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TRUST AND THE PUBLIC SERVICE

This lecture has been established to honor both the memory of Elliot Richardson and “the ideals of public service he embodied.” I feel honored, as well as grateful, to have been chosen as the first Elliot Richardson Lecturer. Elliot was an old colleague and friend. We served together through most of the years of the Nixon administration. Nonetheless, it was after we were out of government that I came best to know him, as we served together on various boards. It was then that I came to appreciate, if not fully to share, his attitude towards life and public service. In his later years, Elliot increasingly asserted a bold and idealistic philosophy, which could strike one as naïve. Yet, as I shall develop, it had an underlying subtlety. Let me proceed in this presentation in the following manner to touch upon Elliot Richardson and his larger implications for public service.

1. The nature of the man.
2. A disquisition on trust, as fundamental to democratic government (and derivatively to public administration).
3. The breakdown of public trust and the problems it has engendered.
4. Where we should go from here.
I. The Nature of the Man. The ancient Greeks told us that “character is destiny.” Elliot Richardson well demonstrated the validity of that statement. No doubt, Elliot is best known to the public for resignation at the time of Watergate when he was ordered to fire Archibald Cox. Yet that public image was a source of annoyance, if not frustration, to him—for he wanted above all to be remembered for what he had accomplished in government, not for what he had refused to do.

Moreover, that confrontation which led to the “Saturday Night Massacre,” was not in his view, as the prevailing image would have it, simply a case of good versus evil, or virtue versus vice. For Elliot, such things were never that simple. Life inherently was complexity. Elliot would have much preferred to find a way to reach agreement with the President who had four times appointed him to high office. But the President asked too much—for him to violate the commitments that he had entered into. And that would have been out of character.

It was not surprising (though I confess I was somewhat surprised), and definitely in character, that Elliot, whatever his private thoughts, was on the plane to fly to California for Richard Nixon’s funeral. Elliot had far more than civic courage. He had landed in Normandy on D-Day and had earned the Bronze Star, as well as a Purple Heart, for heroic service.

Perhaps his best known observation about both life and public service was “we have the defects of our qualities” or as I prefer, “the defects of our virtues.” In Elliot, a seeming defect was to place great, if not excessive trust in the good will of others. In negotiation, he would argue, one was obliged always to assume that the other party was well-motivated. No doubt, given the realities of this cruel world, that might seem
naive—as well as the basis for frequent disappointments. Nonetheless, there was a subtlety and a strategy behind this seeming naivete. If one assumed the worst about the other’s motivations, unavoidably one would encounter the worst. By contrast, if one assumed the best about his motivations, one might well bring forth the better angels of his nature. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it failed. But almost invariably it elevated the discourse.

Elliot conceived of himself as a moderate, as indicated in his classic work, *Reflections of a Radical Moderate*. But he was a moderate only by the standards of the New England tradition. He was not driven by, nor did he understand the passions of ideology that have come to dominate our public debate. That innocence was reflected in his last run for public office in the early 1980’s—for the Republican nomination for Senator in Massachusetts, which he failed to obtain. In expressing my own astonishment at his loss in the primary to a western Republican senator, I observed that the Republican party could quite easily have picked up a Senate seat with Richardson—but, in Massachusetts, only with Richardson. His response amazed me at the time. “Richardson is a figure of the Establishment,” he said with some distaste. Far better apparently to forego a Republican seat, than to acquiesce in the candidacy of one who is not a true believer. By such a standard, Elliot was certainly a moderate.

For Elliot, life was fulfilled through hard work—particularly if that meant dedicated public service. One writer has commented: “Richardson…loved government with a passion that too many politicians now reserve for reviling it.”

I recall an occasion on which Elliot, a former Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and I were in the backseat of one of those black London taxis on the way to the
Embassy Residence. One of our British escorts was in the jump seat rattling on about the doings at the embassy. Elliot leaned over to me and whispered with a laugh about the Ambassador’s role, “it is not a very demanding job.” He said it in a way that implied, while one could have fun in such a position, one could and should do far more elsewhere for the nation or for mankind.

II. I turn now to a disquisition on trust. Trust is fundamental for democratic government. Indeed, it is fundamental to all successful government, which must ultimately rest on the support of the governed. Wilhelmine Germany, for example, was barely democratic, but trust in government was, to put it mildly, high. Moreover, trust derivatively is fundamental to public administration as well. Public administration requires respect. Whenever a general trust in government disappears, public administration inevitably suffers for it loses the foundation for its public support.

As you may see, I am using Elliot Richardson as a twin metaphor in both politics and public administration. Later I shall use the loss of trust to explain the estrangement that now exists between the two. Was Elliot Richardson too trusting? Was that his “defect?” Arguably! But in his view, trust in the possibly unworthy was part of a process—to elicit better performance.

Trust is fundamental for sustaining the American polity. The ancient Greeks might well have gone further: character can be destiny in nations as in individuals. Other societies, by contrast, may be less dependent upon trust. Despite widespread and rather ostentatious cynicism, French society, for example, appears to be invigorated rather than crippled. Yet, in a recent book, Francis Fukuyama has pointed out that the success of the United States (and some others) comes from trust that extends beyond the
family and tribal entities to the larger society. Without such trust, other societies find it hard to create the broader national institutions that appear necessary to undergird political and economic success.

The French have a proverb: “God save me from him I trust.” Yet it also has been said, in a phrase attributed to Count Cavour: “The man who trusts other men will make fewer mistakes than he who distrusts them.” That perhaps is a succinct, if more cautious, phrasing of the Richardson philosophy.

Trust is indispensable in American politics, marked as it is by the separation of powers. It is the glue that binds us together. Let me illustrate with a story. It is drawn from intelligence, an inherently sensitive realm, which, due to its unavoidable secrecy, must depend heavily on trust.

In the 1980’s during the Reagan years, Eddie Boland, an old-line Democrat from Massachusetts, was chairman of the House Permanent and Select Committee on Intelligence, better known as HIPSI. Each year he would bring a bill to the House floor. The bill was relatively brief, for most of the substantive details were in a classified appendix that was not distributed. Any member could read the classified appendix in the committee room, which was secured and where the classified material remained.

During the debate on the bill, one of the members walked over to Boland and said: “Eddie, I don’t know what you have in this bill—but I know you, and if you say it’s okay, it’s okay.” That episode captures why it is that trust is indispensable to the working of our system.

Immediately thereafter, Boland turned to the committee staff and said: “You heard that. You have to make sure that every member can always say that about me.”
Boland also believed, however, that he had to be able to trust the Executive Branch. It was that which caused the confrontation between the Legislative and Executive Branches over aid to the Contras in Nicaragua—and to the three controversial Boland Amendments. During those controversies that started in the early 80’s, I myself as an ex-DCI stressed to the White House that the Central Intelligence Agency has no real constituency to support its programs. The only thing that it had to have going for it was the Congress’ confidence in the integrity of the DCI. Particularly in matters of intelligence, trust is indispensable.

In this country, trust in government has ebbed and flowed. In the 1890’s during the Populist rising, distrust was widespread in the West and South. (Mary Ellen Lease, a fiery Populist agitator, could then declaim: “farmers should raise more hell and less corn.”) That was succeeded by the Progressive Era with its deep faith that government could be effective and that public servants could provide disinterested expertise. Trust in government remains at least adequate through Woodrow Wilson’s “New Freedom,” through World War I, and through the 1920’s. But trust in government collapsed with the onset of the Depression, with its varied miseries—high unemployment, growing poverty, failing farms, etc. Yet, ironically, it was the Depression and the social programs of the New Deal that revived trust in government. It grew further during World War II and the early part of the Cold War. There was great public confidence that governments could accomplish what they set out to do. Trust in government, however, stalled when the Johnson administration overreached with its Great Society programs—the “war on poverty,” and the like. It was immediately followed by Vietnam and by Watergate, and
by a growing public skepticism—and by genuine hostility in some segments of the public.

Let me go back to the Progressive Era, for that era is the source of many of presuppositions regarding public administration. Though public administration was “of politics,” it was not political and definitely not partisan. Public servants, it was believed, could be relied upon to be professional and, in a surgical sense, disinterested. Whatever the political objectives set down by political forces, these dedicated professionals would design the fairest, most efficient mechanism to achieve those objectives.

To retain public support, the public must have confidence in the professionalism of public administration and in its detachment, within reasonable limits, from politics. Generally, this view of public administration prevailed—until the mid-1960’s. It was then that the consensus began to be shaken. There was the revolt against “authority,” the civil rights movement, Vietnam, the youth rebellion, Watergate. All these were to play a part in the breakdown of public confidence in government. All of you are familiar with the polling data measuring the decline of public trust—to which I will return momentarily.

III. The Breakdown of Public Trust and the Problems it has Created. When I speak so firmly regarding the breakdown of public trust and the problems that it has created, I am mainly speaking about the Federal level. Confidence in state and local governments seems actually to have risen—perhaps in counterpoint to the criticism and anger regarding the Feds. Manifestly, however, the Federal government or Washington has become the perennial target of late night humor. This is reflected in the Dictionary of Quotable Quotes, to which I have turned. Government is there defined as “the common
enemy.” Bureaucracy is defined as “a giant mechanism operated by pygmies.”

Washington, DC is described as “a city where an insignificant individual may trespass on a nation’s time.” Perhaps more pungently, as some of you may know, a friend in Washington has been defined as “someone who stabs you in the chest.”

The polls tell us a great deal about these changing public attitudes. In the 1950’s, in response to the question, “do you trust the government to do the right thing most of the time,” more than 70% of the public said yes. By contrast, during the late 1970’s, the percentage of the public responding yes to that same question had fallen below 30%. It has rebounded only modestly in the intervening years. Admittedly, public opinion can be quite volatile. Nonetheless, a shift of that magnitude tells us all too much regarding the current state of public trust in government.

What are the consequences of this decline in public trust? For one thing, it has meant decades of political campaigning which disparage both government and government servants, which has only recently abated. The decline of public respect for government has, quite simply, resulted in a growing tendency of qualified people to shun the Federal service. To some degree, state and local governments may have been the beneficiaries of this phenomenon. Yet, the lessened ability of the Federal service to attract appropriate people has been documented by the Volcker Commission and others. That lessened attractiveness has been strongly reinforced—at least until recently—by the fabulous opportunities in the private sector.

There has been a growth in the burdens on political appointees, so that it has become harder to persuade qualified persons to accept Federal service. There are growing and time-consuming requirements for divulging past history and financial
statements—and possibly divesting oneself of particular assets. Recent appointees have been obliged to invest many man-months and to spend tens of thousands of dollars on professional help just to fill out the necessary forms. There are also barriers to returning to one’s prior business activities—so that an administration may be forced to turn to older candidates, who need not return to their former activities. There is the potential embarrassments of the confirmation process. It takes far longer to get through the security clearance, the political vetting, and the confirmation process. Donald Rumsfeld, the new Secretary of Defense, could say that he was “all alone” for an extended period—with the rest of the almost fifty presidential appointees still unfilled. Finally, many slots just go unfilled. In one recent case, a candidate was finally found after 35 others had said no.

So much for the political appointees—what about the government’s permanent staff? I start with the Foreign Service. In a “frank exchange,” as the diplomats call it, before the Commission on National Security/21st Century, the Department of State was described by Foreign Service officers as broken. Applications for the Foreign Service have fallen by some 25% since the 1980’s. In the last year, there were fewer than 10% acceptances among the hundreds offered appointments. Even worse, a higher percentage of experienced, mid-level officers are now departing after 6 or 8 years of service.

For the military services, while the story is more complicated, the upshot has been that morale has been low, and recruitment and retention have been serious problems. To cite one example, 13.6% of Army captains voluntarily left the Army just last year (1999), and the hemorrhaging has continued. If one extrapolates continuation of such rates of departure, one can readily foresee a worrisome dearth of experienced leadership. The
United States regards itself and is regarded as the leader of the international community. Such difficulty in recruiting and retaining experienced personnel for the diplomatic service and for the armed forces makes it far-harder for such leader effectively to conduct foreign policy.

If we turn to the civil service at large, despite a substantial carryover from the past of experienced personnel, the government is simply no longer getting the same slice of the nation’s talent as it did in the past and arguably will need in the future. The Commission on National Security/21st Century, on which I served, regarded the personnel questions as one of the principal challenges for this nation in future years. It made numerous recommendations for improving the attractiveness of government service that could result in reversing the problems associated with recruitment and retention. Still, today, one is up against the enhanced attractiveness of the private sector. Consequently, improvements in the rewards of government service may only serve as a kind of palliative, which ameliorates but does not solve the personnel problem.

The reasons people embraced government careers in the past have regrettably weakened. The challenges then seemed greater. There was the sense of being at the center of the fray. There was the belief that, as an individual one could have an impact on issues that were important. A junior official could believe that his impact on the society exceeded that of a CEO of a middle-sized company. Many could take the attitude: “I would come back and do that, even if they didn’t pay me.” Such motivations seem far weaker today—and reinforced by the feeling that public respect for one’s life as a public servant has diminished.
IV. Finally, Where Do We Go From Here? How do we begin to reverse the public disenchantment with public service and the diminished respect for and attractiveness of public service. In the first instance, some of the reforms proposed to increase the psychological rewards of public service need to be implemented. But that is just a first step. Beyond that, much must be done to bring about an altered public attitude towards government. More precisely, the ideological divide that developed in the 1970’s and 1980’s must be tempered. It is the basis of the bitter partisanship that has rejected the faith of (reasonably) impartial public service. To that extent, we must re-embrace the notion of the moderate (radical or otherwise) that bitter partisanship and the belief that no one could be reasonably impartial were the basis for the question (and the conviction) was he “one of ours” or “one of theirs.”

In brief, that means at least a partial revival of the confidence that the Progressive movement of the early 1900’s reposed in government. But that definitely would not mean a revival of the old-style liberalism that insisted on activism or activist government as the only acceptable way. Nor would it mean its opposite: doctrinaire libertarianism, that regards government as inherently the enemy. Given the public mood of the moment, we must strive for and be satisfied with an attitude toward government that is wary but not hostile.

It will be a long, slow effort. Quite frankly, the manner of Bill Clinton’s recent departure from the White House has probably not helped. (While Clinton did fascinate the public, he clearly did not inspire trust.)

Nonetheless, I am somewhat encouraged by the attitude expressed by the new President. He has not rejected faith in government or expressed distrust of public
servants. He has spoken of “activist but limited” government. There is nothing of the repugnance expressed in the Reagan Inaugural address that “government is not the solution; government is the problem.”

George W. Bush has styled himself a “compassionate conservative.” Admittedly, there is a certain amount of fuzziness in the phrase. Nonetheless, I believe it is the type of Republicanism with which Elliot Richardson could readily have identified. It represents a rejection of extreme individualism. Indeed, President Bush won the recent election by persuading enough suburbanites and enough women that he was deeply enough concerned about the social issues that they cared for—that it overcame the normal electoral determinant of economic prosperity. One writer has recently observed:

“Clearly Bush is not an anti-government zealot (like the Gingrich revolutionaries). He seems to be grasping for a practical philosophy of conservative government, one rooted in his own faith and broadly appealing to the ‘quiet of the American conscience.’”

Of course, only time will tell, but I take the reduced appeal to public distrust and the recent indications of greater bipartisan cooperation in the Congress as signs of hope that we shall narrow the ideological and partisan divide that has weakened the public faith in both politics and public administration.

Let me close by returning to Elliot Richardson.

A society always had need of role models. In terms of public service, Elliot Richardson was certainly an appropriate role model. As I indicated, Elliot was saddened by the confrontation that terminated his service in the Nixon administration.
Nonetheless, he faced up to what he regarded as his unwelcome responsibility—to give up the public service that he treasured and to resign. And so, on that last Saturday afternoon, when his departure became unavoidable, he read to Archibald Cox these words from the ancient Greeks—from *Homer’s Iliad*.

“Now, though numberless fates of death beset us,

which no mortal can escape or avoid,

let us go forward together,

and haply we shall give honor to one another,

or another to us.”

That quotation was read by Richard Darman at Elliot’s funeral. I close with those words both for reassurance and for inspiration.

Thank you!