Sharp's study succeeds brilliantly in reconstructing the great crisis of the union that the deadlocked election of 1800 precipitated. He is less successful in integrating the story of that crisis into longer-term developments. As he steps back from the election itself, the familiar old story of democratization comes into view. "The 1800 election," he concludes, "was a pivotal milestone in the process of transforming national politics from deferential, elitist, and narrowly based to what would eventually become a more democratic, mass-based, two-party system." In ideological terms, this was the transition from the "anti-party, civic humanist" ethos of "classical republicanism" to modern American democracy (175). Somewhat confusingly, however, the two national parties that vied for supremacy in 1800, despite their deep philosophical differences, were both "classical republican," though Republicans certainly gestured toward a democratic future. Sharp recognizes that the related democratization and republicanism-to-liberalism narratives do not have much to do with the compelling story he tells here. His story focuses on the survival of the federal union. Without that union there would be no national history, and therefore no "democracy in America," Tocqueville to the contrary notwithstanding.

–Peter S. Onuf

NOT MY FAULT

Christopher Hood: *The Blame Game*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 226. $39.95.)

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Citizens around the world associate public sector bureaucracies and their leaders with a wide range of mysterious and sometimes pathological behaviors. This has remained true despite centuries of institutional evolution, including waves of innovation and reform across different political systems. Perhaps unsurprisingly, several major academic disciplines, including political science, public administration, economics, and sociology, have taken up the problem. Simply cutting through the existing literature would be an imposing task. In *The Blame Game*, Christopher Hood directs attention to a single phenomenon. By positing blame avoidance as a central motivation behind the behavior of politicians and bureaucrats, he illuminates a surprisingly large swath of modern political life.

Why focus on blame avoidance, as opposed to its opposite (credit claiming), or merely performance in general? One reason is salience: people are

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naturally inclined to dislike losses more than they like gains of a similar magnitude. This is consistent with the psychological evidence for loss aversion, but it is also consistent with the realities of life in developed economies. In normal times, governments perform reasonably well at providing basic public services, and so it is the exceptions to this norm that tend to attract notice from the public. In any case, an aversion to blame should strike most readers as an intuitively reasonable foundation to build upon.

The book focuses on three strategies for escaping, or at least redirecting, blame. The first is the "presentational" approach, whereby officials attempt to induce more favorable perceptions by diverting public attention. Such techniques might include offering excuses, keeping a low profile by saying nothing, or burying bad news in the midst of other headlines. The second is a set of "agency" strategies, which attempt to force other actors to assume responsibility. These techniques include delegating authority to external agencies or organizing production around teams. Finally, "policy" strategies seek to reduce blame through adherence to norms or rules. These might include following standard operating procedures or simply adopting popular policies. Naturally, the structure of the organizational task and cultural norms may dictate the appropriateness of particular tactics. Some tactics may be combined, both at a particular moment and over time. Other combinations, however, may not be logically consistent with one another.

After discussing the mechanics of blame avoidance, the book assesses whether these activities have become more or less pronounced over time. The results here are inconclusive. For example, many governments today employ larger public affairs staffs than their counterparts of decades ago. This may be consistent with an increased use of presentational strategies. But it is hard to tell whether this change is simply a byproduct of the denser network of media coverage that modern governments face. Overall, Hood finds that there is perhaps weak evidence for long-term trends in all three of the main blame-avoidance strategies.

The analysis concludes with an assessment of the overall effects of blame avoidance on the quality of government. One observation is that such strategies may actually be beneficial. Delegating authority to unelected experts might make accountability more diffuse, but it may also bring better-qualified actors into positions of authority. Another conclusion is that value judgments about the welfare effects of blame avoidance will depend greatly on the standard of evaluation. For example, if increasing transparency were the goal, then following established protocols would be a desirable blame-avoidance strategy, while mimicking the policies of others would not.

The book is primarily a collection of theoretical arguments, though it draws effectively from recent examples across a diverse set of organizations (primarily in the United Kingdom and United States). Importantly, it also introduces the reader to a body of cross-disciplinary academic work relevant to blame avoidance. While the audience is likely to be academic, it is written in an accessible style that might appeal also to practitioners.

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One of the principal virtues of this work is its ambition. It is surely an accomplishment to unify phenomena as diverse as corporate mission statements and interagency coordinating bodies under a single analytical framework. To a significant degree, this works: Hood effectively conveys how blame avoidance has worked its way into the design of many different organizational processes. Moreover, it is fair in recognizing many of the limitations on its conclusions. To say that blame avoidance pervades government is not, of course, to say that it is the only relevant motivation. Yet it is perhaps inevitable that a framework built around a single idea will give short shrift to other ideas.

Two examples illustrate the junction between blame avoidance and other prominent theories of organizational behavior. First, it is indeed a time-honored technique for legislatures to offload controversial decisions onto independent boards or commissions. The U.S. Base Realignment and Closing Commission made controversial decisions about which military bases to close effectively off-limits to individual congressmen. But legislatures delegate countless tasks to unelected bureaucrats, and in many if not most cases, that choice is simply the result of a division of labor based on specialization. Alternatively, not delegating can be the straightforward consequence of a legislature not trusting an ideologically unfriendly bureaucrat with a policy-sensitive task. So while delegation might well be a blame-avoidance strategy, its use (or nonuse) will more typically be driven by other strategic considerations.

Second, the policy strategy of "protocolization," or adherence to standard operating procedures or best practices, might have simpler interpretations. A classic organization-theory argument holds that such techniques can help agents economize on the burdens of making optimal choices in complex environments. For all of their flaws, best practices may warrant herdlike adoption patterns because they are literally the best available alternatives. Thus, unless we equate blame avoidance with the more generic idea of avoiding bad outcomes, there are many cases in which simpler rationales for devotion to rules would suffice.

More broadly, having established the significance of blame strategies, the book might have elaborated on the connections between these and broader questions of political agency. This is especially the case for agency and policy strategies, as the pure blame-avoidance motivation seems to rest on safer ground with respect to presentational strategies. In the places where alternatives are discussed, for instance in the coverage of Type I and Type II errors, the analysis is well developed and suffers only from being too brief.

In light of the book's overall accomplishment, this concern is probably not so important. It is to his credit that Hood is able to push the argument as far as he does, and he leaves other scholars, students, and practitioners plenty of trails to pick up in future work.

–Michael M. Ting

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