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Managing Boundaries in American Administration: The Collaboration Imperative

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Boundaries have long played a central role in American public administration. In part, this is because boundaries are central to the administrative process, as they define what organizations are responsible for doing and what powers and functions lie elsewhere. It is also because of the nation's political culture and unusual system of federalism, in which boundaries have always been the focus of conflict. Five boundaries have historically been important in the American administrative system: mission, resources, capacity, responsibility, and accountability. New forces make managing these boundaries increasingly difficult: political processes that complicate administrative responses, indirect administrative tactics, and wicked problems that levy enormous costs when solutions fail. Working effectively at these boundaries requires new strategies of collaboration and new skills for public managers. Failure to develop these strategies—or an instinct to approach boundaries primarily as political symbolism—worsens the performance of the administrative system.

Rogers and Hammerstein broke the Broadway musical mold when they opened *Oklahoma!* at New Haven's Shubert Theater in 1943. Audiences had never seen a play-length story told through song, especially not at this level of quality and sophistication. On one level, it was a tangled love triangle, but on a deeper level, it was a celebration of America's move westward.

That move produced enormous tensions because different settlers had very different ideas about how the land should be used. Cowmen liked wide-open spaces in which their cattle could graze freely. Farmers wanted to seal off the land into manageable tracts that they could clear of trees and rocks, cultivate and fertilize, and protect from intruders as their tender crops grew. These tensions inspired a rollicking production number in the musical. "Oh, the farmer and cowman should be friends," the song goes. In reality, of course, they often were not. "One man likes to push a plough," whereas "the other likes to chase a

cow." Despite that, "there's no reason why they cain't be friends." In both the play and in real life, of course, they usually were not.

The tensions focused on boundaries. Later, they spilled out on a new front as settlers spread into the high plains. Wood to build fences was so scarce that companies competed to manufacture the best barbed wire, an especially clever invention that discouraged cattle from roaming while using a much smaller number of wooden posts. Indeed, it was no accident that conflicts over boundaries ripened as America spread westward. Deep divides separated farmers from cowmen, settlers from Native Americans, and those who wanted to keep the land pristine from those who saw enormous potential in development. Everyone fought over water. In his biography of John Wesley Powell, who headed the U.S. Geological Survey in the late 19th century, Wallace Stegner (1954) chronicles these battles. Powell worked hard to assess how best to draw the boundaries of the New West to match its resource-based realities. Too often, Stegner explains, policy makers in faraway Washington sketched neat lines with little understanding of the implications of the decisions they were making. They often drew boundaries that confounded responsibility over water and, ever since, governments in the region have struggled with the mismatch of their boundaries, their assets, and their problems.

The production number in *Oklahoma!* is thus a metaphor for a fundamental issue of American government and its administration: where and how to draw boundaries. We know that boundary drawing is often symbolic. In 2002, for example, the U.S. Congress intended to create the federal Department of Homeland Security to demonstrate a powerful message—that the federal government was committed to "connecting the dots" in ways that would prevent another major terrorist attack. We know that administrative boundary drawing is often the product of cross-cutting political pressures (see, e.g., Carpenter 2001;

Skowronek 1982). And we know that efficiency experts have long sought to draw boundaries to maximize productivity (Kanigel 1997).

The conflicts inherent in the role that boundaries play have long made stable boundaries impossible to draw. As a result, both politics and administration have struggled over time as to just where key boundaries ought to be, and the system has accommodated itself to the inevitable uncertainties that surround these cross-pressures. However, new problems are emerging that make even short-term accommodations hard to find. For many key issues, from health care to homeland security, it is hard to match the government's administrative systems to the problems it is charged with solving. The mismatch, in turn, has produced cascading performance problems—and it has become the central problem for modern public administration.

The Historical Role of Boundaries

Perhaps as much as anyone, Americans have always focused on boundaries. That is especially true as they have structured their governments. At the very beginning, the founders decided there were two things they did not want: a single government that consolidated the states (because they could not bear to give up their local identities) and a government that consolidated governmental power in a single executive (because, having thrown off a king, they did not want to risk creating one of their own). The Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia thus focused on where the boundaries of power ought to lie between citizens and government, between the federal government and the states, and within the federal government. There was little explicit discussion about public administration per se, but the debate over the power of the executive was, of course, really about the power of public administration.

Without administrative power, the president would be no more than a figurehead; with too much administrative power, the president could become a tyrant. So the boundaries of public administration became a major backstory in the debate over the U.S. Constitution. The highly principled and fundamentally pragmatic debate produced modern federalism and the separation of powers. In the *Federalist Papers,* Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay defended the new Constitution by arguing that the founders had, at every necessary point, cleverly constructed a boundary to prevent the abuse of power.

The reality, of course, was that every boundary was permeable and movable. Indeed, that was the central genius of the founders. Congress could pass laws, but the president had to sign them. The president could wage war, but Congress had to declare it. The judiciary could intervene when and how it saw best, but within the limits of a judicial system created, appointed, and financed by a complex interaction of the other two branches. The Tenth Amendment reserved to the states the powers not explicitly given to the federal government, but the Constitution gave the federal government the power to regulate interstate commerce, which soon became virtually all commerce.

In short, the Constitution—in its drafting, its structure, and its early function—was a remarkable balancing act of complex issues, political cross-pressures, and boundary-defined responses. The boundaries were flexible because firm ones would have shredded the fragile coalition at the core of the new republic. For generations since, flexible, bend-without-breaking boundaries have been the foundation of American government.

Of course, the American focus on boundaries is hardly unique. When marauding Gauls invaded Rome in 390 BC, the Romans built the Servian Wall to protect the city. In the early second century CE, Emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of an enormous wall in England to separate the civilized Romans from the northern barbarians. More than 2,000 years ago, China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, built a great wall to protect his people from raiding tribes. From ancient castles to medieval chateaux, much of the European tourist trade is a celebration of the historical importance of boundaries. Rogers and Hammerstein's anthem to the American West is a chapter in an ageless saga.

For American public administration, the core issue is not so much about the *existence* of boundaries. Rather, what matters is *which* boundaries (what is being separated from what), *how* they are drawn (including how firm or permeable they are), and how to deal with the inevitable *trade-offs* (because boundaries always leave out important things as they seek to keep other things in). For the last century, in fact, public administration has had boundaries on the brain.

Which Boundaries?

Wilson's classic article "The Study of Administration" (1887) fundamentally focused on the role of boundaries in American public administration. He asked, among other things, what Americans could learn from other administrative systems while preserving democratic values. The important

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point in Wilson's argument is not the effort to set an artificial boundary that would somehow separate policy making from its execution. In reality, of course, these processes are intermingled, and efforts to draw clear lines are bound to create difficult problems. Wilson recognized, however, that effective and responsive administration requires drawing boundaries, somewhere and somehow. Not everyone can do everything. Building the capacity to do different things well inevitably means setting boundaries—the province of legislators versus the responsibility of executives, the domain of the president versus the duties of agency officials, and so on. No boundary can be perfect or perfectly stable. But no action is possible without some boundary somewhere. The challenge is setting boundaries that promote efficiency and effectiveness without threatening accountability and responsiveness. That issue is the central lesson of Wilson's work.

How to Draw Boundaries?

Within administrative agencies, the most important boundaries have always been vertical. Hierarchical authority defines the responsibilities of managers. It defines the nature of the tasks, who is responsible for what, and how different managers contribute to the common mission. By long tradition and established practice, most complex administrative work is bureaucratic; most bureaucratic work is hierarchical; hierarchical work depends on authority; and the underlying structure of these relationships is vertical, up and down the chain of command. The fundamental bureaucratic task, therefore, is determining how and where to draw these vertical lines. Hierarchy and authority are, in the traditional thinking and practice of complex organizations, the key building blocks of coordination (Seidman 1998).

However, Lipsky's work on street-level bureaucrats (1980) made the inescapable point that other forces, including horizontal relationships, can undermine vertical, hierarchical systems. Powerful professional norms and associations with other street-level forces can distort top-down control. This certainly is not a negative feature. It would be impossible for teachers and police officers, for example, to do their work without such relationships. Top officials in such organizations focus energy on setting the balance between policies that insist on vertical control and the amount of operating-level discretion they need to accept to accomplish the organization's mission. Police officers must make split-second, sometimes life-or-death decisions, and they cannot work if they are constantly paralyzed by the need to compare every professional instinct with departmental procedures—or more often, what to do in situations when the rule book leaves off and frontline realities emerge.

Coordination is sometimes a matter of using the hierarchy to assign different tasks to different members of the organization. Sometimes it is the challenge of building interorganizational linkages, so that the right collection of emergency vehicles arrives at accident scenes along the boundaries between neighboring communities. Therefore, much administrative work involves determining how to balance these vertical and horizontal forces. As in Wilson's fundamental observation, the challenge is determining how best to draw boundaries to deal with situations in which even the best decisions can seem arbitrary and produce conflict between top-level control and operating-level flexibility.

How to Make the Trade-Offs?

These questions of organizational design are inevitably puzzles that require trade-offs. Much administrative theory of the last generation has struggled to find new ways of balancing administrative efficiency with democratic control, motivating public employees and enhancing responsiveness to citizens, and matching bureaucratic imperatives and constraints with service needs. Indeed, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's *Reinventing Government* (1992) is a classic work, not just because of the way it shaped the national debate but also because it so neatly framed—to the admiration of some and to the criticism of others—the problem of accommodating traditional administrative systems to the demands of modern policy problems.

For bureaucracy in a democracy, the central issue is how to create an administrative system that is strong enough to be effective but not so strong as to endanger democratic government. That is the classic issue of administrative theory, and negotiating that boundary has preoccupied the minds of the field's best thinkers (see, e.g., Appleby 1945; Dahl 1947; Finer 1941; Friedrich 1940; Goodnow 1900; Mosher 1968). The question has long been which boundaries to draw, how, and where.

Of course, all boundaries are arbitrary. Luther Gulick's classic paper "Notes on the Theory of Organization" (1937) makes the point that there are alternative strategies for organizing bureaucracy. None is perfect, and each involves a trade-off; however, we need to make the trade-off, and we then need to manage its consequences. In Gulick's tradition, we relied on administrative boundaries to control and manage important problems—to fit, sometimes awkwardly with a bureaucratic shoehorn, problems into the structures we have created to manage them. This approach served us well for a very long time.

New Challenges for the 21st Century

However, to the classic trade-offs we need to add a new, far more difficult puzzle: whether the new challenges of 21st-century life—from terrorism to pandemics and international trade to climate change—have undermined the ability of

boundaries—any boundaries, drawn anywhere—to deal effectively with truly important and inescapable issues. Has the effort to force problems into existing structures created unacceptable costs? A careful look at the performance of American government, from the halting response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to the ongoing struggle to manage welfare reform, suggests that we are facing a growing set of inescapable issues, that the agencies charged with managing these programs have boundaries that do not fit the problems well, and that the mismatch of boundaries and problems is causing growing performance problems.

America's most important fences, of course, have deeper roots in political consensus than in administrative pragmatism. Political cross-pressures, from legislative gridlock to the rise of the mass media, have vastly increased the challenges for the nation's administrative system. The result, Rauch (1994) claims, is *demosclerosis,* a progressive loss of government's ability to adapt and respond to new issues. Political tensions are increasingly muddying administrative boundaries.

Moreover, the nation has increasingly relied more on administratively complex tools, which, in turn, require more coordination of more organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. In particular, we have relied more on tools of government that require concerted action across multiple sectors (Kettl 1988; Mosher 1980; Salamon 1981, 2002). For example, NASA reports that it has spent 90 percent of its space shuttle budget through contractors. The difficulty of managing those contractors contributed to NASA's performance problems and two tragic accidents (NASA 2003). The Clinton administration's strategy of "ending welfare as we know it" really meant putting for-profit and nonprofit contractors on the front lines of service delivery, with state and local governments playing a coordinating role (Mead 2004; Riccucci 2004). The administration of most environmental policy occurs through intergovernmental partnerships and contracts with cleanup specialists, and American national policy on greenhouse gases has increasingly come from the statehouses (Rabe 2004). In fact, it is virtually impossible to find any public program that matters in which a single government organization's jurisdiction can capture the features that determine success. Interorganizational, intergovernmental, and intersectoral coordination, of course, has always been important in American administration. As a general, George Washington constantly struggled to manage his private supply contractors.

But the scale of these indirect tools has unquestionably increased, and with that growth has come increasing challenges of managing boundaries. The nation is struggling to tackle more intricate problems whose causes and consequences pay no attention to the boundaries we have created to control and manage them. The nation's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, demanded far-reaching cross-agency and cross-jurisdictional action on a remarkably broad scale. The monkeypox outbreak in the Midwest during 2003 stemmed from the importation of diseased exotic animals from Africa and required the concerted effort of public health officials in several states, in close coordination with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In its deadly march in 2005, Hurricane Katrina deftly struck along the line dividing the Atlanta and Dallas regions of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, vastly complicating that agency's response.

More issues spill over more quickly into adjoining agencies and neighboring jurisdictions. As the world becomes flatter, many local issues reach around the world and many global issues have local implications (Friedman 2005). On one hand, the interconnected and cascading nature of these issues makes it very hard to put boundaries around them. On the other hand, failing to address them can pose enormous costs with broad consequences. Analysts have pointed out the risks that "wicked" problems can cause (Rittel and Webber 1973): difficult issues with uncertain solutions; frequently, political disagreement on what the problem is or what the solution should look like; and the necessity of complex, interdependent responses. The growing complexity of problems and increasing interdependence in trying to solve them unquestionably increases the wickedness of policy issues. In turn, this complicates the difficulty for public managers of managing their agencies because wicked problems, virtually by definition, challenge existing organizational and political boundaries.

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These three forces—political processes that complicate administrative responses, administrative tactics that are increasingly indirect, and wicked problems that levy enormous costs when solutions fail—have risen together to challenge administrative orthodoxy. Public administration has long been based on an effort to create stable, lasting structures with the capacity to solve public problems in a reliable, efficient, and accountable way. However, each of these three forces individually undermines this effort. Combined, they frame a critical challenge for modern administrative theory and practice. Boundary-based solutions are out of sync with 21st-century problems. The issue is how to devise a strategy that retains the search for reliability, efficiency, and accountability and, at the same time, rises to meet the issues that governments face (Behn 2001).

Boundary Tensions

Throughout American history, the nation's leaders have struggled with the inevitability of drawing boundaries somewhere—and with the consequences of boundaries that sometimes have failed to fit the problems. Five basic boundaries have come to shape the behavior of American administrative institutions:

1. *Mission.* In public administration, the most important boundary is the one defining an organization's *mission.* It not only defines what purpose policy makers mean the organization to pursue. Just as important, it also defines what the organization does *not* do. Within a political system, an organization and its mission are always, at least in part, symbolic: a sign of the government's commitment, sometimes serious and sometimes fleeting, to address a problem.

2. *Resources.* Defining a mission—from fighting poverty and providing health care to teaching children and extinguishing fires—also creates a claim on *resources,* which define the second boundary. The allocation of resources provides an important clue to just how strongly the government feels about translating symbols into reality. That, in turn, defines the boundary between government and the rest of society—just how large government ought to be and how many private resources ought to be devoted to public purposes.

3. *Capacity.* Without resources, no organization can build the *capacity* to carry out its mission. Much of that capacity is organized through the organization's structure. There are recurring battles over how best to do so. Gulick's (1937) famous set of alternatives—organization by purpose, process, person, or place—laid out the classic alternatives for coordination. Theorists since have battled over structuring (and restructuring) government (Light 1997; Thomas 1993). At the core, these battles are about how to resolve the political cross-pressures on government bureaucracies. But they are also about how best to create the reservoir of expertise that is required to fulfill the organization's mission.

4. *Responsibility.* Intraorganizational boundaries define each individual's *responsibility* for contributing to the mission. Organizations need to coordinate the work of their members so that not everyone tries to do the same thing and so that needed work actually gets done. From the silent-film era Keystone Cops, whose bobby-hatted officers scurried frantically without seeming to get anything done, to the turmoil that surrounded government's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the problem of securing each individual's responsibility for completing the organization's work has been a constant issue. Boundaries define what each individual's job is and, just as important, what it is not. Indeed, within

public organizations, many of the boundaries seek to limit the exercise of power. Congress delegates power to the bureaucracy, but administrators do not have the authority to step outside the legal boundaries of their delegated authority. The Antideficiency Act, largely unknown outside the halls of federal offices but an unmovable truth on the inside, tells administrators that they can spend government money only for the explicit purposes authorized by Congress and only within the time period that Congress authorizes. Boundaries tell government officials what they must do—and what they cannot do.

5. *Accountability.* All of the preceding purposes merge to define the meaning of *accountability.* Government administrators have only the power that policy makers authorize. In turn, they are politically accountable to policy makers for their actions. Ultimately, of course, these processes are central to bureaucracy in a democracy.

Boundaries and Hierarchy

Hierarchy provides a neat theoretical solution to these enduring problems, but the reality fails to match the theory. As society's problems have become more complex and more interrelated, government's responses likewise have become more organizationally complex. The Medicaid program, for example, seeks to provide health care for the poor and elderly. It has become one of the most enduring legacies of the Johnson administration's Great Society, and it has grown into one of the fastest-growing programs in state budgets around the country. The federal government defines basic eligibility for the program and prescribes a minimal level of care that state governments choosing to participate in the program must provide (and they all do). The states then have the option of adding other services to the core program (and most do). As a result, the Medicaid program is not one program but 50, with further variations in the District of Columbia and the American territories. Private and nonprofit sector hospitals, nursing homes, and physicians provide almost all the care. They submit their bills to other private companies that manage the paper flow and the reimbursement system. Thus, Medicaid is a leveraged partnership in which the federal government supplies the program's core; state governments supplement the basic program and manage the finances; private companies perform the back-office paperwork; and a vast, complex network of third parties actually provides the care. The program is not hierarchical. It is, rather, a vastly complex network of tools that include regulations, intergovernmental grants, and management contracts. The government's enduring problems in managing this network have earned the Medicaid program a place on the "high-risk list" compiled by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), a collection of programs identified as

being at substantial risk of failure, with important consequences for the budget and for critical services to the public (Walker 2006).

In fact, the GAO's high-risk list provides a valuable clue to the boundary-based problems in American public administration. Its March 2006 list included 26 programs, ranging from the Department of Defense's weapons acquisition process to the National Flood Insurance Program, added in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Every program but one—strategic human capital management—deals directly with a federal initiative that collided with existing bureaucratic boundaries. Strategic human capital management deals with the government's deep problems of building capacity to manage the other programs.

Thus, it is no exaggeration that the enduring foundation of American public administration—hierarchy—is eroding under the pressures of 21st-century American government. As the GAO's extensive studies have demonstrated, the mismatch of hierarchical structure and complex, multiorganizational, multisector tools is making it harder to build the capacity to perform government's work, and this capacity gap is creating serious problems for government performance. These forces are also confounding public administration's strategies for securing responsibility and accountability, as it is hard to use vertical structures to hold individuals accountable when they are working in increasingly horizontal partnerships.

Coordination from the Top Down and the Bottom Up

From the top down, the perspective of government policy makers comprises a vast and complex network of partners, many of whom are outside government and must work together closely if public programs are to work. Government's task is to find a way to leverage these partners—to align their activities in close formation, so that the goods and services that emerge are coordinated, efficient, effective, and responsive. This is a far different task than traditional hierarchical management, in which top officials operate through a chain of command, give orders, and expect them to be followed. Of course, giving orders does not ensure they will be obeyed. Compliance is scarcely easy or automatic. Managing government's indirect tools requires a different set of skills (including contract writing and enforcement, performance measurement, information technology, and negotiation) than managing direct programs. The performance problems that flow from such indirectly administered programs often stem partly from the fact that they are attempting to do very difficult things, from putting people into space to getting people off poverty. They flow as well from the fact that many government administrators seek to use the tools they learned to manage services directly through hierarchies on programs that rely on indirect tools and loosely coupled partnerships.

From the bottom up, citizens face growing difficulty in bringing together the vast array of government services with which they deal. From the top down, government is a constellation of programs, organizations, and levels of government. From the citizen's perspective—from the bottom up—government is about quality of life. Citizens want their air to be clean, their water drinkable, their streets safe, their illnesses cured, and their children taught well, among many other things. They pay little attention to which agency manages which program in solving these problems; they just want them solved. Citizens understandably have little patience for the "not my problem" answer to requests for help, even if the complexity of the system often leads citizens to the wrong door. State legislators, for example, regularly note (out of the earshot of reporters) that citizens often complain to them about problems with their Social Security checks. In January 2006, when the new Medicare Part D prescription drug program was plagued by a long list of problems, many governors worked hard to provide backup help, even though the problems were the federal government's making.

To tackle the problem more systematically, governments in the United Kingdom, as well as some state governments, such those in Washington, Georgia, and Louisiana, have developed an aggressive "no wrong door" approach. Instead of telling citizens who arrive in the wrong office or apply for the wrong program that they need to go elsewhere to engage the government, the no wrong door approach attempts to make citizens' interactions with government more seamless. Information systems link related programs and allow program managers to exchange information across organizational and programmatic boundaries. Especially in social service programs, citizens often find that they have to pay multiple visits to different agencies managing related programs, and each time they have to supply the same information. The no wrong door approach allows citizens to come into any social service office, supply the information once, and use the emerging 211 telephone network to find the right collection of services. Instead of sending citizens to another door, the approach focuses on the citizens' needs. It adapts government to citizens instead of forcing citizens to adapt to government. The strategy is no nostrum. In implementation, it has sometimes created its own collection of difficult coordination issues. But it does create a metaphor for the basic problem: that no bureaucracy, however conceived or designed, can encompass any problem that matters, and that solving 21st-century problems demands new, cross-boundary strategies for communication.

Citizens' expectations of government have, beyond a doubt, risen dramatically over the last century. Government has responded with an impressive—some would say overly daunting or excessively large—array of programs and agencies. From citizens' point of view, this has made it far harder to negotiate government—to discover which agency and which program they need, where to find it, and how to connect with it. In complex programs such as welfare reform, government's success depends critically on weaving together the service providers, usually nongovernmental, and then bringing citizens seamlessly into the network.

The rise of indirect government, with so many programs administered through nongovernmental partners, has also brought another paradox. Citizens not only have a harder time linking with government. They often find themselves complaining about government's increasing size and burden even as they become more dependent on it for services from home mortgage assistance to government payments. Moreover, even as they often complain about government, they have become a larger part of it. More and more citizens, from bankers and pharmacists to physicians and social workers, have become part of the service delivery system, often moving seamlessly from private life into roles as quasi-government bureaucrats and then back again.

Operating at the Boundaries

All of these forces combine to define a critical challenge. Battles over boundaries have been endemic throughout American history. Within the executive branch, hierarchy has defined the recurring solution to these battles. Throughout the last half of the 20th century, however, hierarchy has been less and less a satisfactory solution. With the rise of interorganizational tools, it applies vertical solutions to horizontal arrangements. It provides a weak guide for the imperatives of service coordination. That, in turn, raises difficult issues for public administration about government's performance, responsiveness to citizens, and accountability to elected officials.

Roles of Boundaries in Complex Service Systems

The rise of intricate interorganizational service networks has not only vastly complicated the top-down job of government management. It has also profoundly transformed citizens' relationships with government. Consider the five roles of boundaries outlined earlier:

1. *Mission.* With programs increasingly interrelated, defining any organization's mission becomes harder. Missions often multiply. Government organizations not only face the job of managing their own programs but also connecting seamlessly with closely related programs. Focusing narrowly on an organization's

own programs, in fact, can undermine effective government because the more that government tries to address complex problems and the more it uses a broad network to do so, the more any organization's success depends on its ability to work with others.

2. *Resources.* That, in turn, complicates the process of allocating resources. Ambitious goals multiply the demands on society's money. But the imperative of interorganizational collaboration also multiplies exponentially the demands of organizational managers for larger budgets. It is one thing to ask for money to manage one's own programs. The more programs and agencies are interconnected, however, the more top managers press eminently reasonable claims on more money to caulk the boundaries they share with other programs and organizations. Of course, since the beginning of time, there has never been enough money to serve citizens' needs. The rise of such interconnected networks, however, has created a new arena for escalating demands.

3. *Capacity.* As hard as it is to manage any program well, managing interorganizational networks is unquestionably a difficult job. At the least, it is most certainly a different job that requires different skills. It is probably harder. And there is manifest evidence that government at all levels has not ensured that its managers develop skill sets to keep up with the rapidly evolving tools they are responsible for using (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Kettl 2002).

4. *Responsibility.* With networks increasingly sharing the job of service delivery, it becomes more difficult for administrators in government—or in one of the legion of government's private and nonprofit partners—to determine their role in contributing to a program's success. The logic of the no wrong door approach, for example, is powerful. But it vastly complicates the task of defining just what each member of the service system is charged with contributing. Shared responsibility provides multiple opportunities for ducking responsibility; stepping into the breach provides alluring opportunities for increasing individual power.

5. *Accountability.* Perhaps most important of all, the rise of complex interorganizational service systems has created a new class of accountability problems. It has always been difficult for elected officials to hold street-level bureaucrats accountable for their actions (Lipsky 1980). But when responsibility for program implementation propagates through a larger and more complex system, who is ultimately accountable for the performance of public programs? Because responsibility inevitably is shared—across governmental organizations and levels of government, as well as across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors—is it possible to clearly fix accountability on anyone? Foreign observers

often note that when major administrative crises occur in the United States, from the September 11 terrorist attacks to Hurricane Katrina, it is remarkable how few individuals lose their jobs. Some of this undoubtedly flows from fundamental differences in culture. And, as many foreign states develop their own complex interorganizational partnerships, soon they will be asking the same question of themselves. But in the United States, we are left with a profoundly difficult and important question: If everyone is in charge, is anyone in charge?

Our boundaries in American government once provided reassuring (and often successful) answers to these five basic questions. When we face tough challenges, even in the face of complex interorganizational partnerships, we often resort to building new fences. But we are now confronting a basic, serious, and troubling problem. The boundaries that served us so well in the past can no long solve either our administrative or political needs.

Drawing New Boundaries?

Whenever Americans have faced such problems, our instinct has always been to draw new boundaries. With the rise of a larger, more interconnected government, one that relies increasingly on complex interorganizational tools to deliver public services, that instinct not only fails to deliver but often makes it worse. Instead of seeking new strategies to enhance horizontal collaboration, the instinct for restructuring often creates new vertical lines that only increase the complexity of creating a seamless service system. Thus, not only do we rely excessively on an administrative system that is out of sync with the public problems we are trying to solve, but also when we encounter problems with our governmental tools, we fall back on instincts that only make the job harder. That, in fact, is precisely what happened in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks when the new Department of Homeland Security was created. And that is why, when Hurricane Katrina struck three years later, the department failed at the very mission for which it had been created.

Mending Fences

We are left with the symbolic role of boundaries as the one enduring purpose that the traditional approach supports. The American political system continues to put great symbolic importance on the creation of new government agencies, the maintenance of old ones, and the restructuring of systems when problems occur. That is true because the structure of governmental organizations has always been as important for politi-

cal reasons as it has for operational ones. Indeed, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security had far more symbolic than operational meaning. It was a clear, public sign of the government's determination to connect the dots in a way that might prevent another attack.

The evidence from government's disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina, however, was that the creation of the new department had been far more successful symbolically than operationally. Faced with the very challenge for which the department had been constructed, dots lay unconnected throughout the devastated area. The department's failure led predictably to another spasm of reorganization proposals, some of which were unquestionably needed. But, yet again, the episode underlined the basic and inescapable truth of 21st-century America. For a very long time, the symbolic and operating realities of American public administration were in sync with the core hierarchical approach. However, the hierarchical tradition has fallen out of sync with operating realities, but the political symbolism continues to be extraordinarily powerful.

That frames the basic dilemma of American public administration for the 21st century. Devising new strategies to bring public administration in sync with

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the multiorganizational, multisector operating realities of today's government requires a collaborative, network-based approach. That network-based approach, however, conflicts fundamentally with the symbol-driven imperatives of the way American politics approaches public administration. It is hard indeed to assemble the political support necessary to create the administrative approach we need. Failing to do so dooms the system to persistent and potentially escalating problems of performance. Good fences might make good neighbors, as Robert Frost once wrote. But America's enduring passion for building fences is creating a profoundly serious dilemma for governance, and the costs of failing to resolve that dilemma will only increase.

How might we tackle this issue more effectively? We have repeated examples of successful government, even amid major terrorist attacks. On the morning of September 11, officials in Arlington County, Virginia, responded effectively with a well-choreographed interorganizational response to the attack on the Pentagon. Because they began with a sense of the problems they were likely to confront, and because they envisioned a collaborative response as the best solution, they mounted a remarkably coordinated response to the terrorist attack. The police and fire departments

worked in close partnership, federal and state officials worked to support the local response, and collaboration flowed easily even among jurisdictions from different states (Arlington County 2001).

Arlington County's response teaches two lessons. The first is that the nation's boundary problems are eminently solvable, but the solution requires a fresh approach to management that relies more on interorganizational collaboration. The second is that in the absence of such collaboration, poor performance is inevitable (9/11 Commission 2004). The musical *Oklahoma!* has been an enduring hit not only because of the quality of its music but also because of its enduring message. We know that farmers and cowmen—along with other Americans—can be friends. But we also have painfully learned that the instinct to draw boundaries can make that friendship impossible. The imperative is for a fresh approach to government and management that builds on boundaries that strengthen democratic administration—but also for new collaborative strategies that ensure the instinct for drawing boundaries does not undermine democracy and public management.

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