"The Rhetoric and Promises of Accountability"
Remarks Prepared for Presentation at Leiden University
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I am afraid I must start with a confession: I am here under false pretences.

If I understood the rationale behind the Fulbright Senior Specialist program that provided a major portion of the resources that brought me to this podium, I am supposed to be here as a scholar with some expertise that might prove useful for the host institution's endeavors.

In fact, I stand before you disguised as an expert, for my real mission is evangelical rather than practical.

I am here on a mission of salvation – an effort to "save the soul" of a concept that is threatened not by obscurity or some "enemies" committed to its destruction through misuse and abuse, but rather by its popularity and overuse by well-meaning advocates of what that concept implies.

My purpose is to save the concept of accountability from its friends.

The inspirations for this evangelic mission are twofold.

First is my personal and professional fascination with the concept of accountability developed twenty years ago in my effort to comprehend what motivates and shapes the behavior of successful public sector managers – especially the city management professionals that I was having increasing contact with during my tenure at the University of Kansas.

A second inspiration has been my sense that the growing use and attention being paid to term accountability over the past two decades poses a serious threat to our understanding and appreciation of this critical concept.

This situation, I would argue, is analogous to what philosopher Alasdair McIntyre claims to have happened to the concept of virtue as applied in the study of ethics. In his best-known work, AFTER VIRTUE, McIntyre begins his critique by asking the reader to imagine a future world in which the fundamentals of the natural sciences have disappeared. After generations of indifference and ignorance, a scholarly movement to reclaim the natural sciences emerges based on the discovery of some fragments of work authored by the likes of Newton, Darwin, and Einstein.

McIntyre argues that valiant efforts to study the works of such venerable "ancients" and their contemporaries from the 20th and 21st centuries world would be of limited value, for while those dedicated scholars of the future can study the words and ideas of the past, they could never recreate the understanding and appreciation of an era that fostered the enormous advancements in the natural sciences that we take for granted today. They would be capable of knowing something about the natural sciences of our times, but they would not be able to revive this golden age of science.

McIntyre uses this exercise in speculative futurology to provide his readers with a sense of his own position on the condition of the modern study of ethics. For him, modern scholars and contemporary society are incapable of understanding and appreciating the ethics of the classics; all we can do is try to make some sense of the fragments we have from those who thought and wrote about ethics during its golden ages of the past. Central to that loss is our inability to understand the core concept of classical ethics: virtue. Without an understanding of what the concept of virtue involved in the classical expositions, we have been – and will remain -- at a loss to reestablish the meaning and practice of ethics.

I will contend that as students of modern governance, we are facing a somewhat similar problem. For us, it is the core concept of accountability that is at risk. And unless we are willing to reassert the fundamental idea inherent in the concept of accountability, we put a great deal at jeopardy.

I realize that this is a bold assertion, for I am effectively arguing that accountability is to modern governance what virtue was to classical ethics. But in the words of my mentors, if the shoe fits, wear it….

My immediate task is to articulate the problem as clearly as I can, and that entails two parts.

First, it requires that I establish the existence of a credible issue. In this case I am contending that we students of public administration are slowly but certainly <u>losing sight of the concept of accountability as a core term of governance.</u> Through both our indifference to political rhetoric and our preoccupation with superficial reforms, we have started to surrender the idea of accountability to those who fail to appreciate its central role in the construction and sustenance of modern governance. To make this point clearly, I begin by positing a critical distinction between the *word* and the *concept* of accountability, and for the moment I will seek your indulgence by asking that you accept the assumption that such a meaningful concept exists.

That, of course, will lead to the second point of this presentation – and that is to proffer a meaningful conceptualization of accountability in the form of a historically significant idea – that is, one that has indeed played a major role in modern governance. I will do so, but perhaps not at the level of detail nor with the clarity an audience of colleagues might demand. In that sense, I will seek more time and another opportunity to extend my case.

Turning to task one, I would begin with the distinction between accountability-the-word and accountability-the-concept. My evangelical task applies specifically to the concept of accountability, but to comprehend the problem we must focus attention on the use and abuse of accountability-the-word in recent years.

The field of semiotics provides us with a convenient analytic framework for examining the tortured life of accountability-the-word. In semiotics, a word can take on three functional forms – as symbol, as index or indicator, and as icon.

Symbolically, accountability-the-word has emerged as a common synonym within a class of terms applied to acts of reporting – to be accountable is to be answerable, responsible, auditable, and so. In this regard, accountability has no special standing from its synonymic cousins, and thus is subject to being regarded as equal to answerability and related terms, or subject to being applied as a special case or unique variation of some related term (e.g., Professor Boven's use of accountability in his study of responsibility).

From this perspective, accountability is just another word, having value only as a matter of style and syntax. Its meaningfulness is not derived from its historical role as a term of governance, but rather from its etymological roots and association with other terms that often en-velop it at any point in time.

Skipping over the indexical use of accountability for the moment let me focus on its growing use as an icon. It is difficult – and some would argue impossible -- to make the case for a word serving as a pure icon – that is, as a pure representation emptied of its symbolic and indexical content. (When I first tried this particular argument on my daughter, a newly minted Ph.D. in comparative literature, she was shocked I would propose such a thing.) Nevertheless, some words have taken on a less-than-pure iconic form that has impacts in the real world. The image of the word "Hollywood" on a hillside in southern California might be a classic example. Among Jews, the wearing of jewelry with the Hebrew word for life – chai – has iconic value despite the religion's aversion to iconic representations of any sort. You can probably think of other examples, especially in this age of product branding through trademarks (e.g., Coca Cola).

My evidence for the iconic status of accountability-the-word is rather parochial, but I suspect it will be validated in other contexts. I conducted a quick search of the U.S. Congress web site ("Thomas") for each of the last four congressional sessions – from the 104th session which sat from 1995 to 1997, to the 107th which started in 2001 and will end next January – and discovered that the word "Accountability" shows up in the title of 50 to 70 pieces of proposed legislation each term. Focusing on the 54 pieces of "Accountability" proposals for the current (107th) Congress (see Exhibit A), two things stand out.

First, as an icon that generates a positive response from the audience, the word accountability is attachable to just about any and every issue that is a potential subject for legislation. Using the word accountability is like wrapping a proposal in the red, white and blue colors of the American flag and sending it forward. The word is attached to subjects ranging from the operations of the Internal Revenue Service and pricing practices of private sector electric utilities to Yasir Arafat and corporate executives.

Second, its presence as an icon in the title does not require its meaningful presence in the proposed legislation itself. I conducted a very informal content analysis on four proposals chosen at random. Of those four, three contained no further mention of the word accountability in the body of the proposal except in reference to the title itself. In the one proposal that did attempt to apply the term in a meaningful way, it turned out to be an effort to modify the phrase "standards" as applied to education testing by adding the word "accountability" – thus, these were to be more than merely standards, they were to be "accountability standards" for U.S. students to meet. (As we speak, I have a graduate student conducting a more detailed analysis of all the relevant legislation from the several sessions.)

Thus, as both symbol and icon, accountability-the-word poses two challenges to the concept we will discuss below. First, in its many synonymic forms, accountability becomes truly chameleon-like or expansive, as two of the more insightful critics have pointed out. It doesn't lack for meaning, but it does lack for conceptual substance. Second, as icon, accountability proves to be more of a vacuous but affective term that can be put to use by rhetoricians and political strategists to serve their specific goals. In both forms, accountability-the-word implies little or nothing of the concept's meaningfulness.

Accountability-the-word does, however, have strong indexical values that, from my perspective, pose the greatest challenge because they imply more meaningful alternatives to the historically meaningful concept.

When used in different contexts, accountability-the-word has become indicative of different promises. That is, accountability has become a term of art among reformers who regard the term as a signal for changes that will bring about desired objectives. These "promises of accountability" are more than mere rhetorical devices – they represent firm beliefs in the association between accountability and the promised goals (Exhibit B).

For example, in some contexts accountability carries with it the PROMISE OF JUSTICE – or at least the opportunity to seek justice in light of some claimed injury. The context here is most often juridical, and leads to the establishment of formal and informal mechanisms for dealing with everything from the mundane tort claim in administrative courts to seeking justice for crimes against humanity through international tribunals. Of special interest in recent years has been the creation of "truth and justice" commissions in nations that have emerged from years of oppression and strife. Whether we focus on the greatly admired South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission or its less notable counterparts in South America and Eastern Europe, the idea of seeking accountability is central to each as a means for seeking justice.

In other contexts more familiar to students of public sector management, accountability indicates the PROMISE OF PERFORMANCE, and assumes that individuals or groups held to account for their behavior and its consequences would in fact perform better. Several decades ago, when the bureaucratic mindset dominated, this might be labeled the "promise of control," but in these enlightened times we assume that enhanced performance outweighs obedience to orders. From the work of Chester Barnard to New Public Management, this has been the new arena for accountability in modern organized life throughout both the public and private sectors.

On a somewhat broader scale, accountability has become increasingly associated with the PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY. As our standards of assessing democratic governance have shifted from individual liberties and citizen participation to the provision of institutional checks on government, accountability has moved from a secondary characteristic of democracy to a primary indicator. From the current literature focused on democratization, one gets the impression that the creation of vertical and horizontal mechanisms of accountability – from electoral systems to ombudsman – is the key to democracy.

Lastly, for at least the past two centuries, accountability has evoked the PROMISE OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR or (at minimum) the reduction of corrupted behavior. Various forms of reporting requirements, codified norms, and answerability have emerged as the means for preventing or controlling corrupt or inappropriate behavior among public officials. The anti-corruption project has had a significant impact – not merely on the behavior of individuals, but on the shape and performance of entire public personnel systems. (In the U.S., we can trace the development of merit-based civil service systems – and the demise of citizen-based patronage systems – to the anti-corruption reforms of the Progressive Era.) The link between accountability and ethical behavior is assumed rather than proven, and some observers have highlighted the negative consequences of imposing accountability requirements that are panoptic in scope.

The validity and relationships among these four promises of accountability requires further examination, but for present purposes it is enough to point out that these indexical manifestations of accountability create a diversion from our efforts to understand the central role accountability plays in modern governance beyond it application in rhetoric and reform.

This brings me, at last, to the second task of this presentation: that is, the articulation of what I have been implying and assuming to this point – a concept of accountability as a term of governance.

I begin this part of my project at a disadvantage, for governance itself has become the “flavor of the week” concept in political science and public administration, and I risk doing to it what I claim is being done to accountability. Nevertheless, there is no better concept for capturing the fundamental process of dealing with collective problems, whether within the public or private spheres. It is as a term of governance that the concept of accountability takes on significance.

Logically, the governance process can assume a range of different forms and rely on number of different mechanisms. Governance can be conducted through coercion, or it can be structured and institutionalized through rules and set procedures. It can rely on the experience and wisdom of individuals, or it can depend on the impersonalized rationality of bureaucratic systems.

Historically, however, modern governance has relied on a particular set of fundamental mechanisms designed to assure a relationship between rulers and the ruled rooted in the legitimization of expectations. This, I contend, is the essence of accountability-the-concept: accountability involves **any form of governance that depends on the legitimization of expectations between and among the governors and the governed.**

This perspective, in turn, begs the existence of a moral community within which that legitimization occurs – that is, a community in which expectations are formed and given credibility. It is in that sense that we can trace the historical roots of modern governance to those watershed events that led to the establishment of such communities, and thus the adoption of accountability as a form of governance.

My own amateurish exploration of historical narratives has led me to the reign of William the Conqueror in Norman England and his successors through at least Henry II and the signing of the

Magna Carta under King John. The fruits of the 1066 conquest were harvested twenty years later in the Domesday Books that both defined the English realm of the Norman kings and provided the basis for oaths of allegiance that held sway in the increasingly secularized governance of England. The moral community imposed on England by William I in 1086 matured into the legitimized expectations made explicit in the Magna Carta more than a century later. In the intervening years, the forms and norms of modern governance were nurtured in the creation of an administrative kingship and the rule of law. Central to both developments was the establishment of accountability as a central premise of governance.

There is still a great deal more to be done in validating the historical centrality of accountability in modern governance, but of more immediate concern is the ever-present question we get from both our students and the practitioners who rely on us: So what? What difference does it make that the concept of accountability was at the heart of modern governance? How does the "threatened" concept of accountability impact on the realities and practicalities of today?

My response takes the form of a challenge to those engaged in the rhetoric and reform that so abuses the concept of accountability. I challenge them to consider the implications of adopting a perspective that assumes the centrality of a meaningful concept of accountability.

For those who use the term as merely a synonym for some form of reporting, consider the implications of treating accountability as a core concept. I provide one example in Exhibit C, where accountability is posited as a genus encompassing various species that are distinguished by both setting and the relationship of form to the demands of a moral community. Here the centrality of accountability helps provide a more meaningful approach to the many concepts used in modern governance, and it provides fertile ground for analysis and research.

For those engaged by the various promises of accountability, this perspective helps us understand what might be involved in efforts to achieve those promises. The role of accountability in achieving justice, performance, democracy or ethical behavior depends on the capacity of reformers to establish and nurture the requisite moral communities that underlie successful governance approaches. Merely creating mechanisms that call for answerability or responsiveness is not enough. Accountability as a form of modern governance requires much more.

EXHIBIT A
Proposed "Accountability" Legislation, 107th Session, U.S. Congress*

*As of August 15, 2002

ACCOUNTABILITY for Accountants Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.3617.IH]	Executive ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.5088.IH]
ACCOUNTABILITY for Presidential Gifts Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.1081.IH]	Federal Reserve Labor-Management Relations ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.2304.IH]
ACCOUNTABILITY in Testing Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.1163.IH]	Immigration Reform, ACCOUNTABILITY, and Security Enhancement Act of 2002 (Introduced in Senate)[S.2444.IS]
ACCOUNTABILITY of Tax Dollars Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.4685.IH]	Immigration Restructuring and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.1562.IH]
Advancing Truth and ACCOUNTABILITY in Campaign Communications Act of 2001 (Introduced in Senate)[S.93.IS]	International Military Education and Training ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in Senate)[S.647.IS]
Agency ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in Senate)[S.849.IS]	Law Enforcement Discipline, ACCOUNTABILITY, and Due Process Act of 2001 (Introduced in Senate)[S.840.IS]
American Competitiveness and Corporate ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.5095.IH]	LAX Noise Community ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.2429.IH]
Andean Region Contractor ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.1591.IH]	Media Marketing ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.2246.IH]
Arafat ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in Senate)[S.2194.IS]	Medicare+Choice ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.2127.IH]
Assuring Honesty and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.4593.IH]	Monetary Freedom and ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.3732.IH]
Barbara Jordan Immigration Reform and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Referred to Senate Committee after being Received from House)[H.R.3231.RFS]	Nursing Home Staffing ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in Senate)[S.2879.IS]
Children's Health Insurance ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in Senate)[S.1070.IS]	Persian Gulf War POW/MIA ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in Senate)[S.1339.IS]
Coal ACCOUNTABILITY and Retired Employee Act for the 21st Century (Introduced in House)[H.R.3813.IH]	Pharmaceutical Fiscal ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.4998.IH]
Commission on the ACCOUNTABILITY and Review of Federal Agencies Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.5090.IH]	Polluter ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.4572.IH]
Comprehensive Fiscal Responsibility and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.1270.IH]	Postal ACCOUNTABILITY and Enhancement Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.4970.IH]
Comprehensive Holocaust ACCOUNTABILITY in Insurance Measure (Introduced in House)[H.R.3408.IH]	Public Health Emergencies ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in Senate)[S.1650.IS]
Congressional Pay Integrity and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.241.IH]	School Improvement ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in Senate)[S.158.IS]
Congressional Pension ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.4672.IH]	Self Sufficiency and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in Senate)[S.2624.IS]
Contractors ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.5292.IH]	State and Local Law Enforcement Discipline, ACCOUNTABILITY, and Due Process Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.1626.IH]
Corporate and Auditing ACCOUNTABILITY, Responsibility, and Transparency Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.3763.IH]	Stock Option Fairness and ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in Senate)[S.2760.IS]
Corporate and Criminal Fraud ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.4098.IH]	Syria ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in Senate)[S.2215.IS]
Corporate Fraud ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.5118.IH]	Taxpayer Protection and IRS ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Reported in House)[H.R.3991.RH]
Department of Veterans Affairs Research Corporations ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.5084.IH]	Torture Prevention and ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.3158.IH]
Disaster Relief Charities ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.3192.IH]	Truth and ACCOUNTABILITY in Accounting Act of 2002 (Introduced in House)[H.R.3970.IH]
Electricity Information, Disclosure, Efficiency, and ACCOUNTABILITY Act (Introduced in Senate)[S.1231.IS]	Truthfulness, Responsibility, and ACCOUNTABILITY in Contracting Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.721.IH]
Excellence and ACCOUNTABILITY in Education Act (Introduced in House)[H.R.340.IH]	United Nations Voting ACCOUNTABILITY Act of 2001 (Introduced in House)[H.R.1302.IH]

EXHIBIT B

Indexical Values of Accountability

Promise of:	
Justice	**Assumes the opportunity to seek justice in light of some claimed injury will in fact result in justice.**
Performance	**Assumes that individuals or groups held to account for their behavior and its consequences would in fact perform better.**
Democracy	**Assumes the creation of vertical and horizontal mechanisms of accountability is the key to democracy.**
Ethical Behavior	**Assumes corruption and inappropriate behavior can be prevented or corrected through various institutional schemes.**

EXHIBIT C

Species of Accountability

	Settings:			
	Legal	***Organizational***	***Professional***	***Political***
Moral Pulls	Liability	Answerability	Responsibility	Responsiveness
Moral Pushes	Obligation	Obedience	Fidelity	Amenability