

TrueNorth

The return of leviathan

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Just when we thought that the liberty movement had beaten back “big government conservatism,” it seems to be making a comeback. Before taking a look at its latest version, let’s look back at the version that was in control of the GOP right before the Obama led takeover of the federal government on the part of the Democrats. In 2007, the Cato Institute’s Michael Tanner wrote a book examining big government called “*Leviathan on the Right (How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution)*” The book took a look at the retreat of Reagan style conservatism as a force within the GOP. Interestingly enough, this retreat from Reagan conservatism/libertarianism coincided with the loss of political influence on the part of Republicans to Democrats. Here is a short section from the [overview of his first chapter](#):

To understand how conservatism has been turning away from its traditional belief in small government, one has to look no further than President George W. Bush. INDEED, as John DiIulio, the first director of President Bush’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, has pointed out; from the very beginning of his run for the presidency, Bush made clear his differences with small-government conservatives.

His very first campaign speech, on July 22, 1999, articulated what he believed as a “compassionate conservative.” Speaking before inner-city clergymen and women in Indianapolis, “economic growth,” Bush preached, “is not the solution to every problem.” He labeled as “destructive” the idea that government is bad and called explicitly for increasing government support for Medicaid and other federal PROGRAMS. He also rebutted the notion that government needs only to step aside for families and communities to flourish. In particular he stressed that, when it comes to addressing poverty and urban blight, it “is not enough to call for volunteerism. Without more support—public and private—we are asking” local community-serving groups, both religious and secular, “to make bricks without straw.”

This form of conservatism is fundamentally different from the one advocated by Ronald Reagan or Barry Goldwater. That conservatism sought “to curb the size and influence of the federal establishment,” as Reagan said in his first inaugural address. Or as Barry Goldwater

famously said in his 1960 classic, *Conscience of a Conservative*, “I have little interest in streamlining government or making it more efficient, for I intend to reduce its size.”

Goldwater and Reagan-style conservatism is increasingly being supplanted by a new trend in conservative thought, which might loosely be termed big-government conservatism. This type of conservatism believes in a strong and activist government that intervenes in many areas of our lives, from dealing with issues such as poverty or health care to protecting the cultural institutions of our society. Increasingly it has come to resemble contemporary liberalism in its means, if not its ends.

A recent [article](#) in Reason Magazine entitled “*Reform Conservatism Won’t End the Liberal Welfare State, It’ll Reinvent it*” examines the latest version of “big government conservatism:”

Having spent the last six years in the political wilderness, it is understandable that conservatives are eager to reclaim the reins of power. It’s also understandable that they want to play to their strengths—and Democratic weakness—in tailoring an agenda to their core constituency: middle-class Americans.

What is less understandable is why many conservatives have ended up with a mix of old and new liberal ideas that thoroughly scale back the right’s long-running commitment to free markets and limited government. But that is exactly what reform conservatism—a hot new movement powered by about 50 of the brainiest young conservatives—does.

Reformicons, as they are called, deny that of course. But if one looks at reform conservatives’ economic proposals—some of them laid out in *National Affairs*’ editor Yuval Levin’s edited volume *Room to Grow* and fleshed out by *National Review*’s Reihan Salam, *The New York Times*’ Ross Douthat, and some analysts at the American Enterprise Institute—it is hard to escape the conclusion that these are liberal policy prescriptions. Although reform conservatives start from very different philosophical premises than entitlement liberals, when it comes to specific programs, they land at an almost identical spot.

Unfortunately, just like the compassionate conservatives before them, reform conservatives take a valid premise and draw faulty conclusions from it:

But reform conservatives don’t want to simply hack off the heavy hand of government when it thwarts individual aspirations. “Not everyone is John Galt,” Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell noted at a reformicon retreat last year. Reformicons also want to use the hand of government to actively promote middle-class interests.

Levin eloquently notes that **what matters most about society “happens in the space between the individual and the state occupied by families, communities, civil and religious institutions, and the economy.”** I agree. But libertarians (like me) would argue that **we ought to expand that space by keeping the government at bay.**

Here is where these reform conservatives should study the writings of the late Frank Meyer and what came to be known as “fusionism.” The libertarian concern with individual liberty and the traditionalist concern with “the space between the individual and that state” are two sides to the same coin and both are deeply rooted in our heritage. In addition, for either concern to be realized, the role of government must be limited. Enough post WWII traditionalists and libertarians understood this to form a philosophically coherent conservative movement in America. The elections of 1994, 2010 and 2014 showed the political viability of an appeal to limited government. As we head in to the 2016 election, let’s not make the same mistake of trying out yet another version of “big government conservatism.”