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## *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs*

Vol. 8, No. 2

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# Meanings Matter: The Relationship Between Constitutional Values and Social Justice

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Social upheavals are punctuation marks in the progression toward social equity. The American democratic mythos has evolved since the first days of the republic. Those who were ‘in the room’ when the Constitution was signed drove the interests that were represented and protected. Those in the room now are different, infusing old words with new meanings. Today’s fissured political culture, combined with the ripple effects of a global pandemic, offer another upheaval and create the opportunity to impel social justice. The ongoing process of meaning-making transforms power and advantage. This essay urges public service professionals to adopt a message that champions the mythos while acknowledging lived reality.

Keywords: Regime Values, Social Equity, Historical Analysis, Linguistics

*Of course all words are just containers on some level, but that is really the point...Words are crafted by human beings, wielded by human beings. They take on all of our flaws and frailties. They diminish or embolden the truths they arose to carry. We drop and break them sometimes. We renew them, again and again (Tippett, 2016, p. 16).*

Public administration is responsive to the political community it serves. Truths are claimed and recast by whomever is ‘in the room.’ In the US, the Constitution is supposed to be the steadying influence as its words shape and constrain policies and programs. But the meanings of its words shift with the times, reflecting who has advantage. How can public administration revere the Constitution while simultaneously grappling with its contradictions? Beard (1936), Bearfield (2009), and Alexander and Stivers (2020), among others, have thought deeply about the paradoxes between constitutional liturgy and political reality. This article argues that these paradoxes exist because words that enshrine the American dream—freedom, liberty, equality, and justice—assume different meanings over time.

The administrative challenge is to honor constitutional traditions and a democratic republic while bearing in mind that the meaning of words evolves as the political community transforms from homogeneous to heterogeneous. Contemporary social problems and cries for social justice accelerate the challenge to broaden this community beyond those well-heeled

European American men who wrote the founding documents and created a political culture in their image.

Contrasting myth with reality, this argument traces how values are interpreted and re-interpreted during four eras of social tumult: the nation's founding in the 18th Century, the Civil War and Reconstruction in the 19th Century, the Civil Rights Era in the 20th Century, and the current era. Social change is accompanied by redefinition—meaning-making—of constitutional values; as meanings evolve, privilege shifts. The first section uses examples of executive actions to demonstrate how meanings evolve. The next section contrasts values attributed to the American democratic mythos to a more complex reality in which meanings evolve over time. Finally, the evolution of meaning in four eras of sweeping administrative change is unpacked by examining the primary narrative and counter-narratives. We conclude by connecting these eras of social upheaval to the present to offer lessons for administrators striving toward more just and equitable public service.

### **Meanings Are Levers of Change**

Meanings drive narratives and narratives justify administrative action. Voices heard or not heard, history remembered or aggressively forgotten, impact the shape of the narrative (Hannah-Jones, 2020). Abigail Adams' entreaty to her husband to 'remember the ladies' went unheeded as the Constitution was crafted (Roberts, 2005). It would not be until the 20th Century that women would be allowed to vote or have their civil rights protected. The men who wrote the founding documents revered freedom, liberty, equality, and justice for themselves, but the meanings of those words were not applied to enslaved persons, indigenous peoples, or women.

Meanings translate into rights and privileges, and from an economic standpoint, they translate into dollars. In 1864, it was thought progressive for women's salaries in federal jobs to be set at \$600 a year, about half that of men for similar work (Van Riper, 1958). Paying women half what men are paid is now unthinkable but paying them three-fourths what men earn is the norm. Today, to every White man's dollar earned, White women earn 78 cents, Black women earn 63 cents, and Latina women earn only 55 cents, despite the 1963 Equal Pay Act (Hegewisch & Tesfaselassie, 2020). The political/cultural meaning of equal is not the dictionary meaning of equal.

Despite passage of the Pendleton Act in 1883, a law designed to ensure that federal employees would be hired on the basis of merit and protected from discrimination, the administration of Woodrow Wilson purged African American employees (O'Reilly, 1997). One of President Eisenhower's earliest executive orders excluded lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) employees from federal employment because those with "sexual perversions" were thought to be security risks (Newland, 2015, p. 48). The list could go on. Interpretations of what is fair, who has privilege, and what 'equal' means, gets redefined and reinterpreted as a result of who is in the room. The words remain the same; their meanings change. Fast forward to today and #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, #StopAsianHate, LGBTQ Pride, and movements for environmental, racial, and immigrant justice stand in contrast to the Capitol mob of January 6, 2021. Social movements are contests over meanings.

Words are not the levers of change; meanings are, and they are reified through administrative actions. At the founding, the Constitution was not written to ensure inclusivity, rights, and freedoms for *all* people, despite what the words say. The fact is that the administrative state bends and expands to adjust to new meanings.

## **Mythos versus Reality**

The Greek word *mýthos* refers to the underlying system of inter-related beliefs that characterize a culture. Mythos provides meaning through narratives. The American democratic mythos is the origin story, offering a narrative arc and guiding beliefs about the nation's position in the world, its government, and its future. It is the story school children are taught about national ideals, founding principles, and exceptionalism.

The democratic mythos centers around concepts of freedom, liberty, equality, and justice. Mythos lulls Americans into complacency and conceals contradictions. Moreover, those who draw attention to this imperfect reality are castigated as radicals until altered meanings become the norm. While Americans uphold freedom as a principle, reality demonstrates that a *positive* vision of freedom—one in which individuals are free to pursue the American dream and to attain education, property, and wealth—is out of reach for most, as inequity and declining social mobility trend upward (Chetty et al., 2014). Although the U.S. has the highest level of inequality among G7 nations (Schaeffer, 2020), American norms do not treat this as contradictory to the meaning of equality. Rights of citizenship imply a one person, one vote standard, and yet this was far from the case at the founding, under the Black Codes, or today as voter suppression efforts persist and accelerate (Epperly et al., 2019; Gooden & Faulkner, 2020). While Americans pledge allegiance to liberty and justice for all, the justice system favors the wealthy and imprisons the poor (Alexander, 2020).

The contrast between constitutional litany and political reality exists because words that enshrine the American dream—freedom, liberty, equality, justice—assume different meanings over time, just as regime values evolve (Rohr, 1989). Table 1 shows how these value-laden words convey meanings at odds with the lived experience of many.

## **The Administrative State**

The administrative state took root in the nation's earliest years. For instance, the 1790 Indian Trade and Intercourse Act allowed broad administrative discretion in federal control of indigenous affairs. Drafted during Washington's administration, it gave deference to bureaucrats. Westward expansion forged a complicated bureaucracy that performed complex tasks in politically charged environments. Administrative decisions ultimately dispossessed and marginalized American Indians (Blackhawk, 2019). The interpretation of democracy's words was reflected in administrative actions then just as they are now.

Four eras punctuate the evolution of meanings: the nation's founding in the 18th Century, Reconstruction in the 19th Century, the Civil Rights Era in the 20th Century, and the post-COVID era (see Table 2). Narratives during these eras offer lessons for public service professionals who strive to make public services more just and equitable. Current contests over voting rights, policing practices, and critical race theory provide the newest context for showing how meanings evolve and how privilege shifts. Differences between narrative and counter-narrative reflect the contest for meanings.

Martin Luther King, Jr. borrowed his famous quote about the arc of the moral universe being long, but bending toward justice, from 19th-century abolitionist Theodore Parker (Block, 2010). That arc is the throughline that connects these eras. History teaches that narratives have counter-narratives, progress is possible only with deliberate action, and justice is always a work in progress. Each era teaches something about the contest between forces, as the following descriptions explain.

**Table 1.** Words, Mythos, and Contradictions

Word	American Democratic Mythos	Contradictions
Freedom	The quality or state of being free; the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice; liberation from the power of another	Differential levels of arrest and incarceration based on race and socio-economic status; laws that restrict women's freedoms while not affecting men's
Liberty	The power to do as one pleases; the positive enjoyment of social, political, and economic privileges; the power of choice	Choices are constrained by political and economic reality: the impact of immigrant status and zip code on educational and career opportunities and on health status
Equality	The quality or state of being equal; the extent to which persons have an equal voice over decisions that affect them	Unequal pay for equal work; voter disenfranchisement; labor versus management hierarchy; corporate power versus individual power
Justice	The impartial adjustment of conflicting claims	Justice system that disproportionately penalizes the poor and targets people of color

### Narrative 1: The Founding

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution contain lofty language of freedom, liberty, and justice. Those ideals were shrouded in White supremacy, applicable to the well-read, educated, landed, White male colonizers rather than *all* people. Those who crafted the documents were guided by the thinking of philosophers who were also bound to socioeconomic, racial, and gender privileges and hierarchies. For instance, John Locke had authored *Two Treatises of Government* (1698), from which Thomas Jefferson derived the call for life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Locke himself was a stockholder in the Royal African Company, which held a monopoly over the British trade in enslaved Africans (Isenberg, 2017).

Viewing governing as the province of those like themselves, the Framers were skeptical about the ability of ordinary people to govern themselves (Stivers, 2008; White, 1948). Governing was the province of the elite. Scholars of administrative constitutionalism argue that elected officers and public administrators were the ones who drove the interpretation and implementation of the Constitution and enacted the mythos, at least until the Civil War (Lee, 2019; Mashaw, 2012). Lee (2019) refutes the view that either the legislative or judicial branches played much of a role in meaning making in the early years: "For every congressional debate over...constitutionality...or presidential message on federal authority over the states, there were many more instances of ordinary administrators, from Secretaries of State down to local customs collectors, who decided what the Constitution meant in practice" (pp. 1714–1715). Thus, founding principles were reified primarily through public administrators: first the 'gentlemen' of the Federalist era, followed by the 'common men' of the Jacksonian era. The founding mythos they relied on was in service to a small, elite portion of the populace.

### Counter–Narrative

The Founding Fathers constructed a governmental system that ensured they would have dominion over their homes, their property, and their political lives. As Charles Beard (1913) asserted in his revisionist interpretation of the Founding, the Constitution incorporated protections for private property that served the economic interests of the Framers. Their property consisted of real estate, wives, and enslaved people. The Constitution was based on their worldview, one grounded in White supremacy and male privilege. To view founders as

**Table 2.** Eras, Narratives, and Counter-Narrative

Era	Narrative	Counter-Narrative
The Founding	Freedom, liberty, equality, and justice are primary motivations of the founding	Nation founded on white male hegemony, chattel slavery, and inequities that advantaged property owners
Reconstruction	Constitutional expansion of freedoms and equality reshaped federalism and promoted a more active federal government	The first experiment in multiracial democratic governance was short-lived; separate but equal laws and customs resulted in separate and unequal communities
The Civil Rights Era	Enshrining of equality, nondiscrimination, and expansion of freedoms and rights via legislation and judicial decisions pointed toward a more just nation	Explicit forms of discrimination were replaced with implicit forms; burdens are placed on the oppressed to file suit against the privileged
Post-COVID	Continued faith that civil rights laws and market dynamics will correct socioeconomic, health, housing, and education disparities	Citizen protests rebuke discrimination and economic inequality, giving rise to multiple movements: #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ Pride, #StopAsianHate, immigrant rights

purely motivated patriots and Founding documents as embodiments of democratic principles is to neglect a reality built on domination and economic exclusion (Brown, 2015; Zinn, 1980).

In many respects, the Constitution is silent on the subjects that are infused into it. When it was written, women were the property of their fathers and then their husbands; and enslaved people were minimized as three-fifths of a person. There was no confidence that ‘common men’ were competent to participate in matters of governance (Van Riper, 1958). And there are gross contradictions between words and actions. For instance, as Thomas Jefferson wrote of the “political and moral evil” of slavery in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (2006, p. 96), he enslaved hundreds of people at his plantation and opined about their physical, mental, and moral inferiority. The lived experiences and philosophical leanings of the founders shaped the meanings of the American mythos, infusing inequality and constructing racial, gender, and class hierarchy into the very words that proclaim the opposite. In other words, contradictions between the words of the Constitution and today’s inequities were also apparent at its ratification in 1788.

A recent counter-narrative brings the year 1619 back into the American lexicon and demonstrates the contrast between mythos and reality. Hannah-Jones (2019) demonstrates that the US is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. In 1619, twelve years after the English settled Jamestown, one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock, and well over a century before colonists revolted, early colonists bought and enslaved African men and women. While the Declaration of Independence proclaims that all men are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights, the White men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the Black people in their midst.

## Narrative 2: Race and Reconstruction

At the close of the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era—from the mid-1860s through 1877—was dedicated to stitching together North and South, integrating formerly enslaved persons and Black free men into the body politic, and revising the notion of who is competent to govern and who is entitled to rights and privileges enumerated in the Constitution. The progress that was made was swiftly met by resistance as southern states passed Black Codes to create *de jure* segregation and northern states engaged in *de facto* segregation (Anderson, 2017). Freedom from slavery and involuntary servitude as guaranteed in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, equal protection of the laws as guaranteed in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and the right to vote as provided by the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, required the enforcement power of the federal government as states resisted changes (Foner, 2019).

The Reconstruction Era marks the first attempt to change the meaning ascribed to who is entitled to citizenship rights. Meaning-making affected decisions about who is competent to govern. The administrative state played an active, though embattled, underfunded, and short-lived role in supporting this effort via the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land—better known as The Freedmen’s Bureau—from 1865 to 1872 (Cimbala & Miller, 1999). This bureau created new precedents, feeding millions, building hospitals, schools, and higher education institutions, serving to assist Black veterans, legalizing marriages, settling labor disputes, and redistributing land (Anderson, 2017). The administrative apparatus of the federal government strived to enact the new meaning of equality and liberty.

Until Reconstruction, the federal government had been viewed as the greatest threat to individual liberty. But during this era, states became the greater danger (Foner, 2019). Federal government became the instrument of enfranchisement for all men, rather than the instrument of enfranchisement for only White men. Ironically, the Civil Rights Amendments expanded authority of the federal government rather than curtailing or restraining governmental power in the service of freedom. Administrative capacity was also enlarged. In 1870, the Department of Justice was established, and its immediate function was to preserve civil rights as the Department set forth to prosecute members of domestic terrorist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Even with civil rights laws and the power of the state, meaning-making was halting. The newly established Department of Justice lacked the manpower, budget, knowledge, or, in some cases, the political or judicial support, to prosecute racially motivated violence prohibited by the Enforcement Act (Foner, 2019). The swift undoing of Reconstruction’s gains, and the subsequent decades of legalized segregation demonstrated the resistance to new meanings of who was worthy of rights of citizenship (Foner, 1988). Echoes of this equivocation appear today in administrative shortcomings of programs whose purpose is to secure justice for the disadvantaged while being underfunded, understaffed, and unsupported by those in power.

### Counter–Narrative

The Reconstruction Era, though short-lived, was successful primarily because of *who* was at the table—legislating, leading, and administering governance of the expanded democracy. In the period from 1863 through 1877, more than 1,500 Black elected officials and officeholders have been identified (Bailey, 2006; Brown, 1998; Foner, 1996; Rabinowitz, 1982). This time period expanded universal, free education not just in the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) but also for impoverished White people across the nation (Davis, 2013). Moreover, it laid the foundation for the ongoing fight for affordable healthcare and universal access to medical care (Interlandi, 2019).

An accurate historical accounting, not one that treats representation as a mere nod to diversity and inclusion, is testimony to how democratic self-governance can change meanings. To

restrict the telling of Reconstruction as a tale of political debates among White elected elites is to obscure the active role that Black people played in securing and legislating their own freedom. These soldiers, spies, freedom fighters, and orators refused to let the issue of slavery be pushed under the political rug (Davis, 2013; DuBois, 1935; Foner, 2010). While Black people had to rely on White politicians to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, pass constitutional amendments and civil rights laws before they were allowed to hold office, the persuasive oratory of Frederick Douglass, the political activism of Harriet Tubman, the compelling words of Sojourner Truth, and the actions of many more kept these aspirations alive.

The reactionary backlash to these gains was swift and harsh. As soon as General Oliver of the Freedman's Bureau issued Circular 13 granting 40 acres to free Black men, President Andrew Johnson overturned it. Like a hydra, White supremacist regimes sprang up throughout the South. State legislators defied and dismissed federal authority and reimposed White supremacy through Black Codes (Anderson, 2017). These Codes enforced racial segregation and were legitimated by the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which decreed that separate facilities were constitutional. At the national level, this definition would limp forward until 1954 when *Brown v. Board of Education* would decree that separate is not equal. Citizenship rights granted to formerly enslaved people were halted by laws that restricted access to the polls and barred them from the freedoms, public spaces, and benefits that Whites enjoyed. Under the radar was the plight of indigenous peoples, who were not granted the right to vote until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924.

### **Narrative 3: The Civil Rights Era**

The Civil Rights Era of the 1960s and 1970s was a period of social upheaval that expanded the meanings for freedom, liberty, equality, and justice once more. Propelled by civil rights and antiwar protests, Second Wave feminism, and the Stonewall riots for LGBTQ rights, government responded with legislation enshrining freedom from discrimination. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, all served to establish a more active role for the administrative state to advance freedoms and equality for Black and indigenous persons of color (BIPOC), women, and other marginalized groups. Meanwhile, judicial decisions chipped away at masculine advantage. *Roe v. Wade* (1973) established reproductive freedom; *Frontiero v. Richardson* (1973) removed sex discrimination from benefits for military spouses; and *Weinberger v. Wiesenfeld* (1975) declared it unconstitutional to determine who is eligible to receive social security benefits for childcare on the basis of sex.

In the cauldron of social unrest that was upending meanings about *whose* rights matter, the first Minnowbrook Conference sought to bring concepts of equity to center stage. The question turned from asking whether a program is effective and efficient, to asking *for whom* the program is effective and efficient (Frederickson, 2005). Rather than focusing on the mathematical principle of equality espoused in the founding documents, debate moved to questions of fairness and justice, balancing an uneven playing field that had marginalized rather than equalized opportunity (Denhardt, 2004; Gooden, 2015; Guy & McCandless, 2012).

### *Counter-Narrative*

Civil rights, while necessary, do not, of themselves, guarantee substantive rights in regard to jobs, education, healthcare, housing, and a justice system that is just for all. As Davis (2013) explains, the expansiveness of freedom was narrowed into a smaller frame enumerating civil rights. Legislative victories obscured the ongoing battle for equity, serving a vision of White benevolence over harsher truths of lingering racism and sexism. The Civil Rights Movement was conscripted into the story of how Americans, in their inherent goodness, had perfected

the Union and overcome divisions (Davis, 2013). History was bent in service of the mythos, while brutal police killings of African Americans continued, and sex harassment had a chilling effect on women's career opportunities.

The Fair Housing Act proved toothless and ineffective, and new tools of more subtle discrimination, such as zoning laws, perpetuated and exacerbated patterns of segregation (Rothstein, 2017). While segregation in public schools was outlawed with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973) decision permitted school funding differences based on local property taxes and values. The outcome substituted economic segregation for racial segregation, while effectively upholding both. While housing and educational opportunities remained segregated, so too did employment prospects. Although employment discrimination was outlawed under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, testing requirements and other hiring practices perpetuated unequal systems alongside a myth of bureaucratic neutrality and meritocracy (Portillo et al., 2019).

A parallel story of forgotten pioneers and progress echoes in academia. While the Minnowbrook Conference refocused the field's attention on social equity, there were no women or people of color present at that original conference (Ricucci, 2018), and until recently few scholars have credited Frances Harriet Williams as a pioneer of these causes decades earlier (Gooden, 2017). Williams, an African American woman, a public servant in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration, and an intellectual leader, championed social and racial equity in practice as she led the Office of Price Administration and in her scholarship (Williams, 1947).

#### **Narrative 4: Meaning-Making in the Post–2020 Era**

The fourth era to examine is the present, as the meaning of freedom, liberty, equality, and justice are under the magnifying glass once again. This era is a perfect storm where #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, #StopAsianHate, and the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic magnify economic and health inequities for BIPOC, caregivers, women, and exacerbated prejudice and hate against the Asian community. This moment, driven by political and social unrest, economic uncertainty, widespread disinformation campaigns, and a predictable backlash of White rage (Anderson, 2017), comes on the heels of a neoliberal free-for-all that saw economic inequality skyrocket.

When the pandemic arrived in the US, governors and mayors asked residents to join together to combat further spread of the virus. The refrain 'we are in this together' rang hollow against the narrative of individualism and unfettered self-interest of the American economy. The juxtaposition of obligation to community against individual rights has resulted in an uneasy truce between those who wear a mask and get vaccinated and those who refuse to wear a mask or declare 'my body, my choice' in regard to vaccinations.

Decades of faith in limited government and the power of the market—a pervasive and dominant narrative—has resulted in extraordinary economic inequality. The top one percent of households have more capital than the combined wealth of the bottom eighty percent (Editorial Board, 2020). #MeToo protests challenge toxic masculinity and Black Lives Matter and #StopAsianHate protests amplify the disparate treatment and violence that disproportionately impacts those who are not of European extraction. Videos of unwarranted police killings of African Americans challenge the mythos of a well-intentioned and benevolent state that treats everyone justly. Health and income disparities mean that persons of color and low-wage earners are more likely to be exposed to the virus at the workplace and less likely to receive the healthcare they need when they contract it. Like picking a scab, the bleeding of prior eras occurs again.



The gulf between mythos and reality means that the narrative races to catch up. There are structural inequities that policies and programs have either cemented in place or failed to resolve. Meaning-making that advances toward greater inclusion and equity is where hope resides, and the administrative state could be the vehicle to advance it. Local governments are revising police protocols, and public programs are revisiting policies and procedures to address systems that produce disparate impacts on the marginalized.

While the confluence of social inequity, economic inequality, health disparities, and the persistent spread of COVID magnify ironies and hypocrisies of the narrative, faith in the constitutional liturgy continues. Protestors make calls for justice with the refrain: 'No justice, no peace.' There is sufficient faith in the promises of the mythos to keep trying, as social movements grapple with the definitions of freedom and liberty, equality and equity, and justice.

### *Counter–Narrative*

As COVID-19 moves from a pandemic crisis to an endemic virus, the nation reckons with the new normal. Congress and the national media continue to grapple with truth-telling, blame, and the narrative of the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Tucker & Balsamo, 2021). These events rendered visible the otherwise hidden rips and tears in the national mythos. Videos of police brutality remove deniability that persons of color are treated differently from Whites. Meanwhile, images of an ill-prepared, sometimes complicit Capitol Police taking selfies with insurrectionists underscore this disparate treatment and beg Americans to reexamine this harsh, complex reality instead of the sugarcoated ideal of a nation marching steadily toward justice (Kendi, 2021).

All these realities take the shine off the narrative of a persistent march toward freedom, liberty, equality, and justice. The pushback against equal rights and opportunities—and the reaction to a reckoning to tell our nation's history in a more honest manner—is daunting. In public administration, the emphasis on social equity as an imperative strains under the weight and realization that crises deepen inequities at the intersections of identity.

### **Conclusion**

While these eras might feel like distant history, the throughline that connects them is prominent. Progress often feels like three steps forward and two steps back, particularly for groups vying for a seat at the table. But it is worth remembering the lessons of history: Narratives have counter-narratives, and progress is not inevitable. It is possible, however, with deliberate action.

The work of public administration is not just 'running' a constitution. It is about infusing the words of the national narrative—freedom, liberty, equality, justice—with meaning. Commitment to this challenge requires deep reflection if it is to lead to shifts in policy and practice in a way that advances social justice. As history shows, meaning-making is a continuous process, taking place after periods of tumult, to be followed by self-satisfaction until equilibrium fails and meaning-making happens again. Even when there is reliance on evidence-based decision making, evidence is always used as part of a narrative and it is the narrative that alters the constructed images that guide administrative action (Schlauffer et al., 2018).

Administrative agencies, through rulemaking and program design, are interpreters and implementors of mythos, as are protestors in the streets. While representative bureaucracy is essential, rarely is it sufficient to ensure that all voices are heard. Similarly, coproduction efforts bring more voices to the table, but that, too is insufficient (Gazley et al., 2020). It is the

combined effect of three factors—administrative action, representative participants actively engaged in decision making, and a guiding narrative—that impels social justice and equitable policy implementation.

Social tumult is like a mirror. From the nation's founding to the Civil War; from reconstruction to the Civil Rights Acts of the twentieth century; from the Black Power movement to Black Lives Matter, the body politic draws attention to the gap between mythos and reality. In 1985, Frederickson and Hart called for a benevolent public service that is guided by "the moral truths embodied in the enabling documents" of the nation (p. 548). Shortly thereafter, Frederickson (1990) pointed out the reality that government had failed in its promise to provide equal protection to everyone. These contradictions continue. To ensure social equity and advance social justice, public service professionals must adopt a two-pronged approach, one which champions the mythos, upholding and relying on the founding documents, while acknowledging lived reality and the evolution of meaning.

A taut rubber band, when released, returns to its original form. In the case of American political culture, this means that White men's interests take precedence over others, just as they did in 1789. Demands for social equity are revising this and driving meaning-making. A grander, more inclusive, more just, and more equitable mythos is possible. Being explicit about meanings facilitates re-evaluation of who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged by government action. In doing so, forces for and against freedom, liberty, equality, and justice, become explicit.

### Disclosure Statement

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

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