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Book review: 'Struggle' offers coherent discourse on role of gov't

What do Americans want from their government? What do Americans need from their government?

These two questions animate "The Struggle to Limit Government: A Modern Political History," by John Samples, the director of the Center for Representative Government at The Cato Institute, a public policy research foundation.

Samples received his Ph.D. in political science from Rutgers University and is currently an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins; his previous books include "The Fallacy of Campaign Finance Reform," which was published in 2006.

"Struggle" is composed of seven chapters organized from a chronological perspective. Although the majority of the book covers the evolution of the conservative movement over the last 30 years, Samples begins by detailing how social programs expanded significantly during the 1960s and '70s - and how their growth has continued virtually unimpeded since 1980, the year Ronald Reagan was first elected president.

As Samples observes, the last time ideology unanimously and unequivocally trumped economics was during World War II. After Dec. 7, 1941, a clear majority of the American people were in agreement with the notion that "evil" had to be defeated regardless of the cost. We were fighting to preserve and protect our entire way of life; money was no object.

Unfortunately, this kind of universal consensus has been difficult to achieve or maintain in more recent decades. "Americans have shown a great deal of trust in the federal government twice in recent history: in the years before 1963 and for a period after September 11th," Samples writes. "In both cases, Americans had a sense of common purpose rooted in a sense of external threat."

Samples recounts the philosophical and political shift that precipitated Reagan's election: "By 1980, progressives had dominated the federal government for over four decades. The scope and spending of government had greatly increased during that time."

He then proceeds to meticulously deconstruct Reagan's presidency. "The years 1981 and 1982 are the most important in the history of the struggle to limit government in the United States," Samples asserts. "The record of Reagan's first two years should not be overestimated."

At the same time, he does point out the inconsistencies inherent in many of Reagan's core policies. "Reagan's commitment to individual liberty implied free movement of goods, services, and people across international borders," Samples notes. "Ideas notwithstanding, the early Reagan record on trade and immigration focused on restricting liberty in trade and employment."

Moving beyond the Reagan era, Samples turns his attention to subsequent administrations and makes a convincing case that the state of the economy has been the motivating factor behind a constantly changing definition of the appropriate role of government.

Although the book is primarily concerned with chronicling the conservative movement, Samples does devote a considerable number of pages to the Clinton years and especially the pivotal midterm elections of 1994. "The American people had grown increasingly disconnected with politics in the early 1990s," Samples explains. "They seemed ready to limit a corrupt and incompetent federal government."

Moreover, he tends to view George W. Bush through the same conflicted lens that characterizes his assessment of Reagan. "Bush both accepted and rejected the old regime," Samples contends. "He largely accepted its emphasis on active government as a way to promote the welfare of individuals."

A recurring theme throughout "Struggle" is the nature of the relationship between the size of the federal government

and the expanding national deficit. Samples argues that a primary reason we need to limit government is relatively straightforward: the American people are simply unwilling to pay for many of the services they increasingly demand.

“For most of the years covered by this study, spending by the federal government has exceeded its revenues,” Samples observes. “Government can continue in business because some of its costs can be shifted to future taxpayers who have no say about current budgets.”

The author does an exceptionally good job of infusing about every social issue that you can think of into a powerful and coherent discourse on the appropriate role of government. Still, the book is not without valid criticisms.

In the liner notes for the book, for example, the assertion is made that: “Samples does not simply point and critique; he also includes extensive prescriptions for improvement.” A careful reading of the book, however, does not readily reveal these strategies. If the author is indeed making concrete recommendations regarding a preferred course of action, they are either carefully hidden or ingeniously disguised; they are certainly not self-evident.

A second weakness of the book is that the author hardly even mentions the election of Barack Obama and its significance within the larger context of his overall thesis. Obama’s policy initiatives are unquestionably related to his subject matter and it is disappointing and even frustrating that Samples does not include these recent developments in his narrative.

In the final analysis, Samples is unabashedly in favor of limiting the role of the federal government. But he is at least intellectually honest about it and does take the time to discuss the negative implications that inevitably emanate from his position. “Struggle” is a good read.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*