



The Failure of Governance in Bell, California: Big-Time Corruption in a Small Town

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BOOK REVIEW



The Failure of Governance in Bell, California: Big-Time Corruption in a Small Town

By Thom Reilly, *Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016*

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You can take your share of the pie just like us. We will all get fat together. Bob has an expression he likes to use on occasion. “Pigs get fat, hogs get slaughtered.” So long as we are not hogs, all is well. (p. 1)

These words, uttered by the second-in-charge (Assistant Chief Administrative Officer Angela Spaccia) in the Bell 8 posse, will reverberate in the minds of readers as they enthusiastically read Thom Reilly’s methodical and impassioned work chronicling the massive deceit, unabashed greed, and utter disregard for public trust of a group of the city’s highest officials. The book is compelling and enthralling. The nature of the theft of public funds and how the multiple instances of extortion were disguised as legitimate policy and procedure are unbelievable and will make readers wonder if they are reading renditions of a reality show segment. But make no mistake about it: The author’s highly sophisticated writing, scholarly acumen, and multidimensional analysis of the subject matter enable him to educate and challenge readers so as to decrease future occurrences of shameful public corruption.

Referred to as one of California’s Gateway Cities, Bell is a small town in the industrialized section of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. This tiny town, populated mostly by low-income and working-class residents who are primarily Hispanic, was ground zero for one of the largest breaches of public trust and a quiet conspiracy that promoted self-interest, all while disregarding public well-being. In 2010, the residual effects of the perfect storm came to light when City Administrator Robert Rizzo, his assistant Angela Spaccia, former chief of police Randy Adams, and members of the Bell City Council were arrested. The author carefully details the way in which a system of failed checks and balances, a disengaged and disenfranchised public, media abandonment, relaxed governing practices, and unethical and illegal behavior advanced the self-aggrandizement of a few and tragically harmed many.

Using four theoretical lenses—political monopolies, geographic corruption contagion (regional diffusion model), corrupting effects of fiscal systems that enable revenue extraction, and a public-sector ethics framework—the author seeks to analyze how and why the Bell 8 were able to exact their corrupt deeds. The author achieves his goal by skillfully painting the picture of an elaborately corrupt system created by a few public officials that rested on well-orchestrated manipulation and thrived in the presence of a disengaged, economically depressed, and vulnerable public who were failed miserably by the safeguards that should have fostered accountability.

This 200-page book is presented in seven chapters. Chapter 1 offers a historical and geographical description of the city. In earlier decades, remarkable demographic shifts ushered in profound change in the small town. Unregulated card clubs and poker parlors provided needed revenue and attracted investors, temporarily shoring up the city's tax revenue base. However, with the gaming came scandal and corruption at the hands of the city's administration; thus, the forerunner to the nearly two-decade-long corruption to come. It is in this early chapter that readers are presented with a juxtaposition—a complicated netting of seeming do-gooders (e.g., operators of philanthropic enterprises) clothed as city officials who set out on a course to “reform” the city but later became ensnared in the web of corruption.

Chapter 2 is an account of Robert Rizzo, the city's administrator. Readers are guided into the imagery of a Danny DeVito, godfather-like character who is described as troubled (by all accounts an alcoholic), psychologically controlling, contradictory, and brilliantly dishonest. Through staged elections, Robert Rizzo turned the city into a charter city, allowing him, his assistant, and council members to escalate their salaries to unprecedented highs. Rizzo and his co-conspirators established bogus public agencies (using these agencies as the vehicle for them to inflate their salaries), indebted the city in special bond projects that never materialized into capital improvements, and approved for themselves very generous vacation and sick leave benefits that were used as collateral for cash loans that they provided themselves. In Chapter 2, readers discover the multiple ways that Rizzo and the other city officials financed their massive corruption scheme (which among many elements included highly inflated retirement accounts). Their strategies included increasing the price of basic government services, increasing the business license tax, and racially profiling residents and demanding exorbitant fees and penalties for minor and even fabricated infractions. Chapter 3 illustrates the complicit involvement of Angela Spaccia and the police chief, Randy Adams. If Angela Spaccia was the brains of the operation (she crafted the hefty retirement packages for herself and Rizzo), then Randy Adams was the brawn, because, although his tenure as police chief in Bell was short, he simply turned a blind eye to the complaints and even doubled down on the extortion that was taking place by overseeing the illegal seizure of vehicles. Chapter 4 sets the stage for the unraveling of the Bell 8's reign and describes how a few conscientious objectors cast light on the city's corruption. Chapter 5, written with Gregory D. Coordes, can be described as the awakening. Reilly and Coordes describe multiple governmental investigations and an incensed citizenry reckoning with the reality of the depths of its victimization. The council members' sentences varied, but Rizzo, who ultimately opted for a plea, never fully enabled his high-powered legal team the opportunity to unfold before the court their “separation-of-powers” defense. Spaccia did go to trial but did not enjoy the outcome that she perhaps sought. Finally, in this chapter, the authors present how the court's action to reject Rizzo's indemnification pursuit against the city is an important lesson in public policy and the protection of the public's

interests. In Chapter 6, the role of the city's legal team, the law firm of Aleshire & Wynder, and the monumental legacy of the corruption is described. The ensuing renegotiations of bonds, interest payments, suits, malpractice claims, IRS settlements, collection of restitution payments, and newly enacted California laws designed to prevent future corruption are detailed. The last chapter is a summary, but more importantly, it revisits the theoretical framework that guided the writing and in doing so enables scholars to examine the effectiveness (or its lack) inherent in council–manager and mayor–council governance models. It is undergirded by the question: How did such massive corruption occur? The author positions readers to form their own answer to the guiding question by presenting them with an analysis of the events as understood through the lenses of several prevailing theoretical perspectives.

The book has many strengths, including the case that is made for the need to enforce ethical standards, the responsibility that public officials have for those who do not enjoy equal protection under the law, and the subtle yet smart way that the presentation of the issues leads readers to consider how the conditions found in Bell can and do still occur today. The author presents the events using a theoretical backdrop, and in doing so enables readers to explore the ethical and legal pitfalls that were rife for the level of abuse that occurred in Bell. For example, it is no accident that the author carefully describes the vulnerabilities of Bell's residents. Readers can easily discern for themselves how the actions of the city manager were arguably intentional in his choice to assume leadership of a largely immigrant, undocumented, and poor community where the supposed representatives of the people were themselves motivated by economic gains.

When one considers today's threats against the undocumented immigrant community, including looming raids and deportations, there is no way to sidestep the question of whether a version of Bell, California, could persist today. In addition, the book positions ethicists to consider ways in which structures should be created that protect those who lack the protection of law. The author aids his readers with an astute analysis of the enforcement pitfalls associated with the American Society for Public Administration's (ASPA) Code of Ethics, noting that until recently, ASPA lacked an enforcement mechanism and had no method for reviewing complaints against its members.

In addition, the author's analytical skill and presentation of the facts prompt readers to consider the protections that are needed for the public. For example, the racial profiling of workers that took place in Bell is analogous to trends and conditions witnessed in many American cities today. Without overstepping its reach or findings, the book prompts contemplation and affords readers the opportunity to consider the multiple parallels between today's police departments and governmental structures and those of the Bell example. Moreover, the centralization of so much power and unchecked authority as were enjoyed by the Bell 8 situates readers, if only for a fleeting moment, to consider the hazards and ethical dilemmas associated with today's local and national intersection of politics and business.

Not only are the fields of public administration, public policy, law, management, and governance well served by this book, but there are important lessons for media and communication professionals. The free media have long been a champion of those who are not afforded equal protection under the law. As illustrated in *The Failure of Governance in Bell, California: Big-Time Corruption in a Small Town*, the inactivity of the media (until the scandal broke) played a role in the persistence of the city officials' unaccountability to the public. The author's review of the events that took place in Bell invites further consideration of why there is

a need for public administration and politics to be monitored, using media coverage, so as to invite greater transparency and deliberate review of the actions of those entrusted with vast power and authority.

Given the unmistakable lessons this book provides to all, including the general public, academicians, public administrators, the media, ethicists, lawmakers, and the gatekeepers of public goods, it is difficult to find fault or weakness. However, perhaps readers will be well served with a bit of guidance about how to digest the book's rich and dynamic content. This reviewer read the book in one sitting because of its captivating nature. However, upon a second read, when the reviewer segmented chapters and the reading was dispersed over two days, the reviewer found the need to reference the "Key Players" and "Chronology" sections many times. Tracking the multiple characters, their maneuvers, and the historical underpinnings made the reviewer truly appreciate and value the "Key Players" list and the "Chronology" section. These items are found at the beginning of the book, and readers will be wise to bookmark those sections so as to draw references to and cross-check the origins and multiple tentacles of the corruption that took place in Bell. Additionally, the book is not heavily prescriptive with respect to strategies to guard against future corruption. A more robust discussion of how to increase public engagement, media monitoring, and checks-and-balances, which seemingly were core breakdowns in the Bell case, would be fitting.

Public administration practitioners, teachers, and researchers are truly the beneficiaries of this work. This book provides a roadmap with mile markers that are a public sector ethical lens through which to view the requisite conditions that enable massive public corruption. Using this book, practitioners will be challenged and prompted to consider several critical questions, including: How can public trust be regained? and How can public engagement be spurred and sustained?

Teachers will find the book an indispensable tool as they instruct students in the lessons of historical progressive reform approaches while simultaneously challenging them to contemplate new safeguards direly needed to prevent local government corruption. Perhaps the biggest challenge lies in the tasks ahead for public administration researchers and scholars who will glean from this book the need to serve the citizenry by devising studies that examine the efficacy of small and large municipalities' governance structures. Still, no matter what their scientifically derived governance model, or their quest for urban restructuring or political realignment, scholars in search for solutions are challenged with the unenviable job of contemplating ways to curtail human greed and the willingness to exploit the weak and vulnerable.