

Should we defend the administrative state?

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6 FEBRUARY 2020
FULL PAPER: [BIT.LY/2P8QJ9Y](https://bit.ly/2P8QJ9Y)

1

Key points

- Conservative efforts to “deconstruct the administrative state” have triggered an academic “defense of the administrative state”
- But defending the administrative state is counter-productive
- The term is misused in scholarly research. We should distinguish:
 - The state
 - Administrative systems within the state
 - The administrative state as a historically contingent concept
- Also, it wasn't Waldo's idea.

2

2

Politics
Bannon vows a daily fight for 'deconstruction of the administrative state'



NASPAA Annual Conference 2019
Attacks on the Administrative State and the Future of Public Administration

2019 Transatlantic Dialogue (TAD 15)
"Restoring the Administrative State: Trust, Engagement, Security, and Identity"
Oct. 20-22, 2019 | New York City, NY

The Attack on the Administrative State and What Public Administration Can Do About It.

There is no topic more central to the field of public administration than the legitimacy of the administrative state.

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3

Origin of the concept

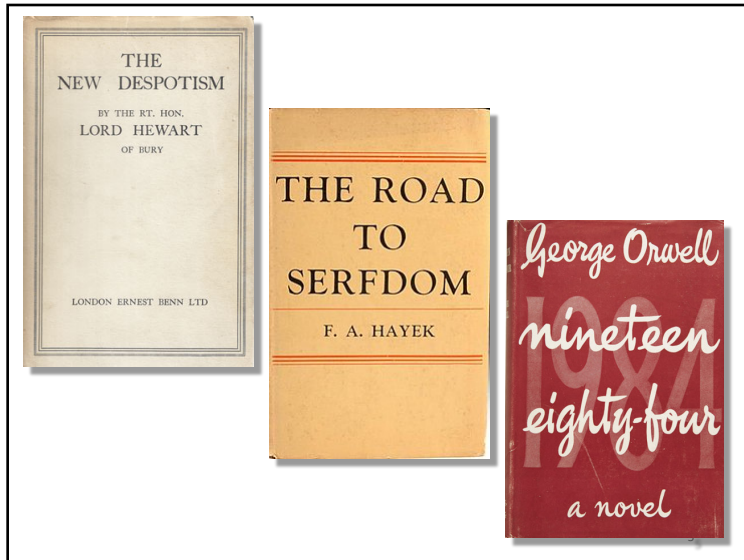
- Common belief: Waldo coined the term in 1948
- Reality: Waldo's book part of a wider debate
- No evidence that Waldo cared much for concept
- Original meaning: A *type* of state dominated by bureaucracy
- Tied to fears about the expansion of government

...what we already have, but cannot have more of. Thus the doctrine arose of "The Administrative State"—an all-wise, all-powerful organism designed to parcel out among us the crumbs of an economic system in which leaves are no longer possible. But this beating down and blowing under of the

Saturday Evening Post,
October 1944

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5

Shifts in meaning within academia (1): Timelessness?

- Initially, historically contingent: a type of state that emerged in 1930s-1940s
- Some more recent usages:
 - Modern administrative state
 - Ancient administrative states
 - Minimal administrative states
 - Third World administrative states
- A state with *any* administrative capabilities?
- A definitional shift? But then:
 - Redundancy: *all* states are administrative states
 - Value loading: still *inherently* problematic?

6

6

Shifts in meaning within academia: (2) A type or part of a state?

- Initial conception: a *type* of state, with a bureaucratic “ruling class”
- More recent usages:
 - One “sphere of government”
 - One of several “governing institutions”
 - “the agencies, people and processes of the executive establishment” (Lewis)
- Definitional shift: *part* of a state
- Implications for value-loading: the administrative state is checked, even “besieged”

7

7

Shifts in meaning within academia: (3) Its “home turf”?

- Before 1940s, scholars define their domain of research as administrative systems, administrative machinery, administrative branch . . .
- After 1940s, we often:
 - Define administrative state as the domain of study
 - Link vitality of field to vitality of administrative state
 - Perceive obligation to defend the administrative state
- Value-loading of concept is positive
 - “essential to civilized life”
- **Has the administrative state become a mere synonym for the administrative branch?**

8

8

Meanwhile, the popular understanding of concept remains unchanged

- Analysis of 26,073 original tweets mentioning “the administrative state” between 2016 and 2019
- Coding of tweets: perception of government overwhelmingly negative
- Top 15 adjectives associated with concept :
 - Modern, sprawling, intrusive, massive, federal, choking, American, malignant, unelected, unaccountable, growing, aggressive, deep, Progressive, corrupt

9

9

Danger of using loaded words

- Frank Luntz:
 - “It’s not what you say, it’s what they hear.”
 - Advice to conservatives: talk about “Washington” rather than “government”
- George Lakoff:
 - Words trigger mental frames
 - Progressives should avoid “the use of conservative language and the frames that the language activates.”

10

10

Remedy #1: More and better words

- Sometimes we are just talking about *the state*
 - Its political structure, functions and capabilities, strength and legitimacy
- Sometimes about *the administrative apparatus of the state*
 - Administrative system, administrative establishment, administrative estate, administrative capabilities, administrative capacities, administrative branch, administrative machinery
- Sometimes about a *historically specific form of state*
 - Initial conception of the administrative state

11

11

Remedy #2: In politics, choose words carefully

- Don’t use language that triggers unhelpful frames
- If we want to defend the public service or good government, do so in those terms.

12

12