Charles T. Goodsell. 2011. *Mission Mystique: Belief Systems in Public Agencies.* Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, ISBN 978-1-933116-75-4, Print Paperback, $32.95.

Government bashing has become such a handy mantra that it is a relief to read a book that purposefully examines good government at its best. Studies of reputable government organizations are important because, whether we like it or not, it is government that allows us to live together collectively and enjoy the benefits of civilization. Charles T. Goodsell, the author of *Mission Mystique* is also the 2003 winner of the American Society for Public Administration Dwight Waldo Award for a lifetime contribution to the literature of public administration. Currently he is Professor Emeritus at Virginia Tech. In this book he seeks to unravel the dynamics that move government bureaucracies into greatness. To do this he started with a simple research question: how do the most highly regarded governmental agencies actually work? What he found and how he found it is chronicled *Mission Mystique: Belief Systems in Public Agencies.*

Goodsell developed a unique normative framework that he used as a guide for the examination of four federal, one state and one local agency. The six highly reputable agencies embraced a range of missions including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Park Service, the National Weather Service, and the United States Peace

Corps as well as the Virginia State Police and the North Carolina County Department of Social Services. All enjoyed excellent reputations as "premier in the respective policy realms." Goodsell's theory is that the agencies he selected are appealing because they are effective. People who work in effective environments feel a strong sense of attachment and dedication to their agencies and fellow employees, and attract outsiders who value the work of the particular agency, providing external support."

To put *Mission Mystique* in perspective, it is necessary to understand the trajectory of Dr. Goodsell's scholarship. His previous books include *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic; The American Statehouse: Interpreting Democracy's Temples; Public Administration Illuminated and Inspired by the Arts; and, The Social Meaning of Civil Space: Studying Political Authority Through Architecture.* Despite his contributions to the field of public administration, Goodsell has been understudied. Few outside of the field even know of his work much less appreciate the import of his insights into modern public administration.

Goodsell maintains that these selected public agencies are not just organizations but also institutions or "living" social organisms that carry values which persist over time. The best institutions possess an "aura" (Goodsell's term) of exceptionalism that flows from the nature of their work, and "hence, can be identified as a mystique associated with their particular mission." Goodsell locates the animating organizational force in the agency's belief system, composed of nine attributes he identified and organized into a template. They include the mission, the societal need for the agency, its reputation, motivation, culture, history, ability to resolve internal and external problems, organizational autonomy, and capacity for growth and renewal.

By way of contrast, Goodsell points to government organizations that are not candidates for "mission mystique" because they are hurt by subjective public perceptions. The Internal Revenue Service, for example, is one of the most effective, fair and corruption-free tax collection agencies in the world. It is "absolutely indispensable to the operation of government", our national security and our economic health. However, the IRS's mission is controversial, and effective political attacks by anti-tax activists have damaged its reputation, resulting in a poor public reputation and low morale among its workers.

The upshot is that Goodsell developed what he correctly describes as a new normative model for the field of public administration. In the course of the study, Goodsell personally visited the agencies he studied. He conducted open-ended interviews with top executives, several managers, individuals down the hierarchy, informed outsiders like retirees, elected officials, clients, critics and bureaucrats from elsewhere, and he absorbed website postings and published literature. He also read internal reports, government documents, newspaper articles, and blogs. The components of the resulting template formed over the years of "concerted research and were not complete until the end of the journey." He found that individuation revealed, over the course of the study, that institutional coherence derives from the particular agency mission and is reflected in a viable belief system.

Ultimately, Goodsell argues that the best public agencies are populated by women and men who are "turned on by the very work they are doing." This work, ranging from stopping child abuse to fighting forest fires or battling epidemics, couples with the low profile activities that "have deep long lasting consequences such as building safe highways, helping children learn and allowing the aged to live out their days in dignity" are all vital to keeping society intact. He also points out that the highest level of attainment in public administration is deep "engagement in important public tasks" and the strong sense of mission that proliferates throughout all aspects of life in a modern government.

At the end of this realistic and generally upbeat treatment of these selected case studies, Goodsell suggests that some government agencies are so good at what they do their judgment should be regarded in the same way as oncologists when diagnosing and treating a cancer patient; just as the patient rarely presumes to second-guess the doctor, Goodsell argues that the public and legislators should not second guess reputable public agencies. He does note that this could lead to the rise of overly powerful bureaucrats such as J. Edgar Hoover and Robert Moses, but he thinks it is worth it because only bureaucracies can preserve the future. This notion recognizes the state as a form of structural power with an existence of its own which is contrary to the pluralist view of the state as an admixture of associations reflecting vying public interests. On another level, this notion that "popular" governmental agencies should be freed from public scrutiny raises questions about the longevity of our political democracy. Considering the totality of

Goodsell's scholarship, the implication is that one of our best thinkers is giving up on the ability of the political process to generate policy makers capable of resolving our policy dilemmas.

Goodsell's book raises a host of questions about good government organizations, the relationship of the bureaucracy to the political process and, by implication, even the viability of liberal democracy. Despite Goodsell's clearly elitist preferences, this book would be of interest to students of public organizations and researchers seeking examples of exemplary qualitative studies. One drawback is that some of the facts in the book are wrong. For example, Goodsell confused Georgia with Alabama as the site of the infamous Tuskegee Experiments. However, each of the well-crafted, synoptic case studies is an opportunity to truly understand what government agencies do and how they do it when they are operating at their best.

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