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## *Is There a Deep State?*

**I**n Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 movie *North by Northwest*, the protagonist Roger Thornhill, a genial New York advertising man played by Cary Grant, is suddenly swept up into clandestine Cold War machinations. Only after he encounters an American spymaster named the Professor, who is based on CIA director Allen Dulles, the brother of John Foster Dulles and a charter member of the American Establishment, does Thornhill begin to decipher the turbulent series of events, including a harrowing encounter with the anonymous pilot of a crop duster, that have put his life in jeopardy. "I don't like the games you play," Thornhill declares. "War is hell, Mr. Thornhill," the Professor retorts, "even when it's a cold one." Thornhill is enraged. "Perhaps you ought to start learning," he says, "how to lose a few cold wars."

It's a telling exchange. Suspicions of an amoral caste of foreign-policy mandarins intent on manipulating, or even subverting, American democracy for their own ends are hardly new. Instead, apprehensions about a cabal have formed a persistent theme of American political debate. Three years after the appearance of Hitchcock's film, the journalist Richard Rovere wrote a famous spoof, complete with footnotes, about

searching for the American Establishment in the *American Scholar*. His minute researches about "a more or less closed and self-sustaining institution that holds a preponderance of power in our more or less open society" prompted William F. Buckley Jr. to publish a response in *Harper's*. Buckley was having none of Rovere's levity. "The fact of the matter," wrote Buckley, "is that Mr. Rovere's disavowals notwithstanding, there *is* a thing which, properly understood, might well be called an American Establishment; and the success of Mr. Rovere's essay wholly depends on a sort of nervous apprehension of the correctness of the essential insight." Indeed, two decades later, Leonard Silk and Mark Silk went on to offer a highly informative conspectus of the institutions of the foreign-policy elite in their 1980 book *The American Establishment*. There the matter rested.

In recent months, however, apprehensions about a deep state, led by intelligence officials at the FBI, CIA and Justice Department, have acquired a fresh prominence. The conservative Christian leader Franklin Graham is sounding alarms about a "coup d'état" against Donald Trump, and the president himself is warning on Twitter about the sinister operations of a "Deep State Justice Department." How much credence should be placed in such assertions? Does a deep state exist? Is there really a

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concerted effort to subvert the Trump administration by government officials? Or is that an outlandish allegation? The *National Interest* invited leading experts, a number of whom have served in government in senior positions, to explicate and evaluate the controversy surrounding a deep state. □

## Emma Ashford

The migration of the idea that a “deep state” controls the U.S. government from the realm of fringe conspiracy theorists to mainstream political discussion is undoubtedly one of the more intriguing developments in the last year. But Donald Trump’s repeated assertions that a deep state exists, and that it is actively thwarting his policy agenda, pushing investigations into his campaign or even wiretapping his offices, mean that the idea has now become a part of our mental landscape.

It is utter nonsense.

Certainly, there will always be pressure on foreign policy from entrenched interest groups, both inside and outside the government. Political scientists study the field of bureaucratic politics for a reason: institutional structure and incentives matter a lot. But the idea that the whole American bureaucracy shares a common goal on practically any issue area simply doesn’t pass muster. The tools of the so-called “deep state”—bureaucratic inertia, internal policy debates, conflicts over resources—are far more often used in interagency turf wars than to force politicians to adopt a certain policy.

At the same time, there are undoubtedly civil servants who find themselves unwilling or unable to implement the president’s policy agenda. Whether it is a special counsel

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who pursues the law rather than loyalty to an individual, as Donald Trump demands, or a Foreign Service professional who finds himself unwilling to work for a leader such as Trump, not all public servants will willingly help Trump implement his policy or personal preferences.

Yet this mostly results in resignations, not internal rebellion. Indeed, as John Feeley, ambassador to Panama, noted in his resignation letter, civil servants take an oath to defend the constitution. When they cannot reconcile that oath or their personal opinions with the administration’s stances, they are “honor bound to resign.”

Nonetheless, critics like Michael Glennon are right that there has been remarkable consistency over time in U.S. foreign policy. Even presidents who are critical of U.S. foreign policy while campaigning usually dial back that criticism in office, and fail to follow through on their promises. Jimmy Carter’s plan to withdraw U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula ultimately failed, while Donald Trump’s promise to end the war in Afghanistan eventually morphed into an increase of troops on the ground.

These critics are accurate in their depiction of U.S. foreign policy. There is a surprising amount of consistency between presidential administrations on foreign policy. But whether they call it “double government” or the “deep state,” the focus of critics on some unelected network of bureaucrats as the cause of this consistency is misguided.

Instead, they’d do better to look to the bipartisan foreign-policy consensus that has guided American policy since the end of the Cold War. This consensus—commonly described as liberal hegemony or primacy—focuses on a globally active United States with extensive overseas military and alliance commitments, and is shared by the majority of the policymaking community in Washington, DC. The result is that when

congressional publicity seekers, posing as champions of the American way.

This will turn out to be as much a chimera as its first precursor, led by Sen. Joe McCarthy and Donald Trump's former counselor Roy Cohn. Still, American politicians won't stop seeking electoral advantage by fostering and exploiting popular beliefs that opponents of the national interest, or even enemies of the people, have occupied key positions in the government, media and other institutions.

But, notwithstanding lapses of vigilance or intelligence, the electorate will eventually figure out what news is truly fake. □

## John Deutch

There are many historical examples of groups operating within, beside or in opposition to legitimate or illegitimate sitting governments. Perhaps the most notorious instance of an effective “deep state” is the covert “Black Hand” organization. Headed by the Serbian intelligence chief, Colonel “Apis,” it engineered the assassination of Austria's Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, setting off the First World War.

Today, in the United States and elsewhere, there are undoubtedly groups, motivated by principle, amusement, or profit, that seek to influence government actions covertly. Such groups employ conventional tools such as lobbying and campaign contributions, and are increasingly delivering their message through both conventional and social media.

Noisy exchanges on TV programs, tweets from the White House and magazine

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commentaries are extremely weak reeds on which to build a theory of the existence of a nefarious “deep state.” The more paranoid supporters of President Trump say that the new deep state constitutes organized resistance by federal government employees who are determined to subvert his presidency. It should come as no surprise that federal employees, mostly in civilian agencies, dislike President Trump's politics and policies, especially those that call for budget cuts and reductions in force. But to call this resistance organized is a stretch. Indeed, it is laughable to claim that an escalation in leaks from disgruntled government employees intending to influence policy serves as *prima facie* evidence of a deep state. Quite the contrary. Such leaks, which are abhorrent to me, many others view as a strength, not a weakness, of U.S. democracy.

There is little analysis or evidence to bear on the question of the existence of a deep state. Perhaps a simpler question is whether there has been a shift over recent years to more behavior that is characterized as coming from a deep state, and whether such behavior risks national security. I doubt both propositions. The significant national-security threats that face the nation today—Iran, North Korea, terrorism, competition with China and Russia—are not central in the deep-state narrative.

Concern with a new and more dangerous conspiracy by U.S. intelligence agencies, greed of private-sector firms, or dissatisfied federal or congressional staff, is not a mortal threat to national security or stability (as Colonel Apis was in 1914). Such behavior has been present in U.S. history since Aaron Burr's effort to establish an independent republic in the west. More importantly, the very genuine terrorist threat (especially augmented by cyberattacks) that the nation faces has an entirely different set of causes, manner of delivery and sponsorship.

*Image: The lobby of CIA headquarters in McLean, Virginia, August 14, 2008. Reuters/Larry Downing.*

The deep-state narrative is stuck on a single subject: who is doing what to whom in Washington—a matter that is of scant significance to most Americans and to the future of the republic. It is the result of President Trump’s unexpected presidential victory and the clash of his admittedly bizarre behavior and voice on the ears of the comfortable political elite that have been in office for decades. I have sympathy with both views: President Trump’s behavior and policy actions are disruptive and nonsensical. However, President Trump is addressing a set of issues that have been avoided for some time by right-thinking people in both parties: the linkage between trade and jobs, economic growth, and overregulation.

Here is my advice. When you hear the term “dark government,” change the channel or turn off the radio; if you see an article, turn the page. Give your attention to questions that directly bear on the welfare of our country going forward: health care, climate change, innovation and genuine national-security concerns. □

## Gary Hart

It is unclear when the Deep State was created, or created itself. The moment of creation, however, almost certainly took shape in the twentieth century. Candidates for creating the Deep State, or permitting it to create itself, are Franklin Roosevelt or Harry Truman: Roosevelt for domestic purposes, Truman for international purposes.

As a machine that runs itself, its members almost certainly are senior career civil servants in every cabinet department and

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agency. That means, at least, fifteen cabinet departments and anywhere from seven to fifteen principal agencies. To be effective, the minimum number of Deep State members must be at least a hundred per department and agency. Thus, the core of the Deep State would be in the neighborhood of two or three thousand individuals. It therefore seems almost indisputable that they wield immense and largely unchecked influence.

Over time, senior officials retire and must be replaced. If this mysterious State arose under Roosevelt, then there must have been over time some tens of thousands of secret members of the Deep State.

Were they required to take an oath of secrecy to join this covert government? That must have been part of the arrangement; otherwise one book, not to say a whole library, would have been published by now describing in thrilling detail how it all works.

Perhaps the Deep State has enforcers who take care of those who squeal. Great research question: how many members or former members of the Deep State met untimely and violent deaths?

And where has the Washington press corps been all these years? Anyone remember a Pulitzer Prize for uncovering the Deep State right under their noses?

Amazing that it took President Donald Trump, who had never participated in government or spent much time in Washington, to reveal this secret. Perhaps he is waiting for the appropriate moment to document the existence of the Deep State and its membership.

Perhaps not.

As a veteran of a few years’ service at the U.S. Departments of Justice and Interior, I can testify that there was little evidence of Deep State activity. Almost to a person, the career civil servants were intelligent, diligent, hardworking and highly knowledgeable about their responsibilities. They could, of course, have been sly devils meeting in