

# **'Almost Perfect': The Bureaucratic Politics Model and U.S. Foreign Policy**

Written by Luke Norcross

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LUKE NORCROSS, MAR 13 2019

This essay argues that the Bureaucratic Politics Model (BPM) provides an almost perfect evaluation of the bureaucracy in the making and realizing of US foreign policy. We will begin by outlining the strengths of the BPM. Then we will assess and dismiss the major scholarly criticisms of the BPM that come from opponents such as Stephen Krasner. Then follows my assessment of the 'almost perfect' aspect – noting here the unique exceptionalism of the president. Finally, we will assess the relationship between the bureaucracy and the president concluding that the agential president and structural bureaucracy are intrinsically tied together but with the bureaucracy as the stronger partner. Therefore, whilst the BPM accurately evaluates the role of the bureaucracy, the position and agency of the president within the bureaucracy creates exceptions making this evaluation only 'almost perfect'.

The BPM proposes that decisions are not made from rational, collective and cohesive decision-making. Instead they are made through conflict, negotiation and bargaining between members of the bureaucracy[1]. Bureaucrats enter these conflicts with their own goals, narratives and concepts[2]. Success is not necessarily measured by rational outcomes, but by the ability of bureaucrats to persuade others to their cause. Furthermore, bureaucrats do not enter these conflicts on an even keel. Bureaucrats enter the conflicts with different personnel, budgets and positions within the government hierarchy. As Miles states 'where you stand depends on where you sit'[3]. As the vast majority of foreign policy decisions are made in groups[4], these conflicts are a constant force[5] and play a major role in the decision making of the bureaucracy. Below we will outline some of the major ways these conflicts manifest themselves in US foreign policy.

One of the major conflicts is between the different departments of the bureaucracy. Jentleson notes that the Commerce and Agricultural Departments often oppose sanctions whereas the State and Defence departments often support them[6]. Sanctions may result in return sanctions that would affect US businesses and agriculture whereas the State and Defence departments are not constrained by these domestic forces. He also notes that these conflicts also occur between the military branches[7]. Involvement in foreign policy activity may garner higher funding and the opportunity for better equipment and more personnel. Keane and Diesen's analysis of foreign policy during the Afghan War shows us several instances of BPM in force. They split America's foreign policy apparatus into the three 'D's' (diplomacy, defence and development) and note that when an issue does not fit nicely into one of these Ds, it creates conflict[8]. They note that there was constant fighting between USAID and the State and Defence departments marked by preference over project length, manpower and resources[9]. In turn, this created a divide with the military who saw the civilian agencies as incompetent in their ability to complete tasks and complete them on time[10]. They conclude that it is this lack of 'united nation-building', a product of the constant bargaining, which led to the US failure in Afghanistan.[11]

The type of department, in terms of domestic and foreign, has also become a site of conflict. There is often a sense from those on the ground in foreign policy theatres that those in Washington fail to understand the situation on the ground and that their attempts to micromanage from miles away are damaging their ability to succeed[12]. Brian Hocking rightly notes that these conflicts will only increase[13]. The complexity of contemporary foreign policy dilemmas is increasingly requiring the presence of what were once solely domestic departments and agencies. Drezner notes that pre-existing departments do not like the introduction of new agencies into their domain as they

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perceive them to be a threat to the goals, values and image of their agency/department[14]. What we see here is not only how individual departments engage in BPM style politics between themselves, but also how groups of departments defined by their seniority and locality engage in broader conflicts. On both levels of analysis, we can see how the BPM environment controls the US foreign policy apparatus and therefore provides a good evaluative framework.

To analyse its value though we must not only embrace its obvious merit but also handle its detractors. Stephen Krasner rightly points out that the BPM has some extremely damning viewpoints in regards to contemporary democracy[15]. If we make bureaucrats and their conflicts responsible for foreign policy then whom do we hold accountable? The fundamental danger of BPM is that 'it undermines the assumptions of democratic politics'[16]. Whilst he is right that it raises serious questions about the accountability of modern democracies, his approach is far too normative. Using the BPM to evaluate foreign policy allows us to recognize reality for what it is. It is only then that we can set about changing it. If we paint over this with another approach that incorrectly glorifies the power of elected representatives or the viewpoints of public/media, then we are blinding ourselves to the reality of the situation. Alden, Amnon and Art dedicate significant space to the problems of the BP, such as its failure to determine in what context conflict and bargaining have most effect[17]and that other factors or the situation itself are a more important determiner[18]. The BPM does not have to outline when it is most prevalent – merely that it is prevalent. This does not mean that it is wrong – only partially incomplete. In regards to other factors we unfortunately lack the space to deconstruct them one by one but the American bureaucracy is shielded from the outside world, not only by brick walls but by tradition, identity and purpose. Whilst external factors will naturally permeate through, they are insignificant when compared to the anarchic conflict of policymaking and the forces and drivers that underpin it. Broadly speaking we can see that even if some criticism is valid, it is either because the BPM fails to either describe everything in totality or because its detractors give undue value to external forces.

From observing the above, one would likely conclude that the BPM provides, even with the criticism above, a perfect explanation of America's foreign policy apparatus. However, this essay argues it is only 'almost perfect'. The reason for this is that the BPM fails to explain the unique agency of the President. How he can rise above the conflict of his bureaucrats and make decisions. These abilities are not unconstrained though. For the second part of the essay we will briefly look at the agency of the president before looking at its constraining relationship within the wider bureaucratic structure.

The president is the creator of the bureaucratic structure[19]. He can appoint and dismiss as he chooses. He does not have to engage in bargaining and can rise above the conflict. If he faces conflict he can simply override it or utilize other avenues unavailable to the wider bureaucracy. His position at the top means that as Krasner[20]and Jentleson[21]suggest, the ultimate decision-making and responsibility for those decisions rests with him. This decision-making role is enhanced during periods of crisis[22]. Jentleson notes that these decisions require 'fast [and] decisive action' citing the example of the Cuban Missile Crisis[23]. Furthermore, the president brings his own experience to the office. Whilst this was more common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century it is none the less important[24]. It could, for example, be argued that Donald Trump's business experience is better suited to the hyper-globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century world rather than a traditional military or civic background. But with experience also comes the president's individuality; their emotions, characteristics and values. Jentleson notes that it is the president's personality 'that affects how well the job gets done' noting the example of Woodrow Wilson and his failure to negotiate with the Senate over the Treaty of Versailles[25]. Whereas the personality of a bureaucrat would be drowned out in the collective noise of everyday policymaking or likely to adopt false personas in order to become more involved[26]. It is this combination of the president's experience, personality and position within government which when forged together give him greater agency. Thereby allowing him to rise out of the chaos, conflict and bargaining of the BPM.

The president cannot serve alone or with only the support of his 'palace guards', the president needs the bureaucracy and can therefore become constrained by it[27]. The bureaucracy creates the framework from which the president makes decisions and can therefore restrict his policy choices[28]. One of the main tasks of the bureaucracy is information gathering, the president cannot invest time in what are comparatively trivial tasks. A rational president should and would use this information to make their decisions. The bureaucracy can therefore have a significant

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impact. Furthermore, the bureaucracy is fundamentally responsible for realizing the decisions of the president. Bureaucrats can create hindrances and blockages affecting the 'de facto' foreign policy as opposed to the 'de jure' policy decided in the meeting rooms of Washington. Mangi cites the example of Kennedy's repeat orders to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey[29]. It took two full months and by the time it was completed the USSR had already removed all their missiles from Cuba[30]. Whilst all the above points are valid, the most important constraining relationship is that of the president with his senior advisors. Jentleson notes that Henry Kissinger was both the National Security Advisor and Secretary of State and that Nixon and Ford become extremely dependent on him[31]. There is a reason why concepts and themes are named after him as opposed to the presidents he served. Kissinger increasingly ran into conflict with fellow advisor William Rogers due to his close relationship with Nixon. Mangi notes the decision to bomb Cambodia and Laos was solely made between Nixon and Kissinger and that Rogers only found out afterwards[32]. There is also the case that senior advisors may be unhappy and resign (e.g. Cyrus Vance and President Carter[33]), presidents may therefore constrain themselves to keep them from resigning. Saunders asks whether a president's experience and leadership can overcome this. She ultimately concludes that experience and leadership are key and that the existence of experienced advisors alone is not enough – the president must be capable[34]. She ultimately concludes policy outcomes depend 'not only who you are and where you sit [BPM], but also who is in charge'[35]. My argument is only an additionally tangent away from this viewpoint. It is evident that the bureaucracy, its size, its scope and its day-to-day operations allow it considerable ability to constrain the presidency. We must therefore note its importance within the wider decision making apparatus and not dismiss it as Saunders has done.

As we can see, the BPM provides an accurate evaluation of the role of the bureaucracy. Fighting between departments and groups of departments fed by collective desires for bigger budgets, personnel and prestige create an environment of bargaining and conflict that overwhelmingly shapes American foreign policy. Whilst some idealists suggest that it either isn't like this or that it shouldn't be like this. They fail to notice that this is simply how it is as seen time and time again from the examples in this essay from Kennedy to Afghanistan in the present. It may be an incomplete model but that does not mean it is wrong. However it is not wholly perfect evaluation – it is only 'almost perfect'. The president can and does rise above the conflict in accordance with his personal abilities, the situation at hand and his location at the top of the bureaucratic structure. But as we have seen in our disagreement with Saunders this ability to rise is clearly constrained by the size and role of the bureaucracy plus the importance of senior advisors. Therefore whilst the BPM provides a very good evaluation, its inability to note president and his relationship within the wider bureaucracy means that it is only almost perfect.

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