

THE POWER ELITE

Thomas Dye, a political scientist, and his students have been studying the upper echelons of leadership in America since 1972. These “top” positions encompassed the posts with the authority to run programs and activities of major political, economic, legal, educational, cultural, scientific, and civic institutions. The occupants of these offices, Dye’s investigators found, control half of the nation’s industrial, communications, transportation, and banking assets, and two-thirds of all insurance assets. In addition, they direct about 40 percent of the resources of private foundations and 50 percent of university endowments. Furthermore, less than 250 people hold the most influential posts in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government, while approximately 200 men and women run the three major television networks and most of the national newspaper chains.

Facts like these, which have been duplicated in countless other studies, suggest to many observers that power in the United States is concentrated in the hands of a single power elite. Scores of versions of this idea exist, probably one for each person who holds it, but they all interpret government and politics very differently than pluralists. Instead of seeing hundreds of competing groups hammering out policy, the elite model perceives a pyramid of power. At the top, a tiny elite makes all of the most important decisions for everyone below. A relatively small middle level consists of the types of individuals one normally thinks of when discussing American government: senators, representatives, mayors, governors, judges, lobbyists, and party leaders. The masses occupy the bottom. They are the average men and women in the country who are powerless to hold the top level accountable.

The power elite theory, in short, claims that a single elite, not a multiplicity of competing groups, decides the life-and-death issues for the nation as a whole, leaving relatively minor matters for the middle level and almost nothing for the common person. It thus paints a dark picture. Whereas pluralists are somewhat content with what they believe is a fair, if admittedly imperfect system, the power elite school decries the grossly unequal and unjust distribution of power it finds everywhere.

People living in a country that prides itself on democracy, that is surrounded by the trappings of free government, and that constantly witnesses the coming and goings of elected officials may find the idea of a power elite farfetched. Yet many very intelligent social scientists accept it and present compelling reasons for believing it to be true. Thus, before dismissing it out of hand, one ought to listen to their arguments.

Characteristics of the Power Elite

According to C. Wright Mills, among the best known power-elite theorists, the governing elite in the United States draws its members from three areas: (1) the highest political leaders including the president and a handful

of key cabinet members and close advisers; (2) major corporate owners and directors; and (3) high-ranking military officers.

Even though these individuals constitute a close-knit group, they are not part of a conspiracy that secretly manipulates events in their own selfish interest. For the most part, the elite respects civil liberties, follows established constitutional principles, and operates openly and peacefully. It is not a dictatorship; it does not rely on terror, a secret police, or midnight arrests to get its way. It does not have to, as we will see.

Nor is its membership close, although many members have enjoyed a head start in life by virtue of their being born into prominent families. Nevertheless, those who work hard, enjoy good luck, and demonstrate a willingness to adopt elite values do find it possible to work into higher circles from below.

If the elite does not derive its power from repression or inheritance, from where does its strength come: Basically it comes from control of the highest positions in the political and business hierarchy and from shared values and beliefs.

Top Command Posts

In the first place, the elite occupies what Mills terms the top command posts of society. These positions give their holders enormous authority over not just governmental, but financial, educational, social, civic, and cultural institutions as well. A small group is able to take fundamental actions that touch everyone. Decisions made in the boardrooms of large corporations and banks affect the rates of inflation and employment. The influence of the chief executive officers of the IBM and DuPont corporations often rivals that of the secretary of commerce. In addition, the needs of industry greatly determine the priorities and policies of educational and research organizations, not to mention the chief economic agencies of government.

The power of the elite has also been enhanced by the close collaboration of political, industrial, and military organizations. As Washington has been called upon to play a more active troll in domestic life, from regulating the business cycle to inspecting children's sleepwear, government has come to depend on the corporate world to carry out many of its activities. Conversely, industry now relies heavily on federal supports, subsidies, protection, and loans to ensure the success of its ventures. To be sure, business people and politicians constantly carp at each other. But the fact remains that they have grown so close that they prosper together far more than they do separately.

At the same time, the Cold War has elevated the prestige and power of the military establishment. The United States has come a long way from the days of citizens-soldiers to its present class of professional warriors whose impact far transcends mere military affairs. The demands of foreign affairs, the dangers of potential adversaries, the sophistication and mystique of

new weapons, and especially the development of the means of mass destruction have all given power and prestige to our highest military leaders.

As a group, then, this ruling triumvirate of politicians, corporate executives, and military officers has, by virtue of the positions they hold, unprecedented authority to make decisions of national and international consequence. But the mere occupancy of these command posts does not fully explain the effectiveness of their power. Of equal significance is their common outlook on life and their ability and willingness to act harmoniously on basic issues.

Shared Attitudes and Beliefs

Leafing through the pages of *Time* or *Newsweek* one quickly realizes that the members of the so-called elite constantly squabble among themselves. Such disagreements, which have become part of the background noise of national politics, occur so frequently as to be taken as proof that not one but a multiplicity of elites exist.

According to Mills and others, however, these differences are vastly overshadowed by agreement on a world view. This world view is a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that shapes the elite's perceptions of government and prevents deep divisions from arising.

Members of the elite agree on the basic outlines of the free enterprise system including profits, private property, the unequal and concentrated distribution of wealth, and the sanctity of private economic power. They take giantism in the world of commerce for granted. More important, they are united in their belief that the primary responsibility of government is to maintain a favorable climate for business. Other governmental responsibilities, such as social welfare and concern for the environment, are secondary to that task.

What produces the acceptance of this world view? Participants in the elite tend to read the same newspapers, join the same clubs, live in the same neighborhoods, send their children to the same schools (usually private and the ones they themselves attended), and belong to the same churches and charities. They work and play together, employ one another, and intermarry. They share, in a word, a life-style that brings them together in mutually reinforcing contact.

Moreover, they undergo similar apprenticeships. Dye finds that 54 percent of the top corporate leaders and 42 percent of our highest political officials went to just 12 private colleges including Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford.

But it is while advancing through their professions that the unity of thought begins to emerge. By the time men and women reach the top of the corporate or professional ladder, their common experiences have given them a shared way of looking at economics and politics so that they

experience and react to events in the same ways. When they enter public service these people cannot, as Mills explains, shed their heritage:

The interesting point is how impossible it is for such [political appointees] to divest themselves of their engagement with the corporate world in general and with their own corporations in particular. Not only their money, but their friends, their interests, their training—their lives in short—are deeply involved in this world. The point is not so much financial or personal interests in a given corporation, but identification with the corporate world. To ask a man suddenly to divest himself of these interests and sensibilities is almost like asking a man to become a woman.

This inability to “divest” oneself of one’s past is perhaps what once led a former chairman of General Motors to declare “What’s good for GM is good for America.”

Candidates: Insiders and Outsiders

Since the early 1970s when politics really began to develop a brand name—a negative reputation over and above the traditional distrust of politicians—candidates for national office frequently tell voters that they are outsiders, that they are not part of the “establishment,” that they will bring fresh faces and new ideas to Washington. Aspirants to office in the 1990s have been especially noteworthy for making this claim. What is interesting to note is that more often than not these candidates and the individuals they work with or appoint to office are themselves insiders, as the recent cabinet appointments suggest.

The role of the Elite in Making “Trunk Decisions.”

Imagine a tree in the dead of winter. With its leaves gone its outline is clearly visible. At the bottom, of course, is the trunk—cut it and the whole tree topples. Higher up three or four main branches support lesser branches, which in turn support still smaller ones until one comes to the twigs at the edges. Cutting the twigs does not change the tree very much. As one saws off branches lower down, however, the shape—and possibly the existence of the tree, one cannot simply prune off a few boughs at the top but has to cut main limbs or the trunk.

Public policies can be thought of in the same way. There is a hierarchy among them in the sense that some (corresponding to the trunk and main branches) support others. **Trunk decisions** represent basic choices—whether or not welfare the federal budget must be balanced in seven years, for example—that, once decided, necessitate making lesser choices—cutting food stamps or Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Whoever makes the trunk decisions sets the agenda for subsequent debates about secondary or branch and twig policies.

Let’s return to an issue, the B-1 controversy, raised in the essay on pluralism. As important as it seemed, the B-1 in the eyes of power elite theorists is only a twig. In order to appreciate their contention, asked why

the United States needs bombers in the first place. Why not rely on land-based missiles and submarines to deter the Soviet Union?

The answer lies in a prior decision to maintain a “triad,” a nuclear retaliatory force consisting of land-based missiles, submarines, and bombers. Having three separate weapons systems, American defense planners concluded, provides an extra margin of safety in the event of a confrontation with the Russians. Are they right? Do we need three types, or could we get along with two? This is an important question—far more important than whether we develop a new bomber or keep an old one—and who decides it structures the debate on this and a host of other issues. Suppose, for a moment, the United States had decided that bombers were unnecessary. The B-1 debate would then be moot and resources allocated to it could be devoted to other purposes such as conventional arms or schools or tax reductions.

Yet the triad is itself only a branch policy; it rests on an even more fundamental policy, **containment**. Early in the post-World War II era, the United States had to develop a policy toward the Soviet Union. A controversy arose. Some urged a conciliatory approach that would recognize Russia’s legitimate security concerns. Other took a harder line. Fearing the spread of international communism, they advocated the use of diplomatic, economic, an especially military means to contain what they perceived to be inexorable Soviet expansionism. The first alternative emphasized cooperation, the second containment; the first implied relatively modest national security efforts, the second enormous expenditures for arms and foreign aid.

Ultimately the United States adopted the strategy of containment, which has been the backbone of American foreign policy since 1947.

Containment represents a trunk decision, while most other defense policies such as the triad or the B-1 are either branches or twigs. Containing the Russians put us on a long and arduous path over which we trod for nearly half a century. National defense swallowed a huge portion of the federal budget; it called for the maintenance of an enormous peacetime army; it led us into alliances with nations in the farthest corners of the globe, including some of the most corrupt and dictatorial regimes on earth; it demanded massive military aid programs; it consumed the talents of our scientific establishment and the ordinary attention of our national leaders. In short, containment, unlike the B-1, was no ordinary policy but a fundamental commitment of American resources and energies.

Who decides trunk decisions like these? According to the power elite theory, the top of the pyramid usually does. Or it has the greatest influence on their formation. The middle levels of government (the Congress, the courts, the states) worry mainly about how best to implement them. This seems to have been the case in the period after World War II when containment first emerged. Most of the key decisions were made behind closed doors in the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon. A few selected senators were involved (primarily to enlist their support

rather that involved them in the actual decision-making process), but containment was never more than a fleeting part of national party and electoral politics. Instead, once the policy had been formulated at the top it was sold to the public.

The Middle Level of Politics

Where does this put the workaday politicians, the inhabitants of the middle level of politics? Sadly, the elite school reports, their influence has largely dissipated over the years, leaving them with only the outer limbs and twigs to manage. It is certainly true that the government in the middle is colorful and noisy and attracts the attention of the popular press. But for the most part its activities hide an important point: Far from competing with the power elite, professional politicians today have lost their ability to control the nation's destiny.

Elite theorists think that most of the participants in the middle are actually motivated by rather selfish and parochial interests. Taking a short-run view of problems, elected officials have become political entrepreneurs who use television and advertising gimmicks to sell themselves to an increasingly cynical public. In their hands policy becomes a means to an end, getting reelected, rather than an end in itself.

Most important, they have lost the will and capacity to grapple with national and international issues. They seem all too eager to leave these questions to presidents and their inner circles. Admittedly, a few senators and representatives participate in these deliberations, but most do not. And neither do state and local officials. Thus, instead of debating the merits of containment or the triad, they are content to argue about how much of the B-1 will be built in their own hometowns.

Forty years ago, C. Wright Mills lamented on this state of affairs:

More and more of the fundamental issues never come to any point of decision before the Congress, or before its most powerful committees, much less before the electorate in campaigns.... When fundamental issues do come up for Congressional debate, they are likely to be so structured as to limit consideration, and even to be stalemated rather than resolved.

Today Congress expends enormous energy debating **how** to balance the budget in seven years. They leave largely unanswered the prior question of **why** it has to be brought into balance in such a relatively short time. This matter is worth noting because many economists agree that public spending has to be controlled but do not necessarily believe that the national budget has to be balanced year in and year out or that the national debt has to be paid off immediately.

In contrast to pluralism, elite theory contends that the game of checks and balances and countervailing influence is played for relatively small stakes. Because ordinary politicians are excluded from the higher circles, where fundamental choices are decided, the agenda is predetermined for them.

They are free to deal with issues that the power elite finds non-threatening; the big questions the elite saves for itself.

The Public

What disturbs power elite theorists most, however, is the demise of the public as an independent force in civic affairs. Instead of initiating policy, or even controlling those who govern them, men and women in America have become passive spectators, cheering the heroes and booing the villains, but taking little or no direct part in the action. Citizens have become increasingly alienated and estranged from politics as can be seen in the sharp decline in electoral participation over the last several decades. As a result, the control of their destinies has fallen into the lap of the power elite.

Today of course, it is hard to deny the apathy and disinterest among average citizens, But whereas pluralists view this passivity as understandable (people are too preoccupied with other concerns to take part in public affairs), if not beneficial (too many individuals placing demands on government can clog the system), elite theorists see it as the inevitable consequence of important decisions being made at the highest levels. People lose interest to the degree that they lose control. Moreover, in spite of Independence Day platitudes about good citizenship, the elite does not really encourage mass participation. Such involvement would make its control too uncertain.

The containment strategy adopted after World War II illustrates this point. AS noted previously, the initial policies, which were developed largely behind the scenes, called for drastic changes in the way the United States conducted foreign affairs. In the years after 1947 the United States fought a major war in Korea and began spending billions and billions of dollars at home and overseas for national security.

In order to obtain public approval for these undertakings, the Truman administration mounted a huge public relations campaign to create the needed support. As it and subsequent administrations emphasized the seriousness of the threat, the people were led to believe that they faced a ruthless enemy determined to take over the world by subversion if possible and by force if necessary. Yet they had almost no opportunity to hear a full debate between the proponents of containment and alternative policies. Nor did they decide the matter themselves. That the outcome might have been the same is not the issue. What matters is that the chance to make a trunk decision was effectively lost. Americans were consumers, rather than creators, of the policy.

Herein lies a supreme irony of American politics, Mills and his supporters claim. Foreign policy is a trunk. From it grow a host of decisions with far-reaching political, economic, social and moral implications. Since foreign relations affect everyone every day in every way, how can a country be democratic if it takes these matters out of the hands of its citizens? How can people be free unless they discuss and debate the things that affect

them the most? The B-1 controversy, for all of its thunder and lightning, is not nearly as important as containment, which at the most critical moments was hardly mentioned in the halls of Congress or in election campaigns.

Elite theory tells us why this silence has lasted for so long: The power elite establishes the basic policy agenda in such areas as national security and economics. Of course, since it only sets the general guidelines, the middle level has plenty to do implementing them, but the public has been virtually locked out. Its main activities—wearing campaign buttons, expressing opinions to pollsters, voting every two or four years—are mostly symbolic. The people do not directly affect the direction of fundamental policies.

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