

GUEST ESSAY

This Idea Explains a Lot About What Has Happened in Trump 2.0

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Elon Musk may be swapping insults with President Trump after pivoting away from politics and stepping down from the Department of Government Efficiency, but the broader initiative, driven by what he described as a mission to end the “tyranny of the bureaucracy,” will soldier on. Even if its impact on government spending remains limited, DOGE’s aggressive approach has rattled Washington’s political establishment.

The administration’s war against the bureaucracy didn’t emerge from the mind of President Trump or Mr. Musk alone. Nor is it the product of traditional conservative preoccupations with shrinking government and reducing spending. Its roots and motivations are far deeper.

It is the culmination of a once marginalized, now transformative strand of political thought about who really holds power in the modern American system. Namely, that our democracy has been usurped by a permanent ruling class of wholly

unaccountable managers and bureaucrats.

Anti-managerialism is back. Well positioned to answer decades of frustration with mainstream conservatives' failure to deliver results, this old idea has become the central principle of the new right.

In fact, much of what is commonly called "populist" politics can be more accurately described as part of an anti-managerial revolution attempting to roll back the expansion of overbearing bureaucratic control into more and more areas of life.

Though it has so far met with limited success amid stiff resistance, grasping the nature of this anti-managerialism is essential to understanding the Trump administration's effort to transform America's institutional landscape, from government to universities and major corporations.

The idea's intellectual history begins with the political philosopher James Burnham, who argued in his seminal 1941 book, "The Managerial Revolution," that the aristocratic capitalist class was in the process of being overthrown by a revolution — just not, as the Marxists predicted, by the working class.

Instead, the exponential growth of mass and scale produced by the Industrial Revolution meant that in both corporation and state it was now those people cleverest at applying techniques of mass organization, procedure and propaganda — what he called the managerial class — who effectively controlled the means of production and would increasingly come to dominate society as a new technocratic oligarchy.

The book made an especially significant impression on George Orwell, who remarked that a managerial class consisting of "scientists, technicians, teachers, journalists, broadcasters, bureaucrats, professional politicians: in general, middling people," hungry for "more power and more prestige," would seek to entrench "a system which eliminates the upper class, keeps the working class in its place, and hands unlimited power to people very similar to themselves."

Orwell was particularly struck by Burnham's observation that the major political systems of the day — fascism, Communism and New Deal-era social democracy — were fundamentally similar in their turn toward the bureaucratic management of society. He observed that everywhere “laissez-faire capitalism gives way to planning and state interference” and “the mere owner loses power as against the technician and the bureaucrat.” Believing that accelerating managerial control risked dragging every society inexorably into totalitarianism, Orwell made Burnham's ideas the basis of his novel “1984.”

While the Cold War persisted, the view that America's government might share some traits with the Soviet Union unsurprisingly proved unpopular, especially among Washington's conservative establishment.

Nonetheless, the managerial class continued to grow, regardless of which political party controlled the government. Cold War defense budgets drove a relentless expansion of the security-state bureaucracy and the military-industrial complex. The advent of Great Society welfare programs and the Civil Rights Act demanded a re-engineering of social relations, prompting a dramatic proliferation of lawyers, regulatory bureaucrats and corporate compliance officers throughout much of public and private life. An ever-greater proportion of Americans began funneling through the credentialing machinery of higher education, inflating demand for yet more upper-middle-class managerial jobs.

By the 1980s, a small number of thinkers on the right, observing the constant expansion of the state and triumph of progressive cultural change, began asking heretical questions about why the mainstream American conservative movement had failed to conserve anything. The writer Samuel Francis, a key member of the “paleoconservative” faction, concluded the answer was that the American right had “yet to come to terms with or make use of the implications of Burnham's thought.”

Francis noted that the managerial class had risen to elite status, just as Burnham predicted. This managerial elite now occupied positions across the heights of society, from government agencies to the boardroom and the faculty lounge, and

was generally united in espousing liberal-progressive ideological beliefs. But Francis perceived that this ideology was only surface level, serving as a moral rationalization for a deeper material interest in enlarging the scope, scale and complexity of managerial organizations and expanding their power across the state, economy and culture.

As Francis pointed out in “Leviathan and Its Enemies,” published posthumously, “each sector of the managerial elite is dependent on and fused with the others, and the elite of each sector reinforces and protects the interests of the elites in other sectors.” This unity of elite interests produced what he called a “managerial regime,” in which any serious distinction between state and nonstate power has collapsed, each sector automatically thinking, moving and growing in tandem.

In such a system, no institution could be considered truly independent or neutral. In other words, Orwell was right: America had succumbed to a form of totalitarianism, albeit what Francis described as a “soft” variety, in which the dominance of the managerial elite generated a level of conformity and coordination similar to what “hard” regimes typically resorted to coercive force to achieve.

This conformity explained why very few progressive changes ever seemed to be reversed even when conservatives made it into office — they could be appointed to leadership positions over the managerial state yet act like left-wing statist. Francis argued this wasn’t the result of a conspiracy but of the whole system’s being structurally progressive in its need to promote social and economic management. As soon as someone joined a bureaucracy, even if a committed conservative, “their positions and functions in the managerial apparatus induced them to advance the interests and ideology of the managerial elite.” America’s system therefore functioned as a ratchet, moving only in one direction no matter who was elected.

The theory also explained why the American working class always seemed to get screwed over. Nominally a democracy, the country was run by an oligarchic elite that had a total lock on power and only worked in the interests of its own class.

Moreover, the spread of globalization meant this managerial elite had transcended borders. Francis therefore argued for a “Middle American Revolution” to sweep the elite from power by breaking their institutional dominance as a class.

Pat Buchanan, to whom Francis was an adviser, would take up this revolution as a rallying cry, making it the basis of insurgent presidential runs in the 1990s and in 2000, prefiguring another outsider: Donald Trump. Mr. Buchanan’s bids failed, and the right turned to neoconservatism, a movement that sought to embrace the growing managerial state and co-opt its elites rather than overthrow them.

But anti-managerialism has re-emerged in force with the new right. Equally opposed to both the left and the now-old guard neoconservatives of the Republican Party, this movement has made tearing down the managerial regime’s institutional hegemony the heart of its political and cultural project.

The new right has concluded that to have any hope of forcing real change in the system it must aim, as JD Vance once put it, to “genuinely overthrow the modern ruling class” by seizing the institutions from them. Only by delivering a decisive blow to the unity and control of the bureaucratic “deep state” through evicting swathes of the managerial class could the left’s structural power be successfully undermined.

This is what the Trump administration set out to do, embracing Mr. Buchanan’s view that “only the White House has the discipline and resources to conduct siege warfare against the bureaucracy.” Hence the administration’s determination to reassert presidential authority over the administrative state, seeing this as an urgent restoration of democratic accountability. It has had some success, including in a recent case in which the Supreme Court tentatively sided with the administration’s challenge to *Humphrey’s Executor*, a New Deal-era precedent establishing the notion that agencies could operate independent of executive control.

We shouldn’t expect this siege to be limited to government, though, because in a managerial system, there is no clear separation between public and private branches of elite power. To the administration, as Mr. Vance put it, “the universities

are the enemy,” for example — not because they are independent bastions of free thought but precisely because they are no more independent than any other managerial institution, staffed by the same class of people with the same interests.

The progressive obsession with diversity, equity and inclusion that the administration is attempting to purge may have advanced in universities and spread rapidly across public and private sectors because it provided ideological justification for greater top-down micromanagement of language and social relations, prompting an explosion of new managerial roles. For the right, confronting the doctrine and its academic source is therefore about more than ideology or wasteful spending; it’s also about combating a key lever of institutional control.

Thus Mr. Trump’s success in recruiting support from some wealthy members of the tech right, like Mr. Musk, who also found themselves chafing under a political class evermore focused on bureaucratic regulation and social engineering of the entrepreneurial technology sector.

Even now, with control of the presidency, the new right sees itself as fighting on as underdogs. Indeed, the administration’s anti-managerial project has struggled so far, the elected executive’s directives stymied again and again by what the new right views as managerial-class institutions set on resisting accountability to popular control, with unelected judges and activists manipulating bureaucratic procedure and the law to defend a bloated apparatus in which they have a stake.

DOGE’s cuts have been relatively shallow and occasionally haphazard, with some, such as those of scientific and medical research staff members, ending up reversed. More significantly, even as some positions and agencies are slashed, the temptation to yield to the iron logic of managerial expansion will only continue to grow, the siren song of employing the managerial apparatus to achieve desired political and policy goals (such as on defense) liable to lead only to steadily higher budgets and more bureaucracy.

Still, the administration's anti-managerial revolution is the most determined and meaningful effort in decades to disrupt the status quo of how America is governed, and for whom. It represents a fundamental transformation in the right's conception of politics, the embrace of a class war that appears here to stay.

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