

**Public Service Ethics and Administrative Evil:  
Prospects and Problems**

By

**Guy B. Adams**  
University of Missouri-Columbia

And

**Danny L. Balfour**  
Grand Valley State University

September 2003

*A Century of Progress.*

--title of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair

*Science Explores, Technology Executes, Mankind Conforms.*

--motto of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair

In the acclaimed novel *The Remains of the Day*, by Kazuo Ishiguro (1988), the central character, Mr. Stevens, reflects on his life of faithful service as butler to Lord Darlington (a British aristocrat and diplomat). Mr. Stevens takes great pride in his high standards of professionalism and the supporting role he played in Lord Darlington's attempts to keep the peace in Europe and support accommodative policies towards a defeated Germany during the years between the World Wars. Lord Darlington arranged numerous informal meetings of key politicians and diplomats at his palatial home in the English countryside where great affairs of state were negotiated over fine food, wine, and cigars. But Mr. Stevens must also struggle with the fact that his employer lost faith in democracy, succumbing to the temptations of fascism in difficult times, and failed to appreciate the true nature of Hitler and his regime, even to the point of supporting anti-Semitism and lauding the economic and social "achievements" of Nazism in the mid-1930s. Lord Darlington's efforts were ultimately discredited and he died in disgrace soon after World War II.

Mr. Stevens, a consummate professional, sees no connection between his actions and the moral and strategic failures of his employer. In a remarkable example of perverse moral reasoning, Stevens comes to the conclusion that his professional behavior shields him from any moral responsibility for his employer's actions (Ishiguro 1998, 201):

How can one possibly be held to blame in any sense because, say, the passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington's efforts were misguided, even foolish? Throughout the years I served him, it was he and he alone who weighed up evidence and judged it best to proceed in the way he did, while I simply confined

myself, quite properly, to affairs within my own professional realm. And as far as I am concerned, I carried out my duties to the best of my abilities, indeed to a standard which many may consider 'first rate'. It is hardly my fault if his lordship's life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste -- and it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account.

Mr. Stevens' justification of his role and abdication of responsibility in Lord Darlington's affairs is a clear example of what we have termed *administrative evil*. The common characteristic of administrative evil is that ordinary people within their normal professional and administrative roles can engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are doing anything wrong. While a "professional" butler may perhaps seem an odd exemplar of administrative evil, Stevens pursues every new technique and practice in his chosen profession with the greatest diligence. Yet, it is his myopic focus on his administrative role and professional "standards" that serve to mask his own contributions to the evil that stemmed from Darlington's moral failures. "Just following orders," his dismissal of two housekeepers whose only offense was that they were Jewish does not stir his conscience, among many other such examples in the novel. Mr. Stevens carries on by stubbornly denying that he did anything wrong and by asserting instead that he actually did everything "right," that is, professionally correct.

Administrative evil is regrettably a recurring aspect of public policy and administration in the modern era. The same reasoning and behaviors employed by Mr. Stevens mask the supporting (and at times, primary) role, played by far too many professionals and administrators in acts that dehumanize, injure, and even kill, their fellow human beings. Our reluctant and tragic conclusion is that administrative evil is unlikely to disappear from a world order that depends so heavily on organizations and professions that systematically enable its reproduction.