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## **Rejoinder to Keller and Spicer**

**Marcia Lynn Whicker, Ruth Ann Strickland and Dorothy Olshfski**

### **ABSTRACT**

The article presents the authors' response to a critique of an article that levied several criticisms arguing for stronger links between political science and public administration. In their commentary on our article, Keller and Spicer levied four criticisms arguing for stronger links between political science and public administration. The approaches Keller and Spicer do espouse are not contradictory with viewing government as a system, and, indeed, complement such a view. Nothing inherent in a systems framework contends that administrators cannot take an activist role, as Carl Friedrich (1940), George Frederickson (1971), and John Rohr (1986) argue they should, for arguing that government converts inputs into policy outputs does not necessarily specify the role of public administrators in that conversion. Another old but still useful concept in political science--that of the iron triangle--sees bureaucrats as activist and astutely forming a political coalition with members of key subcommittees in the U.S. Congress as well as relevant interest groups to garner more resources for their agency and its mission.

### **ARTICLE**

In their commentary on our article, Keller and Spicer levied four criticisms arguing for stronger links between political science and public administration [*PAR*, Nov/Dec 1993]. They said that we have (1) an old fashioned "instrumental" view of both fields that views government as a conversion process, (2) veered toward "technism" with an over-emphasis on positivism and a de-emphasis on other kinds of knowledge, (3) ignored the role of values in public administration, and (4) too broadly construed political science to include public choice, agency theory, and organization theory. We respond.

#### ***1. Government as a conversion process.***

We are critiqued for using David Easton's systems notion (1953) that views politics as a system, with government playing an integral conversion role within it. That this view of politics and government is old, dating from the fifties, does not make it old-fashioned. Some old things, including conceptual frameworks, stand the test of time and become classics, guiding further

inquiry in both subtle and nonsubtle ways. Critics who argue that an existing paradigm is truly outdated must at least acknowledge the need for a replacement, and ideally present one. But no such competing paradigm is presented, or even mentioned.

The approaches Keller and Spicer do espouse are not contradictor)' with viewing government as a system, and, indeed, complement such a view. Nothing inherent in a systems framework contends that administrators cannot take an activist role, as Carl Friedrich (1940), George Frederickson (1971), and John Rohr (1986) argue they should, for arguing that government converts inputs into policy outputs does not necessarily specify the role of public administrators in that conversion. Another old but still useful concept in political science—that of *the iron triangle*—sees bureaucrats as activist and astutely forming a political coalition with members of key subcommittees in Congress as well as relevant interest groups to garner more resources for their agency and its mission.

Principal agent theory, which Keller and Spicer embrace, examines some very specific notions about the power of Congress to check bureaucrats in that conversion process: Do bureaucrats act as agents, and if so, of whom? Is Congress the principal and what control does Congress exert over bureaucrats' behavior? These questions flesh out systems theory, examining a key interaction within the political system, rather than contradict it by espousing a new paradigm. Indeed, implicit in principal agent theory, not systems theory, is the passive agent role for bureaucrats responding external principals that so concerns Keller and Spicer.

Further, they, not we, make the analogy that this conversion of private sector economic resources into public goods and services resembles an *efficient engine*. The question of mechanistic efficiency is separate from a framework that acknowledges one of the most important flows of inputs and outputs in the economy, and notes that the flow is *political* as well as economic. The inability to measure and prove efficiency at the organizational level, because of the inability to place a legitimate dollar value on government outputs from their nature as public goods, is the bane of present bureaucrats, leaving them open to antigovernment public sentiments, negative caricatures of public employees, and meat-cleaver approaches to funding issues. If this aspect of Keller and Spicer's criticism were only true, the life of virtually every public employee would be much improved. And in making the analogy to an engine, we attribute a major role—hardly passivity and neutrality—to the bureaucracy, precisely the opposite of what Keller and Spicer imply we do.

## ***2. Ignoring nonpositivist forms of knowledge.***

We did argue for more rigorous quantitative training and contended that political science historically has offered that to a greater extent than public administration. Yet rigorous quantitative training is not the same thing as positivism and empirical technique<sup>^</sup>: nor did we say it was. Historically, rigorous quantitative methods came first to positivism within political science, but now the field is embracing more rigorous theory building techniques as well, especially set theory mathematics, linear and matrix algebra, calculus, and the mathematics of inequalities in applications of game theory and public choice to political phenomena.

Subfields within political science have also on occasion used simulations, which are rigorous and quantitative, and may or may not be empirical (see Stoll, 1983; Sigelman and Dometrius, 1986; Cohen, 1984; and Whicker and Mauet, 1983). Perhaps we should have been clearer: Our argument for more rigorous quantitative training provided within political science includes rigorous theory building approaches as well as statistical empirical techniques.

As for the role of case studies, we do not deny their contributions, especially in teaching, but rather we contend that case studies alone do not a theory make, or even a framework. Case studies have the greatest impact upon a field in it.'; infancy, when paradigms are being sought; or occasionally later in the development of a field, when contradictions so theory show its weaknesses. Had, for example, someone written an important case study of the conflicts between the Soviet Union and The People's Republic of China in the 1950s, our "domino theory" of foreign relations and the assumption of monolithic communism that it was built upon might have crumbled in time to prevent U.S. escalation in Vietnam. But such a case study might have been written and ignored, precisely because it was a case study and therefore subject to tor. Case studies have a role in science, but as the science becomes developmentally mature, the role shrinks from a leading one to a bit part.

### ***3. Ignoring values in public administration.***

No scholar is immune from the influence of his or her value system, nor would the world necessarily be better off if that were the case. But, simplifying, values can have two different impacts: (1) they can shape *how one interprets data., events, outcomes, and facts, the methodology of science;* and (2) they can define *what are appropriate areas of inquiry—the substance of science.* We argue for minimizing the former, but acknowledge that even rigorous quantitative techniques only go so far toward this end. Two scholars, however, one liberal and one conservative (or any other salient distinction), both viewing the same set of events and outcomes, should agree on a description of those events. If they do not, due to incompatible frameworks, they should at least be aware that their differences in description arise as much from their own cognitive approaches as from the events themselves, and how their frameworks produce disagreement.

Nowhere, however, do we contend that values should not help define the substance of Science. In fact, we argue the reverse: that the values embraced as "dependent variables" within political science—power, justice, conflict management and reduction, and redistributive policies—are legitimate and useful values to guide scholarly inquiry within public administration.

### ***4. Including public choice, agency theory, and, organization theory in political science.***

Perhaps Keller and Spicer have a legitimate bone to pick with us here by noting that we have claimed political science embraces public choice, agency theory, and organization theory, when these fields were grounded in economics, sociology, and psychology. But it is a small bone, and we are glad they pick at it with appropriate levity. .After all, a *political* figure, John E

Kennedy, noted success has many fathers while failure is an orphan, so for political science to claim these areas bespeaks their success. An even older writer and observer of political events, Aristotle, did claim that the study of politics is the queen of the sciences. But in the free-wheeling interdisciplinary futuristic academy, perhaps where ideas are generated will be less important than who does what, where, why, and how with them—the guts of what politics is all about.

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