

# INTELLECTUAL WASHINGTON TODAY

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Intellectual Washington Today

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### Abstract



In a *Washington Post* editorial thirty years ago, Amitai Etzioni described how Washington, D.C. was becoming an intellectual city. Previously, Washington was viewed as the home of the national government, journalism, lawyers, and lobbyists but not as an academic or intellectual city. However, Etzioni claimed that Washington had become a policy and scientific powerhouse as a result not only of its growing and improving universities and their research institutes, but also because of its federal agencies, think tanks, and policy research organizations. This article reviews the points made by Etzioni and examines the situation today.

### Introduction

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**, is a city with many ironic descriptions. It is often described as the Northern-most Southern city. John F. Kennedy said it was a city of Northern charm and Southern efficiency. It has been called a city full of former student body presidents, and a city consisting of residents who come from somewhere else. Currently Washington may be known as a city of politicians, interns, diplomats, and bloggers. It is not often thought of as a scientific city or an intellectual city. However, Washington has been growing and changing. As the nation becomes increasingly a post-industrial society, Washington is becoming a leader in new types of organizations and new kinds of jobs.

### A Description of Washington 30 Years Ago

To explain the purpose of an editorial he contributed to the *Washington Post* in the Spring of 1985, Amitai Etzioni said that people sometimes asked him why he had moved from Columbia University to Washington, D.C., which previously had not had a reputation as a source of innovative ideas. He wrote that the Washington Metropolitan University — the combination of universities, policy research institutes, and government agencies — “easily matches the intellectual vigor of contemporary London,” and that it had “almost as many little magazines (where intellectuals float new ideas) and writers-in-residence as the Left Bank of Paris.”

Etzioni pointed out that several new research organizations had been added to the D.C. area prior to 1985: the Roosevelt Center, the Center for National Policy, and the Cato Institute.

He also noted that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) did more research in biology and related disciplines than was conducted at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia and Brown combined.

Major research centers in economics could be found in the World Bank, the Federal Reserve Board, and the Congressional Budget Office.

The natural sciences were strong in the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and the Department of Defense (DOD).

Etzioni made a distinction between academics who were deep scholars of narrow topics and intellectuals who took a broader perspective on the direction of American society and trends in literature and the arts. He claimed that many intellectuals had moved to D.C. because they found the academic abundance congenial.

Etzioni also noted that academics and intellectuals communicated with each other not only in seminars, but also in magazines that stimulated new ideas. As just a few of these published in D.C., he listed:

- *The Wilson Quarterly*,
- the American Enterprise Institute's *Public Opinion*,
- *Regulation*, which reports on the effects of government intervention,
- *The Cato Journal*, and
- *Foreign Policy* magazine, then a new competitor to *Foreign Affairs*, published in New York.

Etzioni further noted that *Science* magazine was the nation's leading journal of science, and that the National Academy of Sciences published *Issues in Science and Technology* (both products of D.C.) Finally, he noted that Washington provides numerous television news and discussion programs to the nation.

As an academic and intellectual city, how has Washington progressed since 1985?

### **Many Universities in Washington**

There has been continued growth and improvement in universities, particularly the growth of George Mason University since it became independent in 1972.

The familiar Washington, D.C., universities — American University, Catholic University, Georgetown University, George Washington University, Howard University, Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, the University of Maryland, Marymount University, and the University of the District of Columbia — are all prospering.

Several well-established universities, for example George Washington University and the University of Maryland, now have buildings in several parts of the city. These locations provide classes more conveniently to students but also conduct research, as does George Washington University's Virginia Science and Technology Campus in close-by Ashburn, Virginia.

Universities based in other cities also have a presence in the Washington area. For example, Cornell University, New York University, Syracuse University, Pepperdine University, and Virginia Tech are all here.

Clearly universities find it desirable to have a connection to Washington, D.C.

### **The Growth of Information-Based Activities**

The information intensive activities of the federal government have also expanded greatly since 30 years ago. A few examples of such activities in the Washington area are the following:

- The National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, has become the center of a “cyber valley” in the Baltimore-Washington corridor. [Schiff, 2013]
- The Dulles access toll road in northern Virginia contains the expanded “beltway” contracting firms and information services firms such as AOL.
- The Route 270 corridor in Maryland just north of D.C. continues to be the home for biological research, with key institutions being NIH, the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and Bethesda Naval Medical Center.
- Research programs, administered at NASA Headquarters and the Goddard Space Flight Center in nearby Greenbelt, Maryland, have made fundamental contributions to improving weather forecasting, to earth science, and to our understanding of climate change. NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope has dramatically advanced our understanding of the cosmos.
- The number of patents issued by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, in the past twenty years has more than tripled, from 113,268 in 1994 to 329,613 in 2014. [USPTO, 2015] The USPTO now has not only a new building but a new campus in Alexandria, just south of D.C.

Washington is definitely a leader in applications of information technology. The Internet, an outgrowth of an earlier DOD research project, has transformed business, government and personal communication in recent years. The D.C. area’s knowledge workers now spend hours each day in “cyberspace” and the contents of filing cabinets are now “in the cloud” with both positive and negative consequences. Cybersecurity is a leading domestic and international concern and “identity theft” is a new worry for private citizens.

The *Washington Post* is now owned by Amazon.com. Many newspapers have gone out of business. There are now numerous blogs written by former journalists.

### **Improving Management in Government and Business**

In the years since Etzioni wrote his article, there have been many changes in the federal government which have transformed both the practice of government in Washington and also influenced the management of corporations and state and local governments.

In 1987, Congress created the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Improvement Program aimed at improving the productivity of U.S. firms, which in the 1970s were having difficulty competing with Japanese manufacturers. The Baldrige National Quality Award was expanded to include education and health care organizations in 1999, and a government and non-profit category was added in 2007.

As an example of Washington's growing influence, a 1991 General Accounting Office report showed how the Baldrige Program companies increased their market share an annual average of 13.7 percent. [Garvin, 1991] Such a high growth rate meant that companies using quality improvement methods in just a few years bought or replaced companies not using these methods. A more recent study said that participating companies had an 820:1 ratio of benefits for the U.S. economy to program costs. [Link and Scott, 2012] To arrive at this ratio, they compared the benefits received by the 273 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award applicants from 2007 to 2010 with the cost of operating the Baldrige Program. The 820-to-1 ratio represents only the benefits for the surveyed applicants, but it represents all of the Baldrige Program's costs. Link and Scott note that the benefit-to-cost ratio would be much higher if program costs were compared with benefits for the entire U.S. economy.

Quality Improvement Methods were taken seriously by President Bill Clinton who appointed Vice President Al Gore to head the National Performance Review in 1993. This initiative had the goal of dramatically improving the performance of the federal government through a combination of process improvement methods and increased contracting as an alternative to larger government agencies.

In March 1998, the National Performance Review pointed to a number of important achievements, later presented in Kamensky [1999]:

- The size of the federal civilian workforce was cut by 351,000 — the smallest since President Kennedy held office and, as a percentage of the national workforce, the smallest since 1931.
- Action was recommended on about 1,500 issues in 1993 and 1995. Agencies completed about 58 percent. Of the original recommendations, 66 percent were reported as completed. For those requiring Presidential or Congressional action, President Clinton signed 46 directives and Congress passed and the President signed over 85 laws.
- About \$177 billion in savings were recommended over a 5-year period. Agencies locked into place about \$137 billion. In addition, as of March 1998, the process improvement award winners estimated savings or cost avoidances of about \$31 billion because of their actions.
- Agencies eliminated about 640,000 pages of internal rules, about 16,000 pages of Federal Regulations, and rewrote 31,000 additional pages into plain language.
- Agencies sponsored 850 labor-management partnerships. A 1998 survey of employees showed those in organizations that actively promoted reinvention were twice as satisfied with their jobs.
- Over 570 federal organizations had committed to more than 4,000 customer service standards.

Kamensky [1999] also reported that public trust in the federal government was increasing after a 30-year decline. While it was not clear whether this improvement was directly linked to the work of the National Performance Review, the Review made an important contribution.

## **The Use of Information in Policy-Making**

Who analyzes information and writes reports in the D.C. area has also been changing. Since Etzioni wrote his article, the Office of Technology Assessment was closed and the number of Congressional staff was significantly reduced during the time that Newt Gingrich was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. As a result, it can be said that the task of providing background information for legislation has been taken up by lobbying firms on K Street which often draft new legislation, a task previously performed by Congressional staff members. [Benen, 2011]

Also, political activity has moved from public demonstrations on the mall to campaign contributions and lobbying behind closed doors. It is harder now, in 2015, to know what changes in laws are occurring. Hedrick Smith [2012] in his recent book notes that when he was head of the Washington bureau of *The New York Times*, he did not realize that a series of laws and court decisions were fundamentally changing taxes and entitlement programs beginning in the late 1970s. Over time, these changes have led to a dramatic increase in inequality in the United States, which has affected all U.S. citizens.

### **Conclusion**

In his article 30 years ago, Amitai Etzioni focused primarily on the many policy research organizations in Washington. During his years as a professor at the George Washington University, Etzioni himself has made notable contributions to policy research and discussions. He created the Society for the Advancement of Socio-Economics and an academic journal, the *Journal for the Advancement of Socio-Economics*. He founded and leads the Communitarian Network, a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to supporting the moral, social and political foundations of society. He is currently Director of the Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies at George Washington University.

Of course not all of the information-related activities in the Washington area involve transformative policy analyses. Much of the work — for example, at the Patent Office and the National Security Agency — requires careful attention to detail. In the past 30 years, the number of information-related jobs in the Washington, D.C., area has increased dramatically.

However, large organizations that conduct these information processing activities create a demand for educated workers and, just as importantly, for additional innovations in handling information-related tasks. For this reason, several local universities have recently started degree programs in big data, data analytics, and cyber security.

The “post-industrial” society which has exploded in the D.C. area in the past 30 years has also been growing globally. Around the world, new universities are being established and are improving. In any event, Washington, D.C., is well-positioned to be a leading city in this post-industrial era.

Overall, the city-wide university that Etzioni described 30 years ago is a key player in defining and creating the nation and the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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