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The American State and the Obama Presidency: A Preliminary Discussion

Abstract:

I characterize American State power as the expression of a “shock and awe” strategy, that is, the style of making dramatic policy pronouncements which centralise efforts and concentrate bureaucratic resources. ‘Shock and awe,’ refers to the capacity of American state leaders to employ its sovereign power and ample resources determinedly to a particular end. This capacity rebuffs the notion of the United States as a weak state. It describes how powerful the centralized exercise of (civilian and military) bureaucratic authority bent on a single purpose has become in the US state. The state is the executive – the bureaucratic departments and agencies including the military controlled under presidential authority. Shock and awe is a strategy which presidents seek to employ definitively to address a crisis at home or abroad. It is distinctly American because of the constraints – including constitutional, political and electoral – under which the executive pursues policy and responds to crises.

Keywords: American state, executive, Obama, shock and awe, Tea Party

1. The nature of American State power

In this essay I characterize American State power as the expression of a “shock and awe” strategy, that is, the style of making dramatic policy pronouncements which centralise efforts and concentrate bureaucratic resources. Examples of this approach since the Second World War include President Barack Obama’s jobs speech to Congress on 8 September 2011 recommending his American Jobs Bill, President George W Bush’s emergency legislation to bail out Wall Street, the \$800 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) and in earlier periods President Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty and President Jimmy Carter’s declaration of a policy to reduce America’s consumption of energy as the moral equivalent of a war. ‘Shock and awe,’ refers to the capacity of American state leaders to employ its sovereign power and ample resources determinedly to a particular end. This capacity rebuffs the notion of the United States as a weak state. It describes how powerful the centralized exercise of (civilian and military) bureaucratic authority bent on a single purpose has become in the US state. The state is the executive – the bureaucratic departments and agencies including the military controlled under presidential authority. Shock and awe is a strategy which presidents seek to employ definitively to address a crisis at home or abroad. It is distinctly American because of the constraints – including constitutional, political and electoral – under which the executive pursues policy and responds to

crises. And it is often a means of overwhelming and side tracking local obstacles to expressions of national public authority.

This centralized bureaucratic and military capacity is a long distance from the hidden or nascent nineteenth century American state.¹ The early American polity was not a complete state as it is recognized to be today because it had such an undeveloped administrative arm. The U.S. Constitution barely mentions administration and early amendments to the Constitution emphasize rights of citizen (notably that of bearing arms) that in some ways conflicted with a state notionally holding a monopoly on the use of violence – a core state function. But over time administrative capacity grew² and by the middle of the twentieth century that capacity includes extensive regulation and policing, growing social welfare programs and the building of a substantial professional military. Constructing, testing and using the first nuclear mass bomb on Hiroshima epitomized these expansive features of the American state, signalling a new era of capacity.

Any president making policy with American state capacity faces a compelling and recurring constraint:³ citizens of the United States favour limited government (see *Lynn* in this issue). Belief in a small national state has prevailed among both voters and elites since the Republic's creation. Countless surveys of public opinion document this preference.⁴ Two public administration scholars characterize a brief period between the late 1930s and early 1960s as the state's "administrative heyday – a time when government and administration were held in high popular esteem, trusted, and enjoyed bipartisan support."⁵ This positive view was short lived. Through the 1970s and 1980s hostility to government grew as did declining trust in national institutions. As a stance toward government the opposition to 'big government' has grown since the presidential election in 2008 galvanized under the Tea Party umbrella: 77 of the 87 new GOP House members elected in November 2010 for instance gather under the Republican Study Committee a conservative grouping united around shared Tea Movement sympathies such as reducing federal deficits and opposing the rise of 'big government.' This expression of populist opposition to government action is cyclical. President Ronald Reagan famously declared that "government is the problem" not the means with which Americans can address enduring problems, challenging many of his predecessors' actions such as presidents Johnson and Nixon.⁶ Although a sentiment widely embraced and celebrated by the Republican Party nonetheless Reagan's intellectual heir President George W Bush left office in 2008 after a notable expansion of federal spending.

But, and without paradox, Americans even conservative ones, look to this same ideally limited government for responses to crises and emergencies. Following the devastation of Alabama and six other states by tornadoes on 28 April 2011, President Barack Obama assured the survivors that "I want every American who has been affected by this disaster to know that the federal government will do everything we can to help you recover, and we will stand with you as you rebuild." Formulating such responses, policy makers highlight the need for state action – not acting merely from blind ambition but to persuade reluctant voters of the seriousness of the problem. The strategy of shock and awe then unfolds. In due course populist discontent and anti-government sentiment pushes these policies backward and the state withdraws. A new cycle of crisis and response gives us the American state as a powerful recurring presence in US politics. The Tea Movement is unremarkable historically in this cycle, as the Occupy Wall Street protest may prove to be too.

The Great Recession (2007-08) illustrates both the appeal to presidents of deploying state power and voter ambivalence about such exercises of executive power. The almost daily government responses to the US's financial crisis in the fall 2008 show the modern American state dramatically at work. On 25 November alone, in their diet of 'shock and awe' measures,⁷ the US Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson and Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke announced a lending program providing up to \$800 billion. This program underwrote securities backed by car loans, student loans, credit card debt and small business loans⁸ and financed buying up debt tied to home loans guaranteed by the government agencies Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.⁹ On 18 March 2009 the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke, announced a massive expenditure of three hundred billion dollars purchasing US government debt, raising the Fed's balance sheet to over \$3 trillion. One newspaper columnist looked on in shock and awe at this exercise in shock and awe.¹⁰ In November 2009 Fed Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke ruminated that "I honestly believe that September and October of 2008 was the worst financial crisis in global history, including the Great Depression;" and confirmed that 12 of the country's 13 most important financial institutions faced collapse: "so out of the maybe 13 most important financial institutions in the United States, 12 were at risk of failing within a period of a week or two."¹¹ A year later, Chairman Bernanke committed the Fed to an extended quantitative easing intervention into the financial markets. The scale of Federal Reserve support to banks internationally at the peak of the September-December 2008 crisis became public two years later, showing this institution to be a global lender of last resort – in effect shock and awe abroad.

Pumping billions of dollars of loans, buy outs and guarantees into the US economy to shore up the financial sector was conceived of as a short gap measures. But such American state largesse was also a logical culmination of a half century of activist State expansion.¹²

Shock and awe strategies are not necessarily successful as long term solutions to deep problems – as the continuous war on drugs reveals. And it is not demonstrated efficacy and policy solution that executives draw on the American State's shock and awe capacities. It is to be in a position to demonstrate leadership and initiative, and to intimidate adversaries that the idea of dramatic announcement and concentrated resource deployment is drawn upon by presidents.

2. Why shock and awe developed

Three major factors explain and define the development of the shock and awe strategy in the US polity.

2.1 State capacity

The first is the exceptional capacities of the American State as they have developed since mid-twentieth century. These capacities cover several dimensions – fiscal, military, bureaucratic, ideological, rhetorical, cultural and economic.

American presidents have fiscal, bureaucratic, military and policy resources in their command and authority arising from electoral legitimation. Executive authority is also

deployed. They can issue executive orders and in ‘signing agreements’ stipulate a particular meaning of legislative intent often contrary to that intended by the bill’s sponsors. Certainly many of the measures undertaken in different parts of the American State rely on congressional appropriations and rest under congressional oversight (and ultimately judicial review¹³). But as an architectural inheritance expanded and controlled by the executive and administrators since the 1940s, the American State is vast. It is the executive which employs and deploys these resources.

These capacities are best understood as distinct streams of resources within the executive forming in effect mini-states. Different ‘states’ categorise familiar government activities but differentiate them as distinct spheres within the executive-led State. The *military state* encompasses the sixteen agency intelligence sector built since 1946, regularly reorganized most recently after the September 2001 terrorist attacks, and the civil defence program built up during the Cold War decades as well as the conventional military personnel and hardware resources. These are executive controlled. The *activist state* extends over the most familiar notions of ‘government’, the regulatory state, the employment of bureaucracy to deliver public policy programs, the numerous tax expenditure measures variously termed the invisible or submerged state,¹⁴ and the criminal justice system where congressional legislation imposing prison terms in a defined way has created a punitive carceral state with high numbers of prisoners compared with other countries.¹⁵ Mimicking war like mobilization to achieve domestic goals is the main characteristic of the *quasi-war state*. Such initiatives as the war on poverty in the 1960s and the militarisation of the policy since the 1990s to exclude illegal immigrants illustrate this dimension of the American state; the transfer of military policy principles to domestic policy is a further aspect of this state activity discussed in *Jennifer Light’s* study of urban policy in Cold War America.¹⁶ Fiscal activity and resources are standard fare for any state¹⁷ and the American executive is no different in developing and expanding spending, often funded through deficits, and taxing regimes. It is distinct in the scale of deficit spending which can be undertaken because of the status of the dollar as the global reserve currency and the depth of money markets (especially in New York) based on the dollar.¹⁸ The scale of this resource is demonstrated by the Fed Reserve and Treasury Department’s scheme, in October 2008 to rescue the financial sector. Working together under George W Bush’s delegation, the two agencies received an agreed \$700 billion fund, the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), from Congress with which to prop up the US’s ailing financial institutions in a shock and awe response.¹⁹ As the global leader of democratic values and Western interests the executive dominated American state has a powerful and influential *foreign* presence. In addition to its role in coordinating or leading military actions, the American state created an extensive garrison presence globally after 1945,²⁰ and articulated democratic beliefs under both Republican and Democrat presidents – as George W Bush’s speech in China in 2005 and Barack Obama’s in Cairo 2009 each illustrates. Global leadership by the executive is often of a shock and awe type. President George W Bush’s declaration of a war on terrorism after the September 2001 Al-Qaeda led attacks on the Pentagon and New York is such an instance. Invading Iraq in 2003 had this character too.

The relationship between these tributaries and shock and awe executive action is dynamic and mostly reinforcing. Not all these tributaries of the American state result from shock and awe initiatives; nor are they all constantly expanded or renewed through such concentrated policy onslaughts. But few of these American state activities have been im-

mune since the 1940s from periodic shock and awe executive attention which galvanizes expansion and development.

2.2 Executive power

A second force driving the use of shock and awe strategies in the American state is the growth of executive power since the 1940s. This growth has occurred especially in the contexts of crises. How crises – military or domestic – drive state expansion is crucial to understanding the American State structures inherited by President Obama.

Accounts of American state expansion documenting the military and domestic shocks provoking such growth underplay how much these efforts were driven by and centred on the executive not the other branches. Legislation such as the Administrative Procedure Act in practice enhanced rather than limited executive authority, scholars *Posner* and *Vermeule* contend, because of the many legal “black holes” and presidential exemptions from legal requirements they create. The two scholars add: “the scope of these exemptions waxes and wanes with circumstances, expanding during emergencies and contracting during normal times, but it is never trivial, and the administrative state has never been brought wholly under the rule of law; periodically the shackles slip off altogether.”²¹ ‘Emergencies’ equates to crises.

The upshot of administrative development during the Progressive era and its institutionalization in the 1946 Act is a distinctive state in *Hamilton* and *Sutton*’s view: “American social and legal thinkers did not accept the European characterization of organizations and nation building, and attempted to replace these formal qualities of bureaucracy with substantive ones: rules were not justified by hierarchy, but by the immanent contours of the process of social life; obedience arose not from discipline, but from persuasion.”²²

This configuration helps explain the development of shock and awe type strategies as responses to crises. Centralized administrative and political authority is not as weak in the US as often assumed; nonetheless engaging in determinedly policy focused action necessitates either being able to cite a crisis of such proportion that it can’t be ignored or orchestrating crisis-like circumstances around a specific problem. The strength of *agencies* constituting the American state also illustrates a key proactive element in executive use of American state shock and awe resources. Crisis action quite clearly implies a responsive mode and therefore describing a circumstance as of crisis proportions is often politically valuable to incumbents of the executive.

National state power is therefore in effect executive power. The political executive – the presidency and its rich bureaucratic and administrative resources – decides upon the deployment of legitimate force and the expansion of legitimate policy measures and government power. As legal scholars *Posner* and *Vermeule* point out, “in the administrative state, it is not the case that legislatures govern, even subject to constraints and the need for cooperation with other branches. Rather the executive governs, in the sense that it drives the policy agenda even where the cooperation of other branches is needed for political reasons.”²³ In driving the ‘policy agenda,’ resort to shock and awe measures especially during periods of crisis is crucial. A vivid instance of executive authority comes from President Franklin D Roosevelt, a pioneering state builder of augmented central authority. In the pursuit of radical and innovative economic measures Roosevelt faced a potentially intransigent Congress in 1933. Speaking after being sworn in as

president, Roosevelt invoked a military metaphor to be embraced by all his successors: if Congress failed to convene, “I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis – broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.”²⁴

2.3 The state as a resource

The third way of thinking about the American state as instrument through which shock and awe measures can be driven is to recognize how this ability enables executive to use the state as a resource rather than being overwhelmed by the ‘hapless giant’ tendency of the US bureaucracy.²⁵ For executives controlling the American state it is a dependent rather than independent variable.

Even with a delimitation of the state to the executive it is clear that many agencies often conflict in their respective views and values. But what an executive focused approach to the aggregation of these units explains is the mobilization of these agencies toward a common object in a period of crisis.²⁶ Shared emphasis does not mean inter-agency conflicts vanish but it does put limits on their salience for key periods and events which have significance for the state’s endurance and construction of legitimacy. The significant challenges to the executive state’s capacities and powers are more likely to come from other parts of the separated system – Congress for instance – than from within its own functioning. The August 2011 budget and debt ceiling debacle – when agreement to raise the national debt level came only at the very final hour and after one credit rating agency downgraded US debt - illustrates this point.

The executive-led expansion of the American state after 1940 unfolded through overlapping but distinct streams which built up collectively the capacities of the state as an instrument of presidential power. The Second World War and ensuing Cold War powered a military and emergency state itself with two sub strands – military power and intelligence agencies. Second, building upon but consolidating the New Deal era²⁷, federal government activism extended to an expanding litany of domestic policies.²⁸ This activism continues.²⁹ Third, the idea of state power as a tool of presidential policy making and leadership imbued White House rhetoric, pronouncements, designs and strategy. Following Franklin Roosevelt’s lead the rhetoric of war on domestic inanimate foes such as poverty or crime seized presidential speech writers’ and advisers’ imagination as a standard ingredient in major presidential declarations and speeches.³⁰ Strategically such combative language signalled to government officials a distinct policy focus to which resources should be directed and imparted elbow power in struggles over scarce funds. A recent instance is the way in which US policy toward the prevention of illegal immigrant entry across the US-Mexican border has developed under the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W Bush and Barack Obama, very different presidents.

Since the middle of the twentieth century presidents recognize in the American state an activist and interventionist system of governance, a recognition exploited as much by Republican presidents like Richard Nixon and George W Bush as by Democrats such as Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton. This enlarged presence includes not just the reasonably observable changes in taxing, spending and regulating in the United States – thereby re-making through ‘a great transformation’ the US state into ‘an activist state’ for one lead-

ing political scientist³¹ – but extends to deploying legitimate national authority for democratic nation building, defence and against internal if recondite ‘enemies’ such as illegal drug users or illegal immigrants, and to social policies such as education (see *Mätzke* in this issue) . The parameters of legitimate state authority and activism grew.

The exercise of ‘shock and awe’ executive leadership significantly drives the growth of the American State in a political culture hostile to government activism. In some respects a weak political institution, the presidency,³² can nonetheless be directed by skilful incumbents in concentrated bursts of action against generalized problems often called enemies such as poverty or illegal immigrants or more obviously against measurable threats such as war. For some scholars this capacity makes for an ‘imperial presidency’ but such a characterization over personalizes the phenomenon of executive power and underestimates the wider sources of state growth propelling an augmented executive administrative presence in American society. In fact the ‘shock and awe’ strategy as developed by presidents is a response to the distinctive if familiar understanding of where the executive is located constitutionally. A federal political system with institutionalized and entrenched horizontal and vertical divisions of power (see *Lynn* in this issue) the United States’ founding fathers acceded reluctantly to the necessity of centralized national authority, and even then placed constitutional and judicial limits on any central concentration of resources. The United States can often appear consequently as a ‘stateless’ society³³ compared with others in the family of advanced democratic nations including even other federal systems such as Canada or Germany.³⁴

Thus American central power is exercised by the executive on many occasions: to wage war, to galvanize or control social and economic change, to revoke or to institute rights, to impose public order, to empower Americans against foreign threats or to vanquish inanimate foes such as poverty. Whether these campaigns succeed or are appropriate is of course routinely contested, a dispute fuelling the US’s polarized partisan politics, about which more below.³⁵ The motive for such political initiatives is both reactive (or crisis driven) and proactive – for example, when Presidents seize the initiative to outline a plethora of ‘shock and awe’ measures to vanquish a salient foe.

Both this mimicking of war strategy and reactive measures are comprehensible in the institutional, electoral and political incentives structuring presidential decision making and actions. These incentives transformed what began as a dramatic but pragmatic response to war time crisis in the Pacific – bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki – into an increasingly routinized strategy.

Thus strategies of shock and awe rest fundamentally in the institutional division of authority across the presidency, congress and Supreme Court and in the widespread consensus among Americans about that state’s claim to have a monopoly of legitimate force. The way in which the monopoly on legitimate force developed enabled the American State to acquire expansive powers of intervention for ‘short shock’ episodes. All states claim a monopoly of legitimate coercive powers and prohibit private militias. This common feature of state power assumed deeper political significance in the United States because – once it was established despite the constitutional protection to citizens’ bearing arms - it is used to legitimate a wider range of actions; because bureaucratic powers were less developed, the authority provided by a legitimate exercise of violence acquired greater salience. It structured for instance nineteenth century power against Native Americans.³⁶ Consequently and despite the preference of many Americans for a small government and a proscribed state, in fact the United States now has a large national state

– but equally important a proclivity by presidents to employ national authority on a systematic and large scale for problem solving.

3. President Obama and Shock and Awe after 2009.

President Barack Obama's incumbency of the American State has been trammelled by three major developments in US politics. First, entrenched and intensified partisan ideological polarization. Second, the rise of the populist anti-government Tea Party, with some taints of racism (see *Minkenberg* in this issue), has injected an intensified anti-statism into American politics, limiting the use of shock and awe measures. And third, the economic crisis – the depths of which were not fully grasped by policy makers in 2008-09 but which is now recognized as a long term and entrenched structural crisis in production, demand and employment rather than merely an intensified cyclical recession.

These fetters on the deployment of American state resources have not stopped President Obama attempting to resort to big government as a means of achieving ends. He successfully passed a stimulus package in the spring 2009 and in 2010 his health care reform – the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act - was enacted.³⁷ But the administration has had increasingly to grapple with a profound structural (not cyclical) economic crisis in a context of Tea Party influenced resistance of any use of policy instruments such as spending or stimulus packages.

Obama has continued nonetheless to seek to use the American state in a shock and awe fashion. This can be illustrated with the pursuit of the American Jobs Bill in September 2011.

3.1 Announcing the Jobs Bill: Fighting the Economic “Emergency”.

First, President Obama presented this idea in classic shock and awe fashion – a dramatic televised speech to a joint session of Congress, focused on a single issue (employment creation), with a repeated message to ‘pass this bill.’ Both in rhetoric and detail he pitches the bill as a measure all parties should pass – offering a specificity of tax increases and itemized exemptions on the wealthy as the means to fund it.

It is not as large as the April 2009 \$787 billion stimulus package but at a proposed \$447 billion the jobs bill is far from trivial. The bill proposes spending \$240 billion on employer and employee payroll tax cuts, designed to encourage hiring, \$140 billion on infrastructure and extends both unemployment benefits and business tax-relief for new investment. It will be funded by raising taxes – households earning over \$200k and \$250k per annum (2 per cent of taxpayers, about 3 million households) will lose itemized deductions (such as mortgage relief) and the reduction of certain tax benefits/reliefs enjoyed by corporations.³⁸ And under the so-called Buffet rule – named after the billionaire businessman Warren Buffet – there is a proposed tax on millionaires. Such proposals will be aided by the developing grass roots Occupy Wall Street protest movement.

President Obama vigorously promoted his jobs bill across the nation urging voters to write Congress members in support of the measure. Adopting the common shock and awe strategy in his speeches the President has stressed the scale of crisis necessitating the enactment of his bill. He characterized the economic and labour market conditions as an

“emergency” and like such predecessors as Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan he has toured the country speaking in areas blighted by job losses. He told reporters: “what I’ve done over the last several weeks is to take the case to the American people so that they understand what’s at stake. It is now up to all the senators, and hopefully all the members of the House, to explain to their constituencies why they would be opposed to common-sense ideas that historically have been supported by Democrats and Republicans in the past.”³⁹

Presenting the Jobs Bill

Second, even delivery of his speech was marred by disrespect and partisan polarization. Having requested to deliver the speech 7th September, the GOP in the Congress led by Speaker John Boehner forced the White House to switch to Thursday 8th in order to avoid a clash with a Republican Party nominee hopefuls’ debate. This rebuff by the Congress is unprecedented historically. It shows the extent to which the executive needs to marshal dramatic capacities to achieve ends.

While not massively welcomed by Republicans his speech and proposals got more positive noises than most of his bills. There may be some agreement on small aspects of the bill – notably payroll tax relief – but on fundamentals it will fail to be enacted. Indeed none of the proposals may succeed.

This negative reception and pending legislative struggle reflects two aspects of American politics bearing down on the Obama administration. First, he coincides with the cyclical populist anti-government thread in US political culture. The cleavage about the size and role of the American state has rarely been as salient politically. Second, this anti-statism is in part a manifestation of anti-Obamaism.⁴⁰ This creates the third stage in the jobs bill initiative as an instance of pursuing shock and awe strategy. Announcement of a shock and awe policy does not guarantee enactment or efficacy.

Jobs versus the anti-government Tea Party

Third, this outcome is a consequence of the rise of a Tea Party movement which helped elect a majority of Republicans in the House in November 2010. Eighty five members of the House GOP belong to the Conservative Study Group; as the push to default America showed this movement believes it is almost a patriotic duty to take risks with the country’s well-being. This is an age of asymmetric polarization and as the noted journalist EJ Dionne Jr. writes “when your adversaries’ ideas are so dastardly, it’s better to court chaos, win a fight and pick up the pieces later.” This Tea Party influenced GOP has a “new sensibility linking radical individualism with a loathing for government that would shock Hamilton, Lincoln and Robert Taft. Thus the GOP sees the solution to the crisis in the measures its right wing has always favoured: gutting regulation; keeping taxes on the affluent low; cutting government programs; and stopping Ben Bernanke and the Fed from doing anything to put the unemployed back to work that might risk the tiniest bit of inflation and thus deflate, even momentarily, the wealth of the already wealthy.”⁴¹

But the hatred of Obama led Democratic policy to deal with the economic crisis goes deeper than mere partisan disagreement, even at the current severe levels of partisan division. It reflects the racial structures influencing American political development since the nation’s creation, and reflected in government institutions and policy since the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴² Tea Party rallies are white. GOP candidate references to welfare

have racist connotations. The Orange County GOP officeholder who circulated an email showing Obama as a monkey expressed surprise that her caricature could be racist. Having seen the historic election of an African American into the White House, the southern dominated Tea Party movement formed. Its struggle is against both the American state and the Obama White House incumbency.

The Tea Party scored a remarkable success in the November 2010 mid-term elections, catapulting over 80 new Republican members into the House of Representatives. The movement was founded after the election of Barack Obama, America's first African American president. Focused initially on hostility to government spending in general, the Tea Party gathered momentum as an ideological opposition to President Obama's health care reform, enacted after months of struggle in July 2010. However this ideological distinctness masks a historically significant regional pattern to the GOP Tea Party representatives. The movement's elected members are predominantly southern: in the House 39 members come from the South, 23 from the other three regions combined. In percentage terms in the Tea Party caucus this translates into 63 per cent (South), 19 per cent (Midwest), 16 per cent (West) and 2 per cent (East). There are no representatives from New England states.

What these roots of the Tea Party movement reveals is the extent to which its anti-government spending strategy and opposition to a raised debt ceiling are not expressions of standard Republican conservatism but come from a distinct Southern ideological conservatism. This conservatism was Democratic during the one-party segregationist era but is now Republican (with many former Democrat officeholders and voters changing party identification). As a force in national politics this southern GOP faction favours tax cuts, privatizing entitlement programs and increasing tax expenditure relief on private schemes.

This tendency toward intense ideological policy built in the 1980s and 1990s, spurred by the southern leadership of the GOP during Newt Gingrich's period as House Speaker. Its success in the debt ceiling-budget agreement was the refusal to have any tax increases included in the August 9th outcome. This powerful anti-taxes, pro spending cuts Tea Party agenda has been inserted centrally in national politics. But it has now provoked a sort of opposition in the Occupy Wall Street protests.

4. Conclusion: The Demise of the Shock and Awe State?

President Obama's effort to mobilise the American state's resources in a shock and awe strategy to address mass unemployment is consistent with how this institution has developed and has been employed by executives since the Second World War through several decades of executive expansion and initiatives.⁴³

Why has this traditional use of the American state's resources and authority proved so challenging to President Obama? The explanation lies in a threefold sequence some independent of the Obama White House and some specific to this administration.

First, shock and awe has been routinized and lost its dramatic edge. So many presidents have declared war on inanimate or animate objects and deployed this rhetoric so forcefully that its power is diminished. Rather than looking for instance to President George W Bush's response to the effects of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans – in which he promised massive federal aid and military assistance – Americans look to outcomes and often find them wanting. Although President Obama – unlike his predecessors

– has not used the language mimicking war, he has nonetheless promised massive federal assistance in response to crises and marshalled attention in a focused way on specific problem promising the deployment of American state resources to address it. What has happened in the last decade is that this strategy has lost its edge.

Part of the reason for this routinization effect of shock and awe is the development, in a historically consistent way, of a cultural backlash against government. Mobilized by the Tea Party activists and taken to Washington through elected Republican officeholders with Tea Party endorsement this populist sentiment fetters any use of American state resources even in the face of palpable crises such as mass unemployment. President Obama's carefully limited engagement in Libya illustrates this new constraint, while his American Jobs Bill is an attempt to harness this traditional state capacity. But a relentless opposition to the health care law, the subject of a Supreme Court review about its constitutionality in 2012, illustrates how the constraints under which his deployment of American state capacities have deepened. Short of an unprovoked military attack on the US, using American state power decisively is harder and harder for the executive.

Further trammelling Obama's efforts to deploy American state resources is the on occasion racist tinted hostility to him and his policies in American politics. This unexpected but enlarged incivility means the Obama presidency marks a dramatic moment of its own for the present and future development of the American state as an institution and set of resources in US society.

Notes

- 1 About which institution there has been an outpouring of important scholarly writing including *Gerstle* (2009), *Balogh* (2009), *Banaszak* (2010), *Novak* (2008), *Edling* (2003), *Johnson* (2007), *Rockwell* (2010), *Skrentny* (2006), *Steinmo* (2010).
- 2 *Skowronek* (1982, 2009), *Johnson* (2007, 2009), *Rohr* (1986), *Carpenter* (2005, 2010).
- 3 Though as *Posner* and *Vermeule* (2010) note this constraint is in practice muted most of the time.
- 4 ANES data record growing number of respondents agreeing that "government is too powerful" (from 30 per cent in 1964 to 39 per cent in 2000) and a declining number accepting that "government is not too strong" (down to 17 per cent in 2000 from 36 per cent in 1964).
- 5 *Moynihan* and *Ingraham* (2010) p230. The authors seem unaware that the period of strong public support for the administrative system coincided with its role in upholding segregation – one reason for the favourable perception (*King* 2007); the collapse of segregation coincided with declining public support.
- 6 "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." First Inaugural Address 20 January 1981.
- 7 A term embraced amongst others by *David Brooks* in his op-ed "The Testing Time," *New York Times* October 7 2008.
- 8 The TALF programme: Term Asset-Backed Securities Loan Facility.
- 9 A complement to the October 2008 initiative TARP: Troubled Asset Relief Program.
- 10 *John Authors*: "The Short View" *Financial Times* 19 March 2009: "for now, shock and awe rules."
- 11 Quoted from testimony by *Bernanke* to the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report, New York: Public Affairs Publishers, January 2011, p354.
- 12 By the time of this November announcement the federal government has taken on close to \$7.8 trillion of direct and indirect financial obligations, a sum equivalent to half of the US's GNP.
- 13 The US Supreme Court has issued memorable decisions knocking back executive power at key moments such as the decision against President Harry Truman's efforts to nationalize a steel company for the Korean War: *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co v. Sawyer* 343 US 579 (1952).
- 14 *Mettler* (2010, 2011)
- 15 *Murakawa* (2008).

- 16 *Light* (2003).
- 17 *Lieberman* (2003).
- 18 *Krippner* (2011). These strengths remain despite the August 5 downgrade by Standard and Poor of US Treasuries to AA+ from AAA rating.
- 19 Of the \$700bn the US Treasury drew down only \$475bn. This was used as follows: \$245bn supporting banks (including some non-US based banks), \$151bn to support American International Group (AIG) and auto firms, \$1bn for the housing market, and \$17bn on a range of credit support programs including securities backed by credit cards. Most of this has been recouped. *Gillian Tett*: Tarp shows that US can break political deadlock, *Financial Times*, 13 May 2011.
- 20 *Friedberg* (2000), *Sanders* (2000).
- 21 Posner and Vermeule 2010: 10.
- 22 Hamilton and Sutton (1989) p34; and see King and Lieberman (2009).
- 23 *Posner and Vermeule* (2010) p11.
- 24 Cited in *Kennedy* (1999), p134.
- 25 *Skowronek* (1982).
- 26 *Greta Krippner* writes that while “policymakers [in the state] are not presumed to share the same objectives, what they hold in common.. is the set of problems to which they are responding” (2011: 23).
- 27 *Brinkley* (1995).
- 28 *Galambos* (1987), *Aberbach and Peterson* (2005).
- 29 *Pierson and Skocpol* (2007); *Jacobs and King* (2009).
- 30 *Tulis* (1988).
- 31 *Pierson* (2007) p19.
- 32 For an introduction to the vast scholarly literature on the US presidency see the excellent essays in *Edwards III* and *Howell* (2009). And see *Pious* (2008).
- 33 *Nettl* (1968), *King and Lieberman* (2009).
- 34 See *Ziblatt* (2006).
- 35 Among an extensive literature on polarization see *McCarty et al* (2006), and *Lee* (2009).
- 36 *Balogh* (2009) and *Rockwell* (2010).
- 37 *Jacobs and Skocpol* (2010).
- 38 For the background to such tax expenditures see *Mettler* (2011).
- 39 *Calmes* (2011).
- 40 *Jacobs and King* (2010).
- 41 *EJ Dionne* “How much has Obama learned?” *Washington Post* 12 September 2011.
- 42 *King* (2007), *King and Smith* (2005, 2011).
- 43 *B. Sparrow* (1996) and *J. Sparrow* (2011).

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