



The Same Racist Rhetoric Used To Oppose D.C. Statehood Keeps The Federal Government Dysfunctional

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The House's passage of legislation approving D.C. statehood in late June marked a milestone in the political struggle for full enfranchisement of the district, which, until recently, was a majority African-American city, and would become America's most predominantly African-American state. The bill, passed largely along party lines, met pushback from Republicans who recycled the same racist rhetoric opponents of statehood have long used, suggesting that non-white places don't deserve congressional representation. Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR), for instance, contrasted D.C. with Wyoming, which, he said, was a "a well-rounded working-class state. A new state of Washington would not be."

Cotton then pivoted to the other half of the GOP's argument that vilified D.C. as "nothing more than an appendage of the federal government." Cotton acknowledged Wyoming has fewer people than D.C., but he compared the private sector employees in the overwhelmingly white state — "workers in mining, logging and construction, and 10 times as many workers in manufacturing" — favorably to D.C.'s labor market, which is based on federal employment.

Conservatives like Cotton have long villainized African-American pathways to the middle class that include government employment. In a conservative worldview that sees the U.S. government as by and for white people, Black employment in the public sector becomes a target for the GOP and federal jobs become fodder for racist "dog whistle" politics.

In D.C., federal employment was central to the creation of the Black middle class as families and individuals migrated north in search of opportunity. Legislative wins from the Civil Rights Movement later prohibited discrimination in federal employment, forging more economic opportunity. Cotton's dismissal of the federal government is also a dismissal of Black livelihoods and an eschewing of a multi-racial democracy.

The explicit devaluing of public servants is exemplary of the decades-long conservative strategy to disparage the federal government as an entity that represents the undeserving Black and Brown poor. This neoliberal PR strategy codes the federal government as Black, turning white people with racist instincts against the idea of government itself. Here, racism is weaponized by the corporate class to legitimize neoliberal regimes like privatization and deregulation. These policies ultimately seek to dismantle government as a whole.

Milton Friedman's theory of neoliberalism intended to remove government as the responsible party for the provision of goods and services and instead empower the market to do the job. His counterrevolutionary theory necessitated a media campaign to "demonize public service workers" and vilify the government itself.

Devotees of Friedman's ideology like deputy city administrator Emanuel Savas began attacking city governments from within, advocating for the mass privatization of police, fire, sanitation and transit services. Proponents of privatization like Savas believed that economic precarity and permanent crises, like dirty streets, high crime and even health epidemics, were the perfect context for the free market to thrive. He promoted the trope of the lazy undeserving urban worker who needed discipline as justification to deregulate and privatize government functions. On the consumer end, public intellectuals like Daniel Patrick Moynihan vilified the recipients of public services, assembling the intellectual infrastructure of the Black woman as "welfare queen" and her children as victims of familial disorganization. These racist ideas reviled government as an institution that unfairly served poor people of color. Instead, supporters of neoliberalism argued, the rightful heirs to public dollars were corporations and the private sector.

As president, Ronald Regan carried the torch of privatization to the executive branch. Revealing his attitude toward cities, Reagan "eliminated general revenue sharing to cities, slashed funding for public service jobs and job training, almost dismantled federally funded legal services for the poor, cut the anti-poverty Community Development Block Grant program and reduced funds for public transit." Reagan's Reduction In Force (RIF) policy disproportionately affected federal workers in D.C., many of whom were African-American. Blacks in Government (BIG), an organization of Black federal, state and local government employees, posited that African-Americans bore a disproportionate share of Reagan's RIFs. In other words, the conservative agenda to dismantle the federal workforce meant the downward spiral of the Black middle class in the nation's capital.

The venom behind Cotton's assertion that, "Washington is a *city*, with all the characteristics of a *city*, not a state" (emphasis added) is a continuation of anti-urban policies that demonize Black and Brown communities as undeserving of federal dollars. As journalist Tim Murphy points out, the current fears of the white corporate class are much the same as they were during the Reconstruction Era: that Black enfranchisement and a multi-racial economic democracy would compromise the rule of the white and wealthy. This is why Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) equates D.C. statehood with "full bore socialism" and Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC) warns of a "radical" Democratic agenda. The GOP fear the economic consequences of a full-fledged democracy.

The warning from the Republican's expert witness from the Cato Institute that D.C. statehood could usher in "provisions that require the new state to provide jobs or adequate incomes to all city residents" more starkly reveals their fear that a multi-racial democracy might make the wealthy pay their fair share and expand government. The GOP's "chosen approach to urban America" is illustrative of their approach to the federal government as a whole: shrink it until you can drown it in a bathtub.

The fact is, racist attacks on the government make an otherwise unpopular deregulatory agenda achievable. It allows corporate entities like the Koch Industries to generate 24 million metric tons of greenhouse gases a year, polluting the air and imperiling the nation's groundwater supply. It allowed for the deregulation of the financial industry that eventually caused the global

financial crisis of 2008, and it is still stopping lawmakers from preventing another potential Wall Street disaster. The absence of an empowered federal government may fail the non-rich of all races, but it's easier to get racist whites on board with deregulation if they associate the federal government with Black workers and a historically Black city.

Racist attacks on the government connect and energize disparate deregulatory goals, bringing white people with racist instincts along for the ride. President Bill Clinton's "reinvention" of government in the mid-1990s sacrificed the livelihoods of workers of color, and in doing so devastated the capacity of the civil service. Clinton's promise to revive "old-fashioned American" small government is uncomfortably similar to Trump's "make America great again" slogan. Both fulfilled their promise to re-shape the government into an entity that is more corporate friendly and less beholden to Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people.

Contrary to what conservative pundits might have you believe, it is a small government — not a big, democratic government — that is designed to steal from taxpayers and distribute power and money to the elite who do not need it. And contrary to visions of "self-reliant Americans," there is no effective "small government" response to a pandemic. Small government, by and for the corporate class, has American democracy teetering on the edge of facism and disease under the presidency of Donald Trump. Given that the road to privatization and deregulation was paved with white supremacy, we must embrace anti-racist policies to recover the federal government and expand the civil service. Without it, our democracy remains at stake.