

# 5 Ways To Think Like a State

*Written by Jeffrey Tucker.*

Do you notice a pattern when dealing with any aspect of the government at nearly any level? We all have. Experience shows that if something is going to go really wrong, predictably waste your time, annoy you and attack your dignity, and finally just prove to be totally ineffective at accomplishing the task, there's a good chance that it involves the government. This is one of the most persistent and yet least acknowledged features of modern life.

At best, government does necessary things poorly. There is a certain cast of mind at work here. I've written that government as we know it has a toxic personality. Below is my attempt to frame it up and identify the main personality traits of the "administrative state," that is the modern public sector that, in principle, knows no limits to the range of its power.

Society outside the state has corrective forces always at work. Life's not perfect but it is generally trying its best to improve. The market and the voluntary order have within them structures that keep human vice and relentless failure from completely taking over the system.

That's not true with the government. The government builds protective walls around itself that prohibit inputs that would otherwise keep faulty thinking at bay. Things seem stuck in a pattern of failure at every level. At best, government does necessary things poorly. Often it does unintelligent things. At worst, it does unspeakably horrible things.

Some quick examples from everyone's favorite example of government annoyance: the TSA. Lots of people are deeply offended by the TSA's groping gruffness. More striking, however, is its sheer incompetence at its assigned task, its lack of concern for anything but the existing plan, and the disconnect between the goal of security and the actual reality.

But the TSA is hardly unique in this respect. It just so happens that more people encounter it more often than most any other government agency. Yes, it makes everyone crazy. But we would experience the same absurdities if every day we had to deal with the Department of Labor, the Pentagon, the Department of Transportation, or Housing and Urban Development. Those who do can tell you amazing stories!

Here's the deal. The state's distinguishing characteristic is its presumption of control and its use of force to exercise that control. But this is not the whole of the problem with statism. This characteristic gives rise to many other features that are part of what we might call a statist way of thinking. It really amounts to a pattern of being that comes with power, which is to say, that comes with the absence of any check or corrective

consequences.

So what are the features of this faulty way of thinking that seems pervasive in government institutions? Relying on my usual influences (Nock, Hazlitt, Read, Mises, Rothbard, Hayek), let us explore how you too can think like a state.

**1. Presume that all things worth knowing are already known.** That includes the goal and the means to achieve the goal. The state thinks that society should work a certain way and assume a predetermined shape, and it knows this with absolute certainty. There is no process, no unfolding of history that yields unexpected results. The state is so certain of the end point of the social order that it never has to explain or justify its perception.

There is no arrogance in the world like the state's arrogance. It knows the right allocation of income between classes, the right size and number of businesses in each sector, the right allocation between security and risk, what is just and what is unjust, what is and is not fair. It knows when the economy is growing too much or too little. It knows what industries should die or last forever. It knows what is and is not good for you.

Because there is no uncertainty in the statist mind, there is no need for discovery, improvisation, or imagination that reveals itself through time through trial and error. There is no need for listening, learning, adapting. What's more, a state doesn't doubt that it has the means to achieve its goals. To will it is to cause it happen. Its omniscience comes with omnipotence.

This is why there is no arrogance in the world like the state's arrogance. At the same time, any person or any institution can adopt this regrettable habit of mind: managers, parents, pastors, business professionals. Outside the state and the protections it builds around itself, however, reality eventually strikes back. Reality is about uncertainty, change, surprise, innovation, adaptation. Markets give life to these forces in the same way that the state absolutely and by necessity pretends they do not exist.

**2. Presume that the path to victory is paved by enforcement.** This is a feature of the statist way of thinking that is most on display in wartime. Is the war causing more people to join the rebel ranks? The answer is more shock and awe! If that doesn't work, bring out the tanks, the bigger guns, larger bullhorns, and more troops on the ground.

The harsher the punishment, the more the deterrence, or so believes the state. It goes without saying that there is nothing wrong with the state's plan, so the only problem here is that people are being insufficiently deferential to the rightful authority. There is only one way forward: show people who is boss.

This is not only in wartime. Every agency of government thinks this way. You see it in the penal laws. If something is bad like drugs or underage drinking, the answer seems obvious:

increase the penalties for those caught. No punishment is too harsh. The harsher the punishment, the more the deterrence, or so believes the state. In the same way, there can never been too many police, too many people charged with making other people comply.

But might this path create unintended consequences? Might the enforcement be causing the problem to get worse and create blowback, backlash, and black markets? Or might harshness recruit more people into the rebel class and discourage law keeping? In the state's way of thinking, this is not possible. The laws and the regulations are the voices of god, period, and god is never wrong. Certainly this god never, under any circumstances, admits error.

**3. Presume that all disagreement amounts to betrayal and treason.** This point follows directly from the above two. If you know all things and all things are possible through enforcement, it stands to reason that should someone dare to pop up his or her head and take issue, this person is an enemy of the state or whatever the state stands for.

There are only two possible archetypes of the good citizen: the serf and the sycophant. You are against the war? Then you are for the enemy and defying the rightful authority. You have doubts about the endless looting of private wealth and the regimentation of human interaction? You are part of the problem instead of the solution.

In the state's way of thinking, there are only two possible archetypes of the good citizen: the serf and the sycophant. If you fall outside those two categories, you are a rebel to be watched or a traitor to be crushed.

To the state, there is only one path. All things work in this world because one will rules all. In fact, that's exactly what everyone who thinks like a state believes. Unless there is a dictator, life will surely collapse into chaos, brutality, heresy, or some other disaster.

The state can't even conceive of the truth about society that the old liberal tradition reveals: it works precisely because it is not ruled by one will. It is the decentralized knowledge of individual actors that creates order in the world. It is the multiplicity of plans all coordinated through institutions that create the extended order that gives rise to civilization and causes it to develop in unexpected ways.

**4. Presume that the material world matters more than ideas.** Again, this follows from the above three points. The distinguishing characteristic of the state is its control over physical property. It rules the space where its tanks roll and within jurisdictional lines on the map. It takes wealth at the point of a gun.

The human mind and the whole world of ideas is ultimately beyond its reach. Its love of the physical is so intense that it always and everywhere builds huge and imposing buildings for its bureaucrats and giant monuments to itself. It wraps itself in theories of the world that

revolve primarily around physical things.

It dabbles in propaganda and education but not in ways that are reliably successful. The state cannot finally control human minds. Those are and will always be ours alone. Even in the prison camp, the prisoners are free to think what they want. We all can. Anytime. This is why the state is deeply suspect of the human mind and what it produces. The human mind and the whole world of ideas is ultimately beyond its reach.

More incredibly still is that the whole of the man-made physical world as we know it began with ideas. In the same way, the ideas we hold now are the foreshadowing of the world of tomorrow. And that's precisely why the statist way of thinking is fearful of free thought and why the state itself is not forward-thinking.

**5. Oppose every unapproved change in the plan.** This follows from the above four. The end point of the social order is already known. It can be achieved by enforcement and suppression of dissent and the crushing of new ideas. The whole cast of mind presumes no surprises. Therefore, it is best just to make sure that no change takes place that is not already built into the model.

Laws do not leave books. They are only added and accumulated like rings on the trunk of a tree. Thinking like a state, then, means forever wallowing in the legacy content of what has been mandated before. If something was ever a law, it must stay a law. If something was ever enforced, it must be enforced forever. Look backwards to what has been (or a mythical version of it) and not forwards to what might be. The state loves its own history: its leaders, its wars, its legends.

This backwards bias is deeply entrenched. The bulk of the laws and regulations that are daily enforced on people in society have nothing to do with the current political managers (contrary to what elections promise). They date back decades and even as much as a century or more. Laws do not leave books. They are only added and accumulated like rings on the trunk of a tree. Shoring up what exists, adding band aids as necessary, is much more important to the state than reversing mistakes of the past.

So entrenched is this idea that new laws, if they are ever to expire, must have a sunset provision explicitly built into them, and this is usually added only to buy votes. But more often than not, the sunset date arrives and the law is renewed again. It is a momentous event when a bad policy dies: think of the epic significance of the end of prohibition or the end of the 55mph speed limit. These are exceptions that prove the rule.

The state is neither angelic dispenser of grace nor an alien beast of unknown evil. This final feature of thinking like a state is the most destructive to civilization. Change is the source of society's life and development. There are new people, new ideas, new tastes and preferences, new patterns of living, new technologies. Mankind has a penchant to want to

improve and that requires throwing out the old. The state uses all its power to shore up the past and wage a daily battle against the forward motion of history.

If you understand these features, you can't be surprised by all the daily frustrations and annoyances imposed by regulations, bureaucrats, and politicians. The state has a personality disorder, one born of its monopoly status and its coercive tactics. This disorder is not unique to the state. You probably recognize at least some of these traits in people you know. You might even recognize them in yourself.

It's fine to rail against the bureaucrats but there is also a case for empathizing with TSA workers, civil servants, police, and the millions who are part of the same kind of institutional structures. The difference between us and the state is that when these personality disorders appear, we are capable of changing them, and we have every incentive to do so. The state as a whole just keeps keeping on, long after it becomes completely irrelevant to anything that truly matters.

The state is neither angelic dispenser of grace nor an alien beast of unknown evil. It imagines itself to be correcting for society's failings, but blinds itself to the possibility that it is itself a composite of human failings – cumulated, institutionalized, uncorrected, and unleashed with the force of law. In our daily lives, we might all have the tendency to think like the state until we run into failure, and gradually learn to think in a different way.

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