H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ballard C. Campbell. *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. x + 289 pp.

Ballard C. Campbell. *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. x + 289 pp. $15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-20962-7; $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-32871-7.

Reviewed by Larry G. Gerber (Auburn University)
Published on H-Pol (May, 1998)

Over the last century, the growth of government has been one of the most dramatic developments in American history. In 1890, the size and scope of the state in America was strictly limited. Spending by all levels of government represented only 7 percent of GNP; only one out of every thirty workers in the country was a public employee; and few individuals other than Union army Civil War veterans received any direct financial assistance from the government. By 1990, the state had become a dominant factor in the nation's economy and in the daily lives of most Americans. Government spending had risen to 40 percent of GNP; one out of every six workers in the nation was a public employee; and nearly half of all Americans received some form of direct financial benefit from the government.

Ballard Campbell's *The Growth of American Government* offers a comprehensive account of the expansion of the American state since 1887. A contribution to Indiana University Press's highly regarded Interdisciplinary Studies in History series, the book draws effectively from recent literature in political science and sociology to develop a general explanatory framework for the growth that Campbell chronicles so well. While the book is obviously intended for classroom use in survey courses in American history and government and will contain little that is truly new or surprising for experts in the field, scholars will be impressed by Campbell's ability to cover so much ground in only 241 pages of text. While the growth of government is a familiar theme, perhaps no other historian has so successfully interwoven developments at the national, state, and local level over such a long period of time.

Campbell divides the history of American governance into four periods, each with its own distinctive polity: "republican" (1780s-1870s), "transitional" (1880s-1920s), "claimant" (1930s-1970s), and "restrained" (mid-1970s-). Each period, he argues, has been characterized by a distinctive set of policy innovations, fiscal pattern, federal-state relations, and economic conditions. Thus, in the "republican polity" that existed during the nation's first century as a primarily agricultural society, government functions and expenditures were strictly limited, with a consequent absence of direct taxation on the American people, and with the local, state and federal governments carrying out clearly distinguishable tasks (though local governments bore the primary responsibility for public administration and policy formulation).

The "transitional polity" coincided with the onset of full industrialization and involved the development of government regulation of business, increased public expenditures, the creation of new forms of taxation (including the income tax), and a more complex, though still largely cooperative, relationship between state and federal governments. The "claimant polity" that had its origins in the Great Depression but came to maturity in the period of affluence after World War II witnessed a tremendous growth in government responsibility for global stabilization, the economy, income security, civil rights, and work and environmental standards, and it involved the application of federally determined standards to many state activities. In the period of slow economic growth in postindustrial America, a "restrained polity" has emerged. Although the overall cost of government has continued to be high, expenditures have greatly exceeded revenues, and a movement toward deregulation and privatization has developed at the same time that the federal government has engaged in increasingly coercive efforts to mandate certain state and local actions.

Several major themes emerge from Campbell's study. First, Campbell believes that government expansion can-

not be attributed to a single causal explanation. The impact of industrialization, interest group pressures, partisan politics, and the self-interested activity of state actors all contributed to the growth of government, especially at the national level, but Campbell concludes that no "one individual, group, or event dominated policy making during this transformation. Rather, the Federal role expanded in response to numerous pressures, unfolded incrementally, and grew cumulatively" (p. 73). Nevertheless, Campbell does place the greatest emphasis on the socio-economic environment, in particular the demands generated by industrialization, as the single most important factor bringing about changes in government policy and functions. He downplays the significance of party competition as an underlying cause of the growth of government, arguing that differences between the two major parties regarding the expansion of government have been minimal, especially when one considers expansion of government functions at the state and local, as well as at the national level. Nor does Campbell see elections as being critical to the process, since voters have appeared "to act more as consumers of public goods than as initiators of new policies" (p. 45).

Interest groups play a larger role in his story than parties or the electorate at large, but here, too, Campbell denies the assertion made by some scholars that interest groups have been the driving force in the development of the American state. Instead, he contends that they have been far more successful in defending benefits and shaping the implementation of programs than they have been in causing the enactment of new programs and expanding government authority into new realms.

State actors–legislators, executives, and bureaucrats–all contributed to the expansion of government. Elected officials may not have been forced by grass-roots pressures from the electorate to expand the size and functions of government, but Campbell describes a process whereby politicians found that they could gain electoral support by extending benefits and services to particular groups of voters. Non-elected officials also had self-interested reasons for expanding the functions of government, and hence the size and prestige of the bureaucracy. In the end, however, Campbell argues that "it is futile to look for a magic bullet that explains a phenomenon as complex as the transformation of government … [T]he incremental process of policy making followed the course of least political resistance" and "built on existent policy" (p. 52).

Another major theme of *The Growth of American Government* is the continuing impact of America's republican origins. As expressed in both Americans' ideological predisposition to be suspicious of government power as a threat to individual liberty and in an enduring constitutional structure characterized by federalism and a system of checks and balances, the nation's republican tradition has played a critical role in shaping the growth of the American state. Although the United States long ago departed from many of the principles and practices that characterized the early republic, Campbell persuasively argues that the ideological legacy of the American Revolution and the structure of government established by the Constitution in 1789 have continued to impede the development of a cohesive state capable of long-range planning and coordinated policy formulation and implementation. Even as they have come to support a tremendous expansion of the functions and size of government, Americans have maintained an essentially ambivalent attitude about the power of the state, and especially about the increasingly centralized authority of the federal government. Campbell recognizes that it is impossible either to describe or explain the growth of government in the United States by focusing strictly on Washington. One of the great strengths of this book is that it presents a unified narrative that underscores the importance of the changing relationships that developed between local, state, and federal governments over the last century. In the late nineteenth century, not only did local governments play a far greater role in the daily lives of the American people, spending considerably more than half of all money allotted for public purposes, but each level of government performed relatively distinct tasks and interacted very little with the other levels of government. The story of the growth of government in the United States is not simply a story of centralization of all power and authority in Washington, but rather of the growing interdependency of local, state, and federal governments and a consequent blurring of the distinct lines of responsibility that once existed. Campbell's recurring references to developments in Arlington, Massachusetts serve as a highly useful case study of such change over time. Moreover, as Campbell shows, the last half century has actually seen state revenues increasing more rapidly than federal revenues. Local government has clearly lost its position as the most significant level of government in the United States, but state responsibilities have increased almost as dramatically as federal responsibilities since the end of World War II.

While Campbell offers an impressive overview of the growth of American government over the last one hundred years, he acknowledges that a major issue relating to that growth "is not the primary consideration of this

book": the question of whether the expansion of government functions was "constructive, inevitable, or counterproductive" to the public good and whether such expansion tended to favor certain groups or classes of Americans over others (p. 54).

Campbell may not tackle this issue head on, but he certainly conveys the impression that he is generally in sympathy with "liberal" efforts over the past century to use the power of government to reduce the risks of living in the modern interdependent world. At the same time, however, a recurring, though not strongly emphasized, theme in Campbell's account is the ability of privileged groups in society to reap disproportionate benefits from government programs once those programs become established. Thus, in agriculture, one of the first important areas of government intervention in the economy, in the long run "the real beneficiaries of agricultural policy were a comparatively few successful farmers and many businesses that processed and sold their commodities" (p. 127). Similarly, in what has become the most costly area of government spending, income security, members of "the middle class, not the poor, were the principal beneficiaries" (p. 152). Campbell concludes that "regardless of the intentions of lawmakers, the effect of many economic policies was to convey valuable benefits to particular classes of individuals," and that, in most instances, those classes consisted of interest groups that already enjoyed a privileged position in society.

Only in the final stages of the claimant polity, when issues of civil rights and environmental protection became central to the liberal agenda, did the expansion of government functions promise to advance the interests of the underprivileged or the polity as a whole. This expansion of the liberal agenda, however, coincided with intensifying global competition and a slowdown in the rate of economic growth, so that a backlash set in resulting in the rise of what Campbell tentatively calls the "restrained polity" of the last twenty-five years.

Campbell remains uncertain whether the restraint of recent years represents the emergence of a truly distinctive fourth era in the history of American governance, or whether it constitutes only a "subera" (or temporary interlude) in what will later be viewed as the continuing domination of the "claimant polity." One can hardly blame Campbell for leaving open the question of whether future historians will look back at the late twentieth century as the culmination of the polity introduced by the New Deal or as the beginning of a new post-New Deal order. *The Growth of American Government* is an important and impressive work of synthesis. While refraining from obvious partisanship, Campbell does not avoid making interpretive judgments that make this work far more than a simple narrative. Instructors looking for a single and easily accessible work to help students understand the expansion of the American state would do well to consider this book.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Larry G. Gerber. Review of Ballard C. Campbell, *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present* and Campbell, Ballard C., *The Growth of American Government: Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2035

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.