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# **Commentary on Demons, Spirits, and Elephants**

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A brief commentary on Melvin Dubnick's (2018) article: "Demons, Spirits, and Elephants: Reflections on the Failure of Public Administration Theory."

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I was one of a few fortunate audience members who was in the American Political Science Association panel at which Mel Dubnick (1999) presented the first version of this paper almost 20 years ago to a stunned audience. With the passage of time the critique seems less stinging and the arguments less controversial, but at the time this was a radical critique of contemporary public administration theory and research, and of its leading scholars. This helps explain why it has not been published in its entirety before now.

Dubnick's (2018) reflection on the state of public administration theory at the turn of the century makes us aware of how much progress has been made in developing the disciplinary identity of the field, yet there are numerous critical observations and insights and that ring true today.

Today, I see much more consensus on the role of public administration as a social science. The prominent role of behavioral public administration and the wide use of experimental research designs would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. Yet rise of behaviorist public administration also highlights divisions with the discipline and the lack of "bridging concepts" (Moynihan, 2018, p. 4) and middle range theory to connect micro and macro level analyses.

Since that memorable presentation at the American Political Science Association conference, I have required first year doctoral students in my "Logics of Inquiry" seminar at Florida State University to read this paper and it inevitably produces animated debate and discussion. Now that it is in print and accessible to a wide audience, I hope and anticipate it will become a standard reading for such courses. I know of no more insightful depiction of the Simon-Waldo debate and its impact than Dubnick provides. Given the extensive historical account of the debate and competing approaches of Simon and Waldo, this essay should find a place in coursework on the intellectual history of public administration.

I have long felt this is an important work that should be more widely read and hope that this publication will realize that aspiration.

### **Disclosure Statement**

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research authorship, or publication of this article.

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**Richard C. Feiock** is a National Academy of Public Administration fellow, and member of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Board of Scientific Counselors. He holds the Jerry Collins Eminent Scholar Endowed Chair at Florida State University and is the founding director of the FSU Local Governance Research Laboratory. Feiock has been principal investigator on six National Science Foundation awards, published five books, and authored or co-authored 170 refereed articles.