Luther Gulick was an American visionary pragmatist. His contributions to government covered so many arenas and eras that people are constantly surprised when yet another one pops into view.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Gulick collaborated on a wide range of federal issues. For example, Luther instructed the president on administrative options for the new Social Security system, and the president instructed Luther on the importance of the apparently superfluous Social Security “personal accounts,” disabusing him of stripping politics completely from administration. “That account is there,” FDR explained to Luther, “so those sons of bitches up on the Hill can’t ever abandon this system when I’m gone.”

Gulick was a consummate institution builder, helping create the Maxwell School of Citizenship at Syracuse University, the Brookings Institution, the Public Administration Service, the National Planning Association, and, of course, the American Society for Public Administration. He transformed the New York Bureau of Municipal Research, the pioneering local government reform organization, into the Institute of Public Administration (IPA), which he headed for most of his career, starting as its first president and chair in 1931, but even earlier as director of its predecessor organization in 1921.

Luther did not spend time reminiscing about the impressive record of the IPA or his own remarkable role in the development of public administration, although he took pride in having been involved in the drafting of Roosevelt’s stirring “Four Freedoms” speech. Until he was 100, Luther was always looking forward and challenging us to try new ideas.

In his mid-nineties, still on its board, he found the Institute of Public Administration facing a serious financial crisis. The discussion centered initially on whether the IPA could survive. However, Luther urged us to talk instead about whether the IPA should survive, suggesting that if we no longer had the capacity to plow new ground in public administration, he would vote to close shop. Luther said that a nonprofit organization should not look upon mere survival as a justification for existing. Only if the IPA could contribute new knowledge to the field of public administration should it try to climb the difficult road back to solvency. Another board member, Alan K. “Scotty” Campbell, agreed.

The IPA met Luther’s test by providing technical assistance to the newly independent countries formerly dominated by the Soviet Union, whose leaders needed immediate help to avoid political and economic chaos. Despite poor prospects for funding and skepticism from several board members who thought this venture foolhardy in view of the IPA’s sharply reduced capacity, Luther thought the stakes were so high that we should try, and we did. As this gamble began to pay off, Luther also supported the IPA’s leadership of an equally formidable United Nations Development Programme initiative to help the People’s Republic of China design a huge civil service reform and massive government decentralization. He was fascinated by the creativity required to achieve the results sought by the Chinese. Models were to be avoided because they assumed a static society and discouraged innovation.

IPA staff in Bolivia in the 1970s found palpable evidence of Gulick’s influence: POSDCORB (the acronym standing for planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting) was being used to instruct students of government management on the principal roles of the public executive. This was a shorthand that Luther had cooked up for the President’s Committee on Administrative Management (the so-called Brownlow Commission on which he served), an FDR project to redesign the federal administrative structure.

For some, POSDCORB and its associated principles of public administration (articulated in his “Notes on...
taxi in Washington, D.C., when he casually motioned toward a nearby building and murmured, literally in passing, “That’s where we drafted the new Czech constitution with Masaryk after the war.” He meant, of course, the First World War. Luther had been enlisted in this project, instigated by President Woodrow Wilson, to apply his recent PhD in political science from Columbia University to state building—nearly a century ago.

The IPA in its New York headquarters in the late 1960s was booming, and there was no office space available … except the office of the chairman, Luther Gulick, who was in residence at his summer home in Vermont. On his desk were several manuscripts in progress, including one on metropolitan government. As the first city administrator of New York City, he early on recognized that “city” problems require a comprehensive geographic approach that transcends political boundaries and encompasses the de facto urban region. Ever the pragmatic visionary, and only in his late seventies, he still had another two decades of creative contributions ahead of him.

Luther Gulick’s remarkable life began one year before historian Frederick Jackson Turner announced the closing of the American frontier and extended to the election of the first baby boomer as president of the United States. A phone call to Luther with happy birthday wishes on behalf of his many friends and colleagues on his 100th birthday in 1992 found him delighted, and just as enthusiastic as ever.

Gulick had an astonishing international career. His knowledge of the language and cultures of both Japan (where he was born) and Germany (the country of his ancestry) was tailor-made to help plan the fighting, occupation, recovery, and rehabilitation of both countries in World War II. He was one of the first American civilian authorities to enter Germany after its surrender (retrieving a signature stamp from Hitler’s desk), and he accompanied President Harry S. Truman to the Potsdam Conference. He later helped countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America improve their governments. The Egyptians asked him to consider whether democracy could work in a Muslim country; he did and concluded it could.

Luther was matter-of-fact about his many achievements, viewing them in a realistic and self-critical manner. One day we were in a