

# Death by a Thousand Paper Cuts

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Sometimes in this job I have a kernel of a column idea that doesn't pan out. But other times I begin looking into a topic and find a problem so massive that I can't believe I've ever written about anything else. This latter experience happened as I looked into the growing bureaucratization of American life. It's not only that growing bureaucracies cost a lot of money; they also enervate American society. They redistribute power from workers to rule makers, and in so doing sap initiative, discretion, creativity and drive.

Once you start poking around, the statistics are staggering. Over a third of all health care costs go to administration. As the health care expert David

Himmelstein [put it](#) in 2020, “The average American is paying more than \$2,000 a year for useless bureaucracy.” All of us who have been entangled in the medical system know why administrators are there: to wrangle over coverage for the treatments doctors think patients need.

The growth of bureaucracy costs America over \$3 trillion in lost economic output every year, Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini [estimated](#) in 2016 in The Harvard Business Review. That was about 17 percent of G.D.P. According to their analysis, there is now one administrator or manager for every 4.7 employees, doing things like designing anti-harassment trainings, writing corporate mission statements, collecting data and managing “systems.”

This situation is especially grave in higher education. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology now has [almost eight times](#) as many nonfaculty employees as faculty employees. In the University of California system, the number of managers and senior professionals [swelled](#) by 60 percent between 2004 and 2014. The number of tenure-track faculty members grew by just 8 percent.

Conservatives complain that diversity, equity and inclusion administrators are injecting a dangerous ideology into American campuses. That’s true. But the bigger problem is that these workers are among the swelling ranks of administrators.

The general job of administrators, who are invariably good and well-meaning people, is to supervise and control, and they gain power and job security by hiring more people to work for them to create more supervision and control. In every organization I’ve interacted with, the administrators genuinely want to serve the mission of the organization, but the nature of their jobs is to enforce compliance with this or that rule.

Their power is similar to what Annie Lowrey of The Atlantic has called the “[time tax](#).” If you’ve ever fought a health care, corporate or university bureaucracy, you quickly realize you don’t have the time for it, so you give up. I don’t know about you, but my health insurer sometimes denies my family coverage for things that seem like obvious necessities, but I let it go unless it’s a major expense. I calculate that my time is more valuable.

As Philip K. Howard has been arguing for years, good organizations give people discretion to do what is right. But the trend in public and private sector

organizations has been to write rules that rob people of the power of discretion. These are two different mentalities. As Howard [writes](#), “Studies of cognitive overload suggest that the real problem is that people who are thinking about rules actually have diminished capacity to think about solving problems.”

Not long ago, an airline accidentally canceled one of my flight reservations. I called the 800 number and the guy on the other end of the line seemed truly unable to wrap his mind around the idea of getting me on another flight, because the rule said that my reservation was nonrefundable. I had that by now familiar feeling of talking to a brick wall.

This state of affairs pervades American life. Childhood is now thoroughly administered. I’m lucky enough to have grown up at a time when parents let children roam free to invent their own games and solve their own problems. Now kids’ activities, from travel sports to recess, are supervised, and rules dominate. Parents are afraid their kids might be harmed, but as Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff have argued, by being overprotective, parents make their kids more fragile and more vulnerable to harm.

High school students design their lives to fit the metrics that college admissions officers require. And what traits are selective schools looking for? They’re looking for students who are willing to conform to the formulas the gatekeepers devise.

I’ve found the administrators’ code of safety first is now prevalent at the colleges where I’ve taught and visited. Aside from being a great school, Stanford used to be a weird school, where students set up idiosyncratic arrangements like an anarchist house or built their own islands in the middle of the lake. This was great preparation for life as a creative entrepreneur. But Stanford is apparently now tamed. I invite you to read Ginevra Davis’s essay “[Stanford’s War on Social Life](#)” in Palladium, which won a vaunted Sidney Award in 2022 and details how university administrators cracked down on student initiatives to make everything boring, supervised and safe.

Professors used to be among the most unsupervised people in America, but even they are feeling the pinch. For example, Mark Edmundson teaches literature at the University of Virginia. The annual self-evaluations he had to submit used to be one page. Now he has to fill out about 15 electronic pages of bureaucratese that include demonstrating how his work advances D.E.I., to make sure his every waking moment conforms to the reigning ideology.

In a recent [essay](#) in Liberties Journal, he illustrates how administrators control campus life by citing the rules they have devised to govern how members of the campus community should practice sadomasochistic sex: “When parties consent to BDSM 3, or other forms of kink, nonconsent may be shown by the use of a safe word, whereas actions and words that may signal nonconsent in non-kink situations, such as force or violence, may be deemed signals of consent.” Do institutions really need to govern private life this minutely?

Organizations are trying to protect themselves from lawsuits, but the whole administrative apparatus comes with an implied view of human nature. People are weak, fragile, vulnerable and kind of stupid. They need administrators to run their lives. They have to be trained never to take initiative, lest they wander off into activities that are deemed by the authorities to be out of bounds.

The result is the soft despotism that Tocqueville warned us about centuries ago, a power that “is absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild.” In his Liberties essay, Edmundson writes that this kind of power is now centerless. Presidents and executives don’t run companies, universities or nations. Power is now held by everyone who issues work surveys and annual reports, the people who create H.R. trainings and collect data. He concludes: “They are using the terms of liberation to bring more and more free people closer to mental serfdom. Some day they will awaken in a cage of their own devising, so harshly confining that even they, drunk on their own virtue, will have to notice how their lives are the lives of snails tucked in their shells.”

Trumpian populism is about many things, but one of them is this: working-class people rebelling against administrators. It is about people who want to lead lives of freedom, creativity and vitality, who find themselves working at jobs, sending their kids to schools and visiting hospitals, where they confront “an immense and tutelary power” (Tocqueville’s words) that is out to diminish them.

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