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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.

Reviewed by Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton)

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Commissioned by Douglas J. Forsyth (Bowling Green State University)

As American as the Federal Government

Something unexpected happened when University of Virginia professor of history Brian Balogh started to write an introductory, background chapter for his book about twentieth-century state-builders. As he attempted to better understand the roots of American anti-statism, he discovered the presence of a substantial federal government in the nineteenth century. The result of his journey is this outstanding book. With this work, Balogh joins a growing body of political historians who have gradually and methodically punctured the conventional myth that the nineteenth century was "stateless" and characterized by a laissez-faire philosophy. This book puts that myth to rest, a major accomplishment. The federal government, Balogh shows, has always been with us. It never left.

In this important synthesis of nineteenth-century politics, Balogh explains that "Americans sought active governance at the federal level time and again over the course of the nineteenth century. Their efforts produced a variety of mechanisms, from debt assumption to Supreme Court decisions, which undercut the health and safety prerogatives of states in the name of interstate commerce" (p. 19).

Bringing together the research of scholars including John Larson, Richard John, and William Novak, Balogh paints a picture of a strong government before the Progressive Era ever started. Balogh offers one of the most compelling interpretations of the federal government in

the nineteenth century that currently exists. Without abandoning the importance of anti-statism in American politics, a move that many historians have been eager to make with the discovery that government was stronger than we thought, Balogh makes a more subtle and nuanced argument. He concludes that Americans did oppose federal intervention when it was direct, but that on many issues, Americans accepted and sought government intervention as long as it was relatively indirect and hidden from public view. Balogh writes that the mystery of national authority in nineteenth-century America can be resolved 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. The key feature that distinguished the United States in the nineteenth century was the preference among its citizens for national governance that was inconspicuous. Americans preferred to use the language of law, the courts, trade policy, fiscal subsidies—supported by indirect taxes—and partnerships with nongovernmental partners, instead of more overt, bureaucratic, and visible interventions into the political economy.

The government was active in a number of realms, protecting property and territory, nurturing economic development, conquering Native Americans, and mediating relations between the states. The federal government created a system of communication through the mail—a

postal system, as Richard John has shown, that was far more extensive than in other nations—and raised revenue. He recasts our understanding of the Gilded Age, showing that the laissez-faire mentality of the period was an exception in American history, not the norm. Implicit in his analysis is that current policymakers should model their proposals on this precedent to reduce opposition to their plans.

Through this interpretation, Balogh provides a deep history of the kind of associative and hidden state that became so prevalent in the twentieth century. As political historians and political scientists like Christopher Howard and Ellis Hawley traced the types of indirect and third-party interventions policymakers were likely to make, even during periods like the New Deal, Balogh demonstrates that this has a long history in our polity, and these have been the kind of measures that policymakers were able to enact without stimulating a political backlash from voters. According to this literature, the U.S. government tended to work with state and local governments as well as other actors, including voluntary associations, to achieve its goals. The government also relied on hidden forms of intervention, such as tax expenditures, to promote domestic policies.

The book is powerful and convincing. Balogh does a masterful job telling his story and integrating a diverse number of works into a bigger narrative about our political evolution. It is the kind of big-picture book that has been missing too often from the historical literature in recent times. As with all great works, Balogh raises some questions for further discussion. The first is whether this new interest by twentieth-century historians in finding the nineteenth-century state downplays the power of regionalism, as well as localism, and overstates the sense of nation. As the historian William Novak recounted in an essay on citizenship, localism and local associations dominated how Americans understood their standing and obligations in relationship to others.

The second question has to do with our definition of the state. Since the work on the hidden welfare state and the divided welfare state, American political historians rediscovered the importance of government by redefining government intervention more broadly, to include indirect measures like tax cuts. After all, the thrust of Balogh's work is that the state existed, but still without a strong centralized administrative structure, and only by working through local and state governments. While these findings are important, they have changed the nature of the debate. Originally, political historians were addressing direct forms of federal intervention, such as federal regulatory commissions or Social Security. It is worth taking stock and thinking about what is at stake in expanding our definition of government. The central claim of Morton Keller, in *Affairs of State* (1977), was not that government did not matter, but that the federal government did not matter so much.

The final issue raised by the book has to do with the questions we are asking. Twentieth-century historians are pushing backwards into the nineteenth century. Questions of state-building and citizenship are replacing questions about regional division, the development of the party system, and the tensions over slavery. This is not to say the questions that historians such as Balogh are asking are not integral to the history of the earlier period, but they do threaten to overwhelm what might be equally if not more pertinent issues from the perspectives of the time.

These are just questions raised by a stimulating work of synthesis, one that brings together an important body of work that has emerged and offers us a fascinating portrait of nineteenth-century America that profoundly challenges one of the central myths of much of the scholarship—the notion that the federal government emerged in the twentieth century and the origins of the nation were in a stateless society. Nothing could be further from the truth and Balogh cogently puts this argument to rest.

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