

A Presidential Civil Service: FDR's Liaison Office for Personnel Management

by **Mordecai Lee**

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REVIEW AUTHOR

Michael W. Popejoy

Assistant Editor and Book Review Editor, White House Studies

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It is all too rare today to find books about public administration that are enriched by historical archival research and that address specific events in the evolution of the modern administrative state. Most textbooks in the field offer only glimpses of historical upheavals in public policy and concentrate on the current state of affairs, rather than how we arrived at that state. Long gone are the 1940s and 1950s classics of Leonard D. White, who wrote about the complex and nuanced political processes that formed the administrative state, managed as it is by trained, professional administrators. That this system has evolved is perhaps taken for granted by both public administration students and their professors. Lacking such a historical understanding, students may not realize the potential conflicts that can occur between Congress and various presidents in the process of formulating and implementing policy to guide the administrative state. Mordecai Lee's *A Presidential Civil Service: FDR's Liaison*

Office for Personnel Management helps remedy that gap, reminding us that modern public administrators can learn from history.

Lee painstakingly traces the complex evolution of the Progressive-era ideology of merit versus management, beginning with the foundation of the Civil Service Commission, created by law to eliminate political patronage from public administration. He then takes readers through the creation of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Liaison Office for Personnel Management all the way to what America has today, the Office of Personnel Management. As Lee explains, "This book recounts and examines the political conflict between the ideals of merit and management during FDR's presidency, including the origins of the idea of executive-oriented personnel management, the fight over the Brownlow Committee's recommendation, and the subsequent activities of the president's Liaison Office for Personnel Management"

(p. xi). Lee reveals some very real limitations over presidential power and authority relative to Congress in making new public law, while demonstrating how a determined, influential, creative, and inventive president such as FDR found a way to implement his desired policies despite congressional objections.

Lee is both an academic and a former Wisconsin state legislator, both a historian and practitioner of public administration. His rich scholarship in *A Presidential Civil Service* relies on classics in the field, such as White's work, and delves into a wealth of archival sources. This is no hagiographic study of FDR's presidency and personality. Rather, Lee clearly discusses FDR's success in managing executive branch personnel and how he accomplished his goals both ethically and legally, even without the consent of Congress.

FDR adopted the early Progressive-era belief in management over merit, and he wanted to hire professional administrators. But Congress objected to his reorganization of the executive branch to include more executive control over government personnel. Congress was not ready to surrender the Civil Service Commission, whose original intent had been to remove the problems associated with political patronage. And FDR was unwilling to surrender control of personnel staffing in his administration. What Lee so brilliantly illuminates is that FDR found a way to get what he wanted and did so legally. Historically, not all presidents or executive branch public administrators have thought so clearly and acted so creatively to get a policy they wanted, working in the way they wanted it to work, without resorting to violations of law, ethics, or their own professional integrity.

The book is likely too narrow in scope to be used as a primary course text, and it does not come with the usual textbook elements of chapter objectives, questions for class discussion, or instructor support materials. But it could serve as a background reader for graduate courses in public personnel administration, especially if adopted by a seasoned professor able to elicit

and present relevant teaching points. Lee clearly intended *A Presidential Civil Service* to be used in advanced courses in public administration. Each chapter provides extensive descriptive notes, which, along with the comprehensive bibliography, point professors and students toward further areas of inquiry.

Lee's book also presents a hopeful possibility: perhaps, given both the early work of White and now Lee's own contributions, a few more PhD students will be inspired to choose public history as their concentration both in their doctoral work and in their academic career.

REFERENCE

Lee, Mordecai. (2016). *A presidential civil service: FDR's Liaison Office for Personnel Management*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael W. Popejoy is the Book Series Editor for Nova Science Publishers, New York; Assistant Editor and Book Review Editor for White House Studies; and a frequent contributor to *Public Health* (UK) and *Perspectives in Public Health* (UK). He received a PhD in public administration from Florida Atlantic University. He serves on editorial boards for many international academic journals in public administration, public health, qualitative research, and medicine. His forthcoming book *Emerging Global Crises in Public Administration and Public Health* is expected in print in 2018. The numerous unexplored interdisciplinary crosswalks between public health, population medicine, and public administration partnership initiatives constitute one of his major areas of scholarly interest today.