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Gene Healy: Jon Stewart's hipster Woodstock

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Lousy pizza, bars suffused with Epcot-Center charmlessness, and bagels hardly fit for use as doorstops. DC living is nothing to write home about.

I'll say this much for it, though: at least you can get free ringside seats for ridiculousness. Following Mencken's theory that democracy is "the only really amusing form of government," I make a point of attending every big protest that comes to town.

The Jon Stewart/Stephen Colbert "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" brought over 200,000 protesters to the National Mall this weekend--more than double the reported turnout of DC's last Tea Party gathering.

If you were anywhere close, you found your cellphone rendered useless, as 10,000 self-consciously ironic tweets overwhelmed the satellites.

Anti-Tea-Party sentiment ran high at Saturday's rally. As a libertarian who shares the TPer's goal of relimiting government, that should have worried me. Yet, as Stewart himself put it in his closing speech, "I feel good: strangely, calmly, good."

Me too--for different reasons. I feel good because what I've seen on the Mall these last two years convinces me that, crowd size aside, the forces opposing big government are stronger and more energized than the opposition.

"What exactly was this?" Stewart asked the motley throng. I'd sum up the rally's message, such as it was, with a sign I saw several of Stewart's dittoheads carrying. It read, simply, "Meh." That's "an interjection expressing indifference or boredom," per the Collins English Dictionary. (I was hoping for a chant: "Meh. Meh! MEH!")

When French leftists get upset about threats to the welfare state, they overturn cars and hurl rocks at cops. Their American counterparts settle for a hipster Woodstock celebrating political apathy.

From where I stand, it looks like the best are full of passionate intensity, while the worst lack all conviction. Sweet!

That's not to say that earnest conviction was entirely absent from the festivities. "GovLoop.com," a social

networking site for "the government community," piggybacked on the Stewart/Colbert event with a "Government Doesn't Suck" rally lauding federal workers.

In the annals of dumb political marketing, that title's up there with "I am not a crook," "I'm not a witch," and the chant Jamie Foxx led at a recent Obama rally: "we are not exhausted!" It encourages the impression they're trying to dispel.

I couldn't get close enough to see the GovLoop rally, but I visited their site and learned that these friendly feds refer to themselves as "Govies"--as in their prefabricated placard, "Chicks Dig Govies." (Typing that, I just threw up a little in my mind.)

Pity the poor Govies, who consider themselves victims of rising anti-government sentiment. The rally's organizer sprung to action after reading a recent Washington Post poll showing that half of Americans think federal workers are overpaid and underworked.

But the public has it right. My colleague Chris Edwards has shown that "the average federal civilian worker now earns twice as much in wages and benefits as the average worker in the private sector."

I can't be the only person who, upon hearing the snow-day announcement telling nonessential federal employees to stay home, always thinks, "if we know who they are, why don't we just tell them not to come back?"

That would be a start--but only a start--toward cutting our bloated state sector down to its proper constitutional size.

Whatever today's election brings, those of us who share that goal have hard work ahead. The good news is that, judging by Saturday's rally, supporters of the status quo seem half-hearted in their opposition. Could it be that, in their hearts, they know we're right?

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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