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A Glimpse at an Organizational Genius

Luther Gulick was a seminal figure in public administration whose papers form a rare historical collection at Baruch College



Luther Gulick in Washington, testifying before a Senate committee in January 1948.
PHOTO: HKW/Associated Press

By **RALPH GARDNER, JR.**
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Passion is a beautiful thing, especially when it's provoked by a discipline not typically associated with ardent emotion. It was how Luther Halsey Gulick III embraced the field of public administration—passionately.

“Look at this,” said Ralph Blumenthal, a distinguished lecturer at Baruch College, as he stood over a chart titled “Organization of the Government of the U.S.S.R.” It is in the archives of Baruch’s Newman Library. “Gulick was very organized. He was a genius at chart making.”

Gulick was a seminal figure in public administration and his papers arrived at the school two years ago in 710 fraying cartons. The documents form the core of a rare historical collection, “The Institute of Public Administration Collection and The Luther Gulick Papers.”

“This guy never threw anything out,” Mr. Blumenthal said. “We have his laundry lists. His taxi receipts. He saved everything.”

As something of a hoarder myself, I can relate to Gulick's apparent belief that a piece of scrap paper might prove significant decades later.

Gulick joined the New York Bureau of Municipal Research in 1915. He later led its successor, the Institute of Public Administration.

"The reason we think this collection is so valuable is that it traces the beginnings of government reform in America," explained Mr. Blumenthal, the author of books on subjects as varied as Lewis E. Lawes, the warden at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, and the Stork Club. "In 1906, the city was in the grips of Tammany Hall corruption."

Gulick and his colleagues held the radical belief for the time that government could be made to function for the public good.

One of the small gems in the collection is a report about the results of street-cleaning tests by "suction street sweepers" in St. Louis, the tests starting on June 1, 1916.

And when the bureau mounted a New York City budget exhibit during the early 1900s, "50,000 people came through," Mr. Blumenthal reported, establishing a model for honest government that spread nationwide. "It became a great reform movement."

Gulick's reputation as an organizational genius seems to have grown over time. In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt named him to the President's Committee on Administrative Management. The group's mandate was nothing less than to reorganize the federal bureaucracy.

He was also appointed to the War Production Board, an agency whose output included an intricate organizational chart for a corporation overseeing war production plants. "When you have to win a war, you pay attention to this stuff," Mr. Blumenthal explained as he examined the chart.

The archive includes letters to Gulick from, among others, Roosevelt, President Herbert Hoover, physicist Albert Einstein, then Congressman Lyndon Johnson and presidential candidate Jimmy Carter. Gulick died in 1993 at the age of 100.

And Gulick apparently wasn't above seeking advice. The Einstein letter, in German, was in response to one from the bureaucracy expert soliciting advice on a scientific method for picking honest leaders.

Einstein essentially responded, "What do I know about picking leaders?"

"I must even openly confess that I do not believe in any mechanical methods for selecting suitable men for public office," Einstein wrote.

The letter might be the single most valuable document in the collection that, through a grant from the Carnegie Corp. of New York, is undergoing partial digitization so it will be available online to scholars and students of public affairs.

While the “father of relativity” wasn’t more helpful, the archive notes that another signed Einstein letter from the same year was being offered for sale on Amazon for \$27,500.

The letter provoked Mr. Blumenthal’s excitement, but probably no more so than a hundred other items in the collection, from a ceremonial FDR signing pen presented to Mr. Gulick in 1939 for his help in reorganizing the executive branch to the Institute of Public Administration envelope that its proud recipient kept the object in.

“Put in safe 31 May 1939,” the envelope reads.

I wondered whether the archive might include love letters from old girlfriends, since it did just about every other aspect of Mr. Gulick’s life.

Mr. Blumenthal conceded it didn’t. “He was not an old girlfriend kind of guy. He married one woman. When she died, he married another woman. It probably wouldn’t make a Hollywood epic.”