

The Era of Big Government Ain't Over



Bill Clinton's cynical disdain for the intelligence of the American people perhaps reached its apex with his 1995 State of the Union Address in which he solemnly proclaimed, "The era of big government is over." That, just after having attempted to nationalize one-seventh of the American economy through his wife's health care initiative. But it was also after the 1994 congressional elections that did, indeed, seem to indicate that Americans were ready for a radical downsizing of the federal government's role in

their lives.

Sad to say, Clinton grossly overestimated the seriousness with which the opposition party took its rhetoric. The Republican "revolution" of the 104th Congress turned out to be a revolution, as Rose Wilder Lane had put it so clearly decades before, "only in the sense that a wheel turns." Focusing primarily on procedural issues, nominating a philosophically challenged presidential candidate in 1996, and following the "lead" of Newt Gingrich and Trent Lott, the Republican Party revealed itself as an empty suit.

As we approach the millennium, all Americans who take seriously our national heritage of individual liberty, of an expansive civil society protected by a minimal political society, should be deeply concerned with the direction in which both major political parties would take this country.

The distinguishing characteristic of the political class—Democratic or Republican—in America is its inability to appreciate the genius of the American Revolution. For all of its flaws, that was a political revolution predicated on recognizing the dignity of the individual. No longer would individual human beings be considered cannon fodder for monarchical family disputes or religious crusades. Instead, government would exist solely to protect our natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The logic of the American Revolution would ultimately overcome the contradictions of slavery and gender discrimination.

Indeed, the whole debate over the Constitution between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists centered on how effective the Constitution would be in protecting those liberties. The Anti-Federalist skepticism has by now been justified, but most Federalists, with the exception of dissemblers like Alexander Hamilton, sincerely thought they were creating a document that was uniquely American in its respect for the rights of the individual. And for the first 150 years of our national existence, that more or less proved to be the case.

But the breakdown in that worldview is now evident everywhere. Today, there is no area of human existence on which the politicians of both parties fear to tread. On the Democratic side, the president chides the voters of Virginia for being "selfish" for favoring a tax cut. His wife kicks off a drive for a massive federal day care initiative without constitutional authority and despite the fact that more than 90 percent of Americans are satisfied with their children's day care. The vice president gives a speech in Washington at a conference on ethics (of all things) in which he, in his inimitably patron-

izing tone, informs us that the federal government should be to the American people "more like grandparents in the sense that grandparents perform a nurturing role."

To expect the Republicans to put up a principled opposition to such nonsense is to expect too much. Earlier this year House Speaker Newt Gingrich gave a 45-minute talk to wealthy conservative GOPAC members in which he failed to cite a single spending cut he favored, with the exception of interest on the national debt. He did, however, say, "We need to save Amtrak." And despite all the chest thumping on the part of GOP leaders, the budget deal increases spending without eliminating a single major program or department. Indeed, the Commerce Department, which the 104th Congress threatened to eliminate, was given a \$300 million increase by the 105th Congress. Even the IRS got a whopping 9 percent budget increase.

To make matters worse, it seems that the only intellectual energy among conservatives these days comes from neoconservatives like Bill Kristol and Bill Bennett. Their latest theme is, as Bennett recently put it, "You cannot be cynical about government without becoming cynical about America." Kristol, reading from the same script, writes in the *Wall Street Journal*, "How can Americans love their nation if they hate its government?" The answer is, easily. The Framers of the Constitution viewed government as a necessary evil, therefore to be kept as small as possible. Americans can easily love their country while being extremely cynical about a government that clearly ignores its constitutional constraints.

The seriousness of the trend toward big government conservatism was illustrated in a speech by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia at a November dinner sponsored by the Manhattan Institute in New York. Scalia, lionized by conservatives, told a distinguished audience that among the many things the Constitution does not protect was our right to raise our children as we choose. I asked him if the Tenth Amendment didn't cover that, since nowhere in the enumerated powers of Congress was control over how we raise our kids given to the federal government. Well, allowed Scalia, there is such a thing as the General Welfare Clause. I pointed out that none other than James Madison had said that an expansive view of the General Welfare Clause would make the Constitution incoherent. Scalia replied, in effect, that was then, this is now.

But as our Center for Constitutional Studies has been pointing out for years now, we will not be able to rein in big government until we take seriously the constraints on federal power that the Framers placed in the Constitution to protect our liberties. All the more reason why we need term limits and an end to professional politicians. As Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.) said in a rare moment of candor on the House floor, "I dislike getting into constitutional arguments in Congress because we prove there are more Casey Stengels here than James Madisons." So true. Which is why the era of big government ain't over.

—Edward H. Crane