

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition. On the left, a white triangular shape contains the text. The rest of the background is a mix of red, green, and black. A large, black, stylized frying pan is positioned in the upper left. To its right, a green, stylized figure is depicted in a dynamic, almost dancing pose. At the bottom, there are stylized flames in yellow and black. The overall aesthetic is modern and graphic.

The Looming Post-Covid Confrontation with History: From Frying-Pan to Fire?

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No Relief in Sight

- ▶ No specific expertise in public human relations management, but a prediction:
- ▶ Surviving the Covid pandemic is not a “get out of jail free” card
- ▶ Broader historical issues that may have receded during the immediacy of the crisis will in all likelihood re-emerge



Five Historical Challenges

- ▶ Specifically, in roughly historical order:
- ▶ Association with the needs of central governmental power
- ▶ Relation to democratization
- ▶ Professionalization in terms of meritocracy
- ▶ Built-in tension between the “public” and individualism
- ▶ Impact of identity politics



Power: Civil Service and Government in the West

- ▶ Public administration from its origins conceived as instrument of governmental power
- ▶ Even when power directly served the public good as well, the goal was to underscore the divine beneficence of a leader for his subjects
- ▶ The most common role of public administration was in collecting taxes to honor the ruler and to pay for armies



Power: Civil Service and Government in East Asia

- ▶ Ancient Roman tax collectors received no training nor bore any specific status
- ▶ Chinese empire very different, with trained civil service selected on the basis of competitive examinations
- ▶ Song Dynasty system a counterweight to decentralizing centrifugal forces. The civil service gained in authority and prestige because it was an instrument of the emperor's power, and no one else's



Power: Civil Service and Government the Early Modern West

- ▶ Only in Late Middle Ages did European governments again begin to rely on taxes and renew the tradition of public administration
- ▶ Centralizing European states integrated the emerging civil service into the central power structure, rewarding supporters as “placemen”
- ▶ Opposition to placemen would make the rebellious colonists suspicious of public administration controlled by the central government



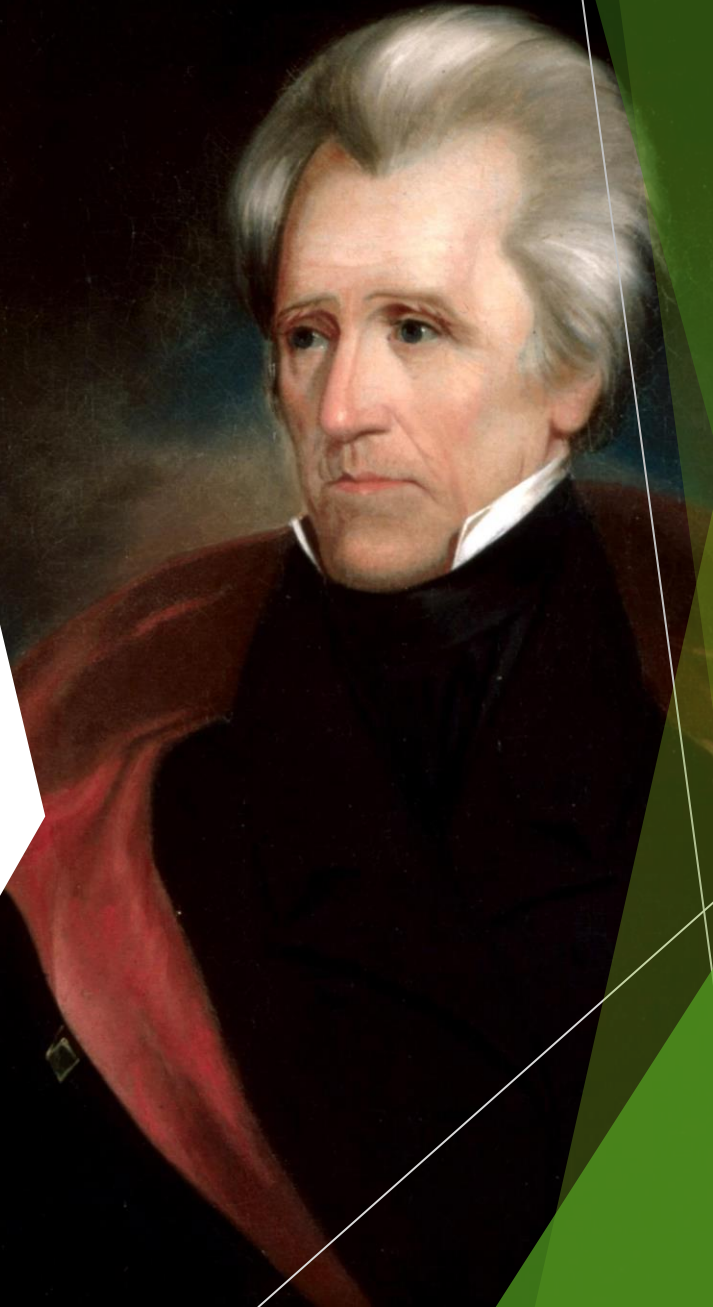
Power: Civil Service and Government Power Today

- ▶ As authority and power of the government spread with the welfare state, so too did suspicions of government employees
- ▶ Especially in U.S.: conspiracy theories about the Deep State, reactions to search of Trump's residence in Mar-a-Lago
- ▶ Association of civil service with government power remains a possible threat to public administration in all democratic societies



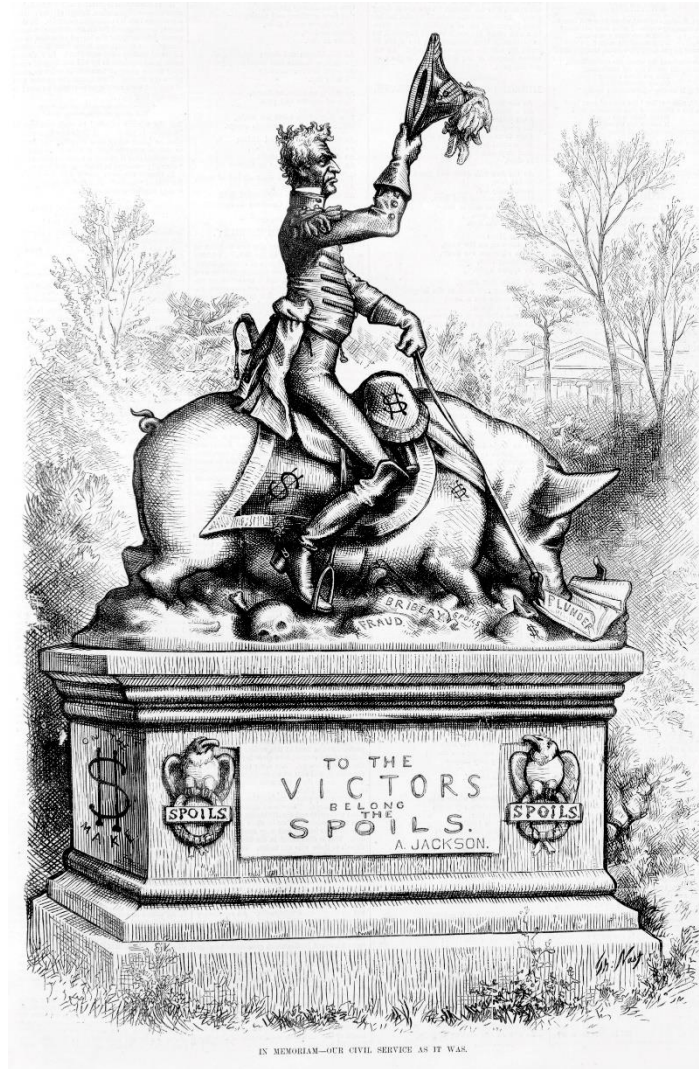
Democracy: America Poses the Problem, I

- ▶ Most American Founding Fathers assumed that well-educated, public-minded civil servants would run the apparatus of government. Didn't anticipate democratic revolution
- ▶ Alexis de Tocqueville: “nothing is more striking to a European traveler in the United States than the absence of what we term the Government, or the Administration”
- ▶ Andrew Jackson: “The duties of public office are so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance; and I cannot but believe that more is lost by the long continuance of men in office than is generally to be gained by their experience”



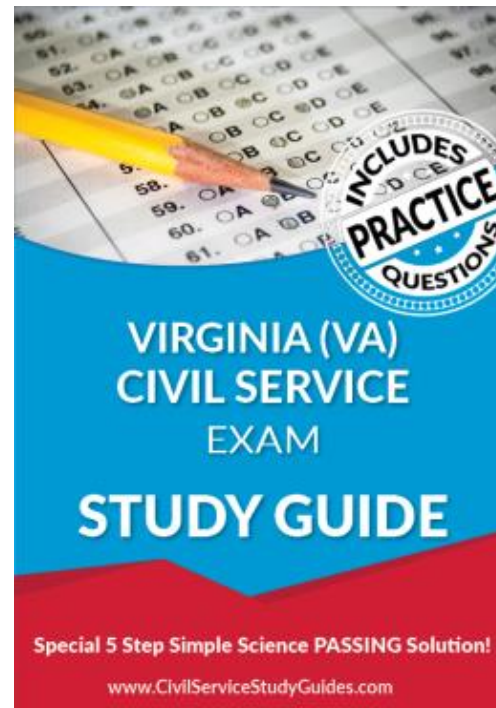
Democracy: America Poses the Problem, II

- ▶ Tocqueville again: “In the United States the democracy perpetually raises fresh individuals to the conduct of public affairs; and the measures of the administration are consequently seldom regulated by the strict rules of consistency or of order”
- ▶ Rotation of office + party politics = “spoils system,” using public offices rewards for service to the party. “To the victor belong the spoils”



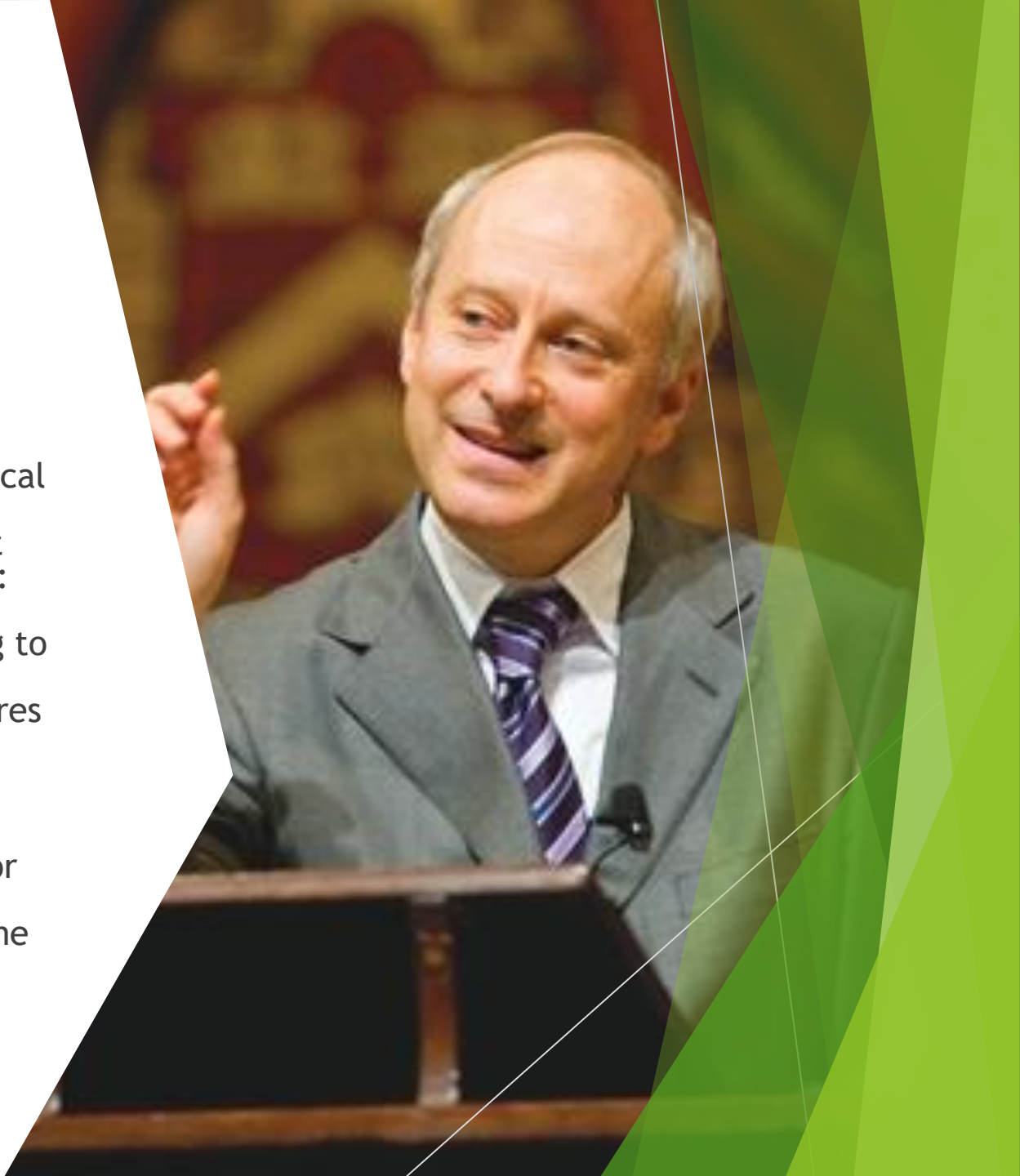
Professionalization: The Forced Choice

- ▶ Reformers intent on substituting, in name of efficiency, a permanent, professional civil service selected on the basis of civil service exams
- ▶ Some advocates hope that professionalization would displace democracy in government
- ▶ In China the goal had been to centralize power and authority by democratizing access to office on the basis of knowledge; in the United States it was take power away from the country's democratic new rulers



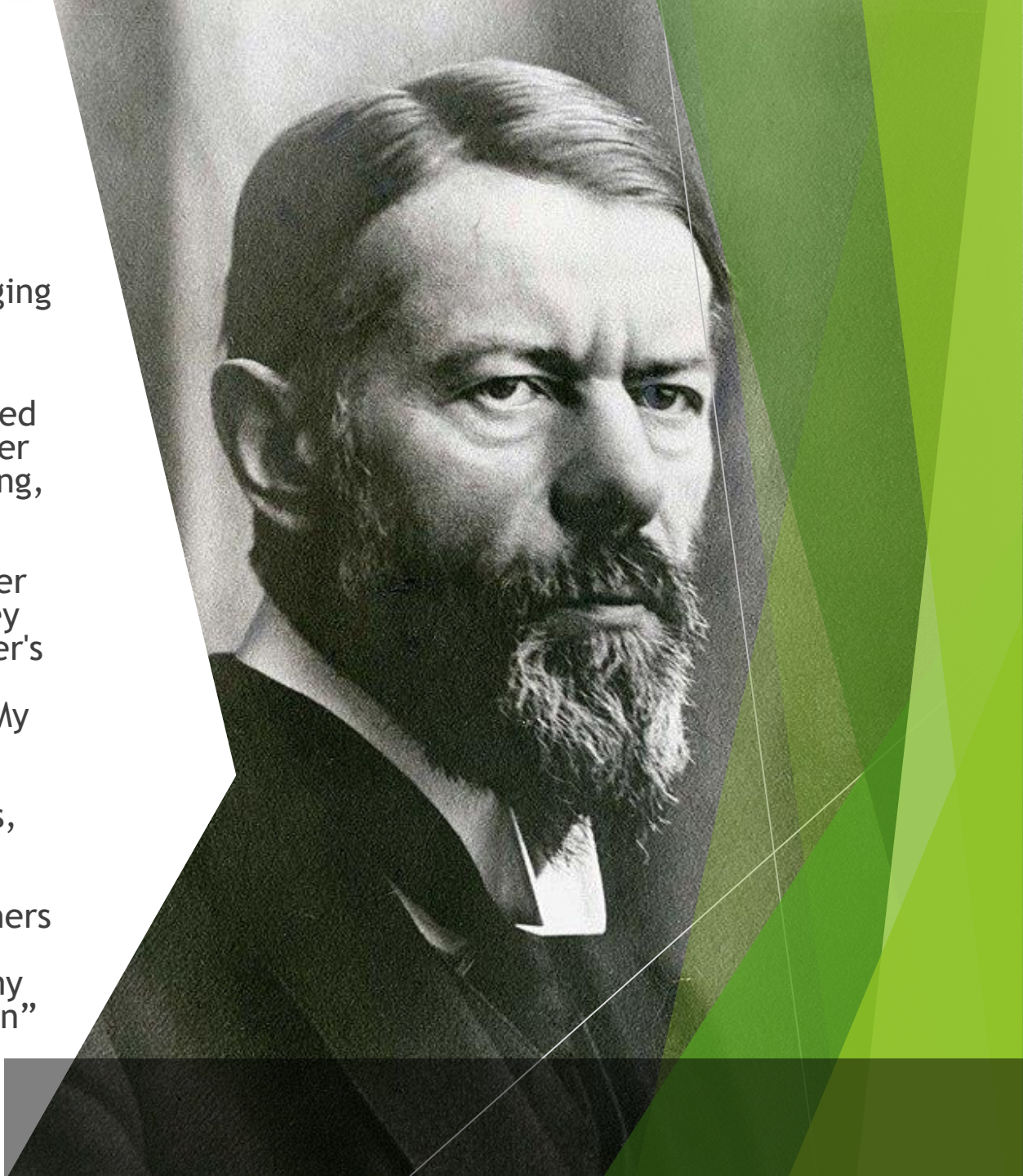
Professionalization: The Problem of Meritocracy

- ▶ The cost: enduring if usually subterranean tension between democracy and professionalized meritocracy
- ▶ May re-emerge in political discourse. One sign, Michael Sandel's recent critique of meritocracy: "Allocating jobs and opportunities according to merit does not reduce inequality; it reconfigures inequality to align with ability," with equally undesirable results
- ▶ Selection procedures for professional public administrators may come under increasing examination



The Public and the Individual: Origins

- ▶ Max Weber analyses of bureaucracy part of emerging social sciences 1870-1920 studying social, public life
- ▶ Old individualism considered obsolete. E. A. Ross: “Under our present manner of living, how many of my vital interests I must intrust to others! Nowadays the water main is my well, the trolley car my carriage, the banker's safe my old stocking, the policeman's billy my fist. My own eyes and nose and judgment defer to the inspector of food, or drugs, or gas, or factories, or tenements, or insurance companies. I rely upon others to look after my drains, invest my savings, nurse my sick, and teach my children”
- ▶ All public government officials



The Public and the Individual: Public Health

- ▶ Golden Age of public administration 1900-1920. Civil service scope broadened, with supportive intellectual infrastructure viewing government as embodiment of society
- ▶ Symbol of this: public health embedded within civil service
- ▶ Example: understanding of public nature of diseases like typhoid, and role played by Mary Mallon (“Typhoid Mary”)



The Public and the Individual: The Enduring Tension

- ▶ Yet elevation of the public could depress status of individual, role of individual rights
 - ▶ Slow start for civil rights
 - ▶ Backlash against treatment of Typhoid Mary
- ▶ This tension would never go away. Signposts for Individual and Society too often seem to point in opposite directions



Identity Politics: The Origins

- ▶ In democratic politics of the 1960s and later, group identity a statement of equality after centuries or even millennia of marginalization. Cries for diversity in workplace, including public administration
- ▶ But zero-sum nature of jobs: if one person held a position, no one else could. Excluded individuals can feel victimized by competitors from groups preferred as offering greater diversity
- ▶ Public administration has been partly shielded, but may lose protection



Identity Politics: The Role of Public Administration

- ▶ Identities often intertwined with conflicting commitments of modernizing societies
- ▶ Example: reactions to women's ministries created in many countries to focus on the needs of women. Other gender, traditionalists resentful of government solicitation shown to women
- ▶ Result: removal or downgrading of women's ministries, as when the Taliban assumed power again in Afghanistan



Sign on a government building in Kabul announcing Afghanistan's new Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, replacing its Ministry for Women's Affairs

Final Thoughts

- ▶ No answers
- ▶ Just a prediction: because the past of public human resources management has never left us, we will be dealing with it for generations to come
- ▶ The necessary first step: understanding and acknowledging the kind of test we're taking here - the kind of challenge that is facing us

