"Playing Piano in a Whorehouse:"

Bureaucrat-Bashing and its Affect on Career Civil Servants

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Abstract

Using focus-group data, we explore how former members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) perceive "bureaucracy-bashing" and its consequences. Participants unanimously believe that pervasive bashing fosters substantial problems for government and its employees. They report that bashing is not only demoralizing, but also that it creates great animosity between "careerists" and the political appointees overseeing their work. Retired SESers believe there is a direct connection between campaign bashing and recruitment, retention and training difficulties for both career bureaucrats and low-level political appointees. In some cases, they argue that the media contributes to negative public opinion toward bureaucracy. Participants are particularly critical of Reagan-era bashing and of congressional bashing that blames bureaucrats for congressional policy decisions. The analysis is grounded in a diverse literature relating to public administration, the presidency, campaigns and elections and public opinion.

Introduction

        This paper explores how "bureaucracy-bashing" has evolved in election campaigns and, more importantly, how it affects the employees being criticized and their capacity to manage public programs. Political messages deriding government waste and abuse, high taxes bureaucratic sloth and overbearing regulations are not new; nor is scholarly attention to the subject. Some of these criticisms were used by our founding fathers against King George III. They certainly continued in the Progressive Era. Recent public-opinion and political-behavior scholarship also establish how potent political symbols such as bashing can be, both for the general public and the alleged targets. Previous scholarship (i.e. Hubbell 1991; Light 1999; Hall 2002) demonstrates that elected officials' bureaucracy-bashing is pervasive for both presidents and Congress. Although casual observation dictates that Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign fostered bashing, scholarly evidence suggests that modern bashing extends at least to Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign (i.e. Light 1999). Bureaucracy-bashing has also been a major theme of populist presidential campaigns, such as those of ex-Governor George Wallace, Ross Perot, and in 2000, the Reform Party's Pat Buchanan and the Green Party's Ralph Nader. Critics (i.e. Hubbell 1991, Light 1999) frequently deride politicians for using bashing to manipulate public opinion and demonize career bureaucrats for political advantage.

        Other scholars offer thorough reviews of bashing content and history. However, we know virtually nothing about how career bureaucrats react to election campaign bashing, especially criticisms of the bureaucracy that takes place during prominent presidential campaigns. This paper seeks to fill in the knowledge gap.

This paper advances our understanding of bureaucracy-bashing in two primary areas. First, we take a unique, interdisciplinary approach. In doing so, we bring together literature on public administration, the presidency, campaigns and elections, bureaucracy and public opinion. We pay particular attention to bashing's implications for symbolic politics. While previous efforts (i.e. Hubbell 1991; Hall 2002) explore how politicians use political symbolism to craft bashing strategies, we extend this analysis by also exploring how the public internalizes symbolic politics, increasing negative feelings toward government and depressing political trust, which makes bashing especially potent. Second, and most importantly, we use original focus-group data to explore how retired Senior Executive Service (SES) members perceive bashing, how it affects their jobs, agencies and public policy.

You Can't Get There From Here: Bureaucracy as Savior and Villain

Just one hundred years ago the bureaucracy-bashing way of life we have today might have seemed impossible. Far from being the scourge of freedom and individual liberty. The professional bureaucracy was seen as a check on party bosses, corruption and favoritism. Despite the vilification of bureaucracy in campaigns today, it was once considered the savior of American democracy. Progressive-Era reformers viewed a professionalized, merit-oriented civil-service system as a remedy to the Democratic machines that dominated many urban environments. Independent regulatory bodies, professional city management and other reforms designed to limit boss and immigrant influence were especially popular (i.e. Hofstadter 1960; Lineberry and Fowler 1967; Gormley 1989; Connolly 1998). Woodrow Wilson's (1887) "politics-administration

dichotomy," which argues that effective public bureaucracy must be isolated from political influence, was a major and practical contribution to government. Even so, politics was not far below the surface. Especially in ethnically charged cities such as Boston, many Progressive reforms were allegedly more useful for disenfranchising ethnic and religious minorities than genuine reform (see, for example, Ignatiev 1995 and Connolly 1998).[1]

Despite the Progressive-Era emphasis on more efficient and professional management, corporate ideology during the period should not be overstated. As one of modern public administration's founding fathers reminds us, "government is different," (Appleby 1945).[2] Understanding how government is different from the corporate world depends on understanding the bureaucrats who serve government. Government is different because it encompasses the public interest and more responsibility than any corporation, has greater reach than any corporation, and because of its unique structure, public accountability and political foundation. These factors often make transplanting business principles and executives directly to government ineffective, if not dangerous (Appleby 1945). Appleby argues that politics and administration are inseparable, and that political concerns help guard against arbitrary administration. Appleby argues that successful public servants must possess a strong commitment to the public interest. Ironically, some of campaign bashing behavior reveals that those aspiring to run the

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[1] For other discussions of bureaucrat-bashing during the Progressive Era, see Hubbell (1992), Mosher (1982) and Van Riper (1958).
[2] Although commonly known as the "government is different" argument, the concept actually comes from Appleby's book *Big Democracy*. For a condensed version of the "government is different" argument, see Schafritz and Hyde's (1997) edited excerpt by the same title. The "government is different" argument is particularly important because it marks the downfall of the politics-administration dichotomy advanced by Wilson (1887), Goodnow (1900) and their predecessors.

bureaucracy—presidential candidates—may have a passion for public service, but not necessarily for public servants.

Bashing could be a deliberate attempt to reassert presidential control over the bureaucracy in instances where the president is constrained by a lack of formal power. In a world in which the bureaucracy falls under executive branch authority, but relies on Congress for its lifeblood[3], and in which the president is constrained by political factors such as conservatism in agencies (Downs 1967), bashing might be an effective tool to redirect government. Given the president's resources to lead public opinion, bashing could be a way to reduce bureaucratic power when the president is legally or practically constrained from exercising formal power. Bashing might be perceived by candidates and presidents as a rational way to improve the president's bargaining stature with Congress, the bureaucracy and other public actors.

However, there is considerable difference between what we will call "substantive bashing" and what Fishel (1985) calls "meaningless rhetoric" (10). Substantive bashing refers to bashing as a means to an end, such as criticizing bureaucrats as an example of why the U.S. Departments of Education and Energy should be abolished. Although this kind of bashing might be objectionable, it at least advances specific policy proposals. Vague criticisms of bureaucracy such as Ronald Reagan's getting government "off people's backs," Jimmy Carter's pledge to "restore the confidence of our people in this nation's governing institutions," and George W. Bush's argument that "Washington is the problem" can be interpreted as a swipe at those working in government (Fishel 1985, 9-10). Campaign "promises" of this variety are "meaningless" on two fronts. First, they are "functionally meaningless." As Fishel adeptly points out, "Was there ever a

Democratic presidential candidate who promised to crush our collective spinal cords with 'big government'?" (1985, 10). Second, they are statements of broad problems and are "programmatically meaningless" because they imply that there are blanket solutions to broad and genuine disagreements on government's role, such as what would amount to "getting government off the people's backs," (Fishel 1985, 10).

"'Meaningless' rhetorical promises can have powerful political consequences," (Fishel 1985, 10). Even though meaningless rhetoric may not have substantial *policy* impact, its *political* symbolism, impact on changing public attitudes and framing can be substantial. Fishel argues that "code words and symbolic phrases" such as generic bureaucracy-bashing are often essential in holding together electoral coalitions (1985, 10-11). Rhetoric also has substantial negative implications for those working for the federal bureaucracy.

Modern Bashing: Symbolism and Campaign Rhetoric

Campaign-based bureaucracy-bashing continues because it is perceived to be effective in getting votes. Candidates and presidents are adept at using message framing, symbolic politics and the earned and paid media to fuel the public belief that the bureaucracy is in crisis. Bashing is often accomplished through symbolic politics. Political elites—including candidates and presidents—create symbols through actions and rhetoric (Edelman 1964). Language is particularly important in evoking these responses, which are based on continuously reinforced predispositions, such as the ideological view that the government bureaucracy is too large and that bureaucrats are lazy or incompetent. Public sentiment toward social groups (i.e. various racial or ethnic

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[3] On this point, see Cameron's (2000) discussion of bargaining games.

groups) heavily influences public opinion on government policies toward those groups. Politicians play a major role in framing that sentiment through the messages they send and the rhetoric they choose (Nelson and Kinder 1996). The "freeloader frame,"[4] used to portray welfare recipients as undeserving and lazy, also has ties to anti-bureaucratic themes. The freeloader frame "is closely associated in contemporary national politics with the anti-big government agenda of recent Republican administrations," (Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1061). In addition to characterizing welfare recipients through the freeloader frame, President Reagan also used the freeloader frame to attack "spiraling financial costs of government social programs," (Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1062). Although Nelson and Kinder do not make the point explicitly, their demonstration of welfare recipients being demonized through the freeloader frame could easily apply to government bureaucrats and the agencies for which they work.

However, the preceding discussion should not imply that voters buy what candidates and presidents are saying. The public's ability to interpret political messages—including candidate rhetoric—and to use that information to form lasting policy opinions is a hotly debated topic in political science.[5] However, recent evidence places more faith in the public. Although some criticize mental shortcuts as undercutting responsible democracy, others argue that citizens can be rational in their logic and make informed political decisions even if they are not fully informed on every policy issue (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991). In addition, apparently in defiance of Arrow's

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[4] Gamson and Lasch (1983) identify the freeloader frame in their discussion of elite attitudes on welfare policy.
[5] Early work on public opinion painted the public as fickle and led almost exclusively by group-related and elite cues (i.e. Lazarsfeld et al 1944). Even Zaller's (1992) classic-but-controversial Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model demonstrates that mass opinion is generated not by firmly held policy beliefs but by mental cues such as heuristics, which allow for quick, but not necessarily thoughtful, answers to ill-designed survey questions.

(1951) social-choice dilemma, "public opinion is rational in the aggregate, even if individual opinion is prone to error….Individual errors cancel out in the process of aggregation, and thus collective opinion conveys real and true information about the citizenry's preferences," (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, 153).[6] Chong (1993) supplies additional evidence to Zaller's (1992) claim that survey methodology in gauging public opinion can be substantially flawed. Chong shows that when given the opportunity to think and reason at length about a wide variety of social issues, even though people tend to respond in reference to framed messages, their policy positions stem from complex considerations, which are often affected by core ideals such as rights and liberties.[7] Recent evidence suggests that the public can and does differentiate between good and bad symbolism in campaign rhetoric. For example, focus-group participants still criticized President George H.W. Bush's Iraq performance during the 1992 campaign, even immediately after seeing campaign ads with simultaneous video and audio messages meant to frame Bush's performance positively (Just et al 1996, 175).[8] Perhaps we should therefore not be surprised that even in cases of scandal such as the Clinton impeachment, the public continues to evaluate presidents based not on media messages, but on personal experience during particular presidents' tenure (Zaller 2001).

Candidates and presidents clearly do not bash under all circumstances. Despite having strategic motives for basing the bureaucracy, candidates also sometimes praise the bureaucracy, although this could also be more strategy than personal conviction.

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[6] Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) offer a review of this debate. The quoted concepts above are originally attributed to Page and Shapiro (1992) and Converse (1990).
[7] In fairness, however, Chong also shows that when given enough latitude, respondents tend to contradict their original positions.
[8] As Just et al point out, simultaneous video and audio messages usually reinforce the intended message, unlike the example cited above.

Rhetorical choices often depend on the audience. "The composition of the audience is likely to make a crucial difference both to the kind of rhetoric speakers employ and to the response," (Mendelberg and Oleske 2000, 173). Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) find that participants in public meetings on school desegregation choose rhetoric based on whether a significant portion of the audience consists of racial/ethnic minorities and whether audience members lead segregated lives (173). Presidents and candidates often display similar logic. Even champion bureaucrat-basher Ronald Reagan could complement bureaucrats at civil-service gatherings or when characterizing civilian Defense Department employees, which were essential to his fight against communism. Reagan even defended Pentagon bureaucrats "when embarrassing disclosures surfaced…revealing [what] the Defense Department had paid for, among other things, toilet seats, hammers and coffee pots," (Hubbell 1991, 245). Even in the face of a ripe bashing opportunity, which Reagan capitalized on in other cases, the President downplayed the political bombshells and instead emphasized the fact that more waste and fraud had been uncovered and corrected in military spending than had been overlooked (Hubbell 1991, 245).

Whatever the reasons for bashing the bureaucracy, our analysis demonstrates that bashing certainly matters. Indeed, even during the turbulent political environment of the 1960s and 1970s, politicians, journalists and the public largely agreed that bureaucrat-bashing could be an avenue to reform. Gormley (1989) argues that bureaucrat-bashing and trust in government was *the* central element of the massive institutional-realignment movement that occupied much of those two decades (1989, 3-4).[9] Even if bashing is only

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[9] On bureaucracy-bashing's role in institutional realignment, see also Huntington (1981) and Gormley's critique of Huntington (1989, 4, footnote 1).

"campaign rhetoric" with little permanent policy impact (i.e. proposals to abolish the Departments of Energy or Education did not succeed), bureaucrats are listening, and they report serious and negative consequences from the bashing they hear.

Bashing the Bureaucracy: Existing Scholarship

Other scholars (especially Hall 2002, Light 1999 and Hubbell 1992) provide excellent analyses of the content and history of bureaucracy-bashing. These works, and the literature discussed previously, make it surprisingly clear that bureaucrat-basing is a real, pervasive phenomenon in American society, and that the public is sensitive to these messages. Ronald Reagan's bureaucracy-bashing has received the most scholarly attention. Although the terminology sometimes varies, Reagan's use of symbolism played a major role in demonizing the bureaucracy.[10] However, Hubbell also notes that bashing was common on both sides of the 1980 Carter-Reagan campaign. Even before the campaign, Carter's 1978 Civil Service Reform Act was presented to the public largely as an easier way to motivate and fire bureaucrats (Hubbell 1992, 239). Hubbell (1992) finds that Reagan used four typologies to depict federal bureaucrats as: 1. loafers; 2. incompetent buffoons; 3. good ole boy[s]; 4.tyrant[s].[11] Although "loafers and incompetent buffoons are unlikely to do much damage to good governance beyond feeding a bit too long at the public trough," good ole boys are dangerous because many have their own policy agendas, while tyrants are worst of all because they "are likely to extend further the long hand of the federal government," (Hubbell 1992, 244).

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[10] Terry (1997) refers to the "theater metaphor" rather than "symbolism."
[11] All terms are Hubbell's own.

Regan used the loafer typology most frequently to expand his political base with his far-right core constituency (Hubbell 1992, 245). The "incompetent buffoon" typology views civil servants as fundamentally lacking in basic skills and common sense. Its symbolic power is especially powerful since most constituents live outside Washington, making in-group solidarity among Reagan's base (which was implicitly highly skilled and thoughtful) and out-group resentment of bureaucrats even easier (Hubbell 1992, 246). Although Reagan frequently used humor in his other bashing frames, he was humorless on "good-ole boy" bureaucrats, who he portrayed as the same corrupt, boss-style figures the Progressive Era attacked. Like tyrants, good ole boys should be feared because of their desire to put personal patronage ahead of the public good (Hubbell 1992, 247). Unlike the other three typologies, which were often used to criticize groups of bureaucrats or specific agencies, the tyrant typology was most often associated with broad criticisms, such as "getting government off the people's backs," (Hubbell 1992, 248).

Terry (1997) summarizes the perceived impact of Reagan's bashing: "The Reagan Administration's jihad against career civil servants caused a great deal of soul-searching within the public administration community. There was a sense of urgency….The perception was that decisive action was needed to counteract the immediate and long-term damage of Reagan's seemingly endless assault on the bureaucracy," (2).[12] Capitalizing on the dramatic effects of theatrical technique (Terry 1997, 4), Reagan and his supporters evoked emotional responses from their audiences by likening the federal

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[12] Page numbering for Terry (1997) is based on the printed version from Proquest. See the "References" section of this paper for the article's original pagination.

government to an "evil empire" (Hubbell 1990, 251). Reagan's ferocious criticism had not been seen since the machine attacks of the Progressive Era (Rosen 1983), if ever.

Hall (2002) demonstrates that Reagan-style tactics were alive and well in 1990s House of Representatives floor debate, particularly during the period surrounding the 1994-95 "Contract With America." Just as presidential bashing might be a product of lack of bureaucratic control, Congress, too, must deal with bureaucracies that often do not operate as planned.[13] Again, symbolic affect is powerful. Bureaucrat-bashing grew exponentially with Ronald Reagan and accelerated after the Republican takeover starting in the 104th Congress and the introduction of the "Contract With America." Furthermore, the negatively framed "bureaucrat" was used much more frequently between the 101st and 104th congresses than neutral- or positively framed terms such as "government worker" or "public servant" (Hall 2002, 245).[14] Ironically, the term "bureaucrat" almost always carried a negative connotation. Yet, "public servant" was always framed positively and reserved either for describing Members of Congress or deceased federal employees (Hall 2002, 246). Like Reagan, conservative members of Congress frequently bashed bureaucracy as blanket "diabribe[s] against government," and to create in-group solidarity among constituents and out-group resentment of bureaucrats (Hall 2002, 246-247).

Finally, Paul Light (1999) notes that modern campaign bashing reveals distinct historical patterns. Using exhaustive Annenberg School for Communication campaign-archive data, Light identifies three bashing milestones: the 1960, 1980 and 1992

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[13] This concept is similar to Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) disconnect between policy intent and policy implementation. For a discussion of how bureaucratic discretion affects Congress, see for example, Balla (2000), Campbell (1998) and McCubbins, Noll and Weingast (1987).
[14] See especially Hall's Table 1.

campaigns (85). From this perspective, the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon campaign is a baseline, in which bureaucracy was not a major campaign issue, and in which Nixon actually expressed a strong belief in bureaucratic integrity. Reagan's 1980 emphasis on "government as a bastion of fraud, waste, and abuse" marked the first turning point in campaign climate toward bureaucracy (Light 1999, 87). The second occurred in 1992, when Bill Clinton seized an opportunity to reposition the Democratic Party away from its popular image as champions of big government. Reform Party candidate Ross Perot also attacked government and bureaucrats in 1992, winning 19 percent of the vote. "What is perhaps more surprising is how easily [Clinton] put the Bush campaign on the defensive….Bush featured the arrogant bureaucrat in speech after speech," repeatedly tying bureaucracy to Democrats from Jimmy Carter through Bill Clinton (Light 1999, 89). Clinton responded by accepting the Democrats' traditional alliance with big government and vowing to reform bureaucracy in meaningful ways for ordinary Americans. "'I want a government that works to spur growth, create jobs, increase incomes; a streamlined government that still plays a central role, because in every advanced country in the world, whether governed by conservatives or liberals, there is an aggressive role for a government working to promote private sector economic growth.'"[15] Bush had difficulty responding, as did Dole four years later (Light 1999, 90). The congressional Republican candidates launched the "Contract With America" using the Perot government-bashing theme, winning the House and Senate in the 1994 election.

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[15] Clinton quoted in Light (1999, 90) from a September 25, 1992 campaign speech at the University of Connecticut.

Methodology

We assess bureaucrat reactions to bashing through data from four focus groups conducted by American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies in July 2000 (a field session held in Denver), October 2000 (a session held at the National Academy for Public Administration in Washington), November 2001 (held at the Brookings Institution in Washington) and a December 2001 session (described below). All sessions included current or former members of the Senior Executive Service or other high-level federal managers.[16] The data we present here focuses mainly on the December 2001 session. During that session, American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, in cooperation with the SEAquels organization of retired Senior Executive Service officers, convened a focus group of approximately 20 retired federal executives for a two-hour discussion in Washington. Prof. James A. Thurber, director of the Center, and A. Lee Fritschler, a former U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education, served as moderators. The sessions were components of the Improving Campaign Conduct project, sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts.[17] Focus-group participants were promised and guaranteed confidentiality in an effort to ensure open discussion and reduce risk of personal harm from publication (Sieber 1992).[18]

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[16] Unlike the findings revealed in the Washington sessions, the Denver field session revealed little or no impact from campaign bureaucrat-bashing.

[17] To learn more about the Improving Campaign Conduct project, readers may visit http://www.american.edu/campaignconduct.

[18] The session was tape recorded and transcribed to preserve accuracy and emotion (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Edin 1991). The moderators kept the discussion structured yet free-flowing, allowing participants to bring up important insights and interact among themselves (Gamson 1992). The wide variety of federal experience in the group and among the moderators also facilitated a particularly conversational tone (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 130-131; Adler and Adler 1987). In addition, using practitioners as data sources minimizes the need to validate their positions (especially since they deal primarily with personal reactions rather than objective facts) (Hammerseley 1992). The focus-group method also offers the advantage of

Findings: Bureaucrats' Reaction to Bashing

The results are striking. Retired "SESers" unanimously believe that bureaucracy-bashing is a severe problem that carries major consequences for personnel and government. Participants directly attribute anti-bureaucratic sentiment among politicians, political appointees and the public to campaign bashing. Furthermore, former SESers carry deep emotional scars from bashing. Many report that Reagan-era bashing constituted some of the most demoralizing and frustrating experiences of their careers. Participants also feel that the animosity bashing creates between political appointees (who supervise career bureaucrats) and "careerists" wastes valuable learning and policymaking opportunities. In particular, retired SESers believe that bashing negatively affects recruiting and retaining high-quality career bureaucrats and low-level political appointees. They also argue that bashing negatively affects training. However, some participants recognize that "bashing" may in fact be a product of new administrations' legitimate policy agendas.

Several prominent themes emerge from the focus group. Retired senior federal managers perceive several other major consequences of bureaucracy-bashing. First,

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facilitating a large amount of data-gathering in a relatively short time (Morgan 1997). All had spent the bulk or all of their careers in government, usually working in several agencies and positions during their tenure. In all, approximately 25 different agencies were represented. Tenure ranged from about 25 years to more than 50, with most participants citing approximately 35 years of federal service. Combined participant tenure represented more than 450 years of federal service. All participants had retired from the federal government, although some still maintained consulting positions or worked in related fields. Demographics such as age, race, etc. were not solicited. Participant selection raises bias concerns since these individuals represent a particularly active group of former executives, who presumably look back at their time in government positively. In addition, although demographics were not solicited, the group was overwhelmingly white and male. Although this demographic may not be representative of the entire federal government workforce, it is on par with the SES, particularly given the fact that many participants retired five years ago or more. However, these limitations do not diminish the rich insight and emotion participants provide.

bashing creates problems for: 1. employee morale; 2. employee recruitment; 3. employee training. Interestingly, respondents believe that bashing creates recruitment and retention problems not only for the front-line bureaucrats, but also for lower-level political appointees. SESers believe that these problems are related to the "negative aura" surrounding public-opinion on bureaucracy, which bashing creates. Some respondents feel strongly that the media reinforces bashing. Some also report that bashing diminishes "careerists'" [19] influence, citing examples of more and more political appointees being put between the bureaucracy and agency heads. Finally, many retired SESers have difficulty separating the consequences of bashing from those of genuine policy differences ushered in by new administrations. However, respondents do recognize that the distinction exists.

Symbolic Power: Bashing's Lasting Psychological Impact

The most striking finding in the data is how strongly retired SESers feel about bashing. They exhibit no doubt that bashing exists and has been a pervasive problem since the Carter Administration. However, like much of the literature reviewed above, participants generally exhibit extreme disdain for individual political appointees they associate with Reagan-era bashing. They are particularly critical about bureaucrat-bashing carrying over into civil-service supervision (i.e. by political appointees managing the bureaucracy), which they attribute largely to Regan-era U.S. Office of Personnel Management Director Donald Devine.[20]

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[19] Many focus-group participants refer to career bureaucrats (non-political appointees) as "careerists."
[20] These findings are consistent with Rosen's (1986) suggestion that Devine eventually retired due to congressional criticisms of his own bureaucracy-bashing.

Disdain for Reagan-era bashing at times appears almost fanatical, as if the focus group offered some long-sought-after opportunity to be heard and report on the alleged evils of the Reagan administration. For example, a male participant eagerly related the story of a Regan-era career bureaucrat who retired following a scandal. According to the participant, when career employees informed top political appointees that the individual could not be retroactively fired because doing so was unconstitutional, a top political appointee allegedly replied: "I don't care about that. The Reagan administration was elected to get rid of the Constitution!" (transcript, 26).[21] The quote is certainly an emotional one, and may well be true. However, without independent verification, we should view it with a healthy dose of skepticism for now.

Nonetheless, the former SESer's elaboration on how the statement affected career morale offers a powerful example of bureaucrat response to bashing: "I had a lot of high career people in that room [when the alleged statement was made] and that word went through the whole agency. I didn't tell them to keep quiet; they went and pushed it through the whole agency. 'Yeah! The Reagan Administration was elected to get rid of the Constitution,'" (transcript, 26). The account suggests that career bureaucrats do sometimes fight back against bashing. As Heclo (1977) notes, doing so might not be the most effective strategy. However, that debate is beyond this paper's boundaries.

Particularly with respect to the Reagan administration, retired SESers believe that at least some political appointees' anti-bureaucracy attitudes are directly tied to campaign rhetoric. However, some participants also report that extreme attitudes mellow over time,

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[21] We will cite all focus-group transcript references in this format. The numbers are transcript page numbers.

and that some firebrand political appointees eventually came to embrace career

bureaucrats. A male respondent said of Reagan-era appointees:

> I think a lot of the young people who came in as appointees and at the sub-cabinet-level jobs espoused [campaign-like anti-bureaucracy rhetoric] or thought they had to espouse that because of the manner in which the campaign was conducted. I would hasten to add that once they learned, and the learning curve varied, but once they became aware that [they would] have to deal with [career bureaucrats], things became very productive in the second Reagan administration, but it took a while.[22]

However, other participants report instances of political appointees demanding personal

loyalty from career bureaucrats. Reagan-era political appointees who did forge positive

relations with career SESers were allegedly forced out because they had "gotten in bed

with the careerists," (transcript, 27).

Career SESers most often report feeling demoralized from bashing and anguish

over wasted policymaking opportunities. Interestingly, the Reagan administration still

plays a major role in retired SESers' feelings. Even moderate participants report that

Reagan-era bashing constitutes some of the most vivid and demoralizing experiences of

their careers. One subject described the first meeting between high-level careerists and

new Reagan political appointees at a U.S. Department of Defense agency:

> [O]n one side of the room, clustered as if they were hunkered down against the Indians, were all the political appointees, not talking with any of us dirty careerists, who were sort of milling around the other side of the room waiting for the meeting to convene. And that was very disconcerting. It was the first time I ever saw a physical separation, at that level, of high-level people who were supposed to be setting policy for a government agency. And my impression from that was, what a waste. Because it took a long while for that thaw to take place with the understanding of these people who came in from all parts of our society with one concept [not trusting career bureaucrats]. It seemed to me that the federal-government careerists were suspect because they were there in a prior administration, and that they couldn't be trusted. And as a

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[22] Transcript, 22.

consequence, it screwed up [the political appointees'] learning curve. It made it much more difficult for them to be effective in the roughly 18 months that they would traditionally serve in a job like that.[23]

To summarize, retired SESers perceive a potent "us versus them" mentality exhibited by political appointees toward career bureaucrats. Participants believe that this mentality is directly related to campaign bashing. Although they are particularly critical of Reagan-era bashing and appointees, participants report similar phenomena in other administrations. Retired SESers are deeply troubled by what they perceive as overzealous politicization of bureaucrat supervision, which they believe stems directly from bashing. Although not discussed above, at least one subject reports that the Clinton Administration routinely reassigned SESers who disagreed with the Administration's policy positions.

Playing Piano in a Whorehouse

There is no doubt that the media play a major bashing role, since the media transmit campaign messages to the public. However, some participants also perceive an independent bashing role for the media, especially through derogatory sound bites and regular investigative series on government waste, such as NBC's "The Fleecing of America," (transcript, 66). Although some of these stories expose legitimate bureaucratic shortcomings, some participants feel that the media overplays bureaucracy's negative side. According to a male subject:

[T]here are a lot of incidents…where government shoots itself in the foot. [I]t's a little bit like the Rodney King incident, where it was terrible what happened, but [the media] played it so many times you kind of thought it happened to [King] 100 times. Well, you take these incidents that the

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[23] Transcript, 20-21.

government does and you play them across 30 newspapers and 27 different TV stations and all of a sudden [the public thinks] there's nothing but a lot of crooks in Washington. Well, there are some, but not all. The media doesn't help.[24]

Partly because of media reinforcement, retired SESers firmly believe that bashing tarnishes public opinion about the bureaucracy and government. SESers argue that this negative image not only affects morale, as described above, but also hinders recruitment, retention and training. Even participants who worked in technical specialties (i.e. the IRS or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission) and report being relatively insulated from bashing[25] still express concern over telling friends they worked for government. One former technical specialist said, "[W]hile we weren't that much affected directly by [bashing], you really felt uneasy about being federal employees. People would look at you as if you had cancer," (transcript, 43). Another long-time federal employee summed up this sentiment more colorfully: "[B]ashing makes [federal employees] like to say, you know, 'Don't tell my mother I'm working for the federal government. She thinks I'm playing piano in a whorehouse,'" (transcript, 37).

Retired SESers believe that this sentiment fosters problems in recruiting and retention. Surprisingly, however, participants perceive these difficulties for both front-line bureaucratic recruitment and lower-level political-appointee recruitment. Several participants believe that bashing leads to pay disparities between the public and private sectors, or even between the civilian and military sectors, which hinders recruiting and retaining high-quality employees (i.e. transcript, 25). According to a former federal lawyer:

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[24] Transcript, 30.

> I think part of the difficulty is in keeping federal pay up to where it ought to be because of this constant bashing in campaign politics. So we can't compete anymore. When a first-year out of law school is supposed to work for a $125,000 a year—now the federal government is never going to pay a first-year employee 125,000, but we used to get the cream of the crop. And people would just beat our doors down to try to get a job at the [agency name], but we're not competitive anymore in salary.[26]

Retired SESers also believe that bashing hinders recruitment and retention of competent political appointees. According to one subject:

> The negative campaigning impacts the quality of the political appointees. The administration comes in, tries to get people to leave the private sector to come to work, and you can get the Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of State, but when you start getting down to the lower levels, the answer is, 'Do I want to come in to manage [a bunch] of old clunks, as have been described in the campaign rhetoric?' So, what you get are second- and third- and fourth-choice political appointees who are incompetent, or totally believe everything they heard in the campaign. And that creates real problems for the careerists because they're dealing with people who really aren't so sharp.[27]

Other respondents say that frustration with bashing played a major role in their retirement decisions. One subject reports that, "One of the reasons that I retired in 1996 was that I was so disgusted with the actions that the Congress elected in '94 was taking, that I was happy to resign and go work for a congressional candidate," (transcript, 34).[28] However, as we discuss below, some of the sentiment former SESers attribute to bashing could, in fact, be a product of genuine policy disagreements. Finally, participants hypothesize that bashing fosters fewer investments in training, especially by lackluster

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[25] Technical specialists' isolation from heated political conflict is consistent with McCubbins, Noll and Weingast's (1987) findings with respect to Congress' hands-off oversight of technical functions.

[26] Transcript, 37.

[27] Male subject (transcript, 38).

[28] Although much of the discussion focused on presidential-campaign bashing, the line between congressional- and presidential bashing is often blurry. Participants frequently report frustration with the 104th Congress and the Republican majority's "Contract With America". Many respondents view the Contract as a congressional version of Reagan-era bashing.

political appointees. According to one former SESer, "If [political appointees] come into government and you feel you don't have confidence in your [careerist] employees, and you feel they're not worthy, then you don't have to spend money to train them," (transcript, 50).

Perception vs. Reality? Bashing and Public Policy

Campaign-based bashing is real and that bashing has important negative consequences for career civil servants. Retired SESers repeatedly say that they carry deep emotional scars from bashing, which affects morale, recruitment, training and work environment overall. We know less about how bashing directly affects public policy. Although the former-SESer focus group did not cover this topic explicitly, a few points are clear.

Bashing's greatest policy impact appears to be contextual, not programmatic. For example, participants believe that candidates bash to foster public support for broad policy objectives. However, bashing may not cite particular programs or offer a full explanation of the policymaking process. This is especially true for congressional bashing of the bureaucracy. Some former SESers say they feel particularly demonized by congressional bashing that blames agencies for congressional policy mandates, which participants attribute to underhandedness or ignorance. For example:

> I've heard a congressional candidate say, 'I'm going to deal with the IRS. [The people are] paying too many taxes.' Well, that isn't fair. See, that's not an issue of judgment; that's just absolute ignorance on the part of the person campaigning, or mean-spiritedness, because the IRS doesn't set the rates. The Congress sets the rates. [Candidates will] say, 'I'm going to bring Interior to heel; those little damn fishes [aren't] worth my development!' The Congress protects the fishes, not the Interior. And I think we get so much of [these types of campaign attacks that are]

> completely oblivious [to policymaking structures], or maybe it just isn't convenient to recognize how much Congress sets this agenda and sets these rules and sets these requirements and to instead blame the bureaucracy for that. And that's so dispiriting to the [career bureaucrats], the IRS people who know they don't set the rates, and yet they're blamed for setting the rates and that's a real bad-news situation.[29]

Another focus-group participant reports that military bashing was used during the Cold War to rally public and congressional support for increased defense funding.

> The morale of the military services was degraded very heavily by the [negative] pronouncements in the campaigns. We had a missile gap and this kind of gap, which would point to incompetent people running the system, when in fact, all it was was a political ploy to say, 'We can bring the services up to where they should be.' [This is] very similar to what George W. [Bush]…has done in his election.[30]

Retired SESers perceive fewer policy consequences from congressional bashing than from presidential bashing. However, they did not elaborate on this point. Nonetheless, perhaps the committee system's emphasis on continued funding for pet projects (i.e. Fenno 1973) prevents congressional bashing from having a drastic impact on agency funding. However, such a finding would be inconsistent with participants' perception that bashing does have a tangible impact in other areas, such as training budgets. Such a finding would also beg the question why the committee process doesn't stop presidential bashing that fosters eliminating federal jobs and programs (as the reinventing-government movement did). This is definitely an area that deserves further research.

The preceding paragraph illustrates an important point: retired SESers' perceptions about bashing and its consequences do not necessarily match reality. SESers' perceptions are certainly real for them. Bashing, and the people associated with

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[29] Transcript, 56.

it, evoke powerful, emotion-laden symbols for bureaucrats, just as Sears and the other authors reviewed above suggest it should. Gaining a full picture of "reality" would require input from political appointees, the media, the public and other players. Even with the current data, however, we should consider that what retired SESers perceive as bashing might be a new administration's way of pursuing a genuine policy agenda.

For example, one participant strongly believes that Reagan-Administration bashing fostered elimination of an important quasi-government program. "When Reagan came in, people from [agency name] and [industry name] and so on, had reached the appointees, and the first thing they did when they came in was go after that little unit that had been established to handle regulatory authority, a four-person unit, and they abolished it," (transcript, 23). This former SESer views the elimination as a consequence of overzealous bashing with drastic personal ramifications for career bureaucrats. However, even if one disagrees with the Reagan agenda, reducing government regulation was one of the Administration's top policy priorities. Even if participants disagree with the means, there can be little doubt that at least some bashing has policy ends. Although this point received a lot of attention during the focus group, few concrete findings emerge. On one hand, given the ferocity with which some participants view the Reagan Administration, it is entirely possible that some participants are disgruntled about their time in government, disappointed or angry that one administration or another reversed bureaucrats' cherished policy priorities, not to mention any number of similar grievances. Although all participants clearly believe bashing is a real problem, some might, in fact, overzealously attribute disagreeable policy agendas or career setbacks to bashing.

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[30] Transcript, 24.

However, retired SESers' strong reactions to bashing do not result simply from traditional American disdain for one's boss. For example, even participants who criticize the Clinton Administration's campaign bashing praise some of the Administration's reinventing-government efforts that empowered bureaucrats and solicited their input (transcript, 28-29). Participants offer similar praise for progressive Reagan appointees (transcript, 27). In addition, several participants volunteer that complaints about bashing may take root in legitimate policy agendas (i.e. transcript, 30). For example, after several former SESers tied deregulation to Reagan-era bashing, one subject responded, "I understood [the moderators'] question [as] more of what affect does campaign bashing have on the agencies, whereas a lot of the remarks that I've heard really have a lot more to do with the political philosophy brought to the agency by the appointees, which to me, is a different thing," (transcript, 36). Some focus-group participants also believe bashing and policy can work in tandem. For example:

> When the Reagan Administration came and [OPM Director] Don Devine [came] in, it soon became apparent that there were policy differences. But, Don Devine didn't want anybody to interfere and he didn't trust all of these executives—careerists—to be making input. So, I think it was a combination of genuine policy differences—[the Reagan Administration] wanted to go in different directions. I can respect that, but [not] the manner in which they did it [through bashing].[31]

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous scholarship (i.e. Hubbell 1991; Light 1999; Hall 2002) demonstrates that bureaucracy-bashing is a real phenomena and that it matters for public opinion (i.e. Sears 2001). This analysis demonstrates that bureaucracy-bashing matters for career bureaucrats and government. We began with a diverse review of existing scholarship on

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[31] Transcript, 44.

bashing, public administration, the presidency, campaigns and elections, symbolic politics and public opinion. Symbolic politics are important not only for the bashing symbols they create, but also for the public-opinion response they evoke toward, and from, career bureaucrats.

Second, we explored how retired SESers perceive bashing and its consequences. Participants unanimously believe that pervasive bashing fosters substantial problems for government and its employees. They report that bashing is not only demoralizing, but also that it creates great animosity between "careerists" and the political appointees overseeing their work. Retired SESers believe there is a direct connection between campaign bashing and recruitment, retention and training difficulties for both career bureaucrats and low-level political appointees. In some cases, they argue that the media contributes to negative public opinion toward bureaucracy. Participants are particularly critical of Reagan-era bashing and of congressional bashing that blames bureaucrats for congressional policy decisions. The relationship between bashing and public policy is less clear. Although some retired SESers argue that bashing fosters reckless public policy, "bashing" may in fact be a product of legitimate policy agendas.

Several important observations and questions are suggested beyond our analysis. For example, the literature (Hubbell 1991; Rosen 1983) suggests that Reagan-era bashing was the most vicious of the last 100 years. Similarly, retired SESers display extreme hostility toward Reagan-era bashing and its personnel aftermath (i.e. cutbacks and morale), which they often associate with specific political appointees. However, Fishel (1985) argues that broad, Reagan-style bureaucratic condemnations are "programmatically meaningless," and hypothesizes that Reagan-era bashing had fewer

policy consequences than more recent bashing. This suggests that retired SESers might display the most animosity toward bashing that had the least impact on tangible government outputs. Although the Reagan Administration implemented major policy changes compared to Carter policies, there is a greater likelihood that the Clinton Administration's cut of more than 250,000 federal jobs affected far more bureaucrats on a personal level. Or did it? Ironically, the focus-group data suggests that federal bureaucrats display deeper emotional scars from what they perceive as "mean-spirited," disrespectful, programmatically meaningless Reagan-era bashing than the Clinton Administration's programmatic cuts and reorganization that directly threatened federal jobs.

There are important lesions for future candidates, presidents and political appointees from our analysis. First, employees appear to remain loyal to Wilson's (1887) politics-administration dichotomy, despite the prolonged scholarly attempt to kill the idea. They understand and accept that new administrations have new policy priorities which may not mesh with bureaucrats' own policy priorities. In keeping with Wilson's vision of neutral competence, career SESers are eager to serve the public and help new administrations succeed—provided that new administrations value bureaucrats' expertise and experience, and solicit their input in respectful, meaningful ways. Political appointees and career bureaucrats could learn a lot from each other—and serve the public better—if bureaucracy-bashing created fewer communication and trust barriers. However, the data also reveal almost-fanatical disdain for candidates and political appointees who retired SESers believe bash overzealously.

Given the rally around public service after September 11, 2001, we might hope that bashing would decline. Unfortunately, this seems unlikely in the long term. Although some retired SESers believe that September 11th will ingrain public support for the bureaucracy, others are more pragmatic. Indeed, history sides with pragmatism. As Hall (2002) demonstrates, the Oklahoma City bombing—a direct attack on federal bureaucrats—did little to change bashing in Congress. Although members of Congress used different vocabulary immediately following the bombing, bashing remained a potent force.

Critics might challenge our prediction, arguing that public employees such as firefighters and police officers have become heroes in the September 11th aftermath. This is true. However, we offer two responses. First, America's public memory tends to be short, and public opinion is easily manipulated, as the literature review demonstrates. The 2002 elections also saw a return of the usual anti-government rhetoric that modern campaigns so often embrace. Second, police officers and firefighters are the kind of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) our society idolizes anyway. The bureaucrats who get bashed usually do not walk beats and usually do not wear uniforms. Symbolic campaign appeals teach most Americans that they have little in common with bureaucrats, and the bureaucrats lack common sense. Bureaucrats are nameless and faceless to most Americans, which makes dehumanization and degradation even easier (Adams and Balfour 1998). Until the politicians who shape public opinion start characterizing bureaucrats, bureaucracy and government more positively as public servants, bashing and its negative consequences will continue.

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