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The good, the ugly, and the bad of bureaucracies



By Stephen F. Gambescia & Stew Bolno

Stephen F. Gambescia is professor and director of a Doctor of Health Science program at Drexel University and **Stew Bolno** is an organizational effectiveness consultant in Philadelphia.

Most Americans are familiar with the phrase: “everyone complains about the weather, but no one does anything about it.” As a comparison to this adage, we offer “everyone complains about bureaucracy, yet when someone tries to do something about it, many people resist and complain.” This appears to be what is occurring, given the current administration’s commitment to highlighting inefficiencies and seeking out waste in all agencies.

The creation of DOGE to investigate, audit, and suggest changes in the federal government may be new, but the concept has existed and been verbalized by candidates and representatives of both parties for years. If people detest bureaucracies so much, affectionately or otherwise, it’s reasonable to query why there is so much strong resistance to the effort?

German intellectual and prominent sociologist [Max Weber \(1864–1920\)](#) [identified the characteristics of bureaucracy](#) and its usefulness through years of research and study. Major characteristics include structural aspects such as strict rules and regulations, documentation of activities, specialization and division of labor, high regard for expertise in narrow areas of

service, as well as interpersonal characteristics such as reporting and obedience to hierarchical authority, formal communication, merit-based advancement, and the sacrifice of self-interest for the good of the organization.

The Good Works of Bureaucracies

Bureaucracies are not inherently bad. Historical examples of their great works and service to a good cause include militaries that are prepared to win large-scale wars, the construction of the [Hoover Dam](#), projects undertaken by the [Tennessee Valley Authority](#), the [Everglades Restoration](#) project, and the dredging to deepen the New York Harbor.

Government projects, such as landing a man on the moon, are remarkable feats in human history. Examples from health prevention, protection, detection, and treatment include the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's response to infectious diseases via state and local entities (both government and nonprofit). [The American Cancer Society's Cancer Prevention Studies](#), which began in the 1950s, involved significant initiatives with physicians, epidemiologists, healthcare and public health professionals, and millions of lay volunteers to recruit, interview, and follow up with subjects to learn about their health-enhancing or risky behaviors.

The Ugly Character of Bureaucracies

Unfortunately, large organizations have cultivated “the bureaucrat,” who is often associated with inefficiency, slow responses, impersonal demeanor, inflexibility, and strict adherence to the letter of the law and red tape rather than the spirit of the rules, which can lead to reasonable and responsible service outcomes, especially for taxpayers.

Such encounters have created caricatures of the bureaucrat — sometimes deserved — leading to criticism and mockery of workers within the organization. Common examples cited by consumers of government agencies include the licensing and registration services of a state's division of motor vehicles, where some workers provide impersonal, robotic, and slow service,

resulting in feelings of dehumanization among consumers. Interactions with agencies that provide life-changing status certificates (birth, marriage, death) or any agency that owes money or provides benefits can also turn ugly.

A positive term for government workers at any level is “public servant.” Their job should be to serve the public “with a smile,” so to speak, without favoritism or bias, while striving to deliver the type of high-quality service one expects from profit-driven organizations.

The Rise of the Bureaucratic State

The rise of the bureaucratic state indicates growth, specialization, and complexity in the public sector. The result of this decades-long trend is increased concern about its degree of efficiency but also challenges the accountability, responsiveness, and overreach in governmental authority — sometimes punitive more than helpful.

Since the founding of our nation, debates have arisen regarding the structure and responsibilities of the proposed government. Many, starting with the [Anti-Federalists](#), expressed concerns about the powers of the executive branch, including centralization of power, lack of deference to states, and insufficient accountability for unelected individuals involved in the policymaking, implementation, and enforcement of laws. While much has been written about the dangers of an overreaching presidency, both Federalists and Anti-Federalists did not foresee the massive increase in government employees and the concurrent expansion of power.

Reality has demonstrated that many of the concerns of the Anti-Federalists have proved correct, most alarmingly in the ever-present “rise of the bureaucratic state.” This rise has been identified and analyzed, with subsequent implications explained by highly regarded political scientists such as [Charles E. Lindblom](#) (1917–2018) and [James Q. Wilson](#) (1931–2012). Both intellectuals recognized the virtues and uses of bureaucracies; however, they also understand that growth in numbers and power over the years has exacerbated known shortcomings of bureaucracies, namely lack of

responsiveness, slow service implementation, excessive focus on “red tape,” inefficiencies, insularity, and ever-increasing costs to maintain them.

According to data published by the Federal Reserve of St. Louis ([FRED](#)), there has been a growth of about 45 percent in federal government employees from January 1980 to January 2025, which translates into a payroll of 23.6 million people. One could argue that the U.S. population has grown; however, given the increased sophistication of computers and the efficiencies technology has introduced, there seems little reason to believe that this growth should be accepted without skepticism.

The rise of unionization helps maintain employment, makes it difficult to fire anyone, and continually negotiates for increased salaries and benefits. The complexity of managing government services today encourages an elite “expert” class, resulting in employees with higher salaries and a demand for more “hands-on” employees. Furthermore, the concentration of government agencies and workers in D.C. fosters cooperation and self-interest among government entities, both for-profit and nonprofit, often prioritizing their common good over the interests of the taxpaying public. As government expands in D.C., so do the so-called “[beltway bandits](#).”

The U.S. Bureaucracy: Evolution from the Ugly to the Bad

The establishment of the [Department of Government Efficiency](#) represents the first serious attempt by a U.S. president directing cabinet secretaries to call a time-out, ask questions, review, analyze, and report to the president, as well as the public, on how they are spending taxpayer money. What has come to light isn’t simply a matter of poor decisions or mismanagement, but outright waste, fraud, and abuse. Those leading the DOGE initiative are astounded by the extent of these issues. Given the project’s high level of transparency, the public now takes umbrage with federal government employees’ graft and massive overspending as a course of doing business.

It is reasonable to question why anyone would react negatively to efforts aimed at identifying waste, fraud, and abuse related to government spending.

At this point in American history, it is even more concerning, given that the country is facing serious debt and has been running annual deficits for decades.

Of course, it is not merely “government” spending. It is the act of politicians imagining, deciding, taxing, allocating, and distributing the financial contributions of citizens. Taxpayers should demand humility, responsibility, and honest oversight from their representatives, including the President of the United States and elected legislators.

Yet neither of the political parties did much of anything to slow growth or to demand high quality performance. The recent injection of DEI initiatives accelerated a situation of shifting policies and unequal treatment for individuals, as well as raising concerns about quality in performance. The DOGE group has pulled the pendulum in the opposite direction. Predictably, it’s meeting with great resistance, even though the bottom line for their effort has not yet been determined.

Political scientist [John W. Kingdon](#) explained that, while much of the media and civic engagement focuses on electing representatives and the influence of political parties, the day-to-day activity of policymaking occurs as a dynamic interplay among three “sides” in an Iron Triangle: a legislative body, the bureaucracy, and interest groups. Over time, political scientists have learned that “We the People” are not involved in policymaking.

A new phenomenon has since emerged. What was once a healthy dynamic of checks and balances among these three entities in the Iron Triangle has changed; like the checks and balances of the three branches of government, the interests of these three sides have become aligned and now often collude to advance a common agenda.

To complicate matters, we are witnessing a strong and active Deep State that continues to advance its own agenda. Today, these problematic actors are not so deep; many operate at the highest levels of “public service.” Furthermore, it’s long been recognized that corporate media — sometimes known as

the [Fourth Estate](#) — has aligned with some legislators, agency heads, and even the president's office to promote or defend a progressive agenda. In the spirit of competition, over the past few decades, AM radio has re-emerged to provide counterpoint. But while their reach is significant in listeners, the money fueling the elite oligarchs' agenda — coming from colluding legislators, deep state bureaucrats, the media, some corporations, and cultural icons — has been advancing. More recently, the internet has permitted easy access for individuals to enter the political sphere with individuals expressing views that span the spectrum of ideas and opinions.

By now, it is a cliché to label someone or something as a threat to democracy. History and common sense reveal that for a large and complex society, one can expect the development of a strong structure to deliver service to the people. However, the evaluation of that entity should be based upon whether the extant structure sincerely serves the people.

If the citizenry does not seek out champions to control the bureaucracy for the good, the bureaucracy will control them, which is both ugly and bad!

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