

Dissing Government

By Jim Hoagland [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

Sunday, November 30, 2003; Page B07

The relentless and prolonged assault by politicians and the public on the competence and motives of their government bureaucracies is slowly but surely undermining democracy in the Americas and Europe.

That is the provocative thesis of an important new book, "Dismantling Democratic States," just published by Princeton University Press. Professor Ezra Suleiman shows that the phenomenon of bureaucracy-bashing perfected by recent U.S. presidents of both parties is rapidly spreading into European societies that once revered "neutral" civil servants as the guarantors of the nation-state's legitimacy.

More important, Suleiman assesses the long-term costs to civil society of the populist campaign speeches that demonize Washington (or Paris or Berlin) and the capital's bureaucrats. The winning politicians are compelled to "reinvent government" or try to coerce it into becoming an enterprise that values cost-cutting efficiency above all else.

The book arrives during a moment of particularly nasty relations between major parts of Washington's bureaucracy and a conservative Republican president who bemoans having to live and work here. This is a happy accident of timing. The book has no partisan ax to grind, and its insights could be useful to the Bush administration -- both at home and in its unexpected bonanza of nation-building projects abroad.

There is a natural antipathy between presidents, who are elected largely because of their ability to articulate and incarnate deeply felt human values, and the bureaucracies they inherit and can only marginally alter. Civil service is about enforcing rules and procedures and treating all citizens and issues equally and not about values as that word is understood by politicians.

For the career Washington civil servant or military officer, institutions matter profoundly. This president's bold policy reversals on the Middle East, arms control and other foreign policy issues are seen as threats to the State Department and the CIA, two institutions that now wage a covert insurgency against Bush out of fear as well as loathing.

But it is not just foreign policy. "President Bush's current plan, as shown in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, is nothing less than the privatization of the federal government," writes Suleiman. "The 170,000 employees . . . will not receive civil service protection" and private contractors will increasingly take over jobs now in the federal workforce.

Part of the value of Suleiman's book, however, is to show that this is a culmination rather than a departure from trends that have been long building and that these trends follow the spread of mass media and marketing in all societies. The problem is not just Bush.

The Princeton professor also analyzes the demoralizing effect of the repeated descriptions of government ineffectiveness voiced by Bill Clinton and Al Gore to justify their campaign to overhaul the bureaucracy and consciously uses the Clinton-Gore term for that campaign to make a larger point:

"Indeed the unpreparedness of the United States federal, state and local governments in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, may well have been the result of the attempts to 'reinvent' governments" over the past three or four decades. "At the very least the connection between the two merits a thorough study."

Americans distrust government's powers and motives. They immediately get the joke that has a federal inspector or a state administrator fatuously saying: "We're from the government and here to help." Such suspicion is a healthy instinct -- but one that is being carried to destructive and demagogic lengths.

Suleiman agrees that bureaucracies need to be made more efficient and more responsive to public needs. But politicians today promise to reduce government's functions (as well as size) as a way of pandering to an alienated electorate. They pressure the career civil service to treat constituents as customers who are always right rather than as citizens who have civic obligations -- including the payment of taxes for common needs.

The horror of Sept. 11 brought an instant renewal of respect for police officers, firefighters and other first responders. But that reflexive rallying around and the determination to reduce personal and national vulnerability are waning as time passes and old attitudes reassert themselves.

Not enough is being done to correct the returning erosion of support for government in this time of war. Not enough is being done to fund and organize public health and security institutions to which we will all turn if and when the terrorists strike again here. Not nearly enough, in fact.