Political Science at IU-Bloomington

by William Siffin

The Board of Trustees of Indiana University established the Department of Political Science at Bloomington on the 23rd of March, 1914; 1989 marks the 75th anniversary of that event. The creation of a political science department in 1914 was a matter of some significance. For one thing, it capped eight years of consideration. The department was first proposed to the trustees in 1906. By 1914, 35 American colleges and universities contained political science departments. A national organization, the American Political Science Association, had been in existence for more than a decade. The study of political science was blossoming into a recognized field, somewhat disputatious, speculative, and much unlike the natural or physical sciences. In 1914 political science was scientific in intent, despite the fact that it studies one of the most elusive qualities of society — power — and some of the less-rational dimensions of human behavior.

Even so, in 1914 the intent was to be systematic in the study of these matters. It was also to part company with the Department of American History and Politics that had existed on the Bloomington campus since 1890. The argument for the new department made by Professor Amos Hershey noted the close connection between history and political science, as well as its links with sociology and what was in those days known as “political economy.” But Hershey also noted some important differences. By the early years of the twentieth century, political science had acquired a scope and character of its own. It engaged in comparative studies and reached for generalizations, and claimed jurisdiction over a number of interesting and distinctive philosophical questions.

Nevertheless, as noted American scholar David Easton has remarked, political science was — and in some ways still is — “a discipline in search of its identity.” We are celebrating 75 years of lively exploration and bounded disagreement.

This didn’t matter in 1914, nor does it now. By the time the department was created several things had happened: a sense of “turf” had emerged, fertilized in the great and influential German universities of the later nineteenth century. These European schools had produced a cadre of scholars who, regarding themselves as political scientists, wanted proper homes within academia. A sizeable and stimulating literature was at hand. And the study of government and politics was attracting an expanding clientele, as the United States moved on the wings of manifest destiny and the deeds of William McKinley and Teddy Roosevelt into what has been called the “American century.” Politics in America was becoming more complicated, more ambitious, and more engrossing.

Thus did circumstance and logic mingle to support a sensible claim that Indiana University needed a political science department. Inasmuch as politics involves the mingling of interest and principle, what could have been more appropriate?

Political science had been an important element of Indiana University’s curriculum long before any thought was given to its departmentalization. Before there were departments at Indiana there was political science. The study of government and politics was part of the agenda from the beginning, when in 1824 the Seminary opened its door to ten students knowingly or otherwise committed to the study of Greek and Latin. They read Plato and Aristotle and Thucydides, whose Greek history had its flaws but was commended by John Quincy Adams as “full of instruction to the orator, the statesman, the general, as well as to the historian and philosopher.”

As the University gradually grew during the nineteenth century, its students studied constitutional law, moral science, and political philosophy. They went to chapel daily unless specifically excused. From 1854 they studied history and political economy as well as language, law, and philosophy. They were being prepared for lives as useful members of an informed elite.

In the 1880s a major change occurred with the appearance of a new president, David Starr Jordan. The students were now exposed to science, and education at Indiana University began to be infused with a new aim: discovery as a prime goal, as opposed to the earlier emphasis upon instilled learning. The reorientation of the curriculum, along with its growth and rising specialization, expanded the study of political institutions and issues.

By the late 1880s there was a Department of History and Political Science. In 1886 President Jordan tendered a job offer to a promising young scholar who had just finished his doctorate at Johns Hopkins. He wrote: Would Dr. Woodrow Wilson be interested in joining the faculty of Indiana University, a “flourishing state University [with] a faculty chiefly composed of young men of modern training?” The salary, presumably negotiable, would be between $1,500 and $2,000 — good pay for a new professor in those days.
The course of twentieth-century American history might have been different had Woodrow Wilson come to Bloomington in 1886. In any event, this particular political scientist was having a notable impact upon the world in 1914 when the department was created. Some might argue, using Wilson as evidence, that to study politics and to teach politics does not indicate an ability to do politics. We modern political scientists, of course, know better than to make such an argument, recognizing the insufficiency of a single case to sustain a large generalization.

Even without Woodrow Wilson the Department of Political Science was influential from its beginnings; the two scholars who initially formed it were men of uncommon breadth and energy: Frank Green Bates and his colleague Amos Hershey.

Across the decades the Department of Political Science has been home to a number of influential and inspiring individuals. Hershey was among the most vivid of them, along with a member of the post-World War II faculty, Charles Hyneman. Both were colorful personalities as well as distinguished scholars. Hershey, who shaped the original organization, was the stuff of legends. His liberal enthusiasm undoubtedly contributed to the vexations of the puritanical president of his times, William Lowe Bryan.

Professor Hyneman, an undergraduate during the 1920s, knew and admired Hershey, but needed no model for his own later academic enterprise. A major figure in the profession and a president of the American Political Science Association, Hyneman was distinctive for his pungency and acuteness, as well as for the argument that Gibson County, Indiana, truly represented a microcosm of the entire sphere of politics: if one really understood the life and politics of Gibson County, then one would have a fine foundation for comprehending politics on any plane. Hyneman’s interests and curiosities were neither narrow nor pedestrian; his influence remains in play today, in the ongoing work of scholars he helped to shape.

One might write a portrait of the department that emerged from the decision of March 1914 in terms of the characteristics and accomplishments of those who have staffed it across the years, but like a Michener novel the work would disintegrate when it came to recent times — particularly the period following the second World War. The Department of Political Science, like its subject matter, became quite large and complicated.

The Department of Political Science had been a product of the nineteenth century — the nineteenth-century world of intellect and the nineteenth-century world of the industrial states vividly discussed in Paul Kennedy’s The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Dusk was falling upon that world in 1914. A hundred years of relative peace and order in a political world dominated by a small number of balanced powers was about to crash into the chaos and crises that have scarred the twentieth century.

In 1914 the world of scholarship knew three great languages: German, French, and English. The “world” was mostly Europe and North America, with Russia, the sick giant, at one end and enigmatic East Asia at the other. There were no modern nation-states in Africa. Latin America was politically inconsequential. The United States was swelling in industrial might and bubbling with domestic political reform. From today’s perspective it was a rather simple world, and the two members of the Department of Political Science covered most of its relevant terrain. Professor Bates dealt with domestic government, including local matters (it is said that he visited every county in the state during his professorial tenure). Professor Hershey addressed international topics, and wrote one of the earliest American books on Japanese government.

Today 30 faculty members, plus a few emeritus professors who remain active, teach dozens of courses and address the politics of every continent. This past fall, for instance, eleven undergraduate courses were concerned with some aspect of American government and politics and the nation’s international relations. About 18 other undergraduate offerings examined other political systems or international political concerns of one sort or another. Along with these were courses on computing machinery in political science, undergraduate seminars in political science, an offering in political theory, and a course on economy, society, and politics.

In 1914 typewriters were quite primitive and adding machines were driven by hand-cranks. In 1989 undergraduates met the requirements of their “intensive writing” courses in political science using word proces-
sors (which facilitate the almost-inevitable rewriting). In 1914 the undergraduates were better spellers and generally more literate; they were a small, elite segment of society. In 1989 six thousand young men and women enrolled in undergraduate political science courses, including 825 "majors" — individuals committed to earning degrees in the discipline. They had access to the department’s 8,000-volume collection, housed in a graceful room that was once the library of the School of Business and the Department of Economics. Some of these students participated in studies conducted in the department’s computerized experimental laboratory, and others may have made use of the department’s relatively powerful in-house computer.

These students, plus about 120 graduate students mostly working towards PhDs, were taught by a faculty that, over the past ten years, published about 50 books and more than 200 articles.

A department linked in 1914 to history, sociology, and political economy was now one node in a complicated array of related enterprises — a research-oriented Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, a series of "area studies" programs concerned respectively with East Asia, Inner Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. Where five foreign languages had covered the needs and interests of the academy, now twice that number were being offered in African studies alone. The once-simple University lying between Vinegar Hill and Dunn Meadow had become a lusty and complex place sprawling over hundreds of acres, with a bus line of its own. Its Department of Political Science largely filled a building that in the 1940s sufficed for the entire School of Business.

To sum it up, the 75-year history of Indiana University’s Department of Political Science, like Professor Hyneman’s Gibson County, is a microcosmic portrait of the growth and transformation of a major American university. The end of World War II brought a bursting expansion to Indiana University, as veterans put the GI Bill to use. The war had blasted the nation out of its relatively comfortable isolation and the University out of what historian Thomas D. Clark called its “rah-rah days.” Under the canny vision of President Herman B Wells Indiana University responded to its changed environment, and the Department of Political Science was in the vanguard of that response.

The explosion of the agendas of teaching and research in politics, initially stimulated by vast international change, was pushed along by rapid developments in the social sciences. More than ever before, political science was becoming in its fashion, scientific. There were new tools and new questions. There were more students and more money. The department grew rapidly during the 1950s and 1960s. What it lost in charm and simplicity it gained in vigor and creativity.

Fortunately and wisely, in all this expansion bureaucracy has been balanced by a continued attention to individual students. There is one faculty member for about 30 political science majors. Students register for classes by computer, but they plan their programs as personally as they wish, with the advice of the departmental undergraduate office and members of the faculty. The colorful characters of the past are gone, but reliable, detailed information is available on the teaching technique and temperament of individual instructors, the product of a careful, continuing course-evaluation process.

What was once an all-male enterprise has become thoroughly heterosexual, both at undergraduate and graduate levels. For better or worse, a significant share of the department’s undergraduate majors go on to law school, but a recent survey of about 200 of the students who received their baccalaureate degrees since 1984 found about one-sixth of them practicing law, about the same percentage working in public service, another 15 or 16 percent employed in some part of the communications media, and the balance scattered among business occupations and teaching. If a discipline’s identity is to be found in the endeavors of its products, then David Easton’s claim that political science is a discipline in search of an identity appears to be affirmed.

If one looks at the accomplishments of those students — or for that matter of a faculty ranked among the top 15 in the nation — one might conclude that identity matters less than relevance and results. By these tests one is inclined to conclude that the trusts did a proper thing 75 years ago. They established an element in the University that has served us well — “us” being the state of Indiana and its people. The next 25 years may bring changes as great as those already noted. As usual, past is prologue, and it will be interesting to see what happens.

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Woodburn Hall, home of political science at IUB