

Title: **Washington is not America's brain**
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Washington is not America's brain

With a population that soon will surpass one-third of a billion people, America's complexity defies the limits of the human imagination. No one, ultimately, can truly understand such a country, in the sense of having detailed insights into the specific needs of all its communities, ranging from tiny villages to neighborhoods in sprawling cities such as Los Angeles. Governments, however, are staffed by people — with all the human limitations that implies.

The United States cannot be well-governed from the center. The federal government can try, of course, but federal agencies and personnel do not possess valid, detailed knowledge regarding local conditions across the country. Prudent leaders remember their inherent human limitations, and understand that such limitations always are reflected in their governance. America, however, is not prudently governed.

The long-popular metaphor that governments are "brains," while countries are the "bodies" they control, is deeply flawed. Countries are not mammals, and do not have a central nervous system. Someone stubbing their toe on a rock will recognize their error almost immediately; they feel pain. By contrast, distant bureaucrats can inflict excruciating pain on Americans without even being aware that they are doing so.



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For instance, officials regulating the American health care system never planned to create an opioid epidemic, but it is obvious that the twists and turns of federal policy played a critical role in its development. And regulation of medication is only the most obvious, direct factor in the opioid disaster: we cannot hope to assess accurately how Washington's economic and trade policies, foreign policy decisions, and other choices indirectly might have contributed to the spread of addiction.

The United States Government is an abstract noun; it possesses no personality, intuition, or moral sense whatsoever. It is less like a brain than an awesomely powerful "chaos machine." Imagine a device that constantly makes and implements decisions of all sorts without any reference to morality or common sense. One minute, it gives everyone who can wiggle their ears a crisp one hundred dollar bill; the next, it declares that all schools must teach square dancing in Grades 3-7; it then decides that wearing a lime green shirt is illegal and punishable by six months in prison; and so on, making

random decisions all day, every day.

Like the U.S. government, the machine would impose its endless whims upon individuals and communities, who would then have to adapt to the machine's decisions as best they could. Whether they like the decisions is irrelevant—and, regardless of who they vote for, the machine continues operating.

The conceit of the national governing elite is that the machine is not random—that there is a benevolent logic to its actions. If the machine sometimes makes errors, this is unfortunate, but turning it off would, they claim, assure disaster. The machine must continue to inflict its decisions on Americans because that is how a modern country is governed—and people who disagree are just nostalgic reactionaries.

Conservative politicians like to huff and puff about the failings of "big government," but the overwhelming majority of them offer no meaningful alternative to the status quo. They might talk about the elimination of a few cabinet departments, a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution, and similar changes, but these would not fundamentally alter the relationship between the American people and the U.S. government. Americans would still remain under the command of a random decision-making machine—it would just be a marginally

smaller one.

A critical question for America is how the machine can be disassembled, transferring its power to communities and individuals. The people who defend the machine's existence are the real reactionaries. Americans from Maine to Hawaii do not need a government that issues endless commands in the form of laws, regulations, and federal judicial decisions. They need a government that will leave them alone to cooperate freely, building and nurturing their own communities. Americans today face a choice: they can continue to receive the "help" of a distant chaos machine, or they can begin seriously discussing how to comprehensively dismantle it and empower themselves.

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