

President Trump's biggest battle is fixing the Managerial Elite and bureaucratic culture

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If Donald Trump manages to unravel the prerogatives and power of the bureaucratic elite whose rules and regulations reach deep into the interstices of everyday life to hamper initiative, stymie independence and stifle originality, he will have fulfilled his most important campaign promise.

The other day, *The New York Times* ran one of their signature wrinkled-brow politics-masquerading-as-news pieces about Donald Trump. *The New York Times*, in case Australian readers are innocent of this datum, does not like Mr. Trump. This particular column, about Trump's transition team, was half minatory, half I-told-you-so crowing. "[Trump Lets Key Offices Gather Dust Amid 'Slowest Transition in Decades'](#)," shouted the headline. The State Department: "hushed and virtually empty." The Pentagon: woefully understaffed. Treasury, Health and Human Services: "many senior posts remain vacant." Things are bad, Comrade, bad. "Seven weeks into the job," Trump is "months behind where experts in both parties, even some inside his administration, say he should be."

Experts, eh? According to the *Times* Trump's failures to fill many positions "has left critical power centers in his government devoid of leadership." "There's no question this is the slowest transition in decades," said one of those experts the *Times* drags in to second its opinions. It is a "flawed transition" that paints an "unmistakable picture" of "dysfunctional transition effort."

In fact, Trump has filled all his key cabinet posts and has, moreover, filled them with people very unlike the *dramatis personae* of recently past cabinets. Trump's cabinet is manned not by political apparatchiks, think-tank denizens, or academics. It is manned by successful — the most successful — businessmen, entrepreneurs, and military men, people whose chief aim will not be to "protect their turf" and coddle the bureaucracy under their charge but rather to get the nation's business done as efficiently as possible. The *Times* did quote Trump observing that "a lot of those jobs, I don't want to appoint, because they're unnecessary." Yeah, right. Whoever heard of cutting government jobs? Can't be done. Shouldn't be done.

But guess what? It is being done. On March 13, the Trump administration released an Executive Order calling for a "Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch." It directs the head of the Office of Management and Budget to "propose a plan to reorganize governmental functions and eliminate unnecessary agencies . . . components of agencies, and agency programs."

"Eliminate unnecessary agencies . . ."

When was the last time you heard of a President actually set about doing that?

The document is quite specific. Within 180 days, the Director of the OMB is charged with submitting a plan "to reorganize the executive branch in order to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of agencies." Moreover, this is no mere shell game, where Department A is renamed Department B and given new offices, a larger staff, and a more lavish budget on the other side of the Potomac. No, the Executive Order calls for *eliminating* "unnecessary agencies, components of agencies, and agency programs, and to merge functions."

I like it. And it is worth stressing that it is of a piece with other initiatives undertaken by Trump, e.g., a hiring freeze on non-essential government personnel, making staff cuts of 20% and a budget cut of 10%. The aim of all this, as Trump said in his inaugural address, was not simply to transfer power from one party to another — chaps with different hats but the same grasping hands and insatiable appetite for your money — but to transfer it from Washington to where Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson and the rest of the Founders thought it should be, to We the People.

This is an essential part of Trump's oft-declared ambition to "drain the swamp" of Washington. Many politicians have said something similar. No one, not even Ronald Reagan, managed to do it. (In Reagan's defense, he had two different goals, both of which he achieved: defeat the Evil Empire of the Soviet Union and cuts taxes.) Trump actually seems to be in earnest about taking on The Bureaucracy. Whether he will succeed is entirely up in the air. If I had to give odds, I would say about 65-35 in favor of Trump. But then I am known for my sunny disposition. Other bookies, pointing to the extraordinary resilience (not to say insanity) of the "anti-Trump" and "never-Trump" agitators discount those odds sharply. Time will tell.

But it is largely on this question that Trump's Presidency will rise or fall. Yes, he will, like all leaders need a bit of luck. Where would Marcus Aurelius have been without the Miracle of the Rain in the Marcomannic Wars? When the Romans, besieged by the Quadi, were bottled up and dying of thirst, a sudden rain storm delivered them from certain defeat and they went on to rout the enemy.

But luck takes one only so far. The rest of the distance is covered by policy, formulation and execution. To understand the radical nature of Donald Trump's administration, one needs to consider his unofficial and unconfirmed cabinet colleague. No, I do not mean Steve Bannon. I mean James Burnham, the American political philosopher who helped start *National Review* in 1955 and whom William F. Buckley Jr. called "the number one intellectual influence on *National Review* since the day of its founding."

Now Burnham died in 1987, so it might seem odd to accord him an honorary place on Donald Trump's cabinet. Pedants might also point out that the chances are remote that Donald Trump has made a detailed study of James Burnham's work. But those are mere details. Burnham belongs in the constellation of Trump's influences for several reasons. There are, to start with, the two Ps: pragmatism and patriotism. Burnham was above all a pragmatic political philosopher. He reached through the mists of high-flown rhetoric to grasp policies that worked, that had a good chance of achieving the goals he wanted to achieve.

Part of Burnham's pragmatism was realism about the metabolism of power. Burnham was famous as a staunch anti-communist crusader. His implacable anti-communism had a moral component: he saw, rightly in my view, that communism, whatever its talk of brotherhood and equality, was evil incarnate. And Burnham saw, too, that fighting communism was partly a rhetorical task—the West had to compete in the matter of visionary appeal—but also partly a matter of brute power. "How divisions does the Pope have?" Stalin famously asked. The iron fist inside the utopian rhetorical glove underwrote the advancement of communist tyranny.

Burnham understood that and was icily clear-eyed in his calculation of power politics. It was one of the things that both fascinated and repelled George Orwell about Burnham.

In the news as I write is a report that Trump is planning to cut the US contribution to the UN by 50%. It's a start. Trump would, I think, have applauded Burnham's response to the UN's

resolutions disapproving of US nuclear policy: “Why in the world,” he wondered, “should any sensible person give a damn what some spokesman for cannibalistic tribes or slave-holding nomads thinks about nuclear tests?” Good question.

And this brings us to the second “P,” patriotism. Like Trump, Burnham put America first. No, I do not mean that he was a follower of Charles Lindbergh and more than Donald Trump is. Rather, he saw that it was only by first catering to one’s own interests that one could successfully cater to the interests of others. Put your own house in order, take care of your citizens, and you will conduce not only to their good but also to the good of others. The “telescopic philanthropy” that Charles Dickens satirized in *Bleak House* had step-by-step become the foreign policy of the United States, to the detriment of the beneficiaries of our largess as well as the moral stature of the US. Trump, like Burnham, aims to reverse that misguided policy.

But Burnham’s most important influence is to be found in his first and most famous book, *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). Readers of *Quadrant* will be familiar with Tocqueville’s famous passages about the character and operation of “democratic despotism” in modern societies. It operates, said Tocqueville, not like despotisms of yore: instead of tyrannizing over man, it infantilizes him. And it does this by the promulgation of rules and regulations that reach into the interstices of everyday life to hamper initiative, stymie independence, stifle originality. This power, said Tocqueville, “extends its arms over society as a whole.”

It does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them; it rarely forces one to act, but it constantly opposes itself to one’s acting; it does not destroy, it prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.

Tocqueville’s analysis has led many observers to conclude that the villain in this drama is the state. But Burnham saw that the real villain was less the state than the bureaucracy that maintained and managed it. The shepherd was really a flock of shepherds, a coterie of managers who, in the guise of doing the state’s business, prosecuted their own advantage and gradually became a self-perpetuating elite that arrogated to itself power over the levers of society.

Anatomizing this sleight-of-hand is at the center of “[James Burnham’s Managerial Elite](#),” Julius Krein’s essay in the inaugural issue of the quarterly he edits, *American Affairs*. “Although the managerial elite uses the state as an instrument to acquire power,” he notes, “the real enemy is not the state but rather the managerial separation of political and economic power from the liberal social contract.”

This separation of the real power of society from the economy of politics renders the managerial elite all-but-untouchable. And this, as Burnham saw, was the property neither of liberalism nor of conservatism but rather of anterior forces that engulfed both. “The contradiction of contemporary conservatism,” Krein writes,

is that it is an attempt to restore the culture and politics of bourgeois capitalism while accelerating the economy of managerialism. Because of its failure to recognize this contradiction, “much of conservative doctrine is, if not quite bankrupt, more and more obviously obsolescent,” as Burnham wrote in 1972. Since then it has only evolved from obsolescent to counterproductive. At this point, expanding “free markets” no longer has

anything to do with classical American capitalism. It is simply the further emancipation of the managerial elite from any obligations to the political community. Likewise, promoting democracy as an abstract, universalist principle only undermines the sovereignty of the American people by rejecting national interests as a legitimate ground of foreign policy.

Donald Trump's executive order is a sighting shot across the bow of the managerial elite that has hollowed out our democracy and elevated itself to a position of nearly untouchable unaccountability. Really, it is not the pathetic battalions of females in pink hats and vagina costumes who should be protesting Donald Trump. It is the managerial elite who have incarnated Tocqueville's warning about Democratic Despotism. They are the real swamp dwellers who stand to lose if Trump's ecological initiative to drain the boggy fen should succeed.

As of this writing, Donald Trump has been President for less than two months. *Pace* the *New York Times*, he has moved with blinding speed, has indeed undertaken a sort of political *blitzkrieg* to keep his promises on enforcing immigration laws, repealing Obamacare, rolling back the regulatory state, and reinvigorating the military. Behind it all, however, is an attack on the managerial elite that has overseen and extended the bureaucratic quagmire that has the West in its clammy and enervating grip. If Trump manages to unravel the prerogatives of that elite, if he succeeds in handing back power to the political process, he will have fulfilled his most important campaign promise. A key intellectual ally in that battle will be Trump's silent and unacknowledged partner, James Burnham.

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