

American Thinker

March 5, 2012

How Big Government Conservatism Paved the Way to More Liberalism

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As I sit on the sidelines watching the Republican party engage in a circular firing squad, and possibly missing the most important, and what should be the easiest, opportunity to reverse our course, I found myself reading Michael Tanner's *Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution*. (2007) Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, illuminated the history of the rise of the big government conservative.

Neoconservatives, which have roots as dissatisfied liberals, were used to government solutions. While we often associate this movement with expansive and aggressive foreign policy, their influence is also deeply felt in domestic issues. While they favor free market solutions, they are less concerned with the economic results than the cultural issue, and feel that government should drive cultural positions. The religious right takes this further by again depending on government power to dictate on the social issues. This unholy alliance was furthered by Bush's faith based initiatives.

The supply side advocates took a sound idea and misused it to avoid the pain of cutting popular government spending by suggesting that all tax rate cuts would generate more than enough revenue to justify the reduction. By proposing that we could have our cake and eat it too, supply side advocates from both Reagan and Bush succeeded in increasing revenue, but failed to take any action to reduce spending and thus both increased our deficits.

Technophiles such as Newt Gingrich, touting the ideas from the Third Wave by Alvin Toffler, saw the problem not as too much government, but a government that is too inefficient. By adapting the technology of the private sector we could cut the cost of government without sacrificing the enormous benefits government was capable of bestowing. Like the supply siders they thought they found a new 'fountain of truth' that could avoid the painful cuts. Efficient government, however, is not necessarily better

government: perhaps we should be grateful that we are not getting all the government we are paying for.

All of these factions of the conservative movement saw the government as the tool of change. They favored a big government and only wished to steer the machine in a different direction from the objectives of the liberal establishment. Both share a sense of moral supremacy and a distrust of individual rights and choice. Both establishments favored construction of a government that could serve the whims of the party in power.

But big government conservatives failed to look beyond their administrations. Any power bestowed on a central government must be considered as if it were in the hands of their worst nightmare.

These powers included a regulatory behemoth that functions like an unelected fourth branch of government. The constitution, rather than functioning as an essential limit on federal power, became a mere obstacle to be sidestepped by clever or convoluted rationalizations.

Frederick von Hayek saw central economic planning as an inevitable step toward tyranny. His critics contend that power in the hand of one government does not necessarily lead to tyranny in the hands of all governments. Yet we must recognize that power bestowed on government rarely subsides on its own, and that the failures caused by such power have too often created demands for even more government power.

While this power is rationalized for a greater good, we begin to find that the differences in objectives is somewhat obscured by the means to achieve them. The power becomes the objective and the stated objectives becomes the means.

"When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."
(paraphrased from Abraham Maslow) With power in their hand there is no problem that cannot be solved with the correct government directive. Objectives will tend to be selected based on the power they bestow to those in control of the means.

There will always be a spirited debate on the proper role of government, but in their quest for government power to support conservative objectives, the establishment Republicans supported the tools and governing philosophy that would be used to subvert those very values.