



Kings and Bureaucrats, Dictators and Deep States: Spectres of Caesarism and Bonapartism from the Industrial Revolution to the Age of Trump

Edward Remus, Associate Professor, Northeastern Illinois University*
Lucas Steinberg, Graduate Student, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

: In contemporary political discourse, twin spectres emerge: administrative absolutism exercised by deep states versus democratic despotism driven by plebiscitary dictators. This essay frames current debates over the unitary executive and the deep state within nineteenth-century conceptions of Caesarism and Bonapartism and it traces these concepts into the American Century. The essay argues that executive strongmen and administrative bureaucracies historically co-expand the power of the capitalist state, and this holds true for the Age of Trump.

In our polarized political imaginations, there are two threats: dictators and deep states; kings and bureaucrats. These twin spectres were originally raised in relation to two concepts, Caesarism and Bonapartism, that were fixtures of nineteenth-century political thought. The first part of this essay situates the spectre of Caesarist "democratic despotism" within contemporary debates over the unitary executive and the administrative state. The second part reprises the analyses of three political thinkers, Walter Bagehot, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Karl Marx, who observed the Caesarist and Bonapartist politics of the industrial revolution; while the third and final part tracks Caesarism and Bonapartism into the American Century. We argue that our contemporaries— who imagine that only a dictator can save us from the deep state, or that only the deep state can save us from a dictator— express symptoms endemic to politics in capitalism; but if history is any guide, the executive and the bureaucracy, far from undermining each other, will ultimately work in concert to expand the power of the state, even in the age of Trump.

Symptoms of Political Crisis: The Dictator vs. The Deep State?

"Within the Constitution's United States," [writes](#) the legal scholar Philip Hamburger, rests an unconstitutional "state within the state"— "sometimes called the 'regulatory state' to emphasize its burdens on economic and personal freedom," and "sometimes called the 'deep state' because of its tendency to interfere with our elected government." Like "the old absolutism" of English kings, Hamburger argues, the bureaucracy exercises "extralegal power" to make, interpret, adjudicate, and suspend the law. As the legal scholar John Yoo [explains](#):

First, expand federal congressional powers beyond their enumerated constitutional limits. Second, delegate those powers to agencies and away from directly elected politicians in Congress. Third, insulate the civil servants so they can wield their discretion without accountability. Finally, force the courts to defer to Congress's delegation and to the agencies' regulations with little question.

"Absolute power" was progressively curbed in its monarchical form from the English Civil War to the Glorious Revolution to the U.S. Constitution, Hamburger argues. Over the past century, however, a "soft absolutism" has returned, exercised "not for a monarch but for the masses." Yoo's chronology is similar: the administrative state was "introduced by one liberal president, Woodrow Wilson, expanded by a second, Franklin D. Roosevelt...perfected by a third, Lyndon B. Johnson...[and] metastasized under Barack Obama." Hamburger urges Americans to "work through all three branches of government" to beat back this "administrative threat."

For Yoo, the executive branch is the key. Yoo endorses legalistic attempts to "disable and hobble" the deep state through constitutional challenges on nondelegation, separation-of-powers, individual rights, and natural rights. But as a proponent of the unitary executive theory, Yoo holds that only a president can "force the administrative state to act in a unitary, rational manner"—to obey the will of the people as expressed by the elected president. The Reagan administration failed to do this, Yoo argues, and conservatives must not repeat his mistake.

Other opponents of the deep state have proposed more radical diagnoses. Trump administration official Michael Anton [argued](#) in the lead-up to the 2020 election that the deep state was preparing a "color revolution," running the "same playbook" of ballot harvesting, street fighting, military insubordination, and media manipulation that the "deep state runs in other countries whose leadership they don't like." Anton advocated legal recourse, but the theory of a deep state "color revolution" [motivated](#) some protesters to violate the law on January 6.

For Anton, the working class represents the ultimate backstop against the deep state— and the spectre of Caesarism emerges here. During the neoliberal era, he [argues](#), "administrative state bureaucracies" oversaw policies of "deindustrialization, outsourcing, and mass immigration" coupled with identity-based "social engineering and grievance politics"—arrangements that worked "well for the oligarchs," but not for the working class. Trump represents the possibility of a post-neoliberal realignment: by winning over the working class and enacting immigration, trade, and cost-of-living policies favorable to them, Trump can effect a "return to normalcy" in American politics. The administrative state would be reformed but not destroyed. The ruling class could block this outcome, however: if progressives were to achieve "total, permanent control of the federal government," representation would devolve into "elective monarchy, in which the true electors are not 'the people' but a handful of horse-trading elites."

This breakdown of republican government would legitimate "authoritarian, one-man rule": Caesarism. "Caesarism comes," Anton observes, "only because liberty is already gone." With the support of the "common people" against the "blue upper class aristocracy," a "Red [Republican] Caesar" would take power via military coup or by abolishing or ignoring presidential term limits. Anton intends this outcome to serve as a warning— he prefers constitutional renewal— but others have embraced it. The "appetite for Caesarism" [is growing](#) within the "conservative movement" and the "Gen Z right"; the livestreamer Nick Fuentes is "disenchanted with President Trump for not governing as a 'Caesar-like figure.'" Only a Caesar, the logic runs, can save the people from the oligarchs; only a dictator can stop the deep state.



Once an obscure political concept, 'Caesarism' [has been revived](#) in the age of Trump.

The reverse logic has been embraced by some of Trump's opponents: only the deep state can stop a dictator. A Trump administration insider [wrote](#) in 2018 that "senior officials...are working to insulate their operations from [Trump's] whims"—insisting this "isn't the work of the so-called deep state"—but the political scientist Francis Fukuyama has embraced the label, [writing](#) a 2023 editorial "in defense of the deep state." The deep state needs to be reformed to ensure greater democratic accountability, Fukuyama argued; but eliminating it entirely could only mean returning to the nineteenth-century "spoils system" of presidential patronage.

Some of Trump's opponents believe such elimination is his aim. Political scientists Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum [argue](#) that Trump practices "ungoverning": he degrades administrative state capacity because it represents an obstacle to his "personal rule." He only falls short of fascism, they argue, because fascism aims "to capture the state and use it, not destroy it."

Yet the deep state's ability to sabotage Trump's agenda has proven disappointingly limited in the eyes of his opponents, and opposition has taken more extreme forms. "Yes, it's fascism," [ran](#) a recent *Atlantic* magazine headline, summarizing a decade of characterizations from the anti-Trump resistance. Would-be assassin Ryan Routh [described](#) Trump as a "dictator"; The *Atlantic* was [moved to clarify](#) that "Calling Trump a Tyrant Is Not a Call to Violence." The terms have become interchangeable: when anti-Trump protests spread across constitutional monarchies, they [featured](#) "banners reading 'No Tyrants' or 'No Dictators,' instead of 'No Kings.'"

Trump's more careful critics have avoided such extreme characterizations. The political scientists Stephen Skowronek, John A. Dearborn, and Desmond King [note](#) that unitary executive theory claims not that "there is too much power in the executive branch but rather that not enough of it is under the president's direct control." Trump did not seek to "get rid of the executive branch" but to "strip away its depth, to...subordinate [administrators] to the president." Trump's goal is a "strong state...hostile to depth." On their account, Trump's war on the deep state revealed "shocking" levels of "administrative resistance"; but it revealed more clearly still the "advantages of depth" and the "risks of unitary control," as "invaluable governmental assets" were jeopardized. Skowronek et al. conclude that state depth can only be insulated from such assaults via the presidential selection process; the president must "value" state depth as a "matter of norms." They advocate strengthening the power of political parties over presidential selection and spoils and call for a renewed consensus behind administrative autonomy.

This would insulate presidential politics from plebiscitary democracy, where some of Trump's critics locate the roots of his assault on the deep state. Political scientists William G. Howell and Terry M. Moe [observe](#) an "asymmetric logic": Democratic presidents have supported administrative state autonomy, while Republican presidents—Nixon incipiently, Reagan clearly, and Trump to an extreme—have opposed it. This is because the administrative state began to advance a "progressive agenda": with the exception of a few departments and agencies, it was "performing functions that [Democrats] supported." Yet this became politically untenable:

The impacts of globalization, technological change, immigration, and growing social diversity were proving objectively harmful, subjectively unsettling, or both to millions of

Americans...One of their prime targets was a federal government that allowed these things to happen and appeared indifferent to their plight.

Into this breach, Trump rode to power championing a "populist government led by a strongman who would channel their grievances and use his power unilaterally to finally set things right."

For Howell and Moe, Trump's politics are fundamentally anti-democratic; but for the historian Peter Gordon, [it is precisely their democratic character](#) that makes Trump a Bonapartist:

[Reelected]...by the widest assortment of average Americans, Trump has gained a democratic mandate...to sweep aside...constitutional constraints...[This] incurious mediocrity has cloaked himself like Napoleon the Third in the nostalgic promise of past greatness...[He] has given voice to all of the worst sentiments of the American demos— its xenophobia and its distraction, its racism and its misogyny, and its bizarre myth of a God-given mission to expel the stranger and dominate the world.

Gordon's conclusion is pessimistic: "democracy spawns its own demagogues."

That Trump has been cast as a Caesarist or Bonapartist figure, and that his opponents have cast the administrative state as the last bulwark of republican government, suggests that both sides are operating within a political imaginary that the history of Caesarism and Bonapartism can illuminate — and, perhaps, challenge. It is to that history that we now turn.

The Trauma of the Industrial Revolution: Bagehot, Tocqueville, Marx

Walter Bagehot was a member of Britain's Liberal Party and editor-in-chief of *The Economist*. An advocate of parliamentary democracy, Bagehot nevertheless [defended](#) what he referred to as "Caesarism" in France under Louis Napoleon's Second Empire (1852-1870).

For Bagehot, Caesarism was the democratic expression of the mass interest in "the preservation of society" in the face of the crisis produced by the industrial revolution. Indeed, Bagehot suggested that Louis Napoleon, "the Crowned Democrat of Europe," embodied not only the desires of France but also those of "the democratic element" internationally. Like Julius Caesar, Louis Napoleon said to the people, "make me supreme, and I will govern for your good and in your name;" he was "a Benthamite despot" who represented the "greatest happiness of the greatest number." Given the failure of liberal parliamentary politics to adequately respond to the discontents of the widely enfranchised French population following the Revolution of 1848, it fell on the "monarchical executive," Bagehot observed, to "insure the security of that industry which is the condition of social life and civilized cultivation": "To keep up this system we must sacrifice everything. Parliaments, liberty, leading articles, essays, eloquence, all are good, but they are secondary; at all hazards...mankind must be kept alive."

If Caesarism enthroned Louis Napoleon, it simultaneously expanded the role of the state bureaucracy. For Bagehot, insofar as this took the form of industrial development, public works, and welfare policy, the French Emperor's "bureaucracy is not only enduring but pleasant. An idle man who wants his politics done for him, has them done for him. The welfare of the

masses...is felt to be the object of the government." Intimately bound up with such welfare measures, the Second Empire also produced new forms of economic parasitism, which Bagehot described as the greatest "defect of the imperial organization": "On a hundred subjects, legal permission, administrative help are necessary to money-making...The very principle of the system is to concentrate power, and power is money...the system requires angels to work it, and perhaps it has not been so fortunate as to find angels." Bagehot further noted how the Bonapartist state encroached on civil liberties, most prominently the freedom of the press, and thus stopped "agitation" and "the effectual inculcation of important thought upon the mass of mankind."

In spite of his ambivalence about the Caesarism of the Second Empire, Bagehot warned that a restored Republic would only reproduce the "calamities of 1848" and return the Empire "worse than it went." The effects of such a repetition of 1848 would represent not only the "defeat of French Liberals" but "a defeat of all Liberals." Bagehot instead encouraged the reform and liberalization of Caesarism— e.g. restoring limited powers to parliament and lifting the state censorship apparatus, both of which occurred under the "Liberal Empire" of the 1860s— in order to preserve what "practical freedom" was still possible under democratic despotism.

The French liberal Alexis de Tocqueville was directly involved in the political life of the short-lived Second Republic (1848-1851): he witnessed the rise of Louis Napoleon as an elected member of the Constituent Assembly. In his speeches and unpublished writings, Tocqueville engaged the problems of the dictatorial executive and the administrative state as interrelated symptoms of "democratic despotism." Tocqueville had already thematized democratic despotism in his writings on Jacksonian America from the 1830s, in which he [imagined](#) an industrial society composed of a mass of men above which "stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate," reducing the people to "a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd."

Tocqueville witnessed the flowering of this new form of despotism in the developments following 1848, when the barbaric possibility of a mass democracy of "men who have entirely given up the habit of self-government" would be realized in the birth of the Second Empire. Tocqueville [saw Louis Napoleon's 1851 coup d'état](#) "already contained in embryo in the revolution of February...From the moment socialism reared its head, one should have foreseen the rule of the sword." Tocqueville had previously critiqued the socialism of his time as "a new form of servitude" in which the state would "inevitably become...the sole industrial entrepreneur," "not only the director of society but also the master of each individual." Tocqueville's critique of socialism hinged on the problem of mass democracy appealing to the power of the state to turn against the freedom of society. It indicated a further possibility that the liberal heritage of the bourgeois revolution might be wielded to install democratic despotism.

Tocqueville responded to Louis Napoleon's coup d'état with a melancholy republicanism.

Following the "abominable" events of 1851, he withdrew from political life. "Not only do I not wish to oppose the new government, I sincerely hope it endures...The nation has forgotten what

bureaucratic and military despotism becomes...It must experience this despotism again...long enough to want something better." He lamented how "in the name of the sovereignty of the nation...all guarantees of public liberty and even personal security have been eliminated," while the people "themselves have been deprived of all means to educate themselves...so that they are nothing but pure voting machines." Nevertheless, he viewed this as only a new phase in the Revolution. "If the spirit of liberty is extinguished in France, the government will endure, and it will not be overthrown until that spirit revives...Only the time of that revival is in doubt."

In his description of the pathologies of mass democracy, Karl Marx, too, was a liberal. Marx took up the liberal concepts of Caesarism, Bonapartism, and imperialism. He [defended](#) the rights of civil society against the despotism of the executive and the "abject spirit of [the] bureaucracy." He [maintained](#) a liberal commitment to "converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it." Like Tocqueville, he looked to the United States as a model of the highest realization of liberal political democracy, and he registered mass democracy's illiberal tendency to install dictatorship and despotism.

Marx differed fundamentally from both liberals and democrats in his critical diagnosis of these pathologies and his corresponding political prescription. For Marx, Bonapartism [was the expression](#) of the necessity for the state to manage bourgeois society in its crisis following the industrial revolution: "It was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation." Bonapartism was intimately bound up with the "social question" of mass unemployment and the popular discontents produced by industrialization. It was the workers themselves, asserting their right to labor as bourgeois subjects, and drawing from the legacy of socialism, who called upon the state to intervene in society. Bonapartism politically sidelined the liberal bourgeoisie, producing dictatorial politicians and dictatorial bureaucrats, expanding both the welfare state and the police state. This [had bizarre, contradictory effects](#): "Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers...in the name...of order."

Bonapartism took a variety of political forms: Louis Napoleon's Second Empire, Bismarck's Prussia and German Empire, and what Marx [identified](#) in Britain as "parliamentary Bonapartism"—the subordination of Parliament to ministerial and executive prerogative under Palmerston. On an international scale, Marx witnessed the Bonapartist state [emerge](#) as a power "apparently soaring high above society," standing not merely above classes but [pursuing](#) its own "autonomized" interests against those of civil society. For Marx, Bonapartism could not remedy the crisis it was installed to address, which would continue to unfold in history. Until the social question was worked through and overcome, Marx believed, the catastrophe of 1848 would repeat under different conditions, always reviving the call for strongmen and bureaucrats.

In response to the pathology of Bonapartist dictatorship, Marx's political prescription was the dictatorship of the proletariat. The speculative concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat indicated how the necessity for dictatorship itself might be taken up by an organized force in society – the proletariat – in order to consciously transform society and, in so doing, overcome the necessity for dictatorship. In this sense, Bonapartism [pointed beyond itself](#) to its "dialectical opposite." For Marx, the dictatorship of the proletariat, which was itself a symptom of

unfreedom, was a means. The end, which Marx would share with the liberal tradition, was the realization of the Enlightenment ideal of a free, self-legislating society.

Repetitions: The Second Industrial Revolution, the American Century, and Today

The theorists Antonio Gramsci and Leon Trotsky carried Marx's analysis of Bonapartism into the twentieth century. Gramsci squared off against Benito Mussolini, Italy's strongman dictator; yet Gramsci [observed](#) that "the bureaucracy became estranged from the country" to such an extent that it constituted a "state/Bonapartist party" of its own. Its functionaries operated across state-adjacent institutions like trade-unions and universities; it had little need for old-fashioned "military action in the grand style." For Trotsky, [Hitler's Germany](#) and [Stalin's Russia](#) both exhibited characteristics of Bonapartism, and Trotsky [implied](#) that FDR's New Deal did as well. All were led by strongmen regarded as authoritarian, and all featured unprecedented expansions of state bureaucracy. Stalin's [betrayal](#) of the October Revolution, for Trotsky, rested in his bureaucratization of the Soviet government, which had originally been based upon independent organizations of the working class. Trotsky hoped that a proletarian uprising would dethrone Stalin; but the spectacle of a proletarian government's degeneration into a totalitarian bureaucracy stood as the starkest possible warning against the pursuit of Marx's politics.

Tocqueville's conservative-liberal politics were revived by James Burnham, an anti-Communist political theorist who mentored William F. Buckley, Jr. and co-founded *National Review*. Burnham [regarded](#) Henry Wallace, who championed a progressive interest-group politics as FDR's vice president, as "the major prophet, in this country, of the Bonapartist mystique": Wallace's calls for greater "economic democracy, ethnic democracy, educational democracy, and democracy in the treatment of the sexes," Burnham held, all represented the state bureaucracy's demand for new coercive powers in areas of social life formerly protected by civil liberties and the Bill of Rights. Caesar [was](#) "the strong executive," but "behind his back rise the serried ranks of the managerial bureaucracy": Caesar is "fronting for the bureaucrats of the managerial state." The only recourse was to strengthen the power of "intermediary institutions" – of states vis-a-vis the federal government, of congress vis-a-vis the executive and the bureaucracy – which could check the inevitable creep of executive-bureaucratic power.



FDR's critics "sometimes compared him to a dictator." Playing on this theme, [FDR's 1934 birthday party](#) "had a 'Caesarian' theme, with guests wearing togas and centurion costumes."

Yet it was Bagehot's defense of Caesarism that would sound the loudest echoes over the subsequent century. The philosopher Oswald Spengler [diagnosed](#) three features of the post-World War I era: the people "cannot be moved" to exercise their political rights; "constitutional formulation[s]" were paid mere lip-service; and politics centered on the Caesar-figure's "personal power." The only question was whether "the caesars" would be "billionaires" or bureaucrats, whether the "dictatorship" would be one of "booty...or state, wealth or authority, success or profession." Spengler [advocated](#) the latter, preferring a Prussian-style "socialist monarchy"—by socialism, he meant the state bureaucracy—over a British-style "capitalist-parliamentary liberalism." For the sociologist Max Weber, however, the rule of the bureaucracy required not a monarch but a president elected by plebiscite. Only through the "[charismatic rule](#)" of a "demagogic" front-man could the bureaucracy secure sufficient popular consent for its necessary and restless expansion. Crucially, however, as the "Caesarist representatives of the masses" mediating the people and the bureaucracy, the role of presidents would be bi-directional. Left to itself, the bureaucracy would become politically "particularist," representing only the interests of the established elites. "The appointment of a...President by popular election

would help to check the one-sided proliferation of [particularist] tendencies," Weber [argued](#), because "it forces the parties to organize and agree among themselves."

Caesarism appeared similarly inevitable by the 1950s: the Caesars were the American presidents, and the imperium— the New Deal, the military-industrial complex, and the United Nations— had gone global. The French historian Amaury de Riencourt [observed](#) how republican constitutionalism remained a "sacred ideal" but a political non-starter. As in the ancient world, "murdering Caesar solved nothing," for Caesarism was not "the result of any one man's ambition" but driven by impersonal mass-democratic forces. The best that could be hoped for was an "enlightened ruler" who would "develop the cosmopolitan bureaucratic state."

The sociologist Peter Baehr [observes](#) that the concepts of Caesarism and Bonapartism fell out of fashion over the course of the twentieth century. They appeared neither sufficient to account for Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism nor necessary to account for the political quiescence of the "end of history." Yet the forms of "[courageous citizenship](#)" born of modern analyses of Caesarism and Bonapartism remain very much with us. The progressive approach still seeks enlightened executive management and representation of the ever-expanding administrative state bureaucracy; the conservative-liberal approach still seeks to erect safeguards against state power, especially in its administrative-bureaucratic form; and the proletarian-socialist approach, though politically dead, still seeks to organize society so as to obviate the need for the capitalist state.

In the crisis of neoliberalism, the *demos* demanded the reform of the state and elected Donald Trump its Caesarian tribune. Trump may diminish state *depth*, but he will not diminish state *strength*: like each preceding epoch, our post-neoliberal era is one of state *growth*. Indeed, as Weber might have predicted, Trump's reforms may result in the depoliticization of the administrative state. Even so, Burnham's epigones will remain, reminding us that we still live under a dictatorship: not that of Trump, but of the state itself. Until society can govern itself— can arrange for all to live by labor— its manifold pathologies will be administered by the state in ever-evolving forms. Our post-neoliberal form of capitalism will itself enter into crisis one day; the spectres of Caesarism and Bonapartism will haunt us yet again; and we may even return to Marx, if only to realize that the trauma of the industrial revolution remains unresolved.

* Edward Remus is an Associate Professor and Social Sciences Librarian at Northeastern Illinois University. His essays and articles, published and forthcoming, appear in Choice, Compact, New Political Science, the Platypus Review, and the Encyclopedia of the American Left. He served as the Associate Producer of Sublation Media's 2026 documentary film, The Last Election.

Lucas Steinberg is a librarian based in New York City. He is currently a candidate in psychoanalytic training at the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis.