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Trump's Big Libertarian Experiment

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“Government,” declared Ronald Reagan in his first Inaugural Address, “is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” Republicans have echoed his rhetoric ever since. Somehow, though, they’ve never followed through on the radical downsizing of government their ideology calls for.

But now Donald Trump is, in effect, implementing at least part of the drastic reduction in government’s role his party has long claimed to favor. If the shutdown drags on for months — which seems quite possible — we’ll get a chance to see what America looks like without a number of public programs the right has long insisted we don’t need. Never mind the wall; think of what’s going on as a big, beautiful libertarian experiment.

Seriously, it’s striking how many of the payments the federal government is or soon will be failing to make are for things libertarians insist we shouldn’t have been spending taxpayer dollars on anyway.

For example, federal checks to farmers aren’t going out — but libertarian organizations like the Cato Institute have long denounced farm subsidies as just another form of crony capitalism.

Businesspeople are furious that the Small Business Administration isn’t making loans — but libertarians want to see the whole agency abolished.

If the shutdown extends into March — which, again, seems entirely possible — money for food stamps will dry up. But Republicans have long been deeply hostile to the food stamp program. Mitch McConnell, the Senate majority leader, has denounced the program for “making it excessively easy to be nonproductive.”

The shutdown has drastically curtailed work at the Food and Drug Administration, which among other things tries to prevent food contamination: Routine inspections of seafood, vegetables, fruits and other foods have stopped. But there’s a long conservative tradition, going back to Milton Friedman, that condemns the F.D.A.’s existence as an unwarranted interference in the free market.

Strange to say, however, neither the Trump administration nor its congressional allies are celebrating the actual or prospective termination of government services their ideology says shouldn’t exist. Instead, they’re engaged in frantic administrative and legal maneuvering in an attempt to mitigate those program cuts. Why?

O.K., we shouldn't be completely cynical (cynical, yes, but not *completely*). Even where there's a government-free solution to a problem, you might worry that it would take time to set up. Maybe you believe that private companies could take over the F.D.A.'s role in keeping food safe, but such companies don't exist now and can't be conjured up in a matter of weeks. So even true libertarians wouldn't necessarily celebrate a sudden government shutdown.

That said, the truth is that libertarian ideology isn't a real force within the G.O.P.; it's more of a cover story for the party's actual agenda.

In the case of the party establishment, that agenda is about redistributing income up the scale, and in particular helping important donor interests. Republican politicians may invoke the rhetoric of free markets to justify cutting taxes for the rich and benefits for the poor, or removing environmental regulations that hurt polluters' profits, but they don't really care about free markets per se. After all, the party had little problem lining up behind Trump's embrace of tariffs.

Meanwhile, the philosophy of the party's base is, in essence, big government for me but not for thee. Stick it to the bums on welfare, but don't touch those farm subsidies. Tellingly, the centerpiece of the long G.O.P. jihad against Obamacare was the false claim that it would hurt Medicare.

And as it happens, many of the spending cuts being forced by the shutdown fall heavily and obviously on base voters. Small business owners are much more conservative than the nation as a whole, but they really miss those government loans. Rural voters went Republican during a Democratic midterm blowout, but they want those checks. McConnell may have trash-talked food stamps in the past, but a sudden cutoff would have a catastrophic effect on the most Republican parts of his home state.

The one piece of the shutdown that Republicans seem fairly calm about is the nonpayment of federal workers. Maybe the party believes, like Trump, that these workers are mainly Democrats. But when the effects of nonpayment start to bite, even that indifference may disappear.

In any case, while the gap between Republicans' supposed ideology and their actual reaction to the shutdown is understandable, that doesn't make it innocent. If a party is going to claim, year after year, to believe that government is the problem, not the solution, then complain bitterly when the government stops handing out checks, attention should be paid.

And if you have libertarian leanings yourself, you should ask whether you're happy with what's happening with government partially out of the picture. Knowing that the food you're eating is now more likely than before to be contaminated, does that potential contamination smell to you like freedom?