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American Hypocrites

The only thing Americans hate more than big government is the absence of government protection.

By Anne Applebaum

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Sarah Palin I've now listened to Sarah Palin's "[Mama Grizzlies](#)" video. I've watched the Tea Party evolve from a joke into a political force. I've read up on the primary candidates who want to take back government, take down government, burn down Washington.

I've seen it all, heard it all, and I don't believe any of it. A rose is a rose is a rose—and hypocrisy is hypocrisy, whether it takes the form of champagne socialism or mama grizzlies who would go on the rampage if, God forbid, their mortgage tax relief were ever taken away.

If you don't live here all the time, and I don't, here is what you notice when you come home: Americans—with their lawsuit culture, their safety obsession, and above all their addiction to government spending programs—demand more from their government than just about anybody else in the world. They don't just want the government to keep the peace and create a level playing field. They want the government to ensure that every accident and every piece of bad luck is either prevented or fully compensated. And if the price of their house drops, they will hold the government responsible for that, too.

When, through a series of flukes, [a crazy person smuggled explosives onto a plane at Christmas](#), the public bayed for blood and held the White House responsible. When, thanks to bad luck and

planning mistakes, an oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, the public bayed for blood and [held the White House responsible](#) again.

In fact, the crazy person was stopped by an alert passenger, not the federal government, and if the oil rig is ever fixed, it will be through the efforts of a private company. Nevertheless, each one of these kinds of events sets off a chain reaction: A new government program is created, experts are hired, new machines are ordered for the airports, and new monitors are sent beneath the ocean. This is how we got the Kafkaesque security network that an [extraordinary Washington Post investigation](#) this week calls, quite conservatively, "A hidden world, growing beyond control."

For this hidden world, with its 1,271 different government security and intelligence organizations and its 854,000 people with top-secret security clearance, is not the creation of a secretive totalitarian cabal; it has been set up in response to public demand. It's true that the French want to retire early and that the British think health care should be free, but when things go wrong, Americans also write to their representatives in Congress and their commander in chief demanding action. And precisely because this is a democracy, Congress and the president respond, pass a law, put up a building.

The mechanism works the same way even when there isn't an emergency. To put it bluntly, middle-class Americans of the right, left, and center have now come to expect a level of personal financial security that—despite the stereotypes—most people would never demand from their governments. In a [review](#) he wrote earlier this month, Brink Lindsey, the vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute—a man who knows what he is up against—pulled up some extraordinary statistics. Most Americans, it turns out, are suspicious of the free market. And most American also approve of high government spending. The majority of Americans are wary of global trade, don't trust free markets, and also think "the benefits from ... Social Security or Medicare are worth the costs of those programs." And when the sample is restricted to people who support the Tea Party movement? The number is still 62 percent.

Yet it is Social Security, Medicare, and the ever-expanding list of earmarks—federal grants—that are going to sink the U.S. budget in the next few decades, not President Obama's health care reform (though that won't help). Yet in Washington, these expenditures are known as "third rails": If you touch them, you're dead. President George W. Bush talked a little bit about making individuals more responsible for their retirement, and then he gave up. The "privatization" of Social Security, as it was sneeringly described, was just too unpopular, particularly among his own supporters.

Look around the world and we don't seem as exceptional as we think. Chileans are willing to save for their own retirement. Most Europeans are reconciled to the idea that not everybody, at any age and in any condition, is entitled to the most expensive medical technology. A secretary of state or defense traveling with dozens of cars and armed security men would seem absurd in many countries, as would the notion that the government gives you a tax break if you buy a house, or that [schools should close if there is ice on the roads](#). Yet we not only demand ludicrous levels of personal and political safety, we reserve the right to rant and rave against the vast bureaucracies we have created—democratically, constitutionally, openly—to deliver it.

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