.

People decide to work in government for their own reasons. You would not want government programs administered by people who chose their profession as a career of last resort. It is important to send a message that government service is worthwhile and can provide meaning that is not easy to find elsewhere.

I worked with people who made a difference every day. The governor may issue an executive order, but someone else implements its provisions. Regulatory commissions make determinations, but it is left up to career public servants to implement and monitor them. The courts set parameters or issue consent decrees that government programs must operate by. It takes competent civil servants to implement the courts' wishes. The same is true with programs established by legislatures.

When I was teaching graduate school, I began the first class with a conversation about examples of government intervening to make our lives safer and better. I pointed out that the paint on the walls was non-toxic because some government program determined that there must be standards for paint. The wiring for the lighting and electrical outlets was safe because of a government regulation. The food from the vending machines that the students ate during breaks had to meet the Department of Agriculture's standards. Cars, buses, trains, and planes all have to meet safety requirements that are prescribed by government, and its employees are responsible for bringing order to society in many ways. Some of this is mundane, but important nevertheless.

I like the example given in James Carville's book *We're Right, They're Wrong*. He describes his first encounter with a government employee, and writes: "The first person ever to slap me on the ass was a federal employee. He was the army doctor at Fort Benning, Georgia, who brought me into this world." Government employees

make a difference in the lives of all Americans, in a time of dire need and mostly out of the spotlight.

Carville expresses his opinion that those who are most critical of government often turn to it when they are in trouble. Think of automobile companies that lobby against higher mileage standards or against cleaner emissions and other forms of government regulation. These companies turned to government for help when their businesses were threatened with bankruptcy.

When the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was being debated, there were daily demonstrations outside the Capitol in Washington, D.C. I witnessed people carrying signs that said “We don’t want socialism.” Members of the same group also had signs that said, “Don’t touch my Medicare,” which is a form of socialized health-care coverage. My guess is that there was someone in that crowd who had a family member who was at some point denied health insurance because of a pre-existing condition, but they failed to connect their experience with what the ACA was proposing to do.

Sometimes when you work in government, you have to work hard to remain engaged. For example, as a budget examiner, early in my career, I volunteered to participate in a field study of methadone maintenance clinics in the New York City area. This had nothing to do with my actual duties, but it broadened my view of how government programs can help people in need.

In 1975, we were gearing up for the Bicentennial celebration of the United States. I had only been in state government for a year. During that time, New York State and New York City faced one of the worst fiscal crises ever. A bond default was looming. The City threatened to drag the State down the fiscal sinkhole. A front-page headline in the *New York Daily News*, referring to a speech by President Ford in which he denied Federal assistance to the City, read, “Ford to City: Drop Dead.” (The president never used those actual words, but they captured the essence of his policy toward New York.) Working for the New York State Division of the Budget, my colleagues and I were tasked with cutting unnecessary expenditures from the state budget. I decided to look for some low-hanging budget fruit.

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In preparation for the nation's Bicentennial, the State was funding a barge, which was widely supported by various patriotic groups. The cost of operating the barge and outfitting it with memorabilia of the Revolutionary War was over \$1 million, which, in 1975, were big bucks. The barge would sail around the state on rivers and canals, and once the celebrations were over, it would be dismantled. In my view (a rather naïve one, I was to learn), I thought this would be a logical budget cut, and recommended just that.

My recommendation made it to the Budget Front Office. Word got out to the public that the barge might be cut. Remember my earlier point about politics versus rational policy assessment? Interest groups, like the Daughters of the American Revolution, mobilized. During a meeting of high-level budget supervisors which was attended by Governor Hugh Carey, the governor entered the room and opened the meeting by thanking everyone for their suggested cuts, but conveyed that he didn't want to hear any more about eliminating the Bicentennial barge. I was crushed. How could this be? Politics often trumps bureaucratic logic. A footnote to the story: after the Bicentennial celebration ended, the barge was dismantled and sold for a pittance to a salvage company.

During the millennium change, many computer programs that state operations depended on were so old that, when these programs were written, the date field only went as high as 1999. When the year 2000 arrived, what would happen to national defense systems? There were unfounded rumors that, in the federal government, which faced a similar problem with its computer systems, nuclear missiles would self-launch. What about the banking system or the checks that people depended on to pay their bills and buy their food? Would these systems crash at the stroke of midnight in the year 2000? Would air traffic control systems work? Would some terror group take advantage of the disarray to cause more chaos? Many of the programmers who were the authors of computer codes that contained date instructions were either retired or dead. Government agencies tried to track them down. Documentation had been misplaced or not prepared in the first place, so fixes would be very difficult, if not impossible. There was

a real sense of fear inside and outside of government. I recall being in a meeting with state agency commissioners who were introduced to the millennial date issue for the first time. A shock and awe-type speech was given to them, because the year 2000 was a deadline that could not be altered. They needed to address this right away. At the time, it seemed very scary.

In New York State, a government task force was assembled to prepare for the possible consequences of the millennial date change. I was part of that task force. We went through a number of simulated catastrophes that might occur. The task force would meet regularly in a bunker deep below the ground. The bunker was originally built during the Cold War and had a massive steel door that could effectively seal it from an atomic blast. The door, I was told, hadn't been tested in decades, but there was something frightening about its appearance and original purpose.

A number of state agency representatives worked extremely hard to prevent computer meltdowns as the year 2000 approached. I was witness to government at its best, even if the worst fears of computer meltdowns came true. As the date change got closer, these people, along with private contractors worked round-the-clock to modify existing systems or write entirely new codes.

The night of the date change, while most New Yorkers were celebrating New Year's Eve, a few hundred public employees were in the bunker and at other locations in New York State, just in case. There were no major consequences. The morning of January 1, 2000, brought a sense of relief in the bunker.

During the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, the world was able to witness public employees in action during and after the attacks, some of whom lost their lives. I witnessed an act that was not generally visible in the aftermath of the attacks. Because the explosions were so horrific, the remains of many who died were never identified, including a member of my own family. For weeks after the incident, the survivors of those public employees who had died waited for survivor benefits to be paid. However, because in many cases there was no evidence of death, no death certificate could

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be issued. Without a death certificate, survivor benefits could not be paid. A person with whom I worked took it upon himself to bring this to its logical conclusion through tireless negotiations with state agencies, such as the Health Department and the State Comptroller's Office. The death certificates were issued and the benefits paid.

Every day, public employees are called on to prevent and deal with disasters in order to protect and serve the public. Much of this service is routine, but it gets done, and the public is well-served.

I am Chair of the New York State Academy for Public Administration. Four years ago, we decided to begin a Public Service Excellence Award Program. These awards illustrate, educate, and inspire people who wonder whether public service, as a career choice, can be meaningful.

A State Department of Environmental Conservation engineer, with 38 years of public service, oversees flood-control projects in the Southern Tier, and played a key role in saving lives and property during and after the major flooding caused by Tropical Storm Lee. This employee was responsible for over 30 flood-control projects, consisting of 52 miles of waterways, 17.5 miles of levees, three miles of floodwall, 179 gates, and a large dam. His work was described as extraordinary, and despite record flooding during Tropical Storm Lee, there was no loss of life in his sector. He also volunteered and assisted several communities on Long Island after Hurricane Sandy. His floodplain management experience was invaluable.

On March 12, 2014, there was a huge gas explosion in East Harlem that destroyed two large apartment buildings. Eight lives were lost and several people were injured. There was also damage to several other buildings because of the explosion. One of the first responders was an investigative team from the New York State Department of Public Service who had to work among the rubble and in very confined spaces to determine the cause of the explosion. The employees maintained their composure when faced with the tragedy they found. Over many weeks, this investigative team worked long hours at the site; 14- and 16-hour days, and many without overtime pay. Others postponed planned vacations. The teamwork and excel-

lence they displayed during this ordeal is a noteworthy example of public service.

Healthcare is one of the most costly expenses of state and local governments in New York. A county attorney decided to take initiative and use his expertise to make changes in a small county's prescription drug program, which resulted in \$11 million in annual savings while simultaneously improving the program. His ingenuity was a win-win for the employees of the county and the taxpayers, and he did it on his own initiative.

Also at the county level, a career public servant was given an award for his leadership in spearheading a waste-to-energy project at a sewage treatment plant, which saved the ratepayers nearly \$500,000 annually in energy costs by converting sewage sludge to energy. The project also involved reclamation of wastewater in the sewer district to be used as cooling water for the treatment plant. This saves the county seven million gallons of fresh water each year.

From human services, from child-abuse hotlines to senior services, from disaster relief to collecting taxes, from inspecting roads and bridges to finding cures for our worst diseases, public service offers countless opportunities for meaningful work that can make a difference. It's not always easy, but the intrinsic rewards can be great.

It will take a new generation of quality leaders and program managers at every level of government to solve the known and as-yet-unknown challenges of this state and country. As public administrators, the challenge is to find ways to tell the stories of what government employees accomplish day-to-day. Their work touches all of our lives in many ways, though we rarely realize it or think about it. The message that a career in government is a desirable, worthwhile, and honorable choice needs to resonate early on with students in our schools. Public service needs the best talent that this country has to offer.