

The APSA Public Administration Section's Electronic Newsletter Volume 2, Issue 1, Spring 2003

April 10, 2003

(revised April 15)

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Greetings fellow public administration scholars!

Welcome back to the PA Section Electronic Newsletter, your vehicle for basic information about section activities and events that are of broad interest to our community of political scientists who study bureaucracy, administration, and management. Each newsletter also contains a topical editorial and a number of links to important information sources. The Electronic Newsletter is edited by [Patrick Wolf](#) of Georgetown University, with important technical assistance provided by [Mel Dubnick](#) of Rutgers University-Newark.

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EDITORIAL

"What I Learned From James Lee Witt," by Patrick Wolf

[James Lee Witt](#) was more central to a presidential election than any federal bureaucrat since Alexander Hamilton. After all, the crucial first presidential debate of the 2000 general election quickly and surprisingly became a contest between George Bush and Al Gore over which candidate had spent more quality time with President Clinton's Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. (Answer: Al Gore overall, but not during the times that he claimed in the

debate.)

Perhaps we should not have been surprised that a FEMA Director was central to a political contest. After all, FEMA is a quintessential distributive policy agency. Constituents are seldom more vulnerable than immediately after they have been victimized by a natural disaster. During its glory days of the 1990s, FEMA appeared as the federal government's white knight, charging into situations of widespread human suffering armed with fiscal and administrative instruments of relief. The agency's advantageous political situation is further bolstered by the fact that its' constituency is both universal and particular. Everyone in America is a potential client of FEMA services, while people who live near, on, or -- in the case of New Orleans -- under water are most regularly in need of FEMA assistance.

Last month, Former Director Witt delivered a rousing guest lecture to my Innovations in Public Management class. His 45-minute address touched upon a number of key points about the history and nature of public administration, namely:

- Witt was the first FEMA Director with a background in emergency management. Prior to 1993, the leadership of the agency had been determined via the spoils system.
- Although the FEMA mission was inherently intergovernmental, the agency typically had fostered a "less than friendly" working relationship with lower levels of government.
- Although the client base of FEMA was as diverse as the country, the top administrators of FEMA had been almost exclusively middle age white males.
- His first task as Director was to improve the morale of FEMA employees by (1) greeting them at the front door, (2) soliciting their opinions about how the agency could be improved, (3) promoting qualified minorities, and (4) developing a performance evaluation that was reciprocal - operators evaluated supervisors (including the Director) and vice-versa.

- **His second task was assembling a task force, consisting of both political appointees and careerists, to develop the agency's strategic plan.**
- **His third and ongoing task was to nurture external political coalitions in support of agency policy reform efforts.**
- **Unlike some previous FEMA Directors, he immediately traveled to the scene of any major disasters and personally supervised the delivery of relief, which is why the question of "who was with James Lee Witt during the Texas floods" was such an important 2000 campaign issue.**

Even this master of bureaucratic politics met his match while trying to gain authorization for a FEMA program to buy out and relocate people who repeatedly required FEMA flood relief. Congressman Billy Tauzin (R, LA) torpedoed the FEMA proposal because so many of his Mississippi delta constituents rely on FEMA funds to replace soaked carpeting each spring. One might expect that carpet stores flourish in Tauzin's district.

Witt was similarly chastened by the absorption of FEMA into the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Under the DHS authorization legislation, FEMA's operational divisions will be parceled out to various components of the new Department. The fact that even an extremely popular and effective independent agency could lose its autonomy and institutional integrity in a single pen-stroke struck me as evidence of the inherent tenuousness of public agencies. The public sector seems to hardly change one whit (so to speak) until some unforeseen event generates a strong political consensus that drives it to change both dramatically and, perhaps, regrettably.

I can't say, to paraphrase a popular book, "everything I ever needed to know about administration in a political context I learned from James Lee Witt." However, I did see more clearly what I already thought I knew.

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UPDATE ON THE VOLCKER

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Because of your generosity, the Section for Public Administration will be able to award its first Volcker Endowment research grant(s) to junior scholars at the [2003 APSA meetings in Philadelphia](#). And to make this a very special occasion, we are delighted to announce that Mr. Volcker will be joining us at the APSA meetings to award the first grant(s). Mr. Volcker also has graciously agreed to participate in a featured interview session immediately preceding the awarding of grants to junior scholars.

A reception honoring Mr. Volcker for his exemplary contributions to enhancing and promoting the practice and image of public service will follow these sessions.

We're looking forward to seeing you there! For more information, read about "[Mr. Volcker to Award First Endowment Grants](#)".

Many thanks to the Volcker Committee of Robert Durant, Pat Ingraham, Don Kettl, George Frederickson, and Matthew Holden for their tireless efforts to develop the Volcker Endowment. Also, a special thanks to Robert Durant for this update.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Calling all IT and E-Government scholars. This season's public management conferences are all targeted towards you.

- First up will be the **2003 Government Technology Performance Measurement Summit** in Ottawa, Canada, May 14-15.
For the details, check out <http://www.performanceweb.org>
- Ottawa not your kind of town? How about Beantown? Boston will be hosting the **National Conference on Digital Government Research**, May 18-21. To check it out, surf to <http://www.dgrc.org/dgo2003/>
- Still not hooked? The **International Conference on Socio Political Informatics and Cybernetics (Pista)** announces a call for papers to present July 31-August 2, 2003, in Orlando, Florida. Pista invites authors to submit their original and unpublished works, innovations, ideas based on analogical thinking, problems that require solutions, position papers, case studies, etc., in the fields of Information and Communication Technologies. For more information, go to <http://www.confinf.org/Pista03>

Speaking of IT, Jane E. Fountain, Associate Professor of Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, has been honored with an Outstanding Academic Book award for 2002 by Choice magazine. The prestigious award recognizes "the best of the best in published scholarship." Jane's book, [Building the Virtual State: Information Technology and Institutional Change](#), was published by the Brookings Institution Press in August 2001. In making the award, the editors apply several criteria including excellence in presentation and scholarship, significance of the contribution to a field, and distinction as an important, often the first, treatment of a subject. For a review of Jane's award-winning book, see the October 2002 issue of the **Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory** (or

just go out and buy the sucker).

Congratulations to the [Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri-Columbia](#), for winning the 2003 Curriculum Innovation Award from the Section on Public Administration Education of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). The Section recently created the award to recognize the innovative curriculum of a person or program in public policy and administration. The award was presented at the Section on Public Administration Education Annual Awards Luncheon on March 17, 2003, as part of the national conference of the ASPA in Washington, DC.

Finally, congratulations to [J. Edward Kellough](#) on his appointment as Graduate Coordinator and MPA Program Director at the University of Georgia. In accepting this honor, Ed was forced to "pass" on the offer to be the head coach of the Georgia basketball team. But, "shoot", why only deal with madness in March when you can experience it year round?

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