

Michael Lewis. 2025. *Who Is Government?: The Untold Story of Public Service*. Riverhead Books.

I find that in a world where the role of government is increasingly scrutinized, especially with the advent of the Department of Governmental Efficiency (DOGE), Michael Lewis's edited book, *Who Is Government?*, is both timely and a breath of fresh air.

Likewise, it seems like an appropriate and essential exploration of the unsung heroes working behind the scenes. To me, this compilation of essays sheds light on the dedication, expertise, and often-overlooked contributions of federal employees. By weaving together compelling narratives, Lewis challenges the prevailing, but unfortunate, stereotypes that constantly paint government workers as inefficient bureaucrats, revealing instead their profound commitment to the public good.

Lewis's writing has gravitas; he has quite a track record. For example, his 2006 book, *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, was later adapted into a film of the same name three years later. By 2010, he released *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*, which explained the Great Recession of 2008. Later, his adaptation of *Moneyball* was released in 2011, followed by *The Big Short* in 2015. Albeit less renowned, my favorite of his books is *The Fifth Risk*, which examines the somewhat surreal transition of political appointments from former President Obama to the first Trump administration with a focus on three government agencies – the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, and Energy.

A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Lewis invites readers into the often-opaque world of federal institutions, exposing the human stories that drive them. Each profile, I find, is a testament to the passionate individuals whose daily efforts keep the nation functioning smoothly. From the mine inspectors safeguarding worker safety to the IRS agents combating cybercrime, the book showcases how these public servants operate

not for accolades or financial gain, but for a higher purpose: the welfare of their fellow citizens, the public good.

In Lewis's first fascinating chapter, titled "The Canary," he discusses Chris Mark of the Department of Labor, who, as a former miner himself, solved the problem of coal mine roofs collapsing on the heads of coal miners, which killed 50,000 coal miners in the last century. To me, he is a largely unrecognized hero who saved thousands of lives over the years. Yet, we know about him?

I find that these narratives are not only informative but also emotionally resonant. As Lewis highlights the personal journeys of these individuals, he emphasizes their commitment to public service. This is particularly poignant in a society where such dedication is frequently overshadowed by cynicism and skepticism regarding government efficacy.

One reason he wrote the book, he says early on, is because: "Our government, as opposed to our elected officials, has no talent for telling its own story." This means, the people, like our students, must speak up for our institutions that make life livable for most Americans.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SERVICE

One of the book's central themes is the vital role that public servants play in society. Lewis underscores that these individuals are not just cogs in a bureaucratic machine; they are the backbone of a functioning democracy. The efforts they undertake—such as ensuring the provision of safe drinking water, regulating food safety, and safeguarding the environment—are critical to maintaining the health and well-being of the community. We can't live without these services if we want to preserve a good life for most Americans.

Unfortunately, in a time when many view government as a necessary evil, or even unnecessary to people like the richest man on

Earth, Elon Musk, the book serves as a reminder of the importance of investing in public service. The book argues that the effectiveness of government hinges on the dedication and expertise of its employees. Lewis adeptly illustrates how cutting resources or dismantling agencies doesn't just impact bureaucratic efficiency; it compromises the lives of everyday citizens.

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

What I find most important here is that Lewis's writing goes beyond simply illuminating the roles of federal employees; it actively confronts stereotypes that often cloud public perception. As he states, "My own ambition for this book was that it would subvert the stereotype of the civil servant. The typecasting has always been lazy and stupid, but increasingly, it's deadly."

The book's story of various public servants reveals that government workers are not merely faceless bureaucrats; they are individuals driven by a sense of responsibility and purpose. Each chapter is a powerful rebuttal to the notion that public service is synonymous with inefficiency or waste.

For instance, Lewis profiles Heather Stone, a woman at the Food and Drug Administration who tracks exotic diseases. Her work saved lives, demonstrating that behind every regulation is a person committed to safeguarding public health. Such stories function as a counter-narrative to the simplistic and often negative portrayals of government workers that dominate public discourse.

A CALL TO ACTION

Who Is Government? is not merely a collection of essays on public servants; it is a clarion call for renewed respect and support for public service. Lewis implores readers to recognize the vital contributions of those who work for the common good. He challenges us to rethink our relationship with government, urging a more nuanced understanding of its complexities and challenges.

I like how he uses a patriotic quote to challenge the public to serve, right before the introduction, by former President John F. Kennedy: “Let the public service be a proud and lively career. And let every man and woman who works in any area of our national government, in any branch at any level, be able to say with pride and with honor in future years: ‘I served the United States Government in that hour of our nation’s need.’”

The book poses critical questions: What would happen if these roles were eliminated? How would society function without the oversight and dedication of these workers? These inquiries force readers to confront the reality that public service is not just a job; it is a calling that impacts millions of lives.

I also find that it is a timely testament to showcasing the importance of government work, even if it needs reform. And yet it is currently being sabotaged in the name of “waste, fraud, and abuse.” DODGE found only a fraction of what they alleged, since they found less than \$200 billion, which represents a tenth of their goal. And what they found was questionable at best.

A RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

This book is particularly valuable as a supplemental text for students studying the evergreen political science staple American Government, or more specifically, an introduction to public administration. It offers insights that can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, encouraging students to see the real-world implications of their studies. By showcasing relatable stories of public servants, Lewis makes the case for public service as a viable and noble career path. In an era when the need for dedicated individuals in public roles is more urgent than ever, *Who Is Government?* It is a book that functions as an inspiring guide for aspiring political science majors and public administration students.

Understanding the nuances of public service can motivate students to engage more deeply with their coursework and consider careers where they can make a tangible difference. The narratives presented in this book can serve as both inspiration and a roadmap for those looking to contribute meaningfully to society as a kind of career guide through learning about current federal governmental roles. It reminds me of how, in Lewis’s chapter “The Searchers,” Dave Eggers found his calling at NASA. While he wasn’t wowed by the surrounding aesthetics of Pasadena’s Jet Propulsion Lab campus, he found it to be “the most inspiring research and exploration being done by any humans on our planet.”

A NARRATIVE RICH IN HUMANITY

One of the key strengths of Lewis’s work lies in its narrative style. His ability to humanize the subjects, coupled with engaging storytelling, makes the book both accessible and thought-provoking. I was drawn into the lives of these public servants, experiencing their triumphs and struggles firsthand. This intimate approach fosters empathy and understanding, encouraging a reevaluation of how we view government workers.

Lewis’s writing is infused with a sense of urgency, making it clear that the stories of these individuals are not just important, they are essential. Their work shapes the fabric of society, and by highlighting their contributions, Lewis invites readers to appreciate the often-invisible scaffolding that supports our daily lives.

Ultimately, this book is a celebration of the spirit of service. It challenges us to recognize the significance of government in our lives and to appreciate the extraordinary efforts of those who work to make our society better. As we navigate the complexities of modern governance, Lewis’s work serves as both an inspiration and a call to action, reminding us that the heart of democracy lies in the hands of its public servants.

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