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Four Essays by Edward C. Banfield, Gustave H. Shubert,  
Werner J. Dannhauser, and Herbert J. Storing;  
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POLICY SCIENCE AS METAPHYSICAL MADNESS

by Edward C. Banfield

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A statesman differs from a professor in a university; the latter has only the general view of society; the former, the statesman, has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas, and to take into his consideration. Circumstances are infinite, are infinitely combined, are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous, but stark mad--dat operam ut cum ratione insaniat--he is metaphysically mad.  
--Edmund Burke, Speech on the Petition of the Unitarians

In the past dozen years or so policy-oriented social science research and analysis has become a growth industry in the United States. This has occurred in response to demand created by the spate of social welfare programs initiated by the Great Society and, for the most part, continued and expanded by the later administrations. Whereas in 1965 Federal agencies spent about \$235 million on applied social science research, in 1975 they spent almost \$1 billion. Of the approximately \$7.4 billion spent in these eleven years about two-thirds was under contract.<sup>1</sup> This brought into being several large independent research bodies, some quasi-public and others private, and it greatly increased the amount of university-based policy-oriented social research and the supply of social scientists. (According to the 1970 Census, the number of social scientists increased by 163 percent in the 1960's; this was larger than the increase

of any other major occupational group and nearly three times that of professional and technical workers as a whole.)

The Federal agencies' enthusiasm for policy-oriented research quickly communicated itself to the colleges and universities. They now take a lively interest in whatever may plausibly have the word "policy" attached to it.<sup>2</sup> Almost all of the major universities have established schools to give graduate training in what is now called "policy science" and these have already turned out hundreds of Ph.D.'s. To be sure, not many of the graduates occupy high posts in government (as long ago as 1970, however, the Civil Service Commission listed 563 "senior executive civil servants associated with program analysis"),<sup>3</sup> but it is reasonable to expect that within a decade or two they will dominate the upper echelons of the Federal and state career services as well as those of some of the large cities.

The penetration of policy science into the executive branch has led to, or at any rate been paralleled by, a comparable penetration into the legislative branch. Congress now employs some 28,000 professionals, a significant and increasing proportion of whom are trained to do policy-related social science research or analysis. Some of these are employed by individual members and others by committee staffs;

most, however, are in one or another of several recently established bodies: the Congressional Research Service (1970), the Office of Technology Assessment (1972), the General Accounting Office's division for program evaluation (1974), and the Congressional Budget Office (1974). There is now serious talk of creating an additional body--an "Institute for Congress"--to be privately funded at first and staffed by professionals "whose stature and ability would earn the deference of the members."<sup>4</sup>

The scale and pace of these developments suggest that the American governmental system may be undergoing profound change. As "policy scientists" come to dominate the bureaucracy, not only its decision-making procedures but its style and ethos will change. In addition, those policy-makers--"politicians"--who are good at taking circumstances into account (they are "statesmen" only if they also take a general view of society) will find the bureaucracy more resistant than ever to control: policy science may make it a Fourth Branch, almost independent of the others. If the analytical techniques produced and propagated from the universities supercede the skills of the politician and (on the rare but all-important occasions when it is manifested) the wisdom of the statesman, the successful working of the political system will be very gravely jeopardized.

## II

From a near perspective the sudden growth of the policy sciences appears as a by-product of the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty. In the 1960's these brought hundreds of new governmental agencies into existence--all of course providing new job opportunities--and stirred the imaginations of those who believed that government, if only it tried hard enough, could cure the various ills of the society.

Actually there has long been a symbiotic relationship between social science and social reform. In the 1880's, Frederick Winslow Taylor spread the gospel of "scientific management" to businessmen and, a little later, schools of business developed budgetary methods. Late in the century, chairs in social science were established, and by 1920 all self-respecting universities had social science departments. By then it was widely believed that government no less than business should--and therefore could--be expertly run (the city manager movement got underway in 1914); naturally the social scientists in the universities were looked to as a principal source of expertise for the organization and management of government and thus of society generally.

At the beginning of the century, according to historian Barry D. Karl, there developed a methodology of social re-

form consisting of variations upon three basic steps: first a core group of specialists and influentials, coming together perhaps at a meeting of a professional group, would define a needed social reform or "problem"; then a conference would be called to broaden the coalition by bringing in journalists, philanthropists, and political leaders; and, finally, a survey would be made and a document produced "containing all the information and interpretation on which reasonable men, presumably in government, would base programs for reform."<sup>5</sup>

This was the method used in 1929 when President Herbert Hoover appointed his Research Committee on Social Trends whose 1,200-page report, Karl tells us, established the principles that "social" behavior came within the purview of the national government, that "science" could do better at framing programs of reform than could legislators or citizens, and that "social welfare" was as fit a subject for national debate as, say, currency reform or the tariff.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1960's this method was used again and these principles were further extended in order to bring the social science establishment and the Great Society into mutually advantageous relations. This time the specialists and their allies acted through that most prestigious of professional associations, the National Academy of Sciences. A

report issued under its aegis in 1968 defined the view that reasonable men should take toward the claims of the social scientists to be brought into the policy-forming process:

The federal government confronts increasingly complex problems in foreign affairs, defense strategy and management, urban reconstruction, civil rights, economic growth and stability, public health, social welfare, and education and training. The decisions and actions taken by the President, the Congress, and the executive departments and agencies must be based on valid social and economic information and involve a high degree of judgment about human behavior. The knowledge and methods of the behavioral sciences, devoted as they are to an understanding of human behavior and social institutions, should be applied as effectively as possible to the programs and policy processes of the federal government. Finally, the behavioral sciences, like the physical and biological sciences, require financial support from the federal government to continue to develop that knowledge and those methods that can lead to greater understanding of the basic processes of individual and group behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Although the report was remarkably adroit in the ambiguity, even confusion, of its wording, it succeeded in conveying the impression that social science had much to contribute to the making of sound policy. Its spirit, although not its letter, reflected the "social science utopianism" which Karl says, was espoused by Hoover "to be a revolution against politics, committed to the rational, unemotional

building of a new, scientific society."<sup>8</sup>

Policy science, in this perspective, appears as one in a long series of efforts by the Progressive Movement and its heirs to change the character of the American political system--to transfer power from the corrupt, the ignorant, and the self-serving to the virtuous, the educated, and the public-spirited, and to enhance the capacity of the executive to make and carry out internally-consistent, comprehensive plans for implementing the public interest. These were the motives that inspired the Pendleton Act of 1881, establishing a civil service system based on the merit principle; the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921; the President's Committee on Administrative Management in 1937 and the two Hoover Commissions in 1949 and 1955; and the Council of Economic Advisers in 1946. They were the motives that inspired proposals to replace politicians with experts in legislatures and to do away with political parties (ideas favored by, among others, Herbert Croly in his Progressive Democracy, 1914) and, when these proved utopian, to lesser reforms that were steps in the same general direction--for example, changes in the organization and practices of Congress to make it an assembly of statesmen deliberating upon the great issues instead of one of politicians arranging deals and running errands, and also changes to require

the political parties to "bring forth programs to which they commit themselves" (the quoted words are from the 1950 report of a committee of the American Political Science Association, Toward a More Responsible Party System).

Today's proponents of policy science are not as naively antipolitical as were the reformers of a generation or two ago. They do not think of themselves as engaged in a "revolution against politics." The old bias is still there, however. Witness the intention to provide Congress with a staff of professionals who will earn the deference of members. (Why not just their respect?) Now and then distaste for politicians and their ways is made explicit, as, for example, when an economist, after finding that the structure of Congress falls "enormously short" of what is required for an "ideal" legislative process, takes some comfort in developments to which the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 may give rise: "With a well-trained, nonpartisan professional staff in both the budget committees and the Budget Office, it will be possible to reduce congressional reliance on the hearings process with its domination by special interests and the executive branch."

### III

The persistent efforts of reformers to do away with politics and to put social science and other expertise in