

# Big Government: Who needs it?

*Donald A. Smith, August 18, 2007*

"Government is not a solution to our problem, government is the problem." These words from Ronald Reagan's first inaugural address have become a mantra for many conservatives. So effective were conservatives at demonizing government that many people who stood to benefit most from government programs bought into the anti-government ideology. As Thomas Frank showed in his 1994 book "What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America," support for Republican candidates was often strongest in the *poorest* counties. Through clever marketing, conservatives were able to convince millions of lower and middle class voters that Republican candidates would defend them against the elitist and decadent values of secularism, Hollywood, consumerism, and Big Government. As well, the much touted "war on terror" appealed to voters' patriotism and fear.

Well, times have changed, and Republicans lost big in the 2006 elections -- due to the bungled war in Iraq, Republican's inability to reign in pork and waste, the incompetent handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, the health care mess, and corruption scandals involving Republican congressmen.

But Republicans haven't changed their mantras. President Bush and the Republican presidential candidates are united in both their support for the war and their opposition to big government and universal health care.

As a life-long liberal, I've always been perplexed by widespread opposition to government programs.

We need the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to protect us from diseases like AIDS, Avian Flu, drug resistant TB, and SARS.

We need the courts and the police to defend us against identity thieves, bank robbers, burglars, drug pushers, counterfeiters (of currency, medicines, and aircraft parts), white collar criminals, deadbeat dads, rapists, and child molesters. The courts also uphold contract law to assure the smoothing functioning of commerce and employment.

We need a strong and independent Food and Drug Administration to oversee the safety and efficacy of our medicines and foods.

We need the Environmental Protection Agency to assure the safety of our air and water, to protect endangered species, and to combat global warming.

We need the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security to protect us from (real!) threats here and abroad.

We need the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to regulate banks, brokerages, and lenders, and to make sure investors aren't ripped off by insider trading, exaggerated or inaccurate financial statements, predatory lending, and other forms of financial fraud.

We need Big Government to immunize our children, build and repair our crumbling transportation system (roads, bridges, buses, and trains), and maintain parks, playgrounds, libraries, and wilderness

areas.

We need the Federal Aviation Administration to safeguard the safety of our air transportation system. (Would you fly commercial jets if there were no regulation of airlines?)

We need the National Science Foundation, to fund basic research in science and technology and help our industries compete in the global marketplace.

We need the National Institutes of Health to fund medical research.

We need the National Weather Service (part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) to alert us to dangerous weather conditions such as snowstorms and hurricanes.

We need Big Government to come to the rescue for disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and epidemics.

We need Big Government to defend our religious and civil rights.

We need Big Government to set standards for doctors and other professionals.

We need programs like Medicaid, Medicare, Head Start, and Social Security to provide a safety net for those too sick, poor, or old to fend for themselves. In the realm of health care, in particular, government can be both more efficient and more humane than medical care managed by private insurance companies. The US pays far more per capital than other countries but lags in many measures of medical well-being.

So beware of politicians who rail against Big Government. Unless you're super-rich, a criminal, or a terrorist, it's unlikely you'll benefit from downsizing of government programs.

This is not to say that Big Government is always good or that there's no government waste and corruption.

The Bush Administration has greatly expanded the pernicious powers of Big Government by obsessive secrecy, detention without trial, signing statements, promotion of torture, illegal wiretapping, expansion of the ineffective and costly war on drugs (including opposition to medical marijuana), and refusal to allow aids to testify before Congress. The Administration has also expanded government's funding of faith-based initiatives and its meddling in education policy. So much for small government!

Despite their anti-government rhetoric, and despite their control of both the White House and (until 2006) Congress, Republicans failed to reign in government spending. Indeed, waste and corruption flourished under Republican leadership. Bush failed to veto even a single spending bill in his first term. Indicted House leader Tom DeLay encouraged pork barrel projects, and Republicans wasted billions of dollars on Hurricane Katrina aid, farm aid, and oil subsidies. The Medicare Drug Benefit Bill committed the government to years of expenditures that benefit pharmaceutical corporations and maintain high prices for drugs. Disdain for Big Government led to the hiring of ideological policy hacks under the thumb of the very industries they were supposed to be regulating. The same disdain for government led to the criminally incompetent handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Republicans complain that government is inefficient. True, they like it that way!

Republicans are supposed to be defenders of Law and Order. But establishing Law and Order requires government spending: on police, investigators, courts, and regulators. Republicans rail against government waste. But they spent over half a trillion dollars on an unjustified, poorly planned, mismanaged war against an enemy unrelated to the 9/11 attacks. (Not only were the reasons given for the war faulty, but mismanagement and poor planning led to the waste of billions of dollars due to no-bid contracts, lost equipment, and aid for questionable groups.)

So, next time you hear Republican politicians chant their mantras of "fight terrorism", "stop government waste", and "government is the problem" wise up. The war in Iraq is a disastrous, expensive distraction from the war on terrorism. The Republicans were hypocritical about controlling government waste and inefficiency. Moreover, who needs Big Government? We all need do.