

Book Review

The Ethics of Dissent: Managing Guerrilla Government

Rosemary O'Leary
(CQ Press, 160 pp., \$29.95)

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Rosemary O'Leary's *The Ethics of Dissent: Managing Guerrilla Government* (2006) describes any manager's worst fear: mutiny among the staff that he or she supervises. Her book identifies bureaucratic sabotage in federal government agencies by dissenting career officials, termed "guerrillas" due to their covert techniques. Focusing on three primary case studies supplemented by twenty-one different supporting vignettes, O'Leary illustrates working conditions that can incite resistance among staff, strategies disgruntled employees may use to mount a resistance, and techniques that leaders can adopt to prevent such movements from boiling over in the first place. In many ways, her book is about recognizing and responding to the informal relationships that underlie the staff hierarchies of any organization, government or private.

O'Leary blames the formal and informal structures of government for causing dissent in the ranks. Much of the problem, it seems, originates from the premise that bureaucracies are not policy-making organs but exist to "implement the will of the people as mandated by legislation enacted by elected representatives" under the direction of supervisory political appointees (O'Leary 2006, 94). Disagreement over the direction or speed of policy implementation engenders friction between lower-level career officials and

the bureaucracy's management, resulting in conflict between alternate and established approaches to policy administration. For O'Leary, "the majority of guerrilla government cases" stem from "the manifestation of inevitable tensions between bureaucracy and democracy" (3). In this sense, the structure of the modern administrative state itself fosters conflict.

But the corporate structure of contemporary government is not entirely to blame for this clash; managers' actions can foster conflict, too. Supervisors who "ignore, discount, or even ridicule information to the contrary" may leave staff with the belief that there is no forum within their organization for them to criticize policy implementation, forcing them to turn elsewhere (O'Leary 2006, 7). O'Leary found that "guerrilla activity typically happens when there is a lack of trust, fear of retaliation, and when employees are rebuffed by superiors" (43). One forest ranger cited in the text, for example, was driven to guerrilla tactics when he felt his supervisors discredited his concerns with environmental degradation in his park. Another group profiled in the book claimed they were driven to establish partners outside of their agency when it became clear that the "goal of protecting the wetlands would never be achieved by working within [their] own bureaucracy" (28). Both stories explain how frustrated bureaucrats can work outside the chain of command when they believe that their legitimate concerns are denigrated.

O'Leary also examines the importance of personal morality and how it affects an individual's willingness to resist a supervisor. Biologists mentioned in the Department of the Interior, for example, saw protecting wetlands in Nevada as an environmental concern of utmost importance. They were "outrage[d] at the perceived, actual, or potential harm caused by their agencies' policies. Each one expressed being driven by a personal sense of what is right" (O'Leary 2006, 100). Examples like these reveal how personal convictions can inspire bureaucrats to challenge policies imposed on them from above.

To be sure, justifying the actions of guerrillas based on their own distinct value systems creates the problem of deciding whose ethics are right. Even if it sometimes is legitimate (or even noble) to "fight the power," not all of

the guerrillas profiled in O'Leary's text should be applauded. As she notes, some of them clearly crossed over the line to unethical behavior (O'Leary 2006, 95). What O'Leary teaches, however, is that consideration of ethics reveals how important personal values are in the workplace, especially in public sector organizations. People who work for government programs are often driven by personal ideals, such as serving the public or defending the environment, and they see their employment as a means to carry out their beliefs. O'Leary's cases demonstrate how important it is for managers to be aware of and to consider these values throughout their work.

The consequence of failing to recognize these values, her stories reveal, is that lower-level officials may use whatever internal or external influence they have to advance their own view of the agency's proper agenda. Like other scholars writing on the integration of political decision making in government bureaucracies (Appleby 1949; Long 1949; Lipsky 1980; Huber 2000; Scholz 1991), O'Leary demonstrates how officials at all levels of bureaucracies play important roles in shaping policy outcomes. Similar to Michael Lipsky's (1980) descriptions of "street-level bureaucrats," O'Leary's cases reveal the importance of staff discretion at the micro level of organizations. Her book explains how career officials, at almost every bureaucratic level, necessarily have *some* discretion about how to implement the agency's mission. This ensures that a career employee inevitably will have *some* room to substitute his or her own values for the "policy statements and declared objectives of the leadership" (O'Leary 2006, 12).

This idea—that employees throughout an agency have at least some influence on the implementation of policy—shows the fallacy of assuming that the political process can control every detail of policies implemented by government bureaucracies. Instead, O'Leary's cases show that political appointees can be circumvented, supervisors can be excluded from decision-making processes, and informal alliances among staff can be formed despite the expectations of those in the highest levels of their organizations. How are these alliances formed? Much as they are in any other venue: guerrillas ally with interest groups and like-minded colleagues, they publicize their issues in the national and local press, and they lobby elected officials to take

their side on legislative issues. In short, guerillas use the same legitimate steps that political officials use to reach an external audience; they just do it without authorization.

One of the great values of this book is that it identifies how supervisor-employee relationships can spin out of control and how policy disagreements can transform from quiet dissent to open revolt. Since many of the individuals profiled in the book engage in behavior that could have gotten them fired from their positions, their stories give a rare glimpse of what can bubble beneath the cracks of organizations far below the eyes of those who supervise them.

The concluding chapters of the book also offer managers practical advice for identifying and confronting dissent among their staff. For O'Leary, "dissent, when managed properly, [is] not only positive but essential to a healthy population" (104). Her point is that organizations need channels of communication to ensure that employees can express their personal viewpoints, even when they are at odds with agency policies. Her conflict-resolution recommendations thus address the inherent tensions between bureaucracy and democracy by suggesting a method to bring more debate and discussion to the bureaucratic decision-making process.

One area that deserves further research, however, is how to improve responsiveness to the public in policy implementation. O'Leary's cases of staff dissent demonstrate that even when lower-level staff influenced agency outcomes, the results were not always what the public wanted. It was unclear if "government guerrillas profiled in this book act[ed] in ways that can be deemed accountable and responsive to the public" (O'Leary 2006, 94). O'Leary's approaches to conflict resolution offer methods to improve communication among staff within the halls of bureaucracies but she mentions little about how the public interest is included in these debates. It remains unclear if the tension between democracy and bureaucracy can be lessened through policy debates among bureaucrats alone or if communication channels should be extended to include the public as well.

Furthermore, additional research could be conducted on the existence or potential for guerrilla activity in a wider spectrum of government agen-

cies. O'Leary's three primary examples involve agencies concerned with environmental issues: the Department of the Interior, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Forest Service. To understand the full potentials of staff dissent, it would be beneficial to further elaborate on the twenty-one supplemental cases provided or to investigate guerrilla activity in other government departments. Departure from policy priorities in agencies involved in national security, for example, could cause catastrophes and even place people's lives in jeopardy (O'Leary 2006, 108).

However one chooses to sympathize with the guerrillas profiled in O'Leary's book, her text brings to light actions that are rarely talked about in organizations. She exposes the relationships that never show up on organizational charts and the impacts that these alliances can have over an organization's outcomes. Her conflict resolution strategies also provide a guide for recognizing and confronting these acts before they gain too much momentum. Anyone in a leadership position is sure to take interest in O'Leary's tales of guerrilla government.

References

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