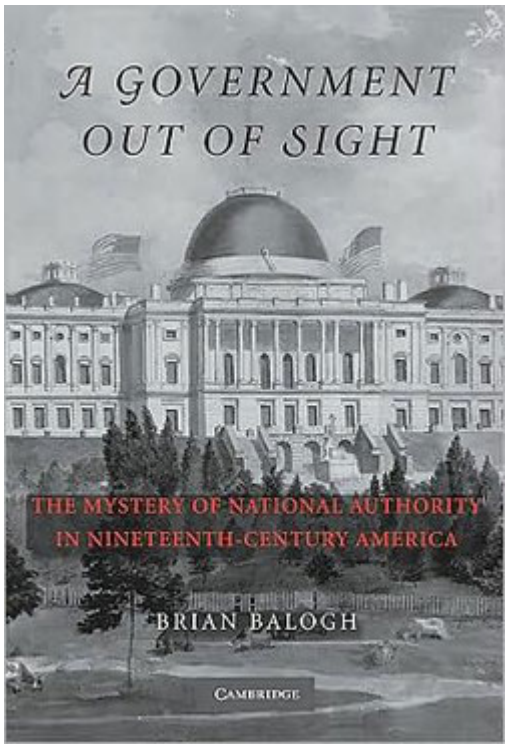
Out of Sight, But on the Horizon: The Secret Life of the American Nation-State



A Government Out of Sight is a very important book. Brian Balogh, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, argues that since revolutionary times Americans have had a paradoxical relationship with the national government. On the one hand, Americans developed a penchant for looking to their national government to build and maintain the social and economic pillars of society. On the other hand, Americans demanded that the structures of this national state remain as "inconspicuous" as possible (379). This "mystery of national authority in nineteenth-century America can be resolved," he concludes, "once we recognize that although the United States did indeed govern differently than its industrialized counterparts, it did not govern less. Americans did, however, govern *less visibly*." Thus, in *A Government Out of Sight*Balogh sets three ambitious tasks for himself: to ascertain the origins of this unique configuration of national authority; to explain what this national government accomplished; and to explain the ideological and historiographical consequences of this 'less visible' government for American politics and society. On each of these fronts, readers will find Balogh's arguments to be clear, deeply-researched, provocative, and ultimately successful. By elucidating the existence, contributions, and ideological ramifications of the national government in American history, Brian Balogh has written a remarkable and powerful book that will become required reading for students of American politics. That said, Balogh's unwillingness to engage questions of agency,

motives, and power will provoke much debate and reflection about the value of solving this “mystery of national authority.”

Balogh approaches the question of national authority in the nineteenth-century United States with an unabashed presentism, presumably in order to find an audience with politicians and political scientists. He views *A Government Out of Sight* as being in dialogue with the recent, rising tide of scholarship in the American Political Development school of thought, which seeks to understand politics by delving “into the intricacies of political conflict and governmental operations in particular historical settings,” according to leading expositors Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, in *The Search for American Political Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, cited passage at 3). Thus Balogh opens his book by declaring that, “The stories we absorb about the past help frame the way we see ourselves today and influence our vision of the future.” Indeed, he believes that “fundamental assumptions about the national government’s origins and history” have fostered an unproductive political debate about ‘big’ versus ‘small’ government in which both the left and right cling to a mythical history of a stateless past (1-2). By illustrating that the national government was, in fact, a central force in shaping the American past—that it “influenced the life chances of millions of Americans” (2)—Balogh seeks a pragmatic, historical third way, above the fray of partisan political ‘triangulation.’ Balogh’s history is intended to provide a narrative of a usable past: conservatives should appreciate that their own political heritage includes clarion calls for active government, while liberals should relinquish their tendency to deride non-bureaucratic, associational modes of governing.

Balogh’s book tells a rich, nuanced historical story about the growth and transformation of a common “vision” of government and government power in the early United States. The story begins during colonial times, when North American colonists, seized by revolutionary republicanism, came to understand politics and the polity as the foundational structural force in their society. Seen most visibly in the widespread tradition of local self-government, politics and political institutions anchored social life in eighteenth-century America. After the American Revolution, this faith in public power culminated in a “developmental vision” that was embodied in and echoed by the Constitution of 1788 (69). Drawing upon recent work by Max Edling and Robin Einhorn, Balogh contends that this vision “created the potential for a powerful central government” that could act independently of state and local governments, but one that much more often “would tread lightly in domestic policy” (57). Above all, this form of government was characterized by its hybrid nature: it was public in form but frequently private in substance, as seen through Alexander Hamilton’s financial system of government institutions conjoined with “the self-interest of wealthy individuals” (57); it was national in name but local in capacity, as national officers lived in the communities they regulated. Debates about how to construct this form of government during the 1780s (and the actual operation of the national government in the following decade) augured “the subtle evolution of national consciousness,” which cemented the

bonds between the people and the young United States (91). The rise of a national consciousness reconstituted Americans' developmental vision on a national scale, as people became accustomed to looking to government to solve social and economic problems.

But the "polity-dominated conception of society was rudely challenged from the start" by ascendant liberalism (37). Although Balogh accepts this familiar narrative about the shift from republicanism to liberalism, he adds a new and important twist. Liberalism may have destroyed republicanism, he argues, but it did so without shattering the governing institutions created by republicanism. Even after the (alleged) liberal triumph, the flexible, hybrid government that arose from the experience of the late eighteenth century remained intact. And during the early republic, the American people continued to look to the national government to solve their problems, especially through the public land system and various internal improvement projects. But American appeals for government action were framed in terms of requests by liberal, self-interested individuals, rather than the older, public logic of republicanism. By the 1820s, as the "rationale" for public action became "the self-interested payoff that such public undertakings would deliver," the national government itself receded from most Americans' conception of government (149). The developmental vision had lost sight of the national government, and Americans would too.

It is in tracing this paradoxical and simultaneous emergence and disappearance of the national government in American political consciousness that Balogh makes his greatest contribution. Indeed, even as Balogh suggests the waning of national government in political culture, he draws upon the work of leading historians of nineteenth-century politics—Richard John on the postal system, Daniel Feller on the General Land Office, Andrew Cayton on territorial governments, William Novak on the common law—to illustrate how federal policy consolidated the republic from a loose alliance of states into a nation-state. The federal government engineered a communications revolution. The federal government killed, dispossessed, and displaced Indians. The federal government sliced and diced the western territories and parceled out lands to white settlers. The federal government, through the judiciary, guided the rise of a national system of law and national standards for commerce. But, Balogh writes, "in all of these venues, public action reinforced private activity that promoted the general welfare but limited central administration" (276). As a result of the obscurity of the federal government, "for most Americans living in the mid-nineteenth century it was not government, but rather civil society, that forged the nation" (277). The story of the American frontier best illustrates this interplay of statecraft and ideology. Even as the federal government fought wars against Indians, surveyed land, and conducted land sales throughout the West, the federal government disappeared from the popular understanding of the frontier. Thus the story of the West became one of rugged, self-interested individuals, rather than one of an active federal government.

The surge of nationalism that accompanied the Civil War only temporarily changed things. Balogh echoes Richard Bensel's claim that public, wartime

institutions disappeared as the emergence of a national marketplace and a national belief in the inviolability of the market generated harsh criticism of governmental 'intrusion' into private life (299). As with the story of the frontier, Balogh's interpretation of constitutional law in the late nineteenth century points to the dynamic of an active government constructing institutions, while those institutions are obscured by anti-statist ideology. As the national judiciary erected the foundations of a national law of corporations and transactions, the way it did so obscured the constitutive role of government.

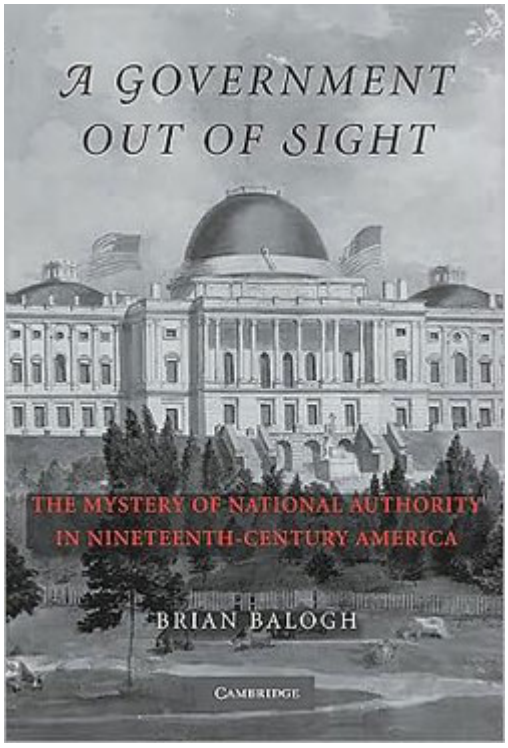
All of this brings us within sight of "the Twentieth-Century State." The architects of the New Deal, Great Society, and even the Reagan Counterrevolution faced certain "patterns" of government that, Balogh concludes, emerged during the long nineteenth century. First, Americans have always looked to government to solve their problems, but the government they look to is simultaneously flexible, public, private, local, and national, rather than monolithic, "visible, [and] centralized." Second, Americans will only tolerate "bureaucracy" during times of national crisis, and especially wartime. Third, national taxes are a dangerous "third rail" of national government. Finally, political development is almost always based in legal development and the action of courts. Taken together, these patterns mean that in America, national government functions "largely out of sight" (382).

Some will find Balogh's conclusion too schematic in tone—a stark departure from the careful, almost thick description of policy and governance that precedes it. This shift in tone occurs periodically throughout the book, almost invariably when Balogh attempts to grab the attention of policymakers and political scientists. This is one of a few minor problems that deserve mention. Balogh relies quite self-consciously on secondary sources, which in itself is not problematic. Rather, one senses that he has occasional difficulty managing the sheer number of historiographical threads from legal, business, Western, and political history that appear throughout *A Government Out of Sight*. The result is that subsections of chapters appear superfluous or forced, such as the discussion of lighthouses as an "uncontested national program" during the early republic (217-18). Digressions of that nature make earlier chapters look far weightier than the brief treatments of the Civil War and Progressive Era, leaving the altogether ironic impression that Balogh—a historian of the twentieth-century U.S.—has slighted more recent history for the Revolutionary and early republican past.

Scholars of the Revolutionary era may also quibble with Balogh's reading of Alexander Hamilton's *Federalist* No. 27, which supplies this volume with its cryptic title. For Balogh, Hamilton desired a state that was leviathan-like and thus preeminently visible to the citizenry. The future Secretary of the Treasury denigrated what he called "a government continually at a distance and out of sight" (3). "What Hamilton failed to anticipate," Balogh concludes, "was a national government that was often *most* powerful … when it was hidden in plain sight" (4).

I'm not so sure Hamilton failed to anticipate this at all. Hamilton uses *Federalist* No. 27 to discuss the problem of political coercion in a large republic. He believed that governments that rule solely by force ultimately fail. Thus the federal government must, upon its formation, insert itself into localities. In this way, Hamilton's federal government would be 'visible,' or 'in sight'—at least at first. But this government, once planted, would quietly take root. As Hamilton himself wrote, "the more the operations of the national authority are intermingled in the ordinary exercise of government, the more the citizens are accustomed to meet with it in the common occurrences of their political life, the more it is familiarized in their sight and to their feelings … the greater will be the probability that it will conciliate the respect and attachment of the community." And the more the national government was "familiarized in their sight," "the less it will require the aid of the violent and perilous expedients of compulsion" (Alexander Hamilton, "Number XXVII," in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Isaac Kramnick [New York: Penguin Classics, 1987], 203). In short, as the federal government became more naturalized, and blended or "intermingled" into people's lives, the less it would be a source of popular discontent. Is this so different from Balogh's federal state, "hidden in plain sight"?

Balogh's reading of Hamilton's *Federalist* essay does not change very much about his overall argument. Nor does it detract from his immense achievement in writing this book. *A Government Out of Sight* unequivocally establishes that there was a national state in the early United States, that the state achieved a great deal in its own right, and that it should loom much larger within the main currents of American historiography. But returning to *Federalist* No. 27 does raise the question of for whom this new state was to work, which "citizens" it sought to "conciliate," and why. Balogh is not necessarily interested in this question because, in all fairness, it goes beyond his scope of inquiry. Thus among the most recurrent language in this book is discussion of what "Americans wanted," what "Americans sought," and what "Americans preferred." But Balogh does not interrogate just who these "Americans" were. Balogh does not shy away from any of the federal government's more dubious exertions of power, such as the Trail of Tears (210-11). And readers will quite correctly draw the conclusion that white settlers agitated for and benefited from this and all Indian displacement policies, and that the Indians suffered immeasurably from these same policies. But in Balogh's project, which sets out to uncover the operations of power, there is little room for winners and losers, for the subjects and objects of power, and for the beneficiaries and victims of government action.



Brian Balogh, A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 414 pp., hardcover, $85.00.

This would not be nearly so important if not for Balogh's conclusion, which reads: "It is time to challenge the deeply held conviction that, historically, Americans have eschewed government intervention at the national level. That is why history matters. Americans must reclaim the national government's critical role in enabling nineteenth-century American expansion, stimulating economic development, and managing international relations" (399). Balogh's book proves that American citizens turned early and often to the national government. But "reclaiming" the national government's role in settling the West, creating a national marketplace, and administering foreign policy seems a much more complicated endeavor—one that will require historians to figure out who these "Americans" were—and to sort out the historical ramifications of the national government's achievements. It certainly is not an impossible historical project, as *A Government Out of Sight* teaches us precisely where and what to look for. But for those like Balogh, who seek an antidote to our own political ills, I'm not so sure they will like what they find.