

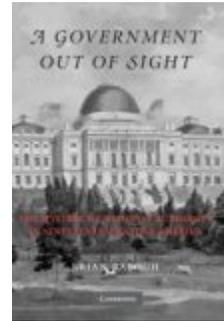


Brian Balogh. *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 428 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82097-4; \$23.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-52786-6.

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A Behind-the-Scenes Investigation of the Central Government that Wasn't (or Was It?)

Balogh's book was designed to refocus the way in which historians view the government of the nineteenth century. Perspectives on history have changed from fine foci on particular events to broad-scale, *longue durée* accounts of institutional change. Balogh's book, *A Government Out of Sight: the Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America*, seems to bridge the two. He attempts to narrate the development of centralized power by bestowing an almost prescient consciousness on some particular exercises of federal power in an era that is (up until this point) more loosely connected in a collective of states. He divides his analysis into three main foci and provides examples of general government influence in each. These are: (1) geographic expansion and the removal of natives to provide for security and population growth, (2) diplomacy and the need for consistent foreign policy, and (3) market forces and economic growth in the private sector.

Typically characterized by *laissez-faire* politics, Balogh's view of the nineteenth century offers a more dynamic and active governmental influence albeit through less noticeable avenues: "Neither ideological perspective [conservative and progressive] takes seriously the possibility that Americans turned regularly to the national government throughout the nineteenth century, or that it played a crucial role in shaping what Americans then and now regard as the 'natural' market" (p. 2). The basic proposition is that the government was not any less involved in the building of the country during this period,

but rather channeled its efforts through projects that did not necessarily point to the national originator. That is how Balogh consistently characterizes the national government—as a facilitator, catalyst, or clearinghouse through which agendas could pass seemingly emanating from another, more local source. Despite the benefit of the power of hindsight and the ability to reconstruct this purposeful system out of more subtle components, Balogh's argument appropriately and substantively challenges prior assumptions of weak central government. Balogh surmises that "with so few visual trappings of a national government," it was no wonder that "most scholars have concluded that the national government was marginal" (p. 152).

The author's central point is conveyed persuasively although at times it seems rather attenuated, just like the government of the nineteenth century—a parallel not lost on the reader. But simply because the premise appears thin, it does not render it invalid. Rather, I believe that the argument finds substance once the reader examines the details of the proposition. Just as a closer scrutiny of the national operations reveals the grander influence of the government, a closer examination of the particular examples of the behind-the-scenes actions and policies lends credence to Balogh's argument. After all, the looming bureaucratic state of the subsequent century did not spring forth wholly formed like Athena from the head of Zeus.

The national government of the nineteenth century was the small pebble which sent greater and far-reaching ripples out into society at large. The most noticeable currents were those associated not with the source, but those that appeared closer to home to the general observer. This was more palpable to the population heavily influenced by Lockean political theory. Leading through economic development, Balogh hints at Beardian economic policies as the overriding compulsion for political cooperation: “Self-interest eclipsed virtue as the life blood of governance by the early nineteenth-century. Explaining the relationship between self-interest and collective benefits was still crucial to the success of any political program. But the growing belief that the market would ‘naturally’ sort out these competing interests easily overshadowed the significant role that the General Government played in guiding this process” (p. 121).

It was necessary for the national government to perform these actions from behind the scenes due to the general hostility towards the centralization of power on such a grand scale. The centralized plan had to remain invisible in order to remain viable and avoid such criticism that “such projects threatened to empower the government, burden the taxpayer, redistribute wealth from one locale to another, and become self-perpetuating instruments of distant control over independent citizens” (p. 113). Tra-

ditionally, the exercise of central power was only *tolerated* where it provided opportunities for private enterprise to flourish. Balogh turns the tables on this perception: he posits that the market was actually *guided* by the policies of the central government and that private enterprise was the beneficiary, not the primary conductor, of the process: “[E]conomic ties held the union together, and it was the General Government’s obligation to promote commercial interaction within its borders” (p. 126).

Whether the reader believes that Balogh has presented an accurate picture of a cohesive set of policies directed by a truly centralized general government or rather has reconstructed the picture using hindsight to make sense of disjointed national initiatives, what is clear is that an alternate perspective on the era is thought-provoking. Perhaps the greatest contribution of this work is that it gives us an “[u]nderstanding [of] the variety of ways in which Americans have governed themselves in the past [which] can change our understanding of who we *can* be, and how we should get there” (p. 6). Balogh’s examination of the relationship between an influential, yet unseen, central government and the private market and general population can inform our current twenty-first-century situation. It may be less of a big vs. small government issue that divides our Democrats and Republicans than a visible vs. invisible one.

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