

Federal government expansion of authority assignment



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Introduction The role of the institution has grown tremendously over the centuries ever since the founders of the United States desired a Federal Government with limited powers whose aim was primarily concerned with promoting the civil liberty of the Americans. According to Savage (2008), during the reign of George Washington, the federal bureaucracy had only three cabinet departments; however, the federal government has since grown not only to more than eight cabinet departments, but also with other numerous bureaus, agencies, government authorities, administrations, and corporations.

Between the periods of independence and the civil war, the federal government performed limited duties with regards to the daily lives of the American people. During these early decades of our nationhood, the state, and local governments were known to exercise more autonomy and were more prominent in the daily lives of American people than they are today. The decline in the autonomy and prominence of the state and local government has been due to the progressive and rapid expansion of the federal government over the centuries.

The expansion of the Federal Government is particularly clearly in the events surrounding the ' Civil war, Reconstruction, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights era'. As this paper will demonstrate, the expansion of the Federal Authority was unprecedented but has been continuously prompted by the increasing need to guarantee economic and social welfare apart from promoting civil liberty of the citizens.

One of the single most important events that marked the beginning of the expansion of the federal government over the local and state government was the Civil War. It is important to note that the declaration of the Civil war was made by President Abraham Lincoln against the constitutional requirement that a formal declaration be sanctioned by Congress. Prompted by the urgency to stop the Confederate offensives at Fort Sumter in South Carolina, the president went beyond his powers to sanction a war in order to protect his people and stop the impending crisis (Hummel, 1996).

Having seen the impending crisis (as he later told Congress), President Lincoln dramatically expanded the Union's navy and army, blockaded the Southern ports, spent money without Congress' appropriation, and arrested Northerners considered sympathizers of the Confederate (Savage, 2008). All these powers were far beyond what was stipulated in the constitution as far as presidential powers were concerned. Being aware of his excesses, the President justified his actions by arguing that he acted to protect the political, social, and economic sovereignty of the Union that was under threat of the Confederate government.

Thus, he asked the congress to retroactively sanction his actions which Congress did (Hummel, 1996). Although, the overriding motive of the war was to protect the Union and to incorporate the southerners into the Union (Hummel, 1996), the actions of the President marked the beginning of the expansion of the federal authority as was seen later in subsequent governments. The Civil War was also important in a number of ways as far as expansion of the federal authority was concerned.

For instance, it was after the civil war that the growth of interest groups within the federal government was seen. According to Hummel (1996), the Civil War not only brought new and more powers to the U. S. Federal Government, but also laid the foundation for the increased rise and influence of the interest groups in the national politics. Hummel (1996) notes that war veterans were the first interest group to benefit from the increased powers of the Federal Government. The group systematically raided the U. S. Treasury with the help of the Federal Government officials.

Originally, only those veterans that had been injured in wars were paid pension dues by the Union and were required to claim their benefits within five years. For instance, the veterans' total pay amounted to \$286 million in 1870 which should not have been paid. However, by 1890, the total amount had risen to more than \$1, 500 million and since the Republicans dominated the Federal Government and looked to this group for political support, the pension laws were greatly liberalized so as to include Union veterans who participated in the Civil War (Holcombe, 1996).

From this point on, the influence of the interest groups has been great within the political circles of the occupants of the white house. Another example of the increasing expansion of the Federal Government was evident in the passage of the Antitrust Act. Prior to the enactment of the Antitrust Laws in 1890, the Federal Government had created the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887 that was supposed to curtail the autonomy of the local and state governments in supervising businesses (Holcombe, 1996).

While these two laws were important in the Federal Government's increased involvement in the daily lives of the American people, perhaps it was Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 that clearly demonstrated the increasing expansion of the federal authority in an unprecedented way. The enactment of the Antitrust Act was prompted by the need to protect the public from the exploitation of businesses and business owners. In other words, through the Antitrust Act, the Federal Government hoped that it would limit the economic powers enjoyed by businesses.

While the enforcement of the laws may have taken a little longer (Holcombe, 1996), the passage of the law in itself was a pointer that the Federal Government was keen on increasing its authority on various sectors of our lives. In the first two decades, after the passage of the Antitrust Act, only 61 cases related to violation of the antitrust laws were heard. However, increased enforcement in subsequent decades saw an increase in the number of cases brought forward.

For instance, more than 130 cases were heard between 1910 and 1919 while about 125 were reported in the following decade. The decrease in the number of reported cases in 1920s was as a result of increased enforcement by the Federal Government and prompted most business to be more cautious (Holcombe, 1996). According to Higgs (1987), the Federal Government increased the scope of the antitrust laws in the 1920s which resulted into more cases that were previously not considered as violation of the law.

Through this increased expansion of the antitrust laws and enforcement, the Federal Government was able to expand its authority over businesses as well as its prominence in the daily lives of the American people. After the configuration of the Interstate Commerce Commission in 1887 and the ratification of the Sherman Antitrust Act during 1890, the expansion of the federal authority continued at the turn of the century immediately at the beginning of the Progressive era. The Federal Government's resolve to increase its foothold on social and economic welfare of its citizen did not stop but continued into the new era.

For instance, during the Progressive era, the Federal Government oversaw the configuration of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) during 1906 and subsequently, the creation of the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade Commission in 1913 and 1914 respectively (McDonald, 1994). With these landmark developments, the Federal government was intent on not only protect the individual rights as was envisaged by the founders, but also keen on looking after the economic and social welfare of the American people. This was more evident in the second phase of the progressive era following the interruption of World War I.

The growth of the federal authority was exponential in the last years of the progressive era. For instance, after the nationalization of the railroads as well as regulation of the waterborne shipping, the Federal Government created more agencies and department to protect the social and economic sectors of its citizens (Holcombe, 1996). This was more demonstrated by the formation of the U. S. Food Administration in 1917, which was tasked with regulating

the food industry including agriculture, production, distribution, and sale of foods in the United States.

Similar controls were extended to fuel production, distribution and sale and later to the entire economy (Higgs, 1987). The discussion of progressive era is not complete without mentioning the changes in the political landscape during the era. The Progressive era saw the introduction of women suffrage and direct election of US senators. It was during this era that the Federal Government alongside other organizations who expanded the freedom in political participation in the United States.

While it can be argued that most of the changes during the Progressive Era, especially in the political sector, could have been as a result of the progressive movements, the successful implementation of these changes was due to the willingness of the Federal Government to increase its power and influence on the daily lives of its people. Perhaps the most important event that demonstrated the resolve of the Federal Government to continue expanding its powers and authority was the Great Depression of early 1930s. Driven by the unprecedented economic crisis, President Franklin Roosevelt created a number of agencies under the New Deal.

While some of these agencies did not last long enough, a good number has remained to date and continue to influence the daily lives of the American people (McDonald, 1994). Some of these agencies include: the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the Social Security Administration (SSA), the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). It is worth noting that it

was out of the programs of these agencies that the concept of the welfare state was born (McDonald, 1994).

Under the concept, the Federal Government assumed the main role of looking after the well-being of the American people. Prior to this development, the local and state authorities played the major role of promoting the social and economic welfare of the people. It was after the great depression that the Federal Government underwent a considerable expansion and reorganization. The New Deal was initiated by President Roosevelt's administration in response to the lasting impact of 1929 Great Depression (Savage, 2008).

Supported by Congress, the legislation was significant in the continued expansion of the Federal Government. For instance, the New Deal took away powers that were until now exercised by the local and state governments and gave them to the agencies under the supervision of the Federal Government. The agencies were also immune from the Congressional oversight (McDonald, 1994). This single piece of legislation was important in strengthening the Federal Government's foothold on controlling the affairs of the citizens.

Significantly, the undertones of the New Deal were replicated in the subsequent administrations and the expansion continued through reorganization of the responsibilities of the Federal Government over its people. The ideas sowed during the New Deal but were later seen in the 1960s during the reign of President Lyndon Johnson. Using the New Deal's ideals, President Johnson coined the term Great Society under which new

agencies and programs were created to improve the welfare state. For example, he started the Head Start, the Office of Economic Opportunity, Medicare and Job Corps programs.

Like the New Deal's programs, some of the programs that were created in the 1960s have become part of the bureaucracy of the Federal Government (Higgs, 1987). It is also important to note that the ideas of the New Deal on the role of the Federal Government in providing for the needs of its people continued even after the 1960s as was evident in the President Nixon's administration (McDonald, 1994). Conclusion There is no doubt that the United States Federal Government has undergone through expansion and reorganization over the centuries and decades since it was formed by our founding fathers.

Today, the Federal Government has been responsible for protecting the civil liberties of its citizens as was envisioned by the founders and expanding its roles to include seeing into the needs of the American people. Most of the expanded roles and responsibilities enjoyed today by the current administrations are owed to the vigorous initiatives and programs adopted by the Federal Governments in the 19th and 20th centuries. This expansion and reorganization of roles and responsibility have been prompted by particular events in the history of our nation.

Additionally, in order to show responsible leadership, the incumbents of the White House have always gone beyond their mandates and prerogatives to steer the country out of one crisis after another. It is therefore important to note that while the expansion of the Federal Government has always come

at the expense of the autonomy and prominence of the local and state governments, the Federal Government has always acted to fill the void created by the failures of the local and state governments. Hence, the Federal Government has contributed largely and has revolutionized considerably the lives of the American people.

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