



## ***No little plans: How government built America's wealth and infrastructure, by Ian Wray***

*New York, Routledge, 2019*

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## BOOK REVIEW

***No little plans: How government built America's wealth and infrastructure***, by Ian Wray, New York, Routledge, 2019

This book by Ian Wray catches the zeitgeist. It is important because it provides a lucid explanation for the decline of the United States and is mirrored in other Western countries, especially the United Kingdom. Just as importantly, the book's case studies demonstrate that until late in the 20th century, the U.S. government confidently shaped and created markets transforming society and the economy. In recent decades, confidence has been lost and government policy has become limited to, if at all, merely correcting market failures.

*No Little Plans* demonstrates why current politics are increasingly toxic. Wray wants to get to the "paradigm shifters" who will attack current conventional wisdom, change mindsets and move thinking in a new direction. As a consequence, this makes for an interesting book for lay readers as well as researchers and policymakers across the full social, economic, military and political spectrum. For the latter groups, it could help provide inspiration for a new road map for more positive plans.

The objective behind Wray's book is to search for another America, a country shaped by government, plans, and bureaucrats. This he achieves by examining the accomplishments behind America's growth into a global power. The thrust of the book has been influenced by Wray's earlier book, *Great British Plans* (Wray, 2016). Amongst this book's conclusions is that UK government innovation and enterprise is lacking. Indeed, he believes there is an indifference and hostility to plans. This has been holding the UK back.

Wray's philosophy resonates with people such as Chalmers Johnson (1982) and Mariana Mazzucato (2014) and their theories of the Developmental State and the Entrepreneurial State respectively. They have convinced him that governments can play a decisive role in shaping a country and help them prosper socially and economically. His research for this book provides proof that the U.S. government played a key leadership role in shaping the country and creating markets. Tacitly, therefore, this book provides his earlier book readers an opportunity to compare and contrast U.S. and UK government practice.

In his conclusions, he highlights Professor Jeffrey Sachs's view that the West is at a turning point in history (Sachs, 2018). By the beginning of the 21st century, Asia's growing output has already overtaken the West's declining output. This is an inconvenient confirmation to Western powers of the failure of neoliberal politics and economics to maintain their competitiveness over the last 4 decades.

Wray's book is in three parts. Firstly, the "American Retreat" explains the U.S. government's gradual withdrawal from intervention in shaping the country. Secondly, the "American Advance" provides case studies of government leadership resulting in national achievements which led to America becoming a global power. And lastly, the "American Dilemma" provides Wray's conclusions, that is, his arguments for a paradigm shift from "conventional wisdom."

The first part explains the fall of science and rational planning in the U.S.: (1) Kennedy's faith in "rule by experts," i.e. the whiz kids whose advice proved disastrous during the Vietnam War; (2) the loss of public faith in government caused by the Vietnam War (see McMaster, 1997); (3) the laissez faire economics of Milton Friedman and his Chicago School of Economics's colleagues; and (4) urbanist and environmentalist critics including Jane Jacobs and Rachel Carson.

Wray then provides eight case studies from the railroads in the 19th century to the internet in the 20th century. The stories illustrate where the U.S. government and public sector bodies have all played a lead role in shaping the country ultimately to become a global power. The studies provide pen sketches of the personalities of many of the key players. These include Asa Whitney (the trans-continental railroad); John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt (national parks); Floyd Dominey (dams and water); Franklin D. Roosevelt, Robert McNamara, and Vannernar Bush (the military industrial complex); Dwight Eisenhower (interstate highways); Robert Moses (New York infrastructure); Werner von Braun (the space program); and J.C.R. Licklider and others (the Internet). There isn't space in this review to do justice to their stories but good tales they are.

It should be noted that Wray does not de-bunk the contributions of “the productive genius of free men” to that growth as described by Ayn Rand. Rather, he shows that without the government paving the way through policies, support, and investment, these freemen would not have been able to prosper. Wray also acknowledges in these stories that many of the big plans were flawed, such as the profiteering in the railroads and Robert Moses insensitively bulldozing big projects through urban neighborhoods despite public protest. As the critics' interventions reveal, these things can be managed, it's the direction of travel which counts.

In the American Dilemma section, Wray's conclusions reprise the dismissal of planning and government intervention by economists such as Friedman and Hayek, the loss of faith in government stemming from Kennedy's “whiz kids” and the government failures in the Vietnam War. By the time President Reagan came to power, the “conventional wisdom” was for small government and total reliance on the market. To Wray's (and no doubt many other's) irritation, Reagan perpetrated the myth that the 10 most dangerous words in the English language are “Hi, I'm from the government and I'm here to help.” I have to admit enjoying a wry smile at the time, unaware of the subsequent long-term negative image to follow. However, it heralded the U.S. government's gradual withdrawal from innovation and planning.

Other measures were being introduced such as the U.S. government raising interest rates in 1979, which unbalanced the global financial system to the advantage of Wall Street. Wray's research also reveals that there was a culture amongst Western national elites of a commitment to globalism, which displaced nationalism. Thus, offshoring sped up the American retreat. This caused catastrophic losses in manufacturing employment. Between 1990 and 2008 some 2.36 million manufacturing jobs were lost in electronics, aerospace, vehicles, clothing, paper, and chemicals. And, as Wray points out, this shift coincided with the rise of Asia. There, ironically, governments act directly in their economies and also actively participate and plan with the private sector. Wray brings this to life with his stories about General Park Hung Chee's interventions with the private sector and Hyundai's stories in South Korea “learning by doing.” This is in conflict with prevailing Western “conventional wisdom” of staying out of the economic market. It's not surprising that the U.S. once again feels threatened again as in the days of the Cold War. Wray suggests it's time for the U.S. to discard the Reagan myth and rekindle its belief in plans.

Pat formulas or a preferred agenda are not offered. However, he observes that future plans, goals, or missions should be woven into U.S. social, environmental, and economic needs. Wray, as a cautious Brit, tentatively suggests a few areas with potential at a national scale including urban revitalization and essential environmental and transport investment in U.S. “mega regions” and artificial intelligence in the field of technology. I'm sure the American reader will have more to add!

*No Little Plans* is a very readable book. Its stories reveal human strengths and weaknesses in delivering big plans. For serious readers, the book contains a lot of insightful and sometimes prescient references. Wray makes clear the need for new missions and goals to inspire government action. This message is aimed at the U.S. but is also pertinent to other Western countries including the UK. I believe that this is a message worth sharing. However, as always, a political champion is required to change the paradigm. Volunteers, please.

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