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Published: Nov. 5, 2010  
 Updated: 4:33 p.m.

**Alan W. Bock book review: History says limiting government won't be easy**

By ALAN W. BOCK  
 Register senior editorial writer and columnist

**Story Highlights**

Book review of "The Struggle to Limit Government" by John Samples

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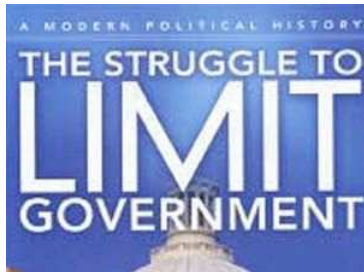
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**ARTICLE**

Tuesday's election results suggest that before long – perhaps after 2012 if things play out as most Republicans hope they will – we will see yet another effort to limit the size and scope of the federal government. As John Samples explains with a plenitude of historical context in his new book, "The Struggle to Limit Government," it has been tried several times since 1980 or so and each time the results have been mixed at best.

Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the generally libertarian Cato Institute and former vice president of the 20th Century Fund, employs a useful framework. He describes the policy regime set up during the New Deal and bolstered during LBJ's Great Society – a regime markedly different from the limited-government individualist regime set up by the Constitution – as the old regime. In his view, the old regime set up shrewdly designed institutions like Social Security to embody its policy changes, and these institutions quickly developed constituencies that made them virtually politically untouchable.



A portion of the jacket for Samples' book

The early recipients of Social Security, for example, received far more in benefits than they could ever have paid in taxes, and for most of the program's life this has been true, with the extra costs delayed for future generations to bear. This may resemble a Ponzi scheme, but politically it's almost pure genius. As it and other programs expanded, people began to get used to the idea that they were owed a certain amount by the government and the idea of dependence gradually became less noxious in the culture at large. The job of government shifted from ensuring liberty to ensuring economic growth.

LBJ, an old New Deal Congressman and master of legislative logrolling, brought this understanding to the establishment of Medicare and other programs – and reinforced the progressive ideal of "the subordination of individual liberty to some collective good." LBJ's institutions remain to this day, but during the 1970s the old regime suffered a crisis as stagflation – supposedly impossible under Keynesian economics – gripped the nation and spending rose to levels perceived as unsustainable. That opened the door for Ronald Reagan, who had been criticizing the old regime since 1964.

Mr. Samples doesn't characterize President Reagan's motivations, but analyzes the results. In short, he was both a rebel against the old regime in rhetoric and a reformer who ended up mostly strengthening it in practice. His tax cuts eventually helped to induce more economic activity, but didn't change the old regime. His fix of Social Security amounted to a few tweaks that extended its fiscal life 20 or 30 years and created the impression that problems were under control. His tax reforms did simplify the tax code but didn't reduce the tax burden substantially. He bet that reducing taxes would eventually reduce spending because Congress would be afraid to run ever-larger deficits. He lost that bet as Congress merrily kept increasing spending. He slowed the rate of growth of government spending but didn't stop it.

After the Clinton interregnum, when divided government seemed to bring economic growth back, George W. Bush explicitly abandoned even the Reaganite rhetoric on limited government and sold "compassionate conservatism" and moral renewal through expanded government action. His ill-fated adventure in Iraq was consistent with the general philosophy of improvement here and overseas through aggressive government action – note the Medicare prescription drug program. Compassionate conservatism and catering to the religious right didn't improve GOP electoral prospects – indeed Samples argues that Bush would have won much bigger without the Iraq war, and we all remember the GOP meltdowns in 2006 and 2008.

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So now the instinctive American distrust of the national government – the New Deal didn't eradicate the individualist culture altogether – has resurfaced (Samples notes that we've trusted government only twice recently, before 1963 and after 9/11) and we may see another effort to limit government. The old regime has vulnerabilities – it has proven unable to ensure prosperity, government is widely distrusted, and Bush and Obama increased spending to the point that federal exactions from the economy, traditionally at about 20 percent of GNP, could easily reach 27 percent and precipitate a crisis. Those who genuinely seek to limit government could do worse than to study this book to see what has worked and what hasn't in the recent past.

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