



The Self-Congratulation of the “Public Servant”

By: Doug Bandow – January 23, 2013

In January, California Democrat Pete Stark finished 40 years in Congress. The 81-year-old proclaimed himself pleased with the half of his life spent in “public service” (read: on Capitol Hill). Yet the public has suffered disastrously from his efforts (allegedly) on its behalf.

Federal spending, deficits, and debt have skyrocketed.
The U.S. has engaged in numerous bloody and unnecessary wars.
Entitlement programs have exploded out of control and threaten America’s financial future.
The burden of inefficient and wasteful regulation has climbed as job creation has stalled.
The war on drugs has morphed into a colossal state nanny whose hand now extends to strike not just the pot smoker, but also the cigarette smoker and the soda drinker.

And this is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

The U.S. has become a society in which public bailouts and liability judgments reward those who fail. The more spectacular the failure, the bigger the payout promises to be. These bailouts, far from protecting the people from economic calamity, shore up the connections between cronies and politicians.

Washington has trouble delivering the mail (and paying for it) but has taken control of the U.S. health care system. Thanks to policies like affirmative action, people are still judged by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character. Many who once believed in a future of infinite possibilities now fear permanent decline.

Representative Stark was not directly responsible for all of these outcomes. He may even have opposed one or two of them. But as a congressman he consistently promoted expanding government as the solution to almost every problem. Is someone somewhere in need of something? Create a new government program, preferably in Washington. Tax or borrow, but always spend and regulate.

What makes Stark’s decades of mal-service particularly tragic is that he genuinely imagines his career as that of a crusader on horseback working for the rest of us. He told NPR that he was going to miss getting up in the morning and looking into the mirror and saying: “Hey, I’m going to do something today that’s going to make life better for somebody.’ And that’s pretty neat.” He contrasted that to his time as a banker when he got up and said: “Whose car am I going to repossess’ or ‘Whose house am I going to foreclose?’”

George Mason University's Don Boudreaux (a former president of FEE) makes the point that if that's what Stark did at his bank, he was a lousy banker. He should have been saying: What family can I enable to buy a home that they can afford, and then pay back the bank? What entrepreneur can I fund to serve the public and make a profit? What new way can I serve people in order to enable the bank to make money?

Consider the question: "Who is most likely to think about how to make someone's life better . . . a businessman or a politician?" The answer should be obvious. There are sinful people in every profession, of course. But we need only compare the incentives of the private and public sectors. The first encourages genuine "public service." The second encourages personal aggrandizement, plunder, and collusion.

First, private entrepreneurs cannot force anyone to do anything. They succeed only if they convince people that it is in the latter's interest to part with their money. That means producing something that actually does make people's lives better. Truth be told, every morning we should praise the people who created pharmaceuticals, airplanes, housing, cell phones, computers, automobiles, art, umbrellas, refrigeration, bicycles, iPods, medical devices, toys, cameras, ice cream, and much, much more. All have enriched our lives. None of these goods—at least as far as I am aware—were created by Pete Stark, much less any other politician.

Second, absent political intervention, markets ruthlessly hold entrepreneurs accountable. Competitors are constantly seeking to serve consumers better. The moment people believe that a new car, computer, cereal, musical group, drug, or most anything else is better, they will dump the old product. Consumer allegiance lasts only as long as people believe they are being served well. So the entrepreneur's job is to figure out how best to serve customers.

Contrast that with the politician. First, they rely on coercion, not service—that is, money comes through taxation, backed by the threat of imprisonment. No matter how badly their programs fail or their ideas backfire, they can continue shoveling the people's money into government initiatives. The more dramatic the failure, the more money politicians will waste. The idea of allowing people to opt out never occurs to politicians, even when their schemes turn deadly—as with, for example, the urban public schools in which students are routinely harassed, assaulted, and sometimes murdered.

Second, accountability is limited. Sure, there are periodic elections. However, the old Soviet Communist Central Committee had greater turnover than Congress does. Lobbyists wine and dine state legislators to give them "safe" districts with a guaranteed partisan majority. Members use the taxpayers' own money to buy votes—that is, to "serve" the interest groups and local constituencies with the greatest electoral influence. Most government expenditures are used "to make life better for somebody," as Pete Stark put it, by enriching those greedy tax consumers who encircle Capitol Hill making demands.

If politicians are a necessary evil, it's because government is a necessary evil. But Big Government is not necessary. The larger the government, the greater the waste and abuse, and the less likely politicians will be to help anyone other than themselves and their political allies.

We would all be better off if the next would-be Pete Stark eschewed politics and demonstrated true public service.

Read more: http://www.fee.org/the_freeman/detail/the-self-congratulation-of-the-public-servant#ixzz2IuqFPebh