

Our big-government war on terror

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July 27, 2010

Guess what happens when you combine a crisis atmosphere with a gusher of federal funds? You get a dangerous, wealth-gobbling bureaucracy that fails to achieve its ostensible goal, whether that's better health care, ending drug abuse -- or uncovering terrorist threats.

That's the lesson of "Top Secret America," last week's high-profile Washington Post series on the post-9/11 "Intelligence-Industrial Complex."

You'd think a classic story of government overreach and incompetence would resonate with conservatives, but their reaction was mostly muted and dismissive.

Though conservatives generally appreciate libertarian insights about bureaucracy's self-perpetuating nature, and the risks of special-interest capture and abuse of power, they have a blind spot when it comes to national security.

It's the state's duty to protect Americans from foreign threats, but, as erstwhile libertarian Jim Henley cautions, "it's still the state when it does those things."

And how. The Post series demonstrates that our metastasizing counterterrorism bureaucracy displays every pathology conservatives decry in our bloated welfare state:

- o Uncontrollable growth? Check. The Post documents more than 1,200 homeland security agencies filling up nearly three Pentagons of new office space since 9/11.
- o Special-interest rent-seeking? Check. Counterterrorism's "a jobs program," where companies court the feds by hosting conferences with "Margaritaville 'socials' " and free back rubs. Defense Secretary Robert Gates offers "a terrible confession": "I can't get a number on how many contractors work" for DoD.
- o Bureaucratic empire-building? Check. Every homeland security poohbah fights for an armed security detail and a secure "SCIF" room ("sensitive compartmentalized information facility"). It's "penis envy," one source explains, "You can't be a big boy" without "a big SCIF."
- o Central planners frustrated by the problem of dispersed knowledge? Check. "I'm not going to live long enough to be briefed on everything," laments one "Super-User" (the moniker for feds with platinum info access). President Obama's nominee for national intelligence director admits that only "God" can comprehend the numberless post-9/11 intel programs (think of Him as the ultimate "Super-User").

The system vomits up some "50,000 intelligence reports each year -- a volume so large that many are routinely ignored." Details about December's "underwear bomber" vanished amid that morass. In the needle-in-haystack fight to ferret out terrorists, we've wasted billions building a bigger haystack.

Our interminable war on terror sometimes seems designed to justify every bad thing libertarians have ever said about government. For example, it's uncontested that the Bush administration's "enhanced interrogation" techniques came from a training program adopted after Chinese communists tortured U.S. soldiers captured in Korea.

Morality aside, it's almost impossible to imagine a dumber basis for fighting terror than adopting communist tactics designed to elicit false confessions. ... Unless it's the Hayekian nightmare of spending a trillion dollars and more than 5,000 American lives trying to create law-governed liberal democracies via military fiat.

Yet, it's usually liberals who report these tales of federal idiocy, and conservatives who resent them for it. "The Washington Post finds waste-in government!" Mona Charen snarks about "Top Secret America." "They seem much less curious" about waste and abuse elsewhere in government. A fair point, but one that cuts both ways.

Public-choice economist and Nobel laureate James Buchanan called his approach "politics without romance." Liberals romanticize government in every area other than law enforcement and defense, to which they apply a healthy skepticism. Conservatives suffer a mirror-image version of that myopia. They're incurable romantics when it comes to generals, policemen or spies.

At its best, the Tea Party movement seems to promise a more consistent anti-statism. Let's hope so, because Big Government doesn't become any more competent or less threatening when it moves from health care to counterterrorism.

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