

Chapter 39

Defense Acquisition, Public Administration, and Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the relationship of U.S. defense management to public administration. It argues that public administration, as a field of study, plays a minor role in defense acquisition, because acquisition has unique characteristics that separate it from the mainstream of the field. The tenuous connections between acquisition and public administration have led to an issue of academic legitimacy in that the discipline has failed to respond to the needs of acquisition professionals. The chapter then presents a discussion and illustration of philosophical pragmatism as a potential contribution of administrative theory to acquisition practice, and it concludes with thoughts on the potential for acquisition to adopt pragmatism as a guiding way for thought and practice.

INTRODUCTION: THE ACQUISITION-PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION GAP

In American scholarship, a poor fit has long existed between studies of the military and the field of public administration (PA). In a *Public Administration Review* section on national security, Jefferies (1977) noted a dearth of scholarly publications on defense matters and attributed it to several factors: first, a civilianizing tendency in the military which gives it a preference for the techniques of business; second, the unique nature of the military ethic and the military profession that sets its members apart from the rest of the public service; and third, a perception from mainstream PA that military matters are unique and separate in many ways (e.g. the armed forces should be studied as an instrument of foreign policy rather than as a participant in domestic administration). Mayer and Khademian (1996) argued that the disciplinary gap between students of PA and students of the American military was the result of scholars' often implicit assumptions that politics is and should remain separate from the formation of national security policy. Stever (1999) described this separation as a glass firewall that was erected as early twentieth century administrative theory developed under Progressive state theory that failed to include the military realm.

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Interestingly, Jefferies (1977) and Mayer and Khademian (1996) use the same particular activity, defense acquisition, to suggest how the gap might be bridged. Jefferies demonstrates the mutuality between defense and public administration by discussing first, the political roles played by military officers in dealing with Congress on acquisition issues, and second, the pervasiveness of government contracting in acquisition. He argues that the central issue of government contracting is not one of method or technique that is unique to the military, but rather is a much broader one that deals with the proper role of government in a democracy: “Does the government adequately develop and maintain policy direction and control over private organizations performing under contract, or do private organizations unduly influence government policy?” (1977, p. 331). Mayer and Khademian agree, asserting that defense acquisition “embodies exactly the same accountability and control problems that exist in every other area of government administration” (1996, p. 187).

Notwithstanding these arguments, the gap persists. Snider and Rendon (2012) and Shaffer and Snider (2014) have documented a continuing lack of attention within PA to public procurement in general and to defense acquisition in particular. Thus, calls for PA to pay increased attention to defense acquisition apparently have not worked.

This chapter takes a different tack in arguing that the gap may be due to defense acquisition (hereafter, ‘acquisition’) paying little or no attention to PA as a field of study. That is, acquisition professionals see at best only tenuous connections between their enterprise and PA. Essentially, the divide between acquisition and PA as described here has its roots in an issue of academic legitimacy, which arises when a discipline’s “agreed-upon bases of theory fail to respond to the needs of actors in the field” (Denhardt, 1984, p. 150).

This chapter addresses this condition in two ways. The first part of the chapter describes three main characteristics or dimensions of acquisition which have precluded PA from influencing it to a greater extent: first, acquisition is managed and controlled by the military; second, the disciplines of engineering and business are more highly valued than PA in acquisition education; and third, acquisition is largely atheoretical and practice-oriented (Shaffer and Snider, 2014). This discussion indicates the unique context of acquisition which lends to its professionals the perception that PA has little to offer as a guiding field of theory and practice. The second part of the chapter describes philosophical pragmatism, which has recently experienced a revival in PA thought, and which offers to acquisition professionals a potentially viable and promising alternative to respond to their needs. Possible ways in which pragmatism might transform acquisition practice are discussed. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on the difficulty in moving acquisition, and PA in general, towards more widespread reliance on pragmatic approaches.

REASONS WHY ACQUISITION PAYS LITTLE ATTENTION TO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

- **Acquisition as a Military Function:** Acquisition is configured as a distinctly military rather than an administrative function in at least two significant ways. First, the locus of acquisition is within the military services, that is, within the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Second, the great majority of acquisition administrators who hold key program manager (PM) positions are uniformed officers.
- **Control by the Services:** For the most part, the management of contemporary acquisition is controlled within the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. In a sense, not much has changed in this respect since the nation’s founding. Until 1947 when the Department of Defense

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