

Drain the Swamp

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The following is adapted from remarks delivered on November 19, 2024, at a Hillsdale College reception in San Diego, California.

The recent election is the product of a decades-long struggle in American politics that has intensified since 2016. The election produced a victory for the man who caused the intensification, Donald Trump. He caused it by convincing a people, jaded from broken promises, that he would “drain the swamp.”

He also convinced the people who inhabit the swamp, and they have scorched the earth to stop him. He has been canceled, derided, slandered, libeled, investigated, searched, impeached, arrested, prosecuted, tried, convicted, shot, and yet...reelected!

Now the battle will begin anew. What will it be like? There are so many problems. The border. Crime. Inflation. Education. War. Ukraine. China. Hamas/Hezbollah/Iran. Debt stacked to the far reaches of a SpaceX mission. Which matters most?

Last February, I paid a visit to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson. He might be, I told him, on the threshold of a historic opportunity. It may become possible to restore constitutional government in place of the administrative or bureaucratic state that has almost overtaken it.

He replied that he prayed about that every day.

That is the issue that matters the most. The worst evils stem from it. The strongest resistance guards its entrenchment.

It is not only the 23 million who work in the administrative state, many of them fine people. It is the universities who inspire and guide it while enjoying its emoluments. It is the corporations it regulates, protects, and subsidizes. It is the press that keeps its secrets and tells its fibs. It is the education bureaucracy that outnumbers the teachers with whom it interferes. It is the half of the American economy it occupies. It is the regulations it gushes, the prosecutions it wages, the verdicts it renders. It is the influence on elections it peddles in the grandest conflict of interest of all.

The administrative state is a different kind of thing from constitutional and representative government. It is a vastness, an idea whose time ought never to have come. It has gone from strength to strength here and over other parts of the West since its birth more than a century ago. It is embodied in the European Union and in socialist Britain, France, and Germany. It is seen as well in communist China, where its iron fist operates without a glove. The administrative state is marked by the eclipse of elected legislatures and executives by tenured civil servants, making laws in uncountable profusion and pretending to be above politics. As Winston Churchill characterized them: "no longer servants and no longer civil."

Look what it has done to America since the swamp began to fill in the 1930s, and especially since the 1960s.

In 1930, government consumed twelve percent of the gross domestic product of the nation. That was about how it had been from the beginning. Today, government handles a little over 50 percent of the nation's wealth. This is a gigantic transfer of resources from the private to the public sector, which defies the meaning of a free society. To quote again Churchill, a champion of the free society, "money should fructify [bear fruit] in the pockets of the people."

Here in the United States, between the presidencies of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the government owned the biggest asset any government ever owned: the western lands, most of the area of the country. The Homestead Act, signed by Lincoln in 1862, gave away ten percent of the land of the United States to anyone who would live on it and work it. That is the spirit of free government at its best.

Over the past century, the transfer of assets has been moving the other way. Somehow, we have come to think that the fruited plains bear more fruit when the government owns them. Certainly, we should have national and state parks and open expanses. But to enjoy them, we must make a living. We must farm, mine, travel, and work as we please. We must act on our own initiative and by our own efforts. We need resources to live on and use, readily available to anyone who wants to work. That is the spirit of a free people.

Another significant change has been the centralization of government. In 1930, more than 60 percent of the money in government was raised and spent in counties, cities, and towns. The public money was held near the people who contributed it. The federal government controlled less than 20 percent. Now those numbers are reversed. Through a long and steady process, we have moved money out of the pockets of the people and into a treasury far, far away. We have converted America from a bottom-up to a top-down country. Rules proliferate. Expense piles up. Anything dependent upon the government moves like molasses on a winter day, except when an interest of the government is at stake.

How we allowed this to happen is a very long story. Early progressive policies were presented as common-sense adjustments to a government that needed not revolution, but reform. Increasingly, problems were presented as emergencies that had to be fixed no matter what. Then the news was orchestrated to produce new emergencies, requiring new regulations to solve them and new agencies to manage and enforce the regulations. Each step increased the size and reach of government.

During the George W. Bush administration, I told a senior presidential advisor that the No Child Left Behind Act would not do much good. Yes, our K-12 schools are struggling to teach children to read. Adding more regulations and bureaucrats—and enabling them to write high stakes testing to drive curricula—is only more of the same. He asked, “How can parents know if their children are learning if we don’t test?” I replied, “They live with the children, and it is not hard to tell if a child can read. Also, they love them and raise them. That is the system of real accountability.” To fix what is wrong in K-12 education, make it *less* top-heavy. Decentralize authority to local districts and schools, put parents first, and address the problem that more than half the employees in public education are administrators, not teachers.

Today, after more than 100 years of trying, the weakness of the progressive regime becomes apparent. At its core, it undermines the principle of consent of the governed. It vaunts expertise and professionalism over politics and the principle of representation. Over time it has become unable to hide its contempt for American citizens. Its leaders have called them deplorables and worse. It seeks to take children from their parents and prosecutes parents if they complain. It seeks to restrict speech to assertions that enjoy its sanction.

These policies stifle the native strength of our country, which is the source of American greatness. Take an example from the progressive attempt to disarm Americans. Hillsdale College is a sponsor of the U.S. Olympic shooting teams, who train at our Halter Shooting Sports Education Center. One of the best shotgun shooters in the world is Vincent Hancock, who just won his fourth gold medal in Paris. He recently gave a talk on our campus in which he noted that in the competition for shooting medals, China is ahead. It wins about ten medals every Olympics, and the U.S. wins about five. Of course, he continued, there are so many more Chinese than there are Americans—but whereas in China no one is allowed to own or fire a weapon except with official sanction, any American can own guns and become

proficient with them. America has more great shooters than any country—people who have trained by their own efforts and for the love of it, and who could no doubt dominate at the Olympics. But of course, we don't conscript Olympic athletes as China does.

Alexis de Tocqueville writes that in America every community and every person is the best judge of the things that concern mainly itself and himself. The army of America is the population of America. So too the workforce. No public-sector army or workforce should be allowed to become dominant. The key to restoring our political and social institutions is to understand that we need strong government, but it must be limited. This is possible only if we govern ourselves in most things.

What does President Trump propose to do? Since his election, appointments and announcements have come rapid fire. My favorite directly addresses the problem of the administrative state. It is the creation of a Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, headed by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy. Musk introduced certain efficiencies at Twitter. He eliminated six of the seven letters in its name to call it X. He eliminated 6,500 of its 8,500 employees, which comes to 76 percent. He fired most of the “moderators,” the people who prevent users of the platform from saying things. Doesn't this suggest a pattern for government? Ramaswamy came to national prominence protesting companies who forgot about their customers in favor of a woke agenda. He had made a lot of money remembering his customers. Doesn't this also suggest a pattern for government?

The DOGE will work as an advisory group outside the government to find a cheaper and better way to do things—or not to do things! It will work with the Office of Management and Budget, the office in the White House that has final approval over regulations. It can do a lot, but fundamental change rightly requires legislation.

Trump's party controls both houses of Congress by narrow margins. Will they pass legislation to abolish a department? To alter the tenure rules for bureaucrats? Or even to confirm Trump's appointments? If not, achievements by executive order can disappear in a day in the next administration. The recent history of Congress, which created and has been operating alongside the administrative state for decades, does not encourage optimism. It will help that Trump won the popular vote, a moral victory, and that the politics of Trump have been changing the party. But will it be enough?

To “expect the unexpected” is a logical contradiction that contains a truth: we do not know what will happen. We sail where we have not been. No president has ever staked his administration on overcoming the administrative state. Reagan, the best of Trump's modern predecessors, was hindered by having the priority of dealing with the Soviet Union, and his party never controlled the House. Others who talked about reducing bureaucracy never attempted to do so in a fundamental way.

If politics and policy at home will be an unpredictable battle, there may be literal battles abroad. We are subject to direct and sudden attack by nations that are more numerous than we. The Chinese navy is larger than ours and gaining every month. Our defense industry is calcified, and military recruitment is down. We have spent trillions attempting to build democracy in nations that had never known it—and still do not. Our national debt piles to the moon.

We will need the wisdom of Winston Churchill, born 150 years ago this month, on these matters. He has been ill understood by Republicans in recent years. Some thought they were following Churchill's example, for instance, in attempting over many years to build a democracy in Iraq. Indeed, Churchill ruled that country as colonial secretary for 20 months after Britain inherited the problem of Iraq following World War I. But his policy, unlike ours, was to leave as soon as practically possible and meanwhile cut the cost.

Different Republicans have suggested that Churchill caused World War II. In fact, he struggled for almost a decade to avoid it by calling for weapons production to deter Hitler. He had warned of the dangers of modern war throughout his life. That danger was not only physical destruction and death, but also the conscription of national life at the expense of freedom. For Churchill, as it seems for Trump, war is something to be avoided and, when it must be fought, fought fiercely to a rapid conclusion. He called World War II, in which he won his glory, "the unnecessary war." Whatever their differences, Trump has these ideas in common with Churchill.

Our great advantage is the same that Britain has enjoyed: bodies of water between us and our worst enemies. But the oceans, like the English Channel, are not as wide as they used to be. To a greater extent we must be protected by diplomacy and weapons. In his first administration, Trump built weapons, and his diplomacy was highly successful. It may be harder this time.

Despite the trials we face and those to come, we would be wrong not to expect success. It is necessary. To remain free, we must have a government accountable to us. That is the first precept of constitutionalism. That is what must be restored.

We are made for freedom. Its beauty calls to us as much as goodness and knowledge call to us, and for the same reason. This is apparent every day in the operation of Hillsdale College. Everyone here is a volunteer. No one comes to Hillsdale without understanding what it is and without promising to help it thrive according to its 180-year-old mission. That is why we are able to cooperate, to think freely, to argue all we want, and to remain civil to each other. That is why we have few rules: goals freely adopted are better than rules and enforcement. We are able to have what the word *college* means: a partnership.

The country is the same. Founded with a beautiful Declaration that makes its mission clear, governed under the longest surviving written constitution in history, Americans built a society, a culture, and an economy of freedom from the ground up, under the shelter of political institutions that we made for this purpose and with the help of Providence.

The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence will fall under President Trump's second administration. I know from my service on the 1776 Commission, during his first administration, that he will wish to celebrate it with a loud voice and a full throat. May we all go from strength to strength in recovering the meaning of that document and restoring the Constitution that enabled us to make America great in the first place.