

I have little doubt that *SuperCooperators* will generate great interest and debate and meet with its fair share of dissension. Nowak, a very successful and plainspoken scientist, has a disinclination to compromise. His style has always been to forge ahead with alacrity, and at times this has led to an absence of historical considerations that offends those working on related problems. But he and Highfield should be commended for communicating in an accessible language many fascinating insights into the nature of cooperation. Their readers will find an informative survey of the rich mathematical models and theories that define a lawlike realm of biological and cultural phenomena.

References

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POLITICAL SCIENCE

Dodging Responsibility

John Brehm

In *The Blame Game*, Christopher Hood identifies one of the most common gripes that citizens have about bureaucracy and government, namely, that no one in either accepts responsibility for making mistakes of omission or commission. In this brief and often illuminating book, Hood (a political scientist at Oxford University) explores the diverse and insidious ways in which ducking blame manifests in public life.

Hood's book follows in a spirit similar to other powerful approaches to politics by posing a single maximand (here, dodging blame) and inferring propositions that extend from this by-necessity unrealistic assumption. David Mayhew famously postulated that members of Congress must be single-minded seekers of reelection, for any other goal must be subordinate to seeking and retaining office (1). They may seek power, or have policy goals, or have aspirations for higher office, but all of these goals are for naught without election to office in the first place. With relevance to bureaucracy, Hood's blame dodging is akin to William Niskanen's budget-maximizing

bureaucrat, James March's slack-maximizing organization member, or Herbert Simon's satisficer (2–4). The weaknesses of such single-minded approaches are palpable: they require grotesquely simplified characterizations of the behavior of the actors (legislators, bureaucrats, organization members) they study.

Of course, all of these actors have other goals, some of which may provide better explanations of particular aspects of the actors' behavior. Yet the strength of single-minded approaches is that by providing clear assumptions about the maximands, authors can deduce specific, falsifiable propositions about behavior. Their methods of deduction might be formal (as with Niskanen), discursive (as with Mayhew), or a hybrid (as with Simon and March), but from each readers would learn to expect something: that the acquisition of a greater budget smothers programmatic goals; that taking a position on controversial matters of politics matters less than claiming credit, which is in turn less frequent than simple advancement of name recognition; or that bureaucrats become less efficient in the long term by seeking resources that permit rapid response in the medium term.

What are the specific propositions that dodging blame implies? In his discussions, Hood identifies four main classes of actors: top leaders, street-level bureaucrats, intermediaries, and “all the different individuals with whom governments and public service providers deal.” (Hood has the habit of colloquializing many of the names of the actors: Top leaders are variously “generals” or “bananas,” and those directly serving the public are the “poor bloody infantry” or “frontline troops,” but none of these, often military, terms are really apt.) All these actors have a repertoire of ways to accomplish the same essential task: Leaders deflect blame toward subordinates, other agencies, or entities entirely outside of government; the front line shoves blame toward their leaders, other agencies, or outside entities; middle management might pass responsibility up, down, sideways, or out; “civil society” (the least coherent of the groups of actors) pushes sideways or outward. In short, all directions of blame shifting are possible—hardly the precision desired from a one-motivation model. Some of these directions are rather dysfunctional. Top leaders who blame subordinates may find themselves bereft of essential support in subsequent crises, and subordinates

who blame their chiefs may find themselves called on the carpet before too long.

Actors may avoid blame by ignoring present problems until public attention shifts elsewhere, persuading the public that the problem is not as bad as it seems (or could be), diverting attention to another problem, or even apologizing for the problem in the first place. One wonders what is left over, especially if apologies count as blame ducking—perhaps the degree to which the actor dodges blame has to do with the very subjective notion of how sincere the apology is? Hood approvingly mentions President Obama's apology and acceptance of blame after the failed attempt to appoint former senator Tom Daschle to the post of Secretary of Health and Human Services (“I screwed up”). Yet it is far from obvious that Obama had any particular role to play in the failed appointment other than being in charge of an administration making its first appointment mistake.

The book contains multiple figures that resemble extensive form games and graphs displaying situations that suggest indifference curves, but Hood uses these graphical devices to illustrate rather than to press an argument. Nor does he provide much in the way of direct quantitative evidence for his principal claims despite occasionally wishing for more useful indices. Instead, he supports his argument with qualitative evidence culled from stories of government or bureaucratic malfeasance. The anecdotes make for great story telling, but are they convincing data?

By the end of this short book, the reader may reach the rather unsatisfying conclusion that what we experience sporadically actually occurs regularly, for reasons that apply only occasionally. Bureaucracies may or may not be functional places where routine processing happens in a fair and appropriate way, but *The Blame Game* provides little guidance as to why politicians and government officials accept blame or how a polity might more effectively encourage appropriate responsibility.

References

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The reviewer is at the Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, 5828 South University Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. E-mail: jjbrehm@uchicago.edu