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Parkinson's Law Revisited

NATO Inflates

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I should like this evening to revisit the work of Cyril Northcote Parkinson. Some of you may recall his magnum opus, *Parkinson's Law*. For those who lack that familiarity I hope an introduction to it will prove worthwhile. The book made a big splash when it came out in 1955 and soon became an international best-seller. I believe its contents remain as valid today as when they were first published.

Parkinson, who lived between 1909 and 1993, was an English naval historian. He was also an extraordinarily prolific writer, the author of almost sixty books. Working as a naval historian in the early and middle years of the 20th century, at a time when British power was in decline, Parkinson noticed some peculiar and unexpected facts. While examining statistics concerning the British Admiralty, he found that in 1914, when the Royal Navy had 62 ships in commission, the Admiralty employed 2000 individuals. Fourteen years later, in 1928, despite the fact that the number of ships commissioned had dropped to twenty, the number of employees in the Admiralty had almost tripled, to 3,500. By 1935, the Admiralty staff had swelled to over 8000; by 1954 it numbered an astonishing 33,800.

Parkinson observed a similar phenomenon in the British Colonial Office. It, too, grew as its responsibilities diminished. In 1935 it employed 272 officials. By 1954, with far fewer colonies and far fewer duties, it employed over 1,600, or four and a half times as many. In other words, an inverse relationship existed between the work to be done and the number of officials required to do it.

The law Parkinson formulated as a consequence of these observations is not, of course, a law in the legal or judicial sense. Rather, it details how bureaucracies actually work as opposed to the way people think they work, or ought to work. Parkinson's methodology was inductive. He examined statistics; he scrutinized; he observed. The conclusions he reached became Parkinson's Law. Its theses, shrewd and sagacious, are also wrapped in a fine tissue of irony and sardonic humor. His law descends to us now enriched by sixty years of supporting evidence.

Parkinson's great insight was to see that bureaucracies hold characteristics almost organic in nature, with organizational frameworks of a predicable order. He realized, as well, that bureaucracies possess a lifelike tendency to self-preservation and resistance to change. Should these facts cause surprise? I think not. After all, what are bureaucracies composed of? They are made up of individuals, each with his own behavioral patterns and idiosyncrasies. Bureaucratic norms and inclinations are thus no more than a composition of many individual behavioral traits mixed, multiplied, and bundled together.

There are multiple other so-called "laws" bearing zero relationship to the legal profession, on matters as diverse as pop-philosophy (*Murphy's Law:* If anything can go wrong, it will); technology (*Moore's Law:* the computing power of microchips will double every two years) and, of course, physics and mathematics (gravity, relativity, etc.). But our focus this evening will remain on those having to do with bureaucracy.

The first among Parkinson's basic principles was that "work expands to fill the time available for its completion". Parkinson used the example of the lady of leisure who could take up an entire day writing and dispatching a postcard, something a busy individual could accomplish in a matter of minutes. This fits with the semi-jocular response provided by the government employee who, when asked what he did, habitually answered: "As little as possible", an answer that quite possibly described some of his actual working habits. Doing "as little as possible" may also serve as a metaphoric turn of phrase for the proposition that being resourceful, inventive or noteworthy is not necessarily beneficial to an official. It can label him an outlier, potential troublemaker, or worse.

In a similar vein, when asked what my responsibilities were in a job I once held, I answered that each morning documents and communications containing my name or initials were placed in a box on the left side of my desk. My task was to cross out my name or initials and place them in another box on the right side of my desk. This is what is sometimes referred to as "paper shuffling". But, as Parkinson makes clear, a "lack of real activity does not, of necessity, result in leisure". The work to be done "swells in importance and complexity in a direct ratio with the time to be spent."

As already suggested, a related facet of Parkinson's Law is that "the number of the officials and the quantity of the work are not related to each other ". Parkinson explains the phenomenon as follows: A civil servant, called A decides that he is overworked, a feeling that can be either real or imagined. He could ask to have someone (called B) appointed to share his work at his own level, but that would risk bringing in a rival for promotion. Instead, he asks for junior assistants (C and D). This not only adds to his own status, but being the only one who knows what each is supposedly doing, or not doing, he avoids having to worry that they could be promoted over him. For this reason, subordinates must number two or more. Inevitably C, or perhaps D, or both, will also claim to be overworked. For reasons already suggested, C and D each receive not one but two or more assistants. At this point A is supervising at least six assistants so that seven officials are performing the work previously done by one.

That, however, is hardly the end of the matter because the seven make work for each other. Meetings are held and conferences scheduled.

Documents are prepared and circulated. Rivalries and competition between offices develop. Since each office must approve or "clear" an official document, alternate versions are drafted, discussed and amended, not infrequently resulting in a jargon-loaded obscurantist mess. But everyone is fully occupied and A is now far more burdened with responsibility than when he worked alone.

Parkinson's work prompted other studies and scrutiny. In 1968, Laurence Peter, a Canadian-born professor, published *The Peter Principle*, its hypothesis being that "managers rise to the level of their incompetence". It means that individuals who perform well in their job move to higher positions. They only stop being promoted when they have risen to a job requiring skills they do not possess.

The *Dilbert Principle*, which dates to 1995, views the same subject from another angle. It suggests that incompetent managers, rather than being ousted, are promoted to purportedly higher positions. While supposedly prestigious, these positions are actually designed to prevent the ineffectual managers from doing damage. They are moved, in other words, into a bureaucratic Siberia.

One need not journey back to Parkinson's day to encounter exquisite examples of his "law" at work and what better place to start than the Federal government? In 1888, an elegant structure built in the French Beaux-Arts style opened just west of the White House. It was called the State, War, and Navy Building as it housed the entire staff of those three major departments. Today it is known as the Executive Office Building and contains some, but far from all, of the White House staff. The latter includes, among other things, the Vice President's Office, the National Security Council, and the Office of Management and Budget. Many staff are located in buildings elsewhere.

The present State Department building, which was completed in the early 1940's, is a massive rectangular stone structure entirely lacking in aesthetic character or appeal. About 8,000 people work there with others across the Potomac in Arlington and in about 300 embassies and consulates overseas. Occupants are fond of comparing the austere, soulless character of the main building to the stylish old Executive Office Building with its evocative French Second Empire architecture, fireplaces and high ceilings. The architecture of this earlier building, they suggest, reflects the gracious patrician diplomacy of the19th century, while the newer building communicates the cruder, more pedestrian diplomacy of today.

This notion brings to mind Parkinson's view that few are capable of accomplishing more than many, since in bureaucracies large numbers spend their time creating work for each other. Consider diplomacy as it existed in the early days of our republic. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson both served as ambassadors to France; John Adams was our emissary to Britain and the Netherlands; his son John Quincy Adams was the first American envoy to Russia; John Jay was our representative to Spain.

These distinguished senior statesmen were sent abroad for a reason. With communication between Europe and North America taking weeks or even months, they were trusted to represent American interests and make significant decisions based entirely on their own wisdom and judgement. They worked by themselves, assisted at best by a clerk or two. All that changed, first with the invention of the telegram, followed by the telephone and then the internet. With communications now instantaneous, embassy staffs hardly make a move without receiving instructions from Washington. Presidents and Secretaries of State routinely converse with their foreign counterparts by telephone.

In their reporting, Foreign Service officers now compete with commercial media, the internet, and multiple intelligence gathering agencies. Large embassies are staffed not just by State Department officers but by representatives of a multitude of other agencies. There are military attachés, commercial attachés, FBI agents, public affairs officers, representatives of the Treasury and Agriculture Departments, etc. Inevitably, this means competition, duplication, and redundancy. A significant portion of the role of the traditional diplomat has, in other words, become expendable. Senior personnel still meet with officials of the host country, but such meetings are increasingly ceremonial rather than substantive in nature.

Does any of this mean that the numbers of personnel are diminished? Of course not. Just the opposite. In classic Parkinson's Law fashion, the fact that so much information now flows in from so many sources, and that so many agencies are involved in providing and receiving it, means that there are abundant ways for them to make work for each other. Personnel are required to coordinate and harmonize their labor with that of other agencies and, when necessary, to defend and rationalize the importance of their own mission.

Things are little different on the home front. No one has any idea how much duplication and overlapping of effort is spread through the Federal government. Even attempting to ascertain how many Federal agencies exist is a hopeless, virtually comic, affair. The Administrative Conference of the United States lists 115 agencies in its sourcebook. But it also notes that "There is no authoritative list of governmental agencies…The United States Governmental Manual lists 96 independent executive units and 220 components of the executive departments. An even more inclusive listing comes from USA.gov, which lists 137 independent executive agencies and 268 units in the Cabinet."

Testifying last summer before the House Judiciary Committee, Jonathan Turley, a professor at George Washington University Law School, spoke of the rise what he called a "Fourth Branch," consisting of "federal agencies that exercise increasingly unilateral and independent powers." He blamed inadequate Congressional oversight and especially Congress's failure to use "the power of the purse". Many observers agree. Members of Congress, busy with fundraising and the exigencies of their own districts, have in recent years forfeited their leverage and responsibility by indiscriminate funding via omnibus bills and continuing resolutions.

This process has had a variety of undesirable results. Politically popular branches are given as much, or more, funding than they require or even request. Unpopular agencies, most notably the IRS, are cut short. The IRS estimates that the gap between taxes that are owed and taxes that have actually been paid amounts to about $400 billion. It lacks the required number of agents needed for enforcement or properly to audit and collect missing revenues. Public awareness that there are insufficient IRS personnel provides an incentive to those seeking ways to dodge payment. Here we have a relatively rare but interesting case of Parkinson's Law inverted by political expediency and negligence on the part of the Congress.

Nowhere are Parkinsonian principles more observable than at international bureaucracies. In these, Parkinson's Law is compounded by rules under which staff must be fairly spread among member nations. As can be expected, allowing a nation to fill its allotted quota often requires the hiring of individuals of dubious qualification. The UN now has 193 member states (up from 51 at its founding in 1945), and employment must must be found for representatives of all of them. Fortunately, there are an abundant number of UN agencies, sub-agencies and satellite organizations, to which functionaries of less than stellar qualification can be farmed out.

There is another important aspect of Parkinson's Law that requires discussion. That is that bureaucracies, like the people who staff them, don't like to die, or even fade away. When existentially threatened, bureaucracies find ingenious ways to dodge or reinvent themselves. Not infrequently this means that rather than shrinking they actually expand. No more classic example of this principle can be found than NATO. At the time of its founding in April of 1949, NATO had a clear and explicit mission, namely one of defense. Although it served corollary, political purposes, it was at heart a military alliance, designed to ward off aggression by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw pact subordinates.

That mission basically ended after the Berlin Wall crumbled in November of 1989, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later. But rather than folding its tent the organization did the exact opposite. It grew. But its expansion turned it into something entirely different from that for which it had originally been created. Twelve nations had participated in the signing of the NATO treaty drafted in 1949 - the U.S., Great Britain, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The most consequential part of the treaty reads as follows: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all”. This is the famous article 5, which remains in force.

As the acronym NATO, which stands for The *North Atlantic* Treaty Organization suggests, the original membership, was entirely North American and Western European. Turkey, admitted to membership in 1952, became the first member located beyond Western Europe. Its admission had a reason: its location was strategic and it had the second largest standing army of any member nation, exceeded only by the United States. Furthermore, it had an ancient historical rivalry with, and enmity toward, Russia. For reasons of political balance, if Turkey was included, Greece, its hostile neighbor and rival, had to be let in as well. West Germany joined in 1955, followed by post-Franco Spain in 1982.

So far so good. While no longer restricted to North Atlantic states, this expansion at least remained consistent with the organization’s basic mission. But then came the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by German reunification the year after. At that point, everything was suddenly and sharply turned on its head, with little accompanying sense or logic. Lengthy negotiations regarding future defense arrangements took place between Soviet and Western leaders. The precise facts regarding the exact agreements reached remain contentious and controversial even now, though the Soviets evidently consented to allowing a united Germany to remain in NATO as long as no foreign troops or nuclear weapons were stationed in what had been East Germany.

However, according to Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader and a key participant in the negotiations, the West made a firm commitment that NATO would not expand eastward. Some U.S. diplomats who took part agree with Gorbachov and recorded so in their memoirs. Others contend that this was a misperception and that no formal commitment was made. Neither side, it seems, had the foresight to imagine that nations which at the time remained full-fledged members of the Warsaw Pact would flop over entirely and turn into NATO members, something which actually happened only nine years later. It recalls the remark once made by the French philosopher and poet Paul Valéry: "The problem of our times is that the future is not what it used to be."

Precisely so! The Cold War was over, but the strategic mindset that accompanied it was too deeply ingrained to dislodge. As a strategic approach it was no longer rational or relevant, but it marched on nonetheless. Restless with the status quo, the State Department bureaucracy began lobbying for NATO expansion as early as the mid-nineties. In the presidential campaign of 1996, President Clinton and the Republican candidate, Bob Dole, actually vied as to who was more strongly devoted to the idea.

Clinton claimed that extending affiliation to former members of the Warsaw Pact would "advance the security of everyone". Exactly why this should be so was never articulated in comprehensible fashion. The aims of expansion remained unclear, its objectives ill-defined, its underlying purpose vague and inscrutable. Unsurprisingly, it was far from a universally accepted view. Numerous experienced American foreign policy experts, Robert McNamara and Paul Nitze among them, as well as influential politicians such as Sam Nunn and Gary Hart, opposed the idea. They viewed the proposition as expensive and, given the weakened and shrunken nature of Russia at the time, devoid of reason. Obviously and as could be expected, the Russians were strongly opposed as well.

But the Clinton Administration elbowed opposition aside, and at a NATO summit meeting in 1999 the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland were admitted to membership. That was only the beginning. Eastern European countries were all eager to climb aboard while the Western ones remained content to be sheltered by a defense pact heavily based on American might. Thus NATO membership mounted rapidly and now stands at 28 nations; fourteen, that is to say fully half, lie in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Of all the follies connected to NATO's expansion to the east, the most consequential occurred in 2004. At that time, seven additional East European nations were provided with membership, including the small Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. These three, all formerly a part of the Soviet Union, have substantial Russian speaking minorities. More significantly, all sit directly on the Russian border. No map is required to see this action as provocative and dangerous. Please recall that Article 5 of the NATO treaty states that an "armed attack against one … shall be considered an attack against … all". A treaty is a solemn commitment, and the equivalent of domestic law. Article VI of the U.S. Constitution states that "treaties made … under the authority of the United States shall be the supreme law of the land".

These words mean that should Russia move militarily against one or more of these small Baltic states the United States would be at war. I do not wish to speculate here, nor am I seeking to predict any future Russian action beyond noting its recent annexation of the Crimea and meddling in the Ukraine and Syria. It is fair, however, to ask whether Russian aggressiveness is attributable, at least in part, to the fact that NATO forces are now positioned right on its border. Is Russian combativeness, in other words, a response to being gratuitously pressed and surrounded?

It is necessary to wonder, too, what the reaction of the American public would be to a Russian move against a Baltic NATO member. How many Americans have even heard of Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia? Post-Viet Nam, post-Afghanistan, post-Iraq, the American public is as wary as it is weary of foreign wars. A Russian intrusion into the territory of a small and distant Baltic nation seems unlikely to stir much passion here at home, especially were it a minor engagement, described as only a squabble over a border. The question requiring consideration, therefore, is whether, and under what circumstances, war with a nuclear powered Russia would win the requisite public and Congressional support. Might Americans not consider this aggression as too remote and seemingly inconsequential to our interests to fight over, treaty or no treaty. Might they not think it a European issue best handled by the Europeans themselves? The answers are, I believe, unclear and problematic.

NATO's original dozen members were all democracies. In fact, the preamble to the organization's charter states that member nations must "safeguard the freedom … of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." It's an ideal long since abandoned, not least in Turkey, where President Recep Erdogan, using last July's failed coup attempt as an excuse, is systematically converting his rule into a dictatorship. Tens of of thousands have been arrested without formal charges, including journalists and members of parliament. Though in a less egregious and demonstrative fashion, the governments of Hungary and Poland have also moved in an autocratic direction.

NATO's headquarters in Brussels houses a civilian staff of a thousand or so, working under a decision making body still called the North Atlantic Council. Also quartered there is a baroque array of military offices, groups, committees, divisions, etc. A NATO handout proudly announces that the headquarters hosts over five thousand meetings a year. Given all this bustling about, is there any wonder the organization felt it needed a grander home? Work began in 2010 on a vast and elaborate new building . It was supposed to be finished two years ago but remains uncompleted. Its cost has already climbed to over a billion euros.

NATO's overall budget for 2016 was roughly $1.3 billion of which the U.S. paid about 22%. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which by bordering on Russia presumably require the most protection, each pay less than one half of one percent. The more significant statistic, however, is that now, even with 28 member nations, the U.S. still accounts for over 70% of their total defense expenditures. A NATO summit meeting held in Wales in 2014 confronted this dramatic imbalance, though as yet with minimal results. Every member country pledged to increase its defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2024. Only five countries - the U.S. , U.K. , Greece, Poland and Estonia - have met this goal so far. The U.S. spends about 3.5% of its GDP on defense; Germany, Europe's wealthiest nation, spends a minimal 1.2%.

These figures demonstrate clearly enough that the United States is carrying an outsize share of NATO expenses. More importantly, they also show that most European countries have allowed their military capability to slide, something they have been doing now for years. This fact became obvious in the bungled European-led war against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, during which the U.S. was forced to come to the rescue. With the exception of the U.K., NATO member nations have contributed little to combatting terrorism in the Middle East. NATO's They have tacitly chosen to rely on American protection rather than providing for their own defense. As it now exists, NATO represents little more than political architecture, an institutional device decked out in fancy military uniform so as to mask European weakness and dependence on American might.

In sum, the NATO of today bears scant relationship to the organization created 68 years ago. In that earlier incarnation, its mission was dictated by an ideologically and strategically divided world. All that has changed. Where there was bipolarity, there is now multipolarity. In

1949, a *Pax Americana* was possible, if not practical. In 2017, it is neither possible nor practical.

Peril is no longer focused on a single powerful adversary but is geographically scattered. Several countries, some of them nuclear, pose potential threats. Terrorism is a risk everywhere. A bloated NATO, rather than dispensing stability and security, adds only risk and uncertainty to the mix. One important thing NATO does do for us, however. It provides a graphic case study of the hazards that may ensue when an ossified bureaucracy outlives the reasons for which it was created. Cyril Northcote Parkinson would, I feel certain, have been only too delighted to point this out.

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