

Preface

The Conflict Behind the Cliché

It started as a challenge issued by President John F. Kennedy in 1961. If we can put a man on the moon before the Soviets, Kennedy reasoned, we can prove to the world that democracy works better than socialism. The race to the moon was a contest between two systems of government, and the question would be settled not by debate, but by who could best execute on this endeavor.

When Kennedy issued his challenge, the Soviets had a sizable head start in the space race. They had more powerful rockets, and cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had just become the first human in space. But America pulled together. In July of 1969, Neil Armstrong planted an American flag on the moon. In Moscow, Soviet officials could only glare at the sky and mutter in Russian.

Instantly, a new cliché entered the lexicon. If we can put a man on the moon, the saying went, then surely we can achieve anything we set our minds to. We had just overcome perhaps the most difficult scientific, administrative, and organizational challenge of all time, and the newly minted phrase expressed boundless confidence in the ability of our country and its government to successfully execute anything it attempted.

While Neil Armstrong was walking around on the moon, such confidence was understandable. In the preceding quarter century, democracy

had achieved a series of great triumphs. An alliance of democracies, with a belated assist from the Soviet Union, defeated Nazism, Fascism, and Imperialism in World War II. The free men and women of the Manhattan Project, including refugees from the autocratic regimes, split the atom. The Marshall Plan helped the democratic nations of Europe rebuild that war-torn continent. Democracy confronted its ideological opposite during the Berlin Airlift, the Korean War, and the Cuban missile crisis. America's booming economy and strong military showed that democracy could deliver both guns and butter. A track record of effective execution showed that democracy wasn't just morally superior to collectivism in a theoretical sense—it could actually get the job done as well. This was recognized at the time by the man who led NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration) to this great achievement, James Webb:

As astronauts walked the moon, Webb proclaimed to all who would listen that Apollo's real achievement lay in demonstrating that a democratic nation could outmanage an authoritarian state. He said that if the United States could go to the moon, it could solve its other public problems.¹

Events of the late 1960s tested this confidence, however. Critics pointed to urban poverty, racial strife, and a deteriorating situation in Vietnam as evidence that government “of the people” wasn't so capable after all. In August 1969, just three weeks after Neil Armstrong's lunar stroll, Richard Nixon became the first American president to cite the success of the Apollo program as proof of government's ability to execute when he unveiled his proposal for welfare reform to a skeptical nation:

We face an urban crisis, a social crisis—and at the same time a crisis of confidence in the capacity of government to do its job. . . It is no accident, therefore, that we find increasing skepticism—and not only among our young people, but among citizens everywhere—about the continuing capacity of government to master the challenges we face. . .

Abolishing poverty, putting an end to dependency—like reaching the moon a decade ago—may seem to be impossible. But in the spirit of Apollo we can lift our sights and marshal our best efforts.²

The lunar landing had become a rhetorical trump card—who would dare argue that American government wasn't capable after it had put a man on the moon?

The 1970s: From Pride to Malaise in a Decade

If we can put a man on the moon, why can't we put metal in the microwave?

—FRASIER CRANE, *CHEERS*

Unfortunately, the 1970s didn't exactly showcase government as a source of national pride. Nixon's welfare reform proposal came to naught and was followed by a series of disappointments: wage and price controls, Watergate, "Whip Inflation Now" buttons, defeat in Vietnam, an energy crisis, stagflation, the Iran hostage situation, and so on.

In July of 1979, President Jimmy Carter gave a nationally televised address on the mood of the nation. His famous (or infamous) malaise speech cited a "crisis of confidence" that threatened our faith in democracy:

Our people are losing that faith, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy . . . What you see too often in Washington and elsewhere around the country is a system of government that seems incapable of action. You see a Congress twisted and pulled in every direction by hundreds of well-financed and powerful special interests.³

Just as Nixon had done a decade earlier, President Carter then played the Apollo card. After all, said Carter, "We ourselves are the same Americans who just ten years ago put a man on the moon." By this point, the appeal fell on deaf ears. As Frasier Crane's question shows, the once proud boast about reaching the moon had morphed into a grumpy expression of frustration, often combined with a cruel taunt about the failure of our government: if we can put a man on the moon, why can't we fix our schools, or end poverty, or keep inflation under control?

In America, and in other western democracies, attitudes toward government had shifted. In his inaugural address in 1981, President Reagan starkly summarized the philosophy that had gotten him elected: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem. Government *is* the problem." Reagan's legendary optimism was reserved for America's people, not her government. In less than twenty years, boundless faith in the federal government's ability to solve problems—embodied by Kennedy's bet on the moon and by LBJ's Great Society—had yielded to skepticism

bordering on scorn. It was as if the success of the moon landing made the subsequent disappointments of the 1970s all the more difficult to swallow.

The Execution Imperative

We never should have landed a man on the moon. It's a mistake. Now everything is compared to that one accomplishment. "I can't believe they could land a man on the moon . . . and taste my coffee!"

—JERRY SEINFELD, COMEDIAN

Putting a man on the moon sets a high expectation of competence, and disappointment follows whenever government falls short of that mark. For example, in the months that followed the invasion of Iraq, America struggled to impose civil order—to the dismay of many Iraqis. As television journalist Charlie Rose put it, “When the United States arrived a lot of people were saying, ‘You know, this is the country that went to the moon, for gosh sakes, they know what to do.’”⁴

By 2008, poll after poll showed unprecedented levels of dissatisfaction with government. The reason was a litany of high-profile stumbles that made the 1970s look like the good old days: Iraq, Boston’s Big Dig, Hurricane Katrina and the drowning of New Orleans, Abu Ghraib, the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and the massive economic meltdown.

When we surveyed members of the Senior Executive Service, the elite ranks of federal managers, 60 percent said that government was *less capable* of executing large projects today than it was thirty years ago. Our survey of fellows of the National Academy of Public Administration echoed these views, with only 16 percent describing the federal government as proficient at designing policy that can actually be implemented. (See Appendixes B and C for more survey results.) Such dim assessments from those who have dedicated their careers to public service should be a wake-up call for anyone who cares about our democratic institutions.

Some have sought to pin the blame for all our problems on President George W. Bush. But George W. Bush cannot be blamed for wage and price controls, or the failed immigration reform bill of 1986, or the failure to enact health care reform in 1994. It’s hard to blame Bush for an

urban education crisis going into its fourth decade. As the quotes from presidents Nixon, Carter, and Reagan suggest, our execution struggles did not spring into being when George W. Bush took office in 2001.

There is indeed ample historical evidence that democratic governments can achieve great things. There is also ample evidence that democratic governments can fail in their attempts. The requirements for achieving great things are two simple but far from easy steps—wisely choosing which policies to pursue and then executing those policies. The difference between success and failure is execution.

This book is about executing large, important, public initiatives. We use a systems perspective to examine the misunderstood and underappreciated discipline of how democracies actually succeed or fail on large undertakings.

Visit any bookstore. Titles on policy, politics, and how to succeed in business abound. But you won't find many books that address the real-life challenge of executing in the public sector. Yet it is skillful execution that delivers the desired results, while faulty execution produces disastrous results.

The public failures that have plagued our recent history don't need to condemn its future. As this preface is being written in early 2009, the situation appears dire. Like leaders around the globe, newly elected president Barack Obama faces massive challenges. He inherits two wars, an economy in meltdown, and a fiscal tidal wave of red ink rushing toward us as entitlement spending threatens to swamp the federal government. Add to this the enduring policy challenges of immigration, health care, education, and the environment, and it quickly becomes apparent that there is no margin for error. Competent execution has never been more critical, in part because of government's unprecedented role in rescuing banks, auto makers, and state governments. Politicians face a groundswell of anger and distrust that is creating an unhealthy gulf between citizens and their government. Right now, neither the economy nor the treasury nor the citizenry have much tolerance for failure.

Without question, making sound policy choices is critical. Determining what government ought to do is of paramount importance in a democracy. Choose a destructive policy, and the most competent execution in the world won't help. By the same token, however, brilliant policies

poorly executed will likewise disappoint. This is not to imply that all our problems are merely technical in nature or that political beliefs are unimportant. But whatever your political beliefs, the execution challenge merits attention. Whether you're a liberal seeking universal health care or a conservative promoting greater choice in education, sound execution matters.

In taking the oath of office, President Obama, like the forty-three presidents who preceded him, promised to "faithfully execute the office of president." President Obama's inaugural address tried to strike a balance between the somber reality of our current circumstances and the hope for better days ahead. Like Kennedy, Obama came to office with bold plans, and had a message for the skeptics in the crowd who questioned the ability of American government to achieve these grand ambitions: "Their memories are short. For they have forgotten what this country has already done," said the new president. Like putting a man on the moon. Obama hasn't forgotten. His inaugural parade was the first in forty years to include astronauts, and also featured NASA's newest lunar rover prototype.⁵ Born in 1961, President Barack Obama has told of being a young boy, "sitting on my grandfather's shoulders and watching the Apollo astronauts come ashore in Hawaii. People cheered and waved small flags, and my grandfather explained with pride and assurance how we Americans could accomplish anything we set our minds to do."⁶

This book is about accomplishing what we set our minds to do. It doesn't present any easy answers because there are no easy answers. The journey to success in public sector undertakings is perilous, strewn with traps and snares that bedevil the efforts of the best and brightest.

This book is not about our past. It is about the future that we are about to create. Back when President Kennedy issued the challenge to go to the moon, success depended on execution. In the same way, our future success hinges on both wisdom in charting a course and excellence in carrying out that vision. Look to the moon for a reminder of what is possible. Let that achievement of forty years ago challenge us to create anew a nation capable of such triumphs. There is much work to be done.