

“Bureaucrat” is just another name for public servant. It has been said that a thin blue line of police protects us from the worst elements of society. But it is a thin gray line of underpaid, overworked, anonymous bureaucrats who protect society against more insidious risks — risks ranging from nuclear contamination to climate change to unsafe food. Due to Trump’s government shutdown, by the way, many of these people are currently not being paid. Yet without the professionals who spend their careers as public servants, the government would be unable to perform its essential task of protecting us all against major risks.

That is the theme of Michael Lewis’s book, [*The Fifth Risk*](#). He tells the stories of some of the people who work ceaselessly to protect us, applying expert knowledge to deal with invisible threats. And Lewis also shows how those efforts are being undermined by an administration staffed with ideologues who don’t have that expertise and don’t care to listen to those who do.

For instance, Lewis tells the story of Catherine Woteki, a scientist at the Agriculture Department. In the 1960s, the University of Virginia didn’t admit women, so she went to the “women’s auxiliary” college. She was told that a woman couldn’t get a job in basic research, so she went into agricultural science as a graduate student at Virginia Tech, where she studied an outbreak of illness among Mexican children in Texas. She has spent her career on issues relating to nutrition and food safety. She had taken charge of food safety for meat and eggs, which are under USDA’s jurisdiction. Later, she became the Department’s chief scientist. Her department stopped the 2015 outbreak of bird flu from spreading by developing a quick test for the disease among poultry, which allowed flocks to be efficiently culled. One of her concerns was protecting the American food supply from climate change in ways like breeding sheep that can live at higher, cooler altitudes. Trump initially nominated his Iowa campaign manager to succeed her. When that didn’t work out, he was forced to pick someone with a scientific background, an executive for a pesticide manufacturer.

Woteki’s story is not the only one Lewis tells. There’s Kathy Sullivan, a geologist who became an astronaut and later served as the Deputy and then Director of the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Agency (NOAA). She fought hard to get approval for an urgently needed weather satellite. She also got social science written into NOAA’s mission, because it turns out that people often fail to act on storm warnings. Kim Klockow at the National Weather Service is a behavioral economist investigating why people turn a deaf ear to warnings. What she found is that previous efforts to deal with this problem (giving people more time and more dramatic warnings) didn’t work. The reason is that people think they’re safe when there have been previous warnings that didn’t result in a tornado near their home. What’s needed are more geographically precise warnings so there will be fewer false alarms.

Of course, the people Lewis interviewed are only the tip of the iceberg. Think of all the people at EPA working on hazardous waste clean-up, toxic chemicals, pesticide safety, dangerous particulates in the area - and yes, climate change. Think of the FDA folks working to keep the food supply (everything except eggs and meat) safe and ensuring that drugs are safe to use and really work. And then there are those who worry about transportation safety, dangerous workplaces, nuclear accidents, and pandemics. And don't forget the Justice Department lawyers who bring civil suits and sometimes criminal cases to enforce those laws.

It's worth remembering some [relevant words](#) from George H.W. Bush:

"And I've not known a finer group of people than those that I have worked with in government. You're men and women of knowledge, ability, and integrity. And I saw that in the CIA. I saw that when I was in China. I saw it at the United Nations. And for the last 8 years, I saw that in every department and agency of the United States Government. And I saw that commitment to excellence in the Federal workers I came to know and respect in Washington, all across America, and, indeed, around the world. You work hard; you sacrifice. You deserve to be recognized, rewarded, and certainly appreciated."

Rail all you want to about faceless bureaucrats and big government. But without these dedicated public servants, our lives would all be much less safe.