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CHAPTER 14

The Relationship Between Politics and Administration: The Concept of Issue Networks

*T*he *iron triangle concept is not so much wrong as it is disastrously incom-
plete. And the conventional view is especially inappropriate for under-
standing changes in politics and administration during recent years. . . . Looking
for the closed triangles of control, we tend to miss the fairly open networks of
people that increasingly impinge upon government.*

Hugh Heclo

▒▒▒▒ READING 14

Introduction

Perhaps no issue has been more controversial or more discussed in public adminis-
tration since its inception as a self-conscious field of study than the appropriate rela-
tionship between the politically elected representatives of the legislature and the
permanent bureaucracy of the executive branch. Indeed, as was pointed out in Chap-
ter 1, the first essay on the subject of public administration written in the United States,
"The Study of Administration," prepared by a young political scientist named
Woodrow Wilson in 1887, essentially wrestled with the problem of the proper rela-
tionship between these two spheres of government: politics and administration.[1] Wil-
son wrote his essay at a time when civil service reform had recently been instituted
in the federal government (the Pendleton Act had been passed in 1883). Wilson sought
to encourage the development of the newly established merit system and the emer-
gence of a field of academic study—public administration—because in his words, "It
is getting to be harder to run a constitution than to frame one." The new complexities
of government—both in terms of widening popular participation of the citizenry in
democratic government and the rising technological problems of organizing public
programs—created, in Wilson's view, the urgent need for developing effective ad-
ministrative services free from congressional "meddling."

[1]Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly,* 2 (June 1887), pp. 197–222.
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Generally, the drift—both in terms of intellectual thought and institutional reform in the United States during the century after Wilson's writing—until the 1970s was toward a realization of the Wilsonian argument in favor of greater administrative independence from legislative oversight. War, international involvements, economic crises, and a host of other influences (including public administration theorists) supported the claims for administrative independence from detailed legislative control. In particular, as political scientist Allen Schick notes, three factors led to congressional acquiescence. The first factor was the massive growth in the size of government. "Big government weakened the ability of Congress to govern by controlling the details and it vested administration with more details over which to govern. In the face of bigness Congress could master the small things only by losing sight of the important issues." This was bolstered by the message of public administration theorists "that a legislature should not trespass on administrative matters inevitably registered on Congressional thinking about its appropriate role, especially because the theme was so attractively laced with the promise of order and efficiency in the public service and carried the warning that legislative intrusion would be injurious to good government."[2]

Nonpartisanship in foreign affairs also played a powerful role in checking congressional intrusion in executive affairs by conveying "the assurance that unchecked executive power would be applied benevolently in the national interest of the United States." Pluralism, a third factor in fostering congressional retreat, according to Schick, furthered administrative independence by the convincing certainty that wider administrative discretion over executive agencies would be in fact used "to provide benefits to powerful interests in society to the benefit of everyone."

In retrospect, perhaps these assumptions were naive, but they were generally accepted as truths until the early 1970s. Suddenly the abuses of Watergate, the disastrous consequences of Vietnam, the failure of numerous Great Society social programs, combined with an unusually high turnover of congressional seats, brought about a dramatic revival of congressional interest in the problems of Congress' control over executive activities. A variety of new laws were enacted to achieve more control: for example, widening the requirement of Senate approval of presidential appointees to executive offices; creation of the Congressional Budget Office to act as a legislative fiscal watchdog; the passage of the Freedom of Information Act to provide Congress and the general public with greater access to executive activities; and the War Powers Resolution, which restricted presidential initiative in foreign military involvements.

Concomitant with the rise of congressional oversight in the 1960s and 1970s, it became fashionable to argue that governmental policies emerged from *iron triangles*—three-way interactions involving elected members of Congress, particularly key committee and subcommittee chairpersons; career bureaucrats, particularly agency heads or senior staffers; and special interest lobbies, particularly powerful lobbies in specialized fields such as health, welfare, education, and defense. From this closed triad of interests, so the theory goes, governmental policies emerge by means of members of Congress writing and passing favorable legislation, bureaucrats implementing these

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[2]Allen Schick, "Congress and the 'Details' of Administration," *Public Administration Review,* 36 (September/October 1976), pp. 516–528.

congressional mandates in return for bigger budgets, and special-interest groups backing (with re-election monies and other support) the helpful members of Congress: in all, a tidy and closed relationship.

Is this how the political-administrative relationships in government actually work today? In the following essay, Hugh Heclo (1944–   ), currently distinguished Robinson University professor at George Mason University, takes issue with the iron triangle conception of modern political-administrative relationships. He emphasizes, "The iron triangle concept is not so much wrong as it is disastrously incomplete." "Unfortunately," writes Heclo, "our standard political conceptions of power and control are not very well suited to the loose-jointed play of influence that is emerging in political administration. We tend to look for one group exerting dominance over another, for subgovernments that are strongly insulated from other outside forces in the environment, for policies that get 'produced' by a few 'makers.' " Instead, says Heclo, in "looking for the few who are powerful, we tend to overlook the many whose webs of influence provoke and guide the exercise of power. These webs, or what I will call 'issue networks,' are particularly relevant to the highly intricate and confusing welfare policies that have been undertaken in recent years."

Note that in Heclo's view of the *issue networks,* unlike the iron triangle concept, which assumed a small identifiable circle of participants, the participants are largely shifting, fluid, and anonymous. In fact, he writes, "it is almost impossible to say where a network leaves off and its environment begins." Whereas iron triangles are seen as relatively stable groups that coalesce around narrow policy issues, Heclo's issue networks are dispersed and numerous players move in and out of the transitory networks, without anyone being clearly in control over programs or policies. Although the "iron triangles at their roots had economic gain as an interest of all parties concerned," Heclo believes "any direct material interest is often secondary to intellectual or emotional commitment involving issue networks." Passion, ideas, and moral dedication replace, to a significant degree, material and economic gain from policy involvement.

The profound influence of the rise of these issue networks on government is manifold, Heclo thinks, especially in adding new layers of complexity to government. First, networks keep issues, potentially simple to solve, complex instead, primarily to gain power and influence by virtue of their own specialized expertise. Second, rather than fostering knowledge and consensus, issue networks push for argument, division, and contention to "maintain the purity of their viewpoints," which in turn sustain support from their natural but narrow public constituencies. Third, issue networks spawn true believers who become zealots for narrow interests rather than seekers of broad mandates of consensus, support, and confidence for public programs. Finally, rather than pushing for closure of debate, issue networks thrive by keeping arguments boiling and disagreements brewing. They survive by talking, debating, and arguing the alternatives, and not by finding common grounds for agreement and getting down to making things happen.

As you read this selection, keep the following questions in mind:

How does Heclo's issue network concept differ from the notion of iron triangles as the basis for political-administrative relationships?

What examples does Heclo give to support his new conceptualization of this relationship?

Do you find his arguments reasonable and correct on the basis of your experience or your reading of the case studies in this text?

What impact does the rise of issue networks have on democratic government in general and public administration in particular?

What new roles must public administrators assume, given the growth of issue networks today? Specifically, in your opinion, how can an administrator prepare or be trained for assuming these new roles?

Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment

HUGH HECLO

The connection between politics and administration arouses remarkably little interest in the United States. The presidency is considered more glamorous, Congress more intriguing, elections more exciting, and interest groups more troublesome. General levels of public interest can be gauged by the burst of indifference that usually greets the announcement of a new President's cabinet or rumors of a political appointee's resignation. Unless there is some White House "tie-in" or scandal (preferably both), news stories about presidential appointments are usually treated by the media as routine filler material.

This lack of interest in political administration is rarely found in other democratic countries, and it has not always prevailed in the United States. In most nations the ups and downs of political executives are taken as vital signs of the health of a government, indeed of its survival. In the United States, the nineteenth-century turmoil over one type of connection between politics and adminis-

tration—party spoils—frequently overwhelmed any notion of presidential leadership. Anyone reading the history of those troubled decades is likely to be struck by the way in which political administration in Washington registered many of the deeper strains in American society at large. It is a curious switch that appointments to the bureaucracy should loom so large in the history of the nineteenth century, when the federal government did little, and be so completely discounted in the twentieth century, when government tries to do so much.

Political administration in Washington continues to register strains in American politics and society, although in ways more subtle than the nineteenth-century spoils scramble between Federalists and Democrats, Pro- and Anti-tariff forces, Nationalists and States-Righters, and so on. Unlike many other countries, the United States has never created a high level, government-wide civil service. Neither has it been favored with a political structure that automatically produces a stock of experienced political manpower for top executive positions in government.[1] How then does political administration in Washington work? More to the point, how might the expanding role of government

be changing the connection between administration and politics?

Received opinion on this subject suggests that we already know the answers. Control is said to be vested in an informal but enduring series of "iron triangles" linking executive bureaus, congressional committees, and interest group clienteles with a stake in particular programs. A President or presidential appointee may occasionally try to muscle in, but few people doubt the capacity of these governments to thwart outsiders in the long run.

Based largely on early studies of agricultural, water, and public works policies, the iron triangle concept is not so much wrong as it is disastrously incomplete.[2] And the conventional view is especially inappropriate for understanding changes in politics and administration during recent years. Preoccupied with trying to find the few truly powerful actors, observers tend to overlook the power and influence that arise out of the configurations through which leading policy makers move and do business with each other. Looking for the closed triangles of control, we tend to miss the fairly open networks of people that increasingly impinge upon government.

To do justice to the subject would require a major study of the Washington community and the combined inspiration of a Leonard White and a James Young. Tolerating a fair bit of injustice, one can sketch a few of the factors that seem to be at work. The first is growth in the sheer mass of government activity and associated expectations. The second is the peculiar, loose-jointed play of influence that is accompanying this growth. Related to these two is the third: the layering and specialization that have overtaken the government work force, not least the political leadership of the bureaucracy.

All of this vastly complicates the job of presidential appointees both in controlling their own actions and in managing the bureaucracy. But there is much more at stake than the troubles faced by people in government. There is the deeper problem of connecting what politicians, officials, and their fellow travelers are doing in Washington with what the public at large can understand and accept. It is

on this point that political administration registers some of the larger strains of American politics and society, much as it did in the nineteenth century. For what it shows is a dissolving of organized politics and a politicizing of organizational life throughout the nation. . . .

Unfortunately, our standard political conceptions of power and control are not very well suited to the loose-jointed play of influence that is emerging in political administration. We tend to look for one group exerting dominance over another, for subgovernments that are strongly insulated from other outside forces in the environment, for policies that get "produced" by a few "makers." Seeing former government officials opening law firms or joining a new trade association, we naturally think of ways in which they are trying to conquer and control particular pieces of government machinery.

Obviously questions of power are still important. But for a host of policy initiatives undertaken in the last twenty years it is all but impossible to identify clearly who the dominant actors are. Who is controlling those actions that go to make up our national policy on abortions, or on income redistribution, or consumer protection, or energy? Looking for the few who are powerful, we tend to overlook the many whose webs of influence provoke and guide the exercise of power. These webs, or what I will call "issue networks," are particularly relevant to the highly intricate and confusing welfare policies that have been undertaken in recent years.

The notion of iron triangles and subgovernments presumes small circles of participants who have succeeded in becoming largely autonomous. Issue networks, on the other hand, comprise a large number of participants with quite variable degrees of mutual commitment or of dependence on others in their environment; in fact it is almost impossible to say where a network leaves off and its environment begins. Iron triangles and subgovernments suggest a stable set of participants coalesced to control fairly narrow public programs which are in the direct economic interest of each party to the alliance. Issue networks are almost the

reverse image in each respect. Participants move in and out of the networks constantly. Rather than groups united in dominance over a program, no one, as far as one can tell, is in control of the policies and issues. Any direct material interest is often secondary to intellectual or emotional commitment. Network members reinforce each other's sense of issues as their interests, rather than (as standard political or economic models would have it) interests defining positions on issues.

Issue networks operate at many levels, from the vocal minority who turn up at local planning commission hearings to the renowned professor who is quietly telephoned by the White House to give a quick "reading" on some participant or policy. The price of buying into one or another issue network is watching, reading, talking about, and trying to act on particular policy problems. Powerful interest groups can be found represented in networks but so too can individuals in or out of government who have a reputation for being knowledgeable. Particular professions may be prominent, but the true experts in the networks are those who are issue-skilled (that is, well informed about the ins and outs of a particular policy debate) regardless of formal professional training. More than mere technical experts, network people are policy activists who know each other through the issues. Those who emerge to positions of wider leadership are policy politicians—experts in using experts, victuallers of knowledge in a world hungry for right decisions.

In the old days—when the primary problem of government was assumed to be doing what was right, rather than knowing what was right—policy knowledge could be contained in the slim adages of public administration. Public executives, it was thought, needed to know how to execute. They needed power commensurate with their responsibility. Nowadays, of course, political administrators do not execute but are involved in making highly important decisions on society's behalf, and they must mobilize policy intermediaries to deliver the goods. Knowing what is right becomes crucial, and since no one knows that for sure, going through the process of dealing with those who are

judged knowledgeable (or at least continuously concerned) becomes even more crucial. Instead of power commensurate with responsibility, issue networks seek influence commensurate with their understanding of the various, complex social choices being made. Of course some participants would like nothing better than complete power over the issues in question. Others seem to want little more than the security that comes with being well informed. As the executive of one new group moving to Washington put it, "We didn't come here to change the world; we came to minimize our surprises."[3]

Whatever the participants' motivation, it is the issue network that ties together what would otherwise be the contradictory tendencies of, on the one hand, more widespread organizational participation in public policy and, on the other, more narrow technocratic specialization in complex modern policies. Such networks need to be distinguished from three other more familiar terms used in connection with political administration. An issue network is a shared-knowledge group having to do with some aspect (or, as defined by the network, some problem) of public policy. It is therefore more well-defined than, first, a shared-attention group or "public"; those in the networks are likely to have a common base of information and understanding of how one knows about policy and identifies its problems. But knowledge does not necessarily produce agreement. Issue networks may or may not, therefore, be mobilized into, second, a shared-action group (creating a coalition) or, third, a shared-belief group (becoming a conventional interest organization). Increasingly, it is through networks of people who regard each other as knowledgeable, or at least as needing to be answered, that public policy issues tend to be refined, evidence debated, and alternative options worked out—though rarely in any controlled, well-organized way.

What does an issue network look like? It is difficult to say precisely, for at any given time only one part of a network may be active and through time the various connections may intensify or fade among the policy intermediaries and the executive

and congressional bureaucracies. For example, there is no single health policy network but various sets of people knowledgeable and concerned about cost-control mechanisms, insurance techniques, nutritional programs, prepaid plans, and so on. At one time, those expert in designing a nationwide insurance system may seem to be operating in relative isolation, until it becomes clear that previous efforts to control costs have already created precedents that have to be accommodated in any new system, or that the issue of federal funding for abortions has laid land mines in the path of any workable plan.

The debate on energy policy is rich in examples of the kaleidoscopic interaction of changing issue networks. The Carter administration's initial proposal was worked out among experts who were closely tied in to conservation-minded networks. Soon it became clear that those concerned with macroeconomic policies had been largely bypassed in the planning, and last-minute amendments were made in the proposal presented to Congress, a fact that was not lost on the networks of leading economists and economic correspondents. Once congressional consideration began, it quickly became evident that attempts to define the energy debate in terms of a classic confrontation between big oil companies and consumer interests were doomed. More and more policy watchers joined in the debate, bringing to it their own concerns and analyses: tax reformers, nuclear power specialists, civil rights groups interested in more jobs; the list soon grew beyond the wildest dreams of the original energy policy planners. The problem, it became clear, was that no one could quickly turn the many networks of knowledgeable people into a shared-action coalition, much less into a single, shared-attitude group believing it faced the moral equivalent of war. Or, if it was a war, it was a Vietnam-type quagmire.

It would be foolish to suggest that the clouds of issue networks that have accompanied expanding national policies are set to replace the more familiar politics of subgovernments in Washington. What they are doing is to overlay the once stable political reference points with new forces that com-

plicate calculations, decrease predictability, and impose considerable strains on those charged with government leadership. The overlay of networks and issue politics not only confronts but also seeps down into the formerly well-established politics of particular policies and programs. Social security, which for a generation had been quietly managed by a small circle of insiders, becomes controversial and politicized. The Army Corps of Engineers, once the picturebook example of control by subgovernments, is dragged into the brawl on environmental politics. The once quiet "traffic safety establishment" finds its own safety permanently endangered by the consumer movement. Confrontation between networks and iron triangles in the Social and Rehabilitation Service, the disintegration of the mighty politics of the Public Health Service and its corps—the list could be extended into a chronicle of American national government during the last generation. The point is that a somewhat new and difficult dynamic is being played out in the world of politics and administration. It is not what has been feared for so long: that technocrats and other people in white coats will expropriate the policy process. If there is to be any expropriation, it is likely to be by the policy activists, those who care deeply about a set of issues and are determined to shape the fabric of public policy accordingly. . . .

The Executive Leadership Problem

Washington has always relied on informal means of producing political leaders in government. This is no less true now than in the days when party spoils ruled presidential appointments. It is the informal mechanisms that have changed. No doubt some of the increasing emphasis on educational credentials, professional specialization, and technical facility merely reflects changes in society at large. But it is also important to recognize that government activity has itself been changing the informal mechanisms that produce political

administrators. Accumulating policy commitments have become crucial forces affecting the kind of executive leadership that emerges. E. E. Schattschneider put it better when he observed that "new policies create new politics."[4]

For many years now the list of issues on the public agenda has grown more dense as new policy concerns have been added and few dropped. Administratively, this has proliferated the number of policy intermediaries. Politically, it has mobilized more and more groups of people who feel they have a stake, a determined stake, in this or that issue of public policy. These changes are in turn encouraging further specialization of the government's work force and bureaucratic layering in its political leadership. However, the term "political" needs to be used carefully. Modern officials responsible for making the connection between politics and administration bear little resemblance to the party politicians who once filled patronage jobs. Rather, today's political executive is likely to be a person knowledgeable about the substance of particular issues and adept at moving among the networks of people who are intensely concerned about them.

What are the implications for American government and politics? The verdict cannot be one-sided, if only because political management of the bureaucracy serves a number of diverse purposes. At least three important advantages can be found in the emerging system.

First, the reliance on issue networks and policy politicians is obviously consistent with some of the larger changes in society. Ordinary voters are apparently less constrained by party identification and more attracted to an issue-based style of politics. Party organizations are said to have fallen into a state of decay and to have become less capable of supplying enough highly qualified executive manpower. If government is committed to intervening in more complex, specialized areas, it is useful to draw upon the experts and policy specialists for the public management of these programs. Moreover, the congruence between an executive leadership and an electorate that are both uninterested in party politics may help stabilize a

rapidly changing society. Since no one really knows how to solve the policy puzzles, policy politicians have the important quality of being disposable without any serious political ramifications (unless of course there are major symbolic implications, as in President Nixon's firing of Attorney General Elliot Richardson).

Within government, the operation of issue networks may have a second advantage in that they link Congress and the executive branch in ways that political parties no longer can. For many years, reformers have sought to revive the idea of party discipline as a means of spanning the distance between the two branches and turning their natural competition to useful purposes. But as the troubled dealings of recent Democratic Presidents with their majorities in Congress have indicated, political parties tend to be a weak bridge.

Meanwhile, the linkages of technocracy between the branches are indeliberately growing. The congressional bureaucracy that has blossomed in Washington during the last generation is in many ways like the political bureaucracy in the executive branch. In general, the new breed of congressional staffer is not a legislative crony or beneficiary of patronage favors. Personal loyalty to the congressman is still paramount, but the new-style legislative bureaucrat is likely to be someone skilled in dealing with certain complex policy issues, possibly with credentials as a policy analyst, but certainly an expert in using other experts and their networks.

None of this means an absence of conflict between President and Congress. Policy technicians in the two branches are still working for different sets of clients with different interests. The point is that the growth of specialized policy networks tends to perform the same useful services that it was once hoped a disciplined national party system would perform. Sharing policy knowledge, the networks provide a minimum common framework for political debate and decision in the two branches. For example, on energy policy, regardless of one's position on gas deregulation or incentives to producers, the policy technocracy has established a common language for discussing the issues, a

shared grammar for identifying the major points of contention, a mutually familiar rhetoric of argumentation. Whether in Congress or the executive branch or somewhere outside, the "movers and shakers" in energy policy (as in health insurance, welfare reform, strategic arms limitation, occupational safety, and a host of other policy areas) tend to share an analytic repertoire for coping with the issues. Like experienced party politicians of earlier times, policy politicians in the knowledge networks may not agree; but they understand each other's way of looking at the world and arguing about policy choices.

A third advantage is the increased maneuvering room offered to political executives by the loose-jointed play of influence. If appointees were ambassadors from clearly defined interest groups and professions, or if policy were monopolized in iron triangles, then the chances for executive leadership in the bureaucracy would be small. In fact, however, the proliferation of administrative middlemen and networks of policy watchers offers new strategic resources for public managers. These are mainly opportunities to split and recombine the many sources of support and opposition that exist on policy issues. Of course, there are limits on how far a political executive can go in shopping for a constituency, but the general tendency over time has been to extend those limits. A secretary of labor will obviously pay close attention to what the AFL-CIO has to say, but there are many other voices to hear, not only in the union movement but also minority groups interested in jobs, state and local officials administering the department's programs, consumer groups worried about wage-push inflation, employees faced with unsafe working conditions, and so on. By the same token, former Secretary of Transportation William Coleman found new room for maneuver on the problem of landings by supersonic planes when he opened up the setpiece debate between pro- and anti-Concorde groups to a wider play of influence through public hearings. Clearly the richness of issue politics demands a high degree of skill to contain expectations and manage the natural dissatisfaction that comes from courting some groups rather than

others. But at least it is a game that can be affected by skill, rather than one that is predetermined by immutable forces.

These three advantages are substantial. But before we embrace the rule of policy politicians and their networks, it is worth considering the threats they pose for American government. Issue networks may be good at influencing policy, but can they govern? Should they?

The first and foremost problem is the old one of democratic legitimacy. Weaknesses in executive leadership below the level of the President have never really been due to interest groups, party politics, or Congress. The primary problem has always been the lack of any democratically based power. Political executives get their popular mandate to do anything in the bureaucracy second-hand, from either an elected chief executive or Congress. The emerging system of political technocrats makes this democratic weakness much more severe. The more closely political administrators become identified with the various specialized policy networks, the farther they become separated from the ordinary citizen. Political executives can maneuver among the already mobilized issue networks and may occasionally do a little mobilizing of their own. But this is not the same thing as creating a broad base of public understanding and support for national policies. The typical presidential appointee will travel to any number of conferences, make speeches to the membership of one association after another, but almost never will he or she have to see or listen to an ordinary member of the public. The trouble is that only a small minority of citizens, even of those who are seriously attentive to public affairs, are likely to be mobilized in the various networks.[5] Those who are not policy activists depend on the ability of government institutions to act on their behalf.

If the problem were merely an information gap between policy experts and the bulk of the population, then more communication might help. Yet instead of garnering support for policy choices, more communication from the issue networks tends to produce an "everything causes cancer"

syndrome among ordinary citizens. Policy forensics among the networks yield more experts making more sophisticated claims and counterclaims to the point that the nonspecialist becomes inclined to concede everything and believe nothing that he hears. The ongoing debates on energy policy, health crises, or arms limitation are rich in examples of public skepticism about what "they," the abstruse policy experts, are doing and saying. While the highly knowledgeable have been playing a larger role in government, the proportion of the general public concluding that those running the government don't seem to know what they are doing has risen rather steadily.[6] Likewise, the more government has tried to help, the more feelings of public helplessness have grown.

No doubt many factors and events are linked to these changing public attitudes. The point is that the increasing prominence of issue networks is bound to aggravate problems of legitimacy and public disenchantment. Policy activists have little desire to recognize an unpleasant fact: that their influential systems for knowledgeable policy making tend to make democratic politics more difficult. There are at least four reasons.

Complexity

Democratic political competition is based on the idea of trying to simplify complexity into a few, broadly intelligible choices. The various issue networks, on the other hand, have a stake in searching out complexity in what might seem simple. Those who deal with particular policy issues over the years recognize that policy objectives are usually vague and results difficult to measure. Actions relevant to one policy goal can frequently be shown to be inconsistent with others. To gain a reputation as a knowledgeable participant, one must juggle all of these complexities and demand that other technocrats in the issue networks do the same.

Consensus

A major aim in democratic politics is, after open argument, to arrive at some workable consensus of views. Whether by trading off one issue against another or by combining related issues, the goal is agreement. Policy activists may commend this democratic purpose in theory, but what their issue networks actually provide is a way of processing dissension. The aim is good policy—the right outcome on the issue. Since what that means is disputable among knowledgeable people, the desire for agreement must often take second place to one's understanding of the issue. Trade-offs or combinations—say, right-to-life groups with nuclear-arms-control people; environmentalists and consumerists; civil liberties groups and anti-gun controllers—represent a kind of impurity for many of the newly proliferating groups. In general there are few imperatives pushing for political consensus among the issue networks and many rewards for those who become practiced in the techniques of informed skepticism about different positions.

Confidence

Democratic politics presumes a kind of psychological asymmetry between leaders and followers. Those competing for leadership positions are expected to be sure of themselves and of what is to be done, while those led are expected to have a certain amount of detachment and dubiety in choosing how to give their consent to be governed. Politicians are supposed to take credit for successes, to avoid any appearance of failure, and to fix blame clearly on their opponents; voters weight these claims and come to tentative judgments, pending the next competition among the leaders.

The emerging policy networks tend to reverse the situation. Activists mobilized around the policy issues are the true believers. To survive, the newer breed of leaders, or policy politicians, must become well versed in the complex, highly disputed substance of the issues. A certain tentativeness comes naturally as ostensible leaders try to spread themselves across the issues. Taking credit shows a lack of understanding of how intricate policies work and may antagonize those who really have been zealously pushing the issue. Spreading blame threatens others in the established networks

and may raise expectations that new leadership can guarantee a better policy result. Vagueness about what is to be done allows policy problems to be dealt with as they develop and in accord with the intensity of opinion among policy specialists at that time. None of this is likely to warm the average citizen's confidence in his leaders. The new breed of policy politicians are cool precisely because the issue networks are hot.

Closure

Part of the genius of democratic politics is its ability to find a nonviolent decision-rule (by voting) for ending debate in favor of action. All the incentives in the policy technocracy work against such decisive closure. New studies and findings can always be brought to bear. The biggest rewards in these highly intellectual groups go to those who successfully challenge accepted wisdom. The networks thrive by continuously weighing alternative courses of action on particular policies, not by suspending disbelief and accepting that something must be done.

For all of these reasons, what is good for policy making (in the sense of involving well-informed people and rigorous analysts) may be bad for democratic politics. The emerging policy technocracy tends, as Henry Aaron has said of social science research, to "corrode any simple faiths around which political coalitions ordinarily are built."[7] Should we be content with simple faiths? Perhaps not; but the great danger is that the emerging world of issue politics and policy experts will turn John Stuart Mill's argument about the connection between liberty and popular government on its head. More informed argument about policy choices may produce more incomprehensibility. More policy intermediaries may widen participation among activists but deepen suspicions among unorganized nonspecialists. There may be more group involvement and less democratic legitimacy, more knowledge and more Know-Nothingism. Activists are likely to remain unsatisfied with, and nonactivists uncommitted to, what government is doing. Superficially this canceling of forces might

seem to assure a conservative tilt away from new, expansionary government policies. However, in terms of undermining a democratic identification of ordinary citizens with their government, the tendencies are profoundly radical.

A second difficulty with the issue networks is the problem that they create for the President as ostensible chief of the executive establishment. The emerging policy technocracy puts presidential appointees outside of the chief executive's reach in a way that narrowly focused iron triangles rarely can. At the end of the day, constituents of these triangles can at least be bought off by giving them some of the material advantages that they crave. But for issue activists it is likely to be a question of policy choices that are right or wrong. In this situation, more analysis and staff expertise—far from helping—may only hinder the President in playing an independent political leadership role. The influence of the policy technicians and their networks permeates everything the White House may want to do. Without their expertise there are no option papers, no detailed data and elaborate assessments to stand up against the onslaught of the issue experts in Congress and outside. Of course a President can replace a political executive, but that is probably merely to substitute one incumbent of the relevant policy network for another.

It is, therefore, no accident that President Carter found himself with a cabinet almost none of whom were either his longstanding political backers or leaders of his party. Few if any of his personal retinue could have passed through the reputational screens of the networks to be named, for example, a secretary of labor or defense. Moreover, anyone known to be close to the President and placed in an operating position in the bureaucracy puts himself, and through him the President, in an extremely vulnerable position. Of the three cabinet members who were President Carter's own men, one, Andrew Young, was under extreme pressure to resign in the first several months. Another Carter associate, Bert Lance, was successfully forced to resign after six months, and the third, Griffin Bell, was given particularly tough treatment during his confirmation hearings and was being pressured to re-

sign after only a year in office. The emerging system of political administration tends to produce executive arrangements in which the President's power stakes are on the line almost everywhere in terms of policy, whereas almost nowhere is anyone on the line for him personally.

Where does all this leave the President as a politician and as an executive of executives? In an impossible position. The problem of connecting politics and administration currently places any President in a classic no-win predicament. If he attempts to use personal loyalists as agency and department heads, he will be accused of politicizing the bureaucracy and will most likely put his executives in an untenable position for dealing with their organizations and the related networks. If he tries to create a countervailing source of policy expertise at the center, he will be accused of aggrandizing the Imperial Presidency and may hopelessly bureaucratize the White House's operations. If he relies on some benighted idea of collective cabinet government and on departmental executives for leadership in the bureaucracy (as Carter did in his first term), then the President does more than risk abdicating his own leadership responsibilities as the only elected executive in the national government; he is bound to become a creature of the issue networks and the policy specialists. It would be pleasant to think that there is a neat way out of this trilemma, but there is not.

Finally, there are disturbing questions surrounding the accountability of a political technocracy. The real problem is not that policy specialists specialize but that, by the nature of public office, they must generalize. Whatever an influential political executive does is done with all the collective authority of government and in the name of the public at large. It is not difficult to imagine situations in which policies make excellent sense within the cloisters of the expert issue watchers and yet are nonsense or worse seen from the viewpoint of ordinary people, the kinds of people political executives rarely meet. Since political executives themselves never need to pass muster with the electorate, the main source of democratic accountability must lie with the President and Congress. Given

the President's problems and Congress's own burgeoning bureaucracy of policy specialists, the prospects for a democratically responsible executive establishment are poor at best.

Perhaps we need not worry. A case could be made that all we are seeing is a temporary commotion stirred up by a generation of reformist policies. In time the policy process may reenter a period of detumescence as the new groups and networks subside into the familiar triangulations of power.

However, a stronger case can be made that the changes will endure. In the first place, sufficient policy-making forces have now converged in Washington that it is unlikely that we will see a return to the familiar cycle of federal quiescence and policy experimentation by state governments. The central government, surrounded by networks of policy specialists, probably now has the capacity for taking continual policy initiatives. In the second place, there seems to be no way of braking, much less reversing, policy expectations generated by the compensatory mentality. To cut back on commitments undertaken in the last generation would itself be a major act of redistribution and could be expected to yield even more turmoil in the policy process. Once it becomes accepted that relative rather than absolute deprivation is what matters, the crusaders can always be counted upon to be in business.

A third reason why our politics and administration may never be the same lies in the very fact that so many policies have already been accumulated. Having to make policy in an environment already crowded with public commitments and programs increases the odds of multiple, indirect impacts of one policy on another, of one perspective set in tension with another, of one group and then another being mobilized. This sort of complexity and unpredictability creates a hostile setting for any return to traditional interest group politics.

Imagine trying to govern in a situation where the short-term political resources you need are stacked around a changing series of discrete issues, and where people overseeing these issues have nothing to prevent their pressing claims

beyond any resources that they can offer in return. Imagine too that the more they do so, the more you lose understanding and support from public backers who have the long-term resources that you need. Whipsawed between cynics and true believers, policy would always tend to evolve to levels of insolubility. It is not easy for a society to politicize itself and at the same time depoliticize government leadership. But we in the United States may be managing to do just this.

Notes

1. Hugh Heclo, *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1977).
2. Perhaps the most widely cited interpretations are J. Leiper Freeman, *The Political Process* (New York: Random House, 1965); and Douglass Cater, *Power in Washington* (New York: Vintage, 1964)
3. Steven V. Roberts, "Trade Associations Flocking to Capital as U.S. Role Rises," *New York Times*, March 4, 1978, p. 44.
4. E. E. Schattschneider, *Politics, Pressures and the Tariff* (Hamden: Archon, 1963), p. 288 (originally published 1935).
5. An interesting recent case study showing the complexity of trying to generalize about who is "mobilizable" is James N. Rosenau, *Citizenship Between Elections* (New York: The Free Press, 1974).
6. Since 1964 the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan has asked the question, "Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing?" The proportions choosing the latter view have been 28 percent (1964), 38 percent (1968), 45 percent (1970), 42 percent (1972), 47 percent (1974), and 52 percent (1976). For similar findings on public feelings of lack of control over the policy process, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations of the Committee on Government Operations, *Confidence and Concern: Citizens View American Government,* committee print, 93d Cong., 1st sess., 1973, pt. 1, p. 30. For a more complete discussion of recent trends see the two articles by Arthur H. Miller and Jack Citrin in the *American Political Science Review* (September 1974).
7. Henry J. Aaron, *Politics and the Professors* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1978), p. 159.

☐ CASE STUDY 14

Introduction

Professor Heclo in the foregoing reading advances an important conceptualization, or rather reconceptualization, of political-administrative relationships, which some scholars suggest are central to the problems confronting modern public administration. However, from the standpoint of the practitioner of public administration, what skills and attributes are most critical for individuals working within high-level policy making arenas? What characteristics are evident in those civil servants who perform well in top political-administrative positions? Are there special human abilities to be found in public officials who effectively do their jobs where politics and administration intersect?

The following case study is from a recent book, *The Politics of Fat,* by Laura Sims, Professor of Human Nutrition at the University of Maryland, College Park and a former

administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Human Nutrition Information Service. Her case recounts how the half-century-old National School Lunch Program, which had as its original goal to feed malnourished school children while supporting farmers, was transformed in the 1990s into a new kind of program promoting sound nutrition for youth. By exploring the process of this program's "reinvention," Dr. Sims affords us a rare insider glimpse behind the scenes, showing how various health and consumer advocates came into play to support this change, along with those who wanted to keep the program running the way it was originally set up, especially the American School Food Service Association and other local school administration groups. The author calls these groups "advocacy coalitions," which is different terminology but means much the same thing that Hugh Heclo refers to in the foregoing essay on "issue networks." Dr. Sims not only gives excellent insights into how these networks actually operate within this particular policy arena, but also emphasizes the central role of a "policy entrepreneur," Ellen Haas, the USDA's Undersecretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, as well as the broader changing external political environment for creating this new agenda issue, building support for its adoption, and making the policy change ultimately happen.

As you read "Reinventing School Lunch," try to think about:

Who was specifically involved, pro *and* con, within this issue network? And why?

What most influenced the policy reform—the political strength of its advocates? Weakness of the opposition? The effective leadership of Ellen Haas? The broad changes in the external political environment? Or what?

After carefully studying this case, do you think that it supports Heclo's thesis, or not, concerning the way that public policy is developed within American Government today?

Reinventing School Lunch: Transforming a Food Policy into a Nutrition Policy

LAURA S. SIMS

The largest and the oldest of all child nutrition and food assistance programs is the National School Lunch Program, permanently authorized in 1946 through the National School Lunch Act and created by Congress as "a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children and to encourage the domestic consumption

of nutritious agricultural commodities and other food." That same premise—feeding schoolchildren while supporting agriculture—remains a grounding principle for the National School Lunch Program today but also has served as the basis for rancorous disputes and conflicting policies regarding its operation.

Administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food and Consumer Service (FCS) (formerly named the Food and Nutrition Service [FNS]), the National School Lunch Program is administered at the state level by the state department of education and usually at the local

level by the school district administration. All public schools are automatically eligible to participate in the program, and it is voluntary in private schools. Almost all public schools (99 percent) and the majority of private schools (83 percent) in the nation do participate in the National School Lunch Program—over 93,000 schools in fiscal year 1996, according to the USDA.

Even though the NSLP is available to about 92 percent of all students, only 56 percent actually participate, and participation is much greater in elementary schools than in secondary schools. In 1992, 25 million children participated in the NSLP each day, at a cost to the government of $4.1 billion.

Schools that elect to participate in the NSLP get both federal cash subsidies and donated agricultural commodities from the USDA for each meal served. The NSLP currently operates as an "entitlement," meaning that federal funds must be provided to all schools that apply and meet the program's eligibility criteria. A three-tiered reimbursement system is used to calculate benefits the school district receives, as follows: children from households with incomes at or below 130 percent of poverty receive free meals; those between 130 percent and 185 percent of poverty receive reduced-price meals; and those above 185 percent of poverty pay for a "full-price" meal. Federal subsidies to each school district are based on the number of children from each of the above groups (even those who are paying full price) who participate in the school feeding program. In 1993, free, reduced-price, and full-price meal subsidies to school districts were $1.695, $1.295, and $0.1625, respectively. Average full prices for lunches ranged from $1.11 in elementary schools to $1.22 in middle and high schools. Severe-need schools (defined as those providing at least 40 percent free meals, with higher costs than the regular rate) are eligible to receive additional assistance of $0.02 per meal served. Current estimates show that over half of all participating children receive either free or reduced-price lunches.

The original 1946 legislation that created the National School Lunch Program set the standard for the kinds of foods that were to be offered to schoolchildren participating in the program. Until recently, these requirements were based on a standard "meal pattern" for all school lunches. The traditional school lunch, offered to children for half a century, was required to include the following foods:

1/2 pint fluid milk

2 ounces protein (meat, fish, 2 eggs, 4 tablespoons peanut butter, or 1 cup dry beans or peas)

3/4-cup serving consisting of two or more vegetables or fruits or both (juice can meet half of this requirement)

8 servings of bread, pasta, or grain per week

This meal pattern reflects a goal that, over the period of one week, children will receive at least one-third of the recommended dietary allowances (RDA) (a standard set to meet the amounts of nutrients needed by groups of healthy people) for basic nutrients, such as protein, vitamins, and minerals. USDA studies show that low-income children depend upon the NSLP to provide up to one-third to one-half of their total daily nutrient intake.

Policy Issues at Work in the National School Lunch Program

When the National School Lunch Program was established in the mid-1940s, the dietary concerns were not the same as they are today. Formulators of that original bill were worried about nutrient deficiencies and making sure that young people received *enough* food to be well nourished. Today, however, concerns are in the opposite direction: obesity among schoolchildren has reached an all-time high. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a document first released by both the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services in 1980, serves as the basis for all nutrition policy. The third edition of that document (published in 1990) was the first to quantify the recommendation for dietary fat; its text suggested that healthy people (over the age of 2) should consume no more than 30 percent of their calories as fat. As explained in more depth later, studies had indicated that school lunches were failing to meet this criterion. Thus, a policy dilemma arises when a major USDA program—such as the NSLP—is not following policy guidelines issued by the same federal department!

Another major policy issue emanates from the initial two-pronged policy objectives for the National School Lunch Program—providing nutritious

lunches for children while at the same time providing a ready outlet for agricultural commodities. Can the USDA be friend to both farmer and health professional? Can a food program also be a nutrition and health program? (Those who answer in the affirmative cite the phenomenal success of the "WIC" Program [the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children], where targeted supplemental food has been shown to produce documented health benefits.)

This policy dilemma is captured directly in the controversy over using agricultural commodities in the National School Lunch Program. Those who favor their use cite economic reasons—that it is simply good business not to be wasteful but to use any surplus foods to feed hungry children. (In fact, according to one USDA estimate, if donated food commodities had not been used in 1987, the costs of the NSLP would have been $880 million higher than its actual cash costs.) Those who oppose the use of commodity products in school meals cite the fact that a number of these products (notably, processed cheese, peanut butter, processed meat, and the like) provide higher levels of dietary fat, cholesterol, sugar, and sodium than are suitable for children.

To receive federal benefits for running the National School Lunch Program, the school district agrees to abide by the rules and follow the requirements for participation. This means that in order to accept cash subsidies to run the NSLP, the school district must also agree to accept various donated agricultural commodities, the value of which is estimated to be between 15 percent to 20 percent of the cash outlay for the NSLP. Both "entitlement commodities," valued at about 14 cents a meal, and "bonus" commodities are available to school food service managers. These donated foods are essentially "free" to the school food authority; the other 80 percent of the food must be purchased locally. Therein lies the dilemma—local school food service managers often feel that if they choose not to accept the donated commodities, they run the risk of pricing themselves out of an ability to provide free and reduced-price lunches to the children who need them.

Recognizing that some products are especially high in fat (and particularly saturated fat), the USDA has recently made a concerted effort to cut back on the amount of dietary fat in surplus commodities donated to schools. Low-fat beef patties are a good ex-

ample of this initiative. In the early 1990s (the first years these alternative low-fat products were offered), they made up only 5 percent of the total ground beef used in the program. School lunch managers, already operating under tight financial constraints and recognizing that children will eat only those foods with which they are familiar, are reluctant to use the new lower-fat products for fear of operating at a deficit. This aspect of running the NSLP was dramatically captured in the title of an article that appeared in the *Washington Post,* "Dissing the Salmon: Schools Can't Sell USDA's Delicacies," which described a situation in which the USDA had been able to purchase millions of pounds of flaked salmon and over a million pounds of frozen asparagus for distribution to schools, only to learn that the children refused to eat the food!

Advocacy Coalitions at Work in the National School Lunch Program

The policy subsystems at work in the National School Lunch Program are vast. The web of interest groups, consumer advocacy groups, and professional associations interested in the National School Lunch Program is as complex as it is dedicated. Those systems starting with the legislative and regulatory aspects of the program as well as those dealing with the implementation of the NSLP span the range from those who produce, process, and deliver the food to school administrators and school food service personnel, to cafeteria workers who prepare and serve the food, to advocacy groups and professional organizations that are interested in the delivery of government-sponsored food assistance programs, to parents and caregivers, and finally to the children who actually participate in the program. With a program that has existed for fifty years and is so prominently remembered by most adults in this country, it is no surprise that an entire industry has built up over the years to lobby for and to implement the NSLP.

The variety and array of agencies, legislative committees, media, interest groups, consumer advocacy groups, and professional associations that have built up around the issue of the National School Lunch Program are vast indeed. In the executive branch of

government, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has had primary responsibility for the administration of this program since its creation in 1946. More recently, the School Lunch Program has been given a more prominent role as a key domestic policy area by the White House—i.e., the Executive Office of the President—both in welfare reform and in agriculture policy.

Within the Congress, two major types of committees exist that influence both the reauthorization of the program and its operation: the authorizing committees and the appropriations committees. The authorizing committee responsible for the NSLP in the House of Representatives was the Education and Labor Committee, reconfigured and renamed for the 104th Congress as the Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee. In addition, the House Committee on Agriculture—with its Subcommittee on Departmental Operations, Nutrition, and Foreign Agriculture—has played a key role in oversight of the operation of the NSLP. In the Senate, the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee has retained authorizing responsibility for the National School Lunch Program. Appropriations committees in each house of Congress—the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee in the House and the Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee in the Senate—have final authority to approve the amount of money appropriated for the operation of the program. Thus, while an "education" committee in the House authorizes the program, an "agriculture" subcommittee actually approves the funding.

In November 1994, Republicans assumed control of both houses of Congress after a hiatus of forty years. The committee structure and leadership changed dramatically, resulting in changing roles and responsibilities for numerous legislators. A number of Republican legislators found themselves cast in the role of downsizing or even eliminating those very programs of which they were once personally very supportive. One example of this dilemma was William F. Goodling (R-Pennsylvania), whose personal story was chronicled in a detailed *Washington Post* article. Representative Goodling, chairman of the House Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee, was quoted as saying, "I have long defended some of these programs, especially the school lunch program. But, that doesn't mean that school lunch or any of the other food and nutrition programs

cannot be improved. And we are under the mandate from the Republican Caucus and in the Contract with America, to make some changes." Other GOP members in the House publicly described their ideological dilemma—while they remained supportive of nutrition programs, they were committed to giving state governments greater flexibility and less paperwork in the administration of the programs.

A vast network of groups in the private sector exists to actively influence the operation of the NSLP. A group's interest in the program stems primarily from the base concern of the organization. If an organization mainly represents food or agricultural commodity interests, it will be far more concerned about commodity specifications, cost considerations, transportation, food storage and safety issues, and other matters related to the food offered to children in schools. These organizations range from agriculture production groups such as the Farmers Union to commodity-specific organizations, such as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Dairy Council, the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, and the National Wholesale Grocers' Association.

If the organization represents health and nutrition professionals, it will more likely be concerned with issues such as the nutritional quality of the meals served, whether the children are learning good nutritional and health practices, and personnel issues such as whether credentialed professionals are providing the needed services. Professional associations—such as the American Dietetic Association (ADA) (with nearly 70,000 members), the American Public Health Association (APHA), and smaller groups of professionals such as the Society for Nutrition Education (SNE) and the National Association of State Nutrition Education and Training Program Coordinators (NASNET)—are active in monitoring changes to the NSLP. Most active, however, in representing its members' vested interests regarding the administration of the NSLP is the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA), which has over 65,000 members.

Large organizations with specific targeted purposes such as the ASFSA have the resources to mount effective lobbying efforts, being able both to operate at the "grassroots" level and to hire well-trained, well-connected lobbyists in Washington. In this regard, the ASFSA has long retained the services of a well-known lobbyist in Washington circles, Marshall

Matz, a lawyer who boasts a long record of key bi-partisan accomplishments with various food and nutrition programs. In addition, the ASFSA has a "government relations" manager on its own staff to organize and coordinate the organization's lobbying efforts (incidentally, the person who most recently held this position was a key staff member for a member of Congress who was on the NSLP authorizing committee). The approaches and effectiveness of the American School Food Service Association's lobbying efforts as the organization has sought to influence key regulatory and legislative changes proposed for the National School Lunch Program are key to this case study.

Consumer advocacy organizations certainly are concerned about many similar issues, but their focus is usually on the recipients of program services—that is, whether entitled children are receiving access to the program and whether the program is meeting the needs of poor and disadvantaged groups. Other consumer groups have focused on the internal, "qualitative" aspects of the menus served in the NSLP, concerned primarily with the nutritional value of the food served. An example of the first type of organization is the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), which has focused its efforts on the "access" issue for low-income children, while groups such as Public Voice for Food and Health Policy and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) have mounted an extensive effort (primarily via the media) to inform the public about the nutritional quality of the meals offered in the School Lunch Program.

A number of coalitions has also been formed whose activities focus on the NSLP. The Child Nutrition Forum, organized and administered by the FRAC, consists of a number of child advocacy organizations, public interest groups, and professional associations; its focus is to bring these various groups together to draw legislative and media attention to access issues involving participation of low-income children in child nutrition programs, including school lunch, school breakfast, and other child care feeding programs. A more recently formed, but short-lived, coalition was Advocates for Better Children's Diets (A-B-C-D). Included among its members were many of the same organizations that are in the Child Nutrition Forum, but the group also included trade associations, such as the American Soy Association. Those unfamiliar with this issue may question why such a group would want to be involved in a coali-

tion that seeks to influence the operation of the School Lunch Program. Texturized vegetable protein (made from soy) is a key ingredient of ground beef patties served to schoolchildren as one measure to reduce the dietary fat in the School Lunch Program. Therefore, this product can be promoted in efforts to improve the "quality" (i.e., reduce the fat content) of the school lunch meals.

Specialized media also play a role in the web of groups that comprise the School Lunch Program's policy subsystem by informing both the internal and external groups about the activities going on in Washington related to the program. For example, the American School Food Service Association publishes two periodicals, the *School Lunch Journal* and the *School Food Service Research Review*. Published twice annually, the latter publication, which is designed primarily for the academic reader, contains articles that feature evaluation and research conducted on the School Lunch Program. Coalitions and advocacy groups also use publications as a means of disseminating their message and often develop "media kits" to inform the public via the print and visual media.

Documenting the Need for Policy Changes in the National School Lunch Program

A substantive factual research base is often required to define the nature of policy changes that may be needed. Older program evaluation reports, authorized and funded by the USDA, had focused on the nutritional content of the school meals but had limited their analysis to those nutrients identified in the original 1946 legislation. Times were much different at the close of World War II, and the goals of the School Lunch Program were aimed primarily at assuring that undernourished children would receive adequate food with sufficient calories, vitamins, and minerals. Using data from the Survey of Food Consumption in Low-Income Households, 1977–78, researchers in the early 1980s gave high grades to the NSLP. Students participating in the School Lunch Program had higher nutrient intakes than nonparticipants, especially for protein and most vitamins and minerals, but not for calories, iron, magnesium, and vitamin B-6.

Using data collected between 1979 and 1983, the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, under contract with the System Development Corporation in Santa Monica, California, conducted the National Evaluation of School Nutrition Programs. The study concluded that children who participated in the School Lunch Program received more of almost all nutrients examined than nonparticipants. The positive impact of school lunch on energy intakes as well as vitamins A and B-6 were noted, although the program did not improve children's intakes of iron and vitamin C. It must be noted that these evaluations focused mainly on assessing calories, vitamins, and minerals, according to the criterion for meeting one-third of the RDA for those nutrients as specified in the 1946 legislation that established the program.

What was needed, of course, was a current analysis of the nutritional content of school meals reflective of the macronutrient content, such as fat. No longer were micronutrients, such as most vitamins and minerals, of major health concern, and the older evaluations did not provide much usable data on those nutrients shown to be associated with the development of debilitating chronic diseases, such as fat, cholesterol, and sodium. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the only data available on the fat content of school lunches were those collected by consumer advocacy organizations as a result of conducting their own surveys. The Center for Science in the Public Interest in its "White Paper on School Lunch Nutrition" showcased the results of its analyses of lunches from three school programs. In two of the programs, they found an average of 42 percent of calories from fat, and lunches from the third program contained 41 percent of calories from fat when whole milk was served and 35 percent when skim milk was served.

Another organization that was prominent in showcasing problems with the National School Lunch Program was Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, founded by Ellen Haas in 1983. In 1988, after reviewing menus from fifty school districts nationwide, Public Voice asserted that "many schools have pumped their menus with high-fat commodities contributed from farm surpluses, such as butter, cheese, eggs, and processed foods—[thus] cutting food costs but also cutting dietary value." At a press conference, Ellen Haas publicly went on record as suggesting that "the program is run more as an agricultural support program than a nutritional program."

These first efforts to publicly expose the types of meals fed to schoolchildren as part of the National School Lunch Program were followed by a series of four reports issued by Public Voice—"What's for Lunch? A Progress Report on Reducing Fat in the School Lunch Program," in 1989; "What's for Lunch? II: A 1990 Survey of Options in the School Lunch Program"; "Heading for a Health Crisis: Eating Patterns of America's School Children," in 1991; and "Agriculture First: Nutrition, Commodities and the National School Lunch Program," in 1992. Most of these reports carried a common theme—that USDA administrators were placing higher priority on distributing agricultural commodities than on providing nutritious school lunches. Recommendations were usually targeted both to Congress to reform dairy policies and to the USDA to reform its commodity distribution practices to encourage the purchase of lower-fat dairy, meat, and poultry products and to expand the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. The 1991 report, in particular, was notable because it was followed by a response from then USDA Secretary Edward Madigan, who publicly "pledged to take steps to reduce the fat content of meals provided by the National School Lunch Program, [thus] bringing their nutritive content into compliance with federal dietary guidelines by 1994."

The data needed to reform the National School Lunch Program were actually collected as part of a study initiated during the George Bush administration by former USDA Secretary Madigan, who was also personally committed to improving the nutritional quality of the meals served in the School Lunch Program. This study, the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study, was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, under contract with the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. The study collected meal information from a nationally representative sample of 545 schools and 3,350 students in May 1992. A most significant finding was that for the first time, the amount of dietary fat in school lunches was documented, and the results showed just how different the amounts of macronutrients were in school lunches compared to the amounts recommended in the Dietary Guidelines. School lunches provided much more dietary fat (38 percent, compared to the Dietary Guidelines' recommendation of 30 percent), saturated fat (15 percent, compared to 10 percent), and sodium (1,479 mg, compared to 800 mg). Further, less than 5 percent of the 515 schools sampled offered school lunches that were

close to the Dietary Guidelines' recommendation for fat. On the positive side, however, school lunches were providing one-third or more of the daily recommended dietary allowances for calories; protein; vitamins A, C, and B-6; and the minerals iron, zinc, and calcium. Thus, this study confirmed what many health professionals and nutritionists had long suspected—the NSLP does a good job of providing at least one-third of the RDA for many nutrients, but the meals contained far too much fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium.

One of the concerns reported was that those schools that offered low-fat (32 percent or less of calories) meals showed a 6 percent lower participation rate than other schools. The report noted, however, that NSLP participation rates in schools offering meals that were in the range of 32 to 35 percent of calories from fat were similar to participation rates in schools where the average meal's fat content was 35 percent or higher. According to the authors of the report, "these findings suggest that schools can make some modifications to reduce the fat content of lunches without adversely affecting participation; if, however, the fat content is reduced to levels below 32 percent of calories, participation falls substantially."

Regulatory and Legislative Reform Efforts

In most traditional analyses, regulatory actions follow legislative changes. However, in the case of reform of the National School Lunch Program, this sequence of policy changes did not apply. The NSLP was permanently authorized, but related programs that were carried under the same legislation were due to expire in 1994. Thus, congressional action was needed to reauthorize these programs, and Congress used this forum as a vehicle to make changes in the NSLP as well. The changes proposed to the NSLP—both legislative and regulatory—will be discussed in chronological sequence in this section of the case study. (To highlight these various policy activities, accounts of the legislative endeavors will be in *italics*, while those initiatives taking place in the regulatory arena will be in "regular" font.)

Building on her success as a consumer activist and media specialist and fresh from her appointment as the USDA's assistant secretary (later, the position

was elevated to the title of undersecretary) for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, Ellen Haas decided to take her school lunch reform message directly to both the public and to the health professionals and consumer advocates who had supported her activities in the past. The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study had provided ample evidence for the kind of reforms in the quality of the school meals that she had long envisioned. This report, released in October 1993, was the first study of the school meals program in ten years and provided important documentation of the nutritional performance of the program. Disturbing—but a clear mandate for Haas—was the finding that virtually none of the schools offered meals that conformed to the Dietary Guidelines recommendations. The study had shown that school lunches exceeded dietary guidelines for fat by 25 percent, saturated fat by 50 percent, and sodium by nearly 100 percent. The report also stated that children who ate school lunch consumed significantly higher amounts of calories from fat than children who got their lunch elsewhere. Especially troubling was the finding that nearly half of the more than 25 million school meals served were to needy students, for whom this may be their only nourishing meal of the day.

This message was taken to the public in a series of public hearings focusing on "Nutrition Objectives for School Meals." These regional hearings were held in four cities—Atlanta; Los Angeles; Flint, Michigan; and Washington, D.C.—in late fall 1993. Originally announced in the *Federal Register* (58 FR 47853 September 13, 1993), the hearings were staged "to provide an opportunity for public dialogue before policy changes are proposed for the National School Lunch Program." The response exceeded everyone's expectations. There were 350 witnesses at the four hearings—including children, parents, teachers, nutritionists and dietitians, school food service personnel, farmers, physicians, the food industry, and community leaders—and 2,500 additional comments were filed afterward by the public. Over 90 percent of these comments supported changes in the National School Lunch Program and applauded the USDA's efforts to improve the nutritional quality of the meals served. In addition to these "public" hearings, Haas provided a forum for interested professionals by meeting regularly with a small group of representatives from consumer, health, and professional groups. In addition, she was a popular "keynote" speaker at meetings of these

professional and consumer groups. She continued to court the media, especially those reporters with whom she had developed friendships from her days at Public Voice—Marian Burros from the *New York Times* and Laura Shapiro of *Newsweek*. Clearly, the objective of "creating a positive political climate" for reform of the National School Lunch Program had been initiated.

On November 2, 1993, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont), chair of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, introduced S. 1614, the Better Nutrition and Health for Children Act. Designed to add health-promotion aspects to current child nutrition programs that were up for congressional reauthorization in 1994, the bill was designed to improve child nutrition programs by making school meals conform to the Dietary Guidelines. It also provided for increased funding for nutrition education and increased access to meals for children during the summer.

Representative Kildee (D-Michigan) introduced a related bill in the House (H.R. 8) on January 5, 1993, and it was referred to the House Committee on Education and Labor (the name of the committee before it was changed by the 104th Congress). Hearings were held before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education on April 12 and 14, 1994, some sixteen months after the bill was introduced. The bill, known at this point as the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act of 1994, received voice vote approval on May 18, 1994, from the full House Education and Labor Committee.

During markup of the bill, several amendments were approved by voice vote, including one proposed by Representative George Miller (D-California) that would permit some schools to drop whole milk from their menus if it accounted for less than 1 percent of the total milk consumed at the school in the previous year. Miller's amendment initially was opposed by Representative Steven Gunderson (R-Wisconsin), whose dairy state had long supported the School Lunch Program's requirement that schools must offer whole milk along with other types. Gunderson offered a substitute that would have allowed milk purchases to be based on a survey of students' preferences. He later withdrew his amendment, saying that he thought the Miller amendment would have little effect in most school districts.

The action line of the story now shifts back to the regulatory arena. Following on the heels of the widely publicized School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study and personal stories gleaned from hearings and reported in popular media stories, the USDA's Ellen Haas clearly had the tools she required—along with a formidable arsenal of departmental regulatory tools and legislative connections—to bring about changes to the National School Lunch Program. The approach used in making the announcement was Haas's trademark press announcement plus public relations effort, tied this time to regulatory reform.

On June 8, 1994, then Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy and Undersecretary Ellen Haas announced the USDA's School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children. In regulatory parlance, these changes were formulated as "proposed rules," a form of enforceable policy initiated by the executive branch that does not require congressional action. The complete text of the preamble and proposed rules appeared in the June 10, 1994, edition of the *Federal Register,* allowing for a ninety-day comment period, ending on September 8, 1994.

The USDA's School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children was based on four strategies to update and improve the quality of school meals:

1. *Eating for health:* Using the power of regulatory reform to ensure that school meals would meet standards for fat and saturated fat content as well as for key nutrients and calories, thus meeting the 1990 Dietary Guidelines for Americans' recommendations

2. *Making food choices:* Launching a nutrition education initiative for children as well as working with professional chefs and other members of the food and agricultural community to offer training and technical assistance to local meal providers

3. *Maximizing resources:* Improving the nutritional profile of commodities by putting nutrition labels on commodities, working more closely with federal partners at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Department of Education (DOE), as well as establishing links to local farmers to enhance access to locally grown commodities

4. *Managing for the future:* Streamlining administration of the NSLP by using technology, reducing paperwork and procedures, and emphasizing flexibility

In order to ensure that schools met the Dietary Guidelines recommendations, a new plan was designed to replace the "meal pattern" system, which school lunch directors had followed since 1946 (i.e., planning meals by incorporating a USDA-specified number of servings of certain foods, such as meat/meat alternative, fruit and/or vegetables, bread, and milk), and use instead a "flexible system of menu planning" called "nutrient standard menu planning" or NuMenus. The USDA-proposed rule mandated that schools use a "nutrient standard" to ensure that the meals offered to children complied with the Dietary Guidelines. The plan required school food services to determine the nutritional content of the school meals by using a computer analysis program, or alternatively, schools could use an "assisted" version of the nutrient analysis by receiving help from outside groups, like state agencies or consultants.

The American School Food Service Association, the major professional organization concerned with the administration of school lunch programs, initially applauded the USDA (at least in public statements) for the "high priority [it] has given to the National School Lunch . . . program" and for giving the 92,000 schools participating in the program four years to comply with the regulations. But its campaign to overturn the regulations was just beginning. ASFSA members complained about the "paperwork burden" associated with compliance, the cost of the new foods in the program, and the level of technical competence required to use computers to determine the nutrient content of school meals. So the association took its cause—and its lobbyist—instead to the Congress, where program reauthorization debates were in progress.

On July 19, 1994, the House passed H.R. 8, and on August 25, 1994, the Senate passed S. 1614 by voice vote. Although the two bills had similar goals, a House-Senate conference committee was needed to work out differences between the measures. The amended legislation was finally approved by the House on October 5 by voice vote and agreed to by the Senate on October 6, 1994. The resulting bill, the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act, was signed into law by President Bill Clinton on November 2, 1994, as Public Law 103-448.

The final legislation reauthorized child nutrition programs as expected but also contained some important policy changes. The USDA's proposed regulations had called for schools to adopt a "nutrient standard menu-planning" system by 1996, a method that would use computers to track the nutrient content of a meal offered in the School Lunch Program. This measure, in particular, was quite unpopular with many school food service directors, who voiced their opposition through the ASFSA's lobbying efforts. In response to this pressure, Congress offered a loophole—the final legislation included language that gave schools an additional option of using a "food-based menu-planning" system, which would allow school lunch directors to meet the Dietary Guidelines in their menus by tracking foods rather than nutrients—the way they were used to doing it.

After years of debate, Congress also settled the issue of whether schools must offer students whole milk as one of their beverage options. Nutritionists have long argued that the requirement adds unnecessary fat to children's diets. But under a carefully crafted provision in the law, the whole-milk requirement was replaced with language that requires schools to "offer students a variety of fluid milk [whole, chocolate, 1 percent, etc.] consistent with prior year preferences." In other words, if students didn't drink whole milk one year, it didn't have to be served the next. To placate the dairy lobby, which strenuously fought the removal of the whole-milk language, the bill required the USDA to provide schools with an amount of low-fat cheese that is the "milkfat equivalent" of the "lost" whole milk.

The final bill also excluded a provision in the House version that would have required the USDA to engage in a formal process known as "negotiated rule making," making it mandatory that the agency meet with interest groups before it issued certain proposed regulations. This provision was sought by groups such as the American School Food Service Association that strenuously opposed the USDA's June 1994 proposed regulations and wished to be able to change any contentious language before such regulations were issued. (Those close to the situation felt that "neg-reg," as it is colloquially called, is just a way of letting a special-interest group write the regulations it wants to implement.)

The chapter on regulatory reform was not closed until June 13, 1995, when the *final* rule on the Schools Meals Initiative for Healthy Children was published as 7CFR Parts 210 and 220, "Child Nutrition Programs: School Meal Initiatives for Healthy Children; Final Rule." The USDA called this final rule "the most comprehensive and integrated reform of school meals in the 50 year history of these programs." (Much more than just new rules for menu

planning, the School Meals Initiative included support for innovative nutrition education, improved opportunities for technical assistance and training for school lunch personnel, and reformulation of donated commodities.) The USDA's final rule was similar to that which the department had proposed a year earlier, except that it included a new menu-planning approach: a food-based menu plan, which, while reminiscent of the plan currently in use, suggested alternatives for reducing the fat content of the meal by adding foods such as grains, fruits, and vegetables. Thus, the final rules accepted three-menu planning approaches—the nutrient-based, the assisted nutrient-based, and the newly added food-based.

In addition to these regulatory changes, the USDA initiated "Team Nutrition," a nationwide integrated program designed to help implement the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children. The mission of Team Nutrition was "to improve the health and education of children by creating innovative public and private partnerships that promote food choices for a healthful diet through the media, school, families and the community."

The Team Nutrition initiative was announced publicly on June 12, 1995, at a media extravaganza attended by first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and USDA Secretary Dan Glickman. In addition to the regulatory changes previously discussed, Team Nutrition included several other initiatives—a nutrition education initiative designed to motivate children to make food choices for a healthy diet; a training and technical assistance initiative to provide support to school food service personnel; and changes to reduce the fat content of agricultural commodities used in the NSLP.

Nutrition Education

This initiative clearly has received the lion's share of public attention and resources. Moving away from the "typical" sources of nutrition education materials and techniques, USDA Undersecretary Ellen Haas clearly wanted something different and reached out to popular media channels. In less than two years, partnership agreements were reached with the Walt Disney Company to use two characters, "Timon" and "Pumbaa," from its movie *The Lion King* as "spokestoons" to promote the importance of a healthy diet to children; with Scholastic,

Inc., to develop nutrition education materials for use in schools; with the national PTA organization for distribution of materials promoting parent involvement in the effort; with the USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service to develop and distribute a community action kit; and with the California Department of Education to serve as models and evaluation projects for Team Nutrition's community-based nutrition promotion efforts.

Technical Assistance and Training

The technical assistance component of Team Nutrition has included the development of "tasty, low-fat, low-cost" recipes with chefs working with local school food service directors (another source of great consternation for the ASFSA); the development of a training plan and standards; the participation of volunteer chefs at local school cafeterias; as well as the development of a national nutrient database and software to implement the NuMenus system in schools.

Commodity Improvement

As described earlier in this case study, the use of donated commodities has long been a source of frustration for those seeking to reduce the dietary fat content of School Lunch Program menus. One direct way of reducing the fat content of school lunches is to change the nature of the agricultural commodities offered free to school lunch administrators or to offer more "low-fat" commodities.

Staff at the USDA's Food and Consumer Service unit work with staff at other USDA agencies, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA), in developing the specifications for commodities that are used in the NSLP. The AMS handles "Group A Commodities," such as livestock, poultry, dairy, and fruits and vegetables; while the FSA has its own dairy division and a domestic program that handles grains, peanuts, and other miscellaneous items. Unlike menu standards for the NSLP, commodity specifications are not published in the *Federal Register* or codified in the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR). Rather, they are distributed to the industries that bid to supply these foods. When specifications are developed, the requesting organization—in this case, the FCS—works with the AMS and the food industry to develop them. Issues that are

considered in developing these specifications include technical feasibility of supplying the products, flavor and acceptability, body and texture, color, and nutrient quality.

To support the USDA's School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children and meet the concerns about agricultural commodities in the NSLP, the USDA established the Commodities Improvement Council in May 1994, early in the process of school lunch reform. Composed of USDA undersecretaries of Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services and Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services and the assistant secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs, the council was charged with developing policy for improving the nutritional profile of USDA commodity offerings while maintaining the department's support for domestic agriculture markets.

The council established a Tri-Agency Task Force to conduct a comprehensive review of the specifications for all commodity products. The charge to the task force was to identify commodities that could be improved by modifying their fat, sodium, or sugar levels while making sure that the products were acceptable to schoolchildren. As a result of this review, more than two-thirds of the 142 distributed commodities (such as fruits, vegetables, grain products, and most unprocessed poultry products such as turkey and chicken) were excluded from further modification because they are typically purchased in their simplest, most natural or unprocessed form. Of the remaining 46 commodities considered for improvement, the council approved half for modification. Meat, cheese, and peanut butter were among the products targeted for fat reduction from their current levels. Canned meat will be reduced from 22–25 percent fat to 19–22 percent, fresh ground beef and pork from 20–21 percent to 17–18 percent fat content, and frozen ground beef and pork from 17–19 percent to 15–17 percent fat content. The task force also recommended that the USDA work with the food industry to develop some new products, including "lite" butter, low-fat macaroni and cheese, meatless spaghetti sauce, reduced-fat cheese, boneless turkey ham, and prune puree (to be used as a fat substitute).

In addition to these low- or reduced-fat products, the USDA is also seeking to provide schools with additional quantities of fruits, vegetables, and grain products that contain virtually no fat. It is also pilot-testing a program in which fresh produce is purchased for the USDA by the Department of Defense and delivered directly to schools. While the American School Food Service Association supported the commodity initiative, many school food service directors were skeptical of its effect, questioning whether children would accept the taste of reduced-fat, -sugar, and -sodium products.

The legislative story had not ended, however. Shortly after the final rules for the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children were announced by the USDA, Representative William Goodling (R-Pennsylvania) introduced H.R. 2066, the Healthy Meals for Children Act. On July 19, 1995, the proposed bill was referred to the House Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities, and on August 4, 1995, it was referred to the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth, and Families. After languishing in legislative limbo for nine months, the bill was discharged from subcommittee action by the full committee on May 1, 1996, and on the same day, the committee considered H.R. 2066, amended it in markup, and passed it by voice vote, ordering it to be reported. After being reported to the House (as amended) by the full committee on May 7, it was called up by the House under suspension of the rules on May 14 and passed by voice vote. For many who were not following these developments closely, the bill is quite innocuous. It simply "amend[s] the National School Lunch Act to provide greater flexibility to schools to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans under the school lunch and school breakfast programs, as amended."

On March 14, 1996, Senator Thad Cochran (R-Mississippi) introduced a similar bill (S. 1613) into the Senate. Described by Senator Cochran as "virtually the same as H.R. 2066," the bill passed the Senate on May 16, 1996, without amendment by unanimous consent. The bill, which passed by voice vote in both houses, met with bipartisan support in Congress.

Critics of the bill had argued that its wording was too vague and did not provide for accountability for schools to follow nutrient-based standards in the NSLP. Before the bill was signed by President Clinton, an important clause was added at the "eleventh hour" to alleviate administration concerns. (A spokesperson for the ASFSA said that the decision apparently came directly from the Office of Management and Budget [OMB] in the White House, with Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman's support.)

The OMB's suggested amendment gave the secretary of agriculture the final decision-making authority to determine whether submitted menu plans met the nutrient standards for the NSLP; the official wording of the legislation now reads that schools can use any method "within guidelines established by the Secretary." On May 29, 1996, President Clinton signed into law the enrolled version of the bill, which became Public Law 104–149.

Looking Back . . .

Why was such legislation needed when new regulations governing the implementation of the NSLP had just been promulgated? Several reasons may be offered. The first has to do with the larger political environment under which changes to the NSLP were made. The 104th Congress, which took office in January 1995, had originally attempted to "block-grant" the School Lunch Program as one of its first actions in the Contract with America legislative proposals. The rationale was to improve decision making and implementation at the local level and decrease the level of federal involvement. After vigorous lobbying by the ASFSA and others, the NSLP was not included in any "block-grant" legislation. However, it was appealing to Republicans to offer a bill later that appeared to decrease the level of federal involvement in the School Lunch Program.

Legislation that permits "maximum flexibility" in planning school lunch menus certainly sounds as though it would decrease federal involvement in how the program would be operated at the local level. As Representative William Goodling was quoted as saying, "The bottom line is that the basic responsibility for developing reasonable approaches to meeting the dietary guidelines is with the school food authorities, with Federal guidance and oversight, but not a panoply of prescriptive rules or preset options."

Democrats and Republicans alike say this episode vividly "illustrates how a well-meaning federal agency carrying out a long-overdue change in nutritional standards barged into an area where local school districts know best." Even the *Congressional Record* contains the following statement: "We are moving this bipartisan legislation because the USDA Food and Consumer Service under the direction of Ellen Haas is out of control. In the name of advanc-

ing good nutrition for children, the USDA is burying our schools in bureaucratic paperwork and regulatory micromanagement."

The bill was backed by an intense lobbying effort by the American School Food Service Association, which used all its power—strong, effective lobbying coupled with an intensive grassroots letter-writing campaign from its 65,000 members—to ensure passage of the bill. It also enlisted the support of the American Association of School Administrators, the National School Boards Association, and the Association of School Business Officials by publishing estimates of increased costs associated with implementing the USDA regulations and by raising fears of increased "Washington involvement" in local affairs. Former House Speaker Tip O'Neill's maxim that "all politics is local" certainly held true in this case.

A second reason for the legislative activity is that school food service officials were quite unhappy with the new USDA regulations; in fact, after the proposed rules were announced in June 1994, the USDA received over 14,000 comments, 12,000 of those reportedly coming from disgruntled ASFSA members. Feeling that their comments had not been attended to in writing the regulations, fearing increased costs associated with implementing the new regulations, and desiring more flexibility in implementing them, the group sought the only way to offset regulations to which it was opposed—new legislation. This new act allowed school food service authorities to use "any reasonable approach" to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans under the National School Lunch Act. (Presumably this language also permits the very same meal pattern that the USDA, in the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study, had found to be high in fat and saturated fat, and had found not to meet Dietary Guidelines recommendations.) Further, the bill states, "The Secretary [of the USDA] may not *require* a school to conduct or use a nutrient analysis to meet the requirements," the clause to which school food service managers were most opposed.

While the USDA and the ASFSA membership share many common goals and say they have never disagreed on the ultimate outcome of improving the nutritional quality of the NSLP, the "devil," as they say, "is in the details." The USDA regulations can specify the nutrient standards on which the NSLP is based, but the overriding legislation now stipulates

how and when those nutrient standards can be met. The USDA's goals of having school meals meet the recommendations of the 1990 Dietary Guidelines for Americans can be met mainly by serving more grains and breads in school lunches and increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables offered, options that school food service managers maintain are too expensive. Further, in order to ensure that these requirements were met, the USDA wanted school food service administrators to keep track of the nutrient content of school meals by using computer-based nutrient analyses. School food service administrators balked, much preferring to continue using their current system and not wanting to implement new technology that was highly dependent on computers and personnel trained to use them.

The third, and perhaps most telling, reason is the "feud" that developed between Ellen Haas and the American School Food Service Association, the primary professional organization supporting the lobbying effort behind the National School Lunch Program. Appointed as USDA assistant secretary in 1993 (over one of ASFSA's former presidents), Ellen Haas had one of the most powerful jobs in the federal bureaucracy and control over nearly 60 percent of the entire USDA budget (roughly $40 billion), the third largest nondefense department in the federal government.

During her professional rise in visibility and influence from local consumer activist to prominence at the national level, Ellen Haas became known as a clear, strong voice for consumers. She developed an enviable record of being able to court the media, policy makers, and "regular citizens advocates" with equal fervor and convince them of the validity of her views. In her role as executive director and founder of the consumer advocacy and research group Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, Haas demonstrated an ability to strongly and ardently advocate for changes in the quality of the foods served in the School Lunch Program. Since 1990, the series of reports issued by Public Voice had publicly—and personally—identified her with concerns about the quality of the food served in the School Lunch Program and had pitted her against the program's most powerful political ally, the American School Food Service Association. Now as the bureaucrat "in charge" of this vast and important program, how could she bring about the various changes that she had so long and so staunchly advocated?

The American Food Service Association was already piqued by the Haas appointment. Then, as one of her first public acts as assistant secretary at the USDA, the ASFSA was the target of criticism for participation figures in the NSLP and for the nutritional quality of the meals served to schoolchildren, criticisms it felt were unfair and undeserved. In announcing what needed to be done to improve school meals, the ASFSA felt Haas had overlooked the "good news" in the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study—that NSLP meals offered more than the recommended amounts of protein and selected vitamins and minerals, and that a statistically significant proportion of the schools surveyed were already meeting the Dietary Guidelines using the current meal plan.

Further insult came when the NSLP came under attack by the legislative proposals of the 104th Congress to block-grant the program. Many closely associated with the process felt that Haas had not been a true "advocate" for the NSLP when her personal dynamism and contacts were most needed on Capitol Hill. They felt she had taken personal ownership of the Team Nutrition project to such a degree that she had no time or interest in working with them to fend off the block-grant proposals.

The disaffection between the USDA's undersecretary and the primary professional organization for school food service managers was clearly a public embarrassment for the Clinton administration. The AFSFA accused Haas of writing "heavy-handed" regulations by proposing that criminal penalties would be imposed if school food service personnel refused to change the meal patterns that did not meet the Dietary Guidelines. Former officers of the ASFSA publicly criticized Haas's administration of the NSLP, saying, "Ever since Haas started in the administration, the Under Secretary has discredited the school lunch program . . . she has humiliated [school food service] people . . . maligned and discredited them."

The "feud" between Haas and the ASFSA has manifested itself in a variety of rather subtle, but devastatingly personal ways; she was snubbed as a speaker at the ASFSA's annual meeting, a veritable "command performance" for the USDA undersecretary with responsibility for the NSLP. And when it came to Team Nutrition, the school food service group felt it had been insulted and bypassed. She was accused of snubbing old-timers at the ASFSA by bringing in executive chefs from high-class

restaurants to "show them how to cook," and rather than reinforcing the efforts of local "experts," they felt that educational efforts had been turned over to Disney "spokestoons" and outside consultants. The relationship was never "healthy"—for either the undersecretary or the ASFSA—and probably irreparably harmed the effort to reform the NSLP.

Analysis and Comment

Reform of the National School Lunch Program is a perfect example of the importance of the agenda-setting stage of the policy-making process. The reauthorization of the National School Lunch Program was due in 1994. This action was usually pro forma; no one seriously challenged the existence of the program after fifty years, and serious modifications to the content of the program were felt to be within the realm of USDA bureaucrats. Therefore, any major changes to the program would need to take place in the regulatory arena.

Nutrition and health professionals had clamored for change in the nutritional standards of the NSLP for years. All knew perfectly well that while school meals were meeting the recommended amounts of vitamins, minerals, and protein, they provided too much fat, saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol. It took the power of a USDA-financed study, the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study, to bring this to the attention of policy makers who were in a position to remedy the problem.

The other key to putting reform of the NSLP on the public agenda was the appointment in 1993 of Ellen Haas as assistant secretary of Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services. She served as a "policy entrepreneur" in this matter. Without her energy and attention focused on the matter of the *quality* of school meals offered to children in the NSLP, any reform efforts would certainly have been much milder and less riveting. In bringing the matter to the attention of professionals and the public (who usually are only mildly interested, at best, in these issues), the results might have been more successful in the long run and certainly would have exacted less personal cost to Haas.

Chapter 14 Review Questions

1. How does Heclo conceptualize the current relationship between politics and administration? What are the basic elements of his *issue network* idea and how does the idea differ from the *iron triangle* notion of political-administrative relations?

2. Heclo primarily applied the issue network notion to the federal level of government. Is it possible to apply it to state and local levels as well? Describe why or why not.

3. In what ways does the issue network concept pose serious dilemmas for democratic government in general and public administration in particular? Does the case offer "answers" to this issue?

4. What implications does the issue network theory hold for the practical functions and training of public administrators? Does it essentially alter the types of jobs, tasks, and roles they perform? Think about what the case study tells us about preparing students for these kinds of jobs.

5. Did you find this issue network concept evident in the "Reinventing School Lunch" case study? If so, in what ways? If not, how would you conceptualize the political-administrative relationships as reflected in the case study?

6. On the basis of your analysis of the foregoing reading and case study, what general recommendations would you make to improve the relationships between administration and politics in America? Be sure to think carefully about the *value implications* of any new reform measures you may advocate.

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Key Terms

politics-administration dichotomy	iron triangles
issue networks	policy makers
proliferation of interests	issue specialization
think tanks	issue watchers
technopols	single-issue organizations
trade and professional associations	presidential appointees
public policy processes	professional-bureaucratic complex

Suggestions for Further Reading

You would do well to compare and contrast Heclo's ideas with those of earlier theorists who argued for a clearer, more distinct separation of politics and administration (what is termed the political-administrative dichotomy), especially Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly,* 2 (June 1887), pp. 197–222; Frank J. Goodnow, *Politics and Administration* (New York: Macmillan, 1900); or the later writers who discovered the interest groups involved with administrative processes and gave roots to the iron triangle concept, particularly Paul H. Appleby, *Policy and Administration* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1949); E. Pendelton Herring, *Public Administration and the Public Interest* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1936); and David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

Of course, because of the sheer size, complexity, and power of American government, more complicated political-administrative relationships have arisen in the last three decades, described by several astute observers, including Hugh Heclo, *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1977); Don K. Price, *The Scientific Estate* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965); Frederick C. Mosher, *Democracy and the Public Service,* 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Christopher H. Foreman, Jr., *Signals from the Hill* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale

University Press, 1988); Emmette S. Redford, *Democracy in the Administrative State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Francis E. Rourke, *Bureaucracy, Politics and Public Policy,* 3d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); Harold Seidman and Robert Gilmour, *Politics, Position and Power,* 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Lawrence C. Dodd and Richard L. Schott, *Congress and the Administrative State* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979); Louis Fisher, *The Politics of Shared Power: Congress and the Executive* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1981); and Herbert Kaufman, *The Administrative Behavior of Federal Bureau Chiefs* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1981).

The *National Journal, Governing,* and *Congressional Quarterly* provide timely insiders' views of this topic. You should give particular attention to the writers who discuss the changes in the 1990s that have decisively altered political-administrative relationships: see David M. Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Donald F. Kettl, *Sharing Power* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1993); James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Paul C. Light, *Thickening Government* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995); and James H. Svara, *Official Leadership in the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

The federal health care reform attempts in the 1990s point out well the influence of issue networks, and the two best books so far on this topic are Jacob S. Hacker, *The Road to Nowhere* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Mark E. Rushefsky and Kant Patel, *Politics Power and Policy Making* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998). For where we are today with issue network theory, see Lawrence J. O'Toole Jr., "Treating Networks Seriously," *Public Administration Review* 57 (Jan./Feb.); pp. 45–52; and R.A.W. Rhodes, *Understanding Governance* (Buckingham, U.K.: Open University Press, 1997).