

### To Enlarge the Machinery of Government: Congressional Debates and the Growth of the American State, 1858-1891

D. Michael Bottoms

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bottoms, D. Michael (2008) "To Enlarge the Machinery of Government: Congressional Debates and the Growth of the American State, 1858-1891," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 .  
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss3/21>

## Review

Bottoms, D. Michael

Summer 2008

**Hoffer, William James Hull** *To Enlarge the Machinery of Government: Congressional Debates and the Growth of the American State, 1858-1891*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$55.00 hardcover ISBN 9780801886553

### The Rise of the Modern State

In his 1982 book *Building a New American State*, political scientist Stephen Skowronek famously described how early twentieth century Progressive Era reformers replaced nineteenth-century America's decentralized, anti-bureaucratic state of courts and parties with a more powerful, centralized, professional, and bureaucratic national government. In this densely written, learned new book, William James Hull Hoffer, an assistant professor of history at Seton Hall University, challenges those historians and political scientists whom he believes have too easily accepted Skowronek's contention that the United States' traditional small-government republicanism gave way directly to the modern administrative state. Through a careful reading of some eight thousand pages of Congressional debates, Hoffer traces critical transformations in political thought and practice during the decades between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, and in the process uncovers what he believes was a coherent body of thought guiding the expansion of the American state that was distinct from the ideas that shaped both the earlier decentralized state, and those that shaped the later Progressive one. The tenets of this second state, Hoffer argues, were rooted, not in ideological beliefs about the proper role and scope of government, but rather in politicians' practical responses to the changing social and political circumstances associated with industrialization and the Gilded Age.

The central figures in Hoffer's story are lawyers, whose experience before the bar uniquely fitted them to perceive the potential ramifications of legislation before the Congress, and whose practical training fostered a pragmatic approach to political issues. Hoffer, himself a graduate of the Harvard Law School, argues that as post-Civil War American society faced increasingly complex social

problems, politicians struggled to find efficient solutions. In chapters detailing debates over education, the promotion of scientific agriculture, the plight of freed slaves, the rationalization of the federal court system, civil service reform, and the regulation of railroads, Hoffer shows how politicians slowly abandoned a small government ethic in favor of federal offices that acted to serve specific national interests. Politicians often couched their legislation in the language of the earlier first state, even as they recognized and debated the ways in which their efforts might transform the nature of the federal government. Thus, the creation of a potentially vast new bureaucracy, the Department of Agriculture in 1862, for example, was sold as a defense of the one institution widely seen as the chief bulwark of small-government republican virtue—the yeoman farmer. Once politicians accepted federal sponsorship of agriculture at the local level, bureaucratic supervision of those activities appeared as a sensible hedge against waste, fraud, and abuse of government funds. From there, it was a short, but logical step to an embrace of bureaucratic rules that standardized federal practices across the country in an effort to ensure fairness and efficiency. These innovations fell far short of the fully articulated administrative state that would characterize the federal government in the twentieth century, but they were also a far cry from the more restricted federal government of the antebellum era. Step by step, each new federal solution led to new federal activities, and so to new ideas about the proper role of government in American life. To be sure, there was opposition to these new initiatives, but Hoffer argues that the central tenets of the second state cut across party and sectional lines, and so represent something approaching national consensus.

Hoffer has performed a valuable service in refining our understanding of the role lawyers and particularly the legal profession played in shaping the modern American state. At the same time, Hoffer's conscious decision to strip away much of the social and political context surrounding these debates has deprived his story of much of the drama that accompanied the wrenching social transformations of the Gilded Age. Instead, the vital impact of the political innovations described here is too often lost in the wearying and arcane give-and-take of parliamentary procedure. Scholars might also question the extent to which political ideas so sensitive to political whim and which changed so quickly can properly be described as a stable and coherent vision of the American state. Despite these reservations, Hoffer has offered a provocative challenge to the standard telling of American state development, and future scholars would do well to take his argument seriously.

*D. Michael Bottoms is assistant professor of history at George Mason University.*