

## BOOK REVIEW —

### **The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation in Government**

Christopher Hood

(Princeton University Press, 242 pp., \$39.95)

*By Brendan Boerbaitz*

In *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation in Government*, Christopher Hood puts forth a compelling argument as to what really motivates the behavioral norms of administrative and political institutions in democracies. Hood contends that blame and its related activities compose more than a temporary condition endured by public officials. He argues that it pervades our institutions and has a lasting presence on how we conduct the business of public affairs. In doing so, Hood sheds light on the complex phenomena that breed the frustration, inefficiencies, and distrust that citizens often identify in their governments. His work provides timely analysis on an important issue. Yet while he succeeds in laying a theoretical foundation for the role of blame in public life, Hood fails to deliver a treatise that empowers genuine action on behalf of readers.

Hood begins with a broad discussion of the nature of the blame game and the spectrum of actors that may partake in its activities. A blame game occurs when multiple participants try to pin the responsibility on one another for some adverse event, acting as “blamers” to avoid being “blamees” (Hood 2010). Games can be played between multiple organizations,

both vertically and horizontally within an organization, and with individuals outside of a formal institution. An additional characteristic of a blame game is that it is very difficult to identify in real-time. Seasoned participants of the blame game are adept at cloaking self-interested motivations under guises of altruism or justice. As onlookers, it’s very difficult to pinpoint who’s in and out or who’s winning and losing.

The first group of actors is comprised of top officeholders and executives. These people are the “top bananas” in their respective organizations, including elected officials in the executive and legislative branches, agency directors, non-profit heads, and CEOs. The second group includes those who deal directly with the public, like social workers, bus and train drivers, emergency service crews, and police officers. These are the “front line” workers in an organization. The third group is comprised of the employees between the “top bananas” and “front line” workers. They include middle managers, contractors, human resource personnel, auditors, and inspectors. The fourth group is the complex world that exists outside of government, including its constituents and clients, patients and prisoners, interest groups and lobbyists, students, and

media watchdogs.

Hood presents blame avoidance activity between these actors as being composed of three general strategies. The first is the presentational strategy, which is used to mitigate or eliminate harm that comes with being perceived as responsible for an adverse event. In effect, this strategy attempts to remove the perception of blame from certain participants (Hood 2010). Users of this strategy will try to spin the story, manipulate the media, or keep a low profile in order to dish out or avoid being cast with blame. The second form of blame-avoidance activity is the agency strategy. This strategy includes the attempts of officeholders and organizations to deflect or limit blame through the creative allocation of formal responsibility, competency, or jurisdiction among different units and individuals (Hood 2010). The final form of blame avoidance is the policy and operational strategy, which includes various attempts by officeholders or institutions to avoid or limit blame by what they do and how they do it (Hood 2010). This strategy allows participants to shape the details of administrative life through the use of strict protocols, the placement of authority for decisions at the individual level, and the organization of workers into powerful union bodies.

The final component of Hood's analysis centers on the broader positive and negative aspects of the blame game. As a reader, it is always commendable to see an author ask new questions and chart unknown waters. While it is very common to see politicians on the campaign trail and media commentators discuss the undesirable outcomes produced by political inaction or the minutia of administrative life, it is rare to find individuals investigate how blame avoidance activity may in some situations actually be beneficial to society. At this point, it is important to take a step back and consider just how often you've considered sparring press secretaries, sketchy administrative dealings, and seemingly unreasonable protocols as

benefitting the public. For most of us, the answer is probably never. Hood provides a persuasive argument as to why we should reconsider our gut-level intuitions.

Hood (2010) argues that presentational strategies, like a sequence of carefully crafted accusations and counter-accusations exchanged between two actors in a blame game, may help educate the public about the protocols, policies, and broader organizational issues in conflict. In reality, it is reasonable to assume that much of the public would lack knowledge of how many parts of government function without there being controversy to magnify government's inner workings. This can be seen on an almost daily basis in the White House Briefing Room. The press corps usually jumps on the chance to report on blame-related controversies between the White House and other parties – like Congress or interest groups – over failed policies, undesirable social outcomes, or political inaction. The exchange usually involves a give-and-take in which the press secretary defends and refines the president's position through a series of responses to questions asked by reporters. Ultimately, the exchange has an educational effect. The public gets greater insight into government's workings than would be available under different circumstances.

Benefits can also be sought from the use of agency strategies in the blame game. For example, to cope with outside calls for reform after an organizational failure many agency directors may choose to endow an ad hoc advisory board with responsibilities once held by the director's office. This example brings us back to a key question: is this act designed to deflect future blame or to drive organizational effectiveness? Hood asks an even better question: does it always matter? He argues that this can at times be a false choice. While many agency strategies end up stalling or limiting debate on a given issue, there are instances where these strategies have real benefits. In fact, it is possible for such an

act to both deflect future blame and improve the organization's effectiveness. The view that some defensive restructurings actually have substantive impacts lends further credence to the belief that blame avoidance activity can benefit the public.

While Hood successfully contributes new insights to an understanding of the nature of public life, his work itself contains several weaknesses. First, Hood's attempt to view blame avoidance tactics in both their positive and negative lights points to a potential gap in his methodology. In order to prove that blame-avoidance activity exists, one must either expose the genuine motivations of those performing the activity or speculate as to the motivations by assessing the consequences of their actions. The first option is obviously more reliable but hard to prove empirically, for how are we to know? Many politicians and agency directors will contend that government is more effective under a decentralized model where practitioners are able to use their expertise to autonomously implement programs without undue interference. Common benefits arising from this model include improved organizational capacity and streamlined service delivery. Since this is true in many cases, it is difficult to distinguish the intentions of those who create these structures – like ad hoc committees and informal delegations – to improve the efficacy of their institutions from those who do so to avoid potential blame. The difficulty of accurately measuring the motivations behind these types of administrative decisions challenges Hood's ability to relate his core thesis to practical issues unfolding in public and private organizations alike.

Second, Hood neglects to assess several key questions in his book. While Hood does lend insight as to why, in theory, blame continues to be a potent force in our institutions; his work does not promote self-understanding on behalf of the reader. He does not address deeper questions such as how blame –and blame avoidance – shapes our lives, supports

a culture of openness, and maintains a democratic ethos. For instance, Hood contends that negativity bias, or the cognitive tendency for more attention to be paid to negative than positive information, dominates the perspective of news media and criticism of government in general. In turn, public officials feel compelled to behave defensively. The consequences of the role that negativity bias has in public life can be seen in the tactics used by actors in the blame game to protect their reputations from failed policies or organizations. This explanation does not go far enough to help the reader understand how their conception of blame fits into a broader social, political, or philosophical context.

An analysis of the origin of blame and the reasons for its continued existence should explore how it relates to other concepts in our lives and speculate as to what our world would be without it. Hood's failure to investigate these questions weakens his work because these are the issues that help readers internalize his core arguments. For instance, Hood does not adequately explain how blame fits in with other notions that organize our conscious thoughts and actions, like responsibility and trust. Blame would not exist – and if it did, would not matter – if we did not trust others to uphold certain responsibilities. We blame those who break responsibilities or violate our trust in order to compel one another to live up to certain expectations. This relationship is further magnified on the stage of public affairs, where media technology allows all those interested to assess the efficacy and trustworthiness of public officials on nearly a 24-hour basis. Also missing from Hood's work is an illustration of a society that lacks a motivational force like blame. How might we motivate one another to fulfill our tasks in a more honest manner? How would we react to personal or professional failures? A book on blame that omits an analysis of this relationship and does not address these questions is missing key components of the story.

While Hood's analysis fails to vest readers with newly found motivation to bring change to institutions, it is particularly strong in forming a framework of blame avoidance activity across countries and institutions. Readers should not expect to put down his book and feel the courage necessary to banish blame from their local government and challenge fast-talking city council members. The marginal impact that this book can be expected to have on most readers is really due to how it is written. It lacks the narrative examples that most researchers aim for when attempting to introduce new ideas to a general audience. His examples tend to reference blame avoidance behavior from a post facto perspective and lend little insight on the ins and outs of the phenomenon as it plays out. His effort would have been greatly improved through the use of case studies that walked readers through blame games as they unfold in real-time.

Readers should expect to feel more educated about a topic that they knew existed but have yet to investigate in detail or have understood in a different context. They will be better equipped to view political squabbles and administrative dealings in perhaps a more accurate light, which is that of the blame game. For instance, my review of his theory left me pondering exactly how much energy is spent by public administrators and policymakers scheming for ways to limit or redirect blame. Perhaps this energy would be better spent on understand-

ing the needs of their constituents or addressing government's many problems. Secondly, readers will know what tools are at their disposal if they ever become mired in a blame game themselves. While this knowledge may not help produce workplaces that are more open and less hostile, it may nonetheless transform into useful information for readers.

Above all, this book compels readers to reflect on the state of governance of their community and country. Popular protests in the Middle East and Northern Africa confirm that one of the many differences existing between liberal and autocratic governments is the ability to blame rulers or powerful bodies in an open fashion. Unfortunately, recent attempts to do so have resulted in brutal crackdowns and explosive violence on behalf of autocrats. But we have also seen glimmers of hope emerging from the turmoil. Egyptians are organizing to hold elections this very year and protestors throughout the region have continued to call for greater freedom. These events remind us that the ability to cast blame – and thereby to challenge or hold others accountable – is not an innate characteristic of public life. Sometimes it must be fought for, and, once earned, maintained and cherished. So perhaps the greatest message emanating from Hood's work is one that he did not intend to argue for at all: that we ought to count our blessings and take fortune in our liberties, for there are many who yearn for the same.

## References

- Hood, Christopher. 2010. *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-Preservation in Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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