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Wednesday, June 2, 2010 3:12 AM EDT

Is smaller government possible?

"People love free money."

John Samples could have used Sen. Tom Harkin's observation of part of 2008's farm-subsidy reauthorization as the title of his new book. But the Cato Institute scholar chose something more conventional: "The Struggle to Limit Government: A Modern Political History."

Samples takes readers on a wonky walk through a depressing saga: the failed rebellion against progressives' century-old assault on individualism, free enterprise and a constrained public sector.

Samples reminds readers the intellectual justifications for what he calls Washington's "progressive regime" were drafted long before the Great Depression. "The Promise of American Life," journalist Herbert Croly's 1909 book, "summarized the previous two decades of progressive thinking." Croly thought Americans needed emancipation "from the evasions, the incoherence, the impatience, and the easy-going conformity of their own intellectual and moral traditions."

"In a word," Samples writes, "progressives sought to reconstruct America." Their agenda included high taxes, income redistribution, nationalist fervor, rule by "experts" and cartelization of industries. Clever incrementalism, punctuated by two huge bursts — the New Deal and the Great Society — got progressives much of what they wanted.

Samples provides the Butcher's Bill of Big Government: Keynesian economics, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, regulatory sprawl, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, federal subsidies to K-12 and higher education, PBS, wage-and-price controls, racial preferences, the EPA.

Everything was going according to plan until Vietnam, Watergate, stagflation, gasoline lines and the failure of the "War on Poverty." The progressive regime was in crisis. For the first time in the modern era, voters were willing to elect a

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president who insisted government wasn't the solution, it was the problem. Yet as Samples documents, Ronald Reagan didn't shrink the federal bureaucracy, he merely pared its growth trend. In real dollars, the EPA's budget grew by 22 percent between 1981 and 1989. Medicare (31 percent), the Federal Aviation Administration (35 percent), the National Science Foundation (36 percent), the National Institutes of Health (49 percent), and the Internal Revenue Service (58 percent) also grew. "Reagan," Samples laments, "did not come close to overturning the old regime."

Neither did Newt Gingrich, whose "revolution" fizzled. Washington, the Georgia pol presciently observed in November 1994, is "like a sponge. It absorbs waves of change, and it slows them down, and it softens them, and then one morning they cease to exist." A divided GOP and Bill Clinton's triangulation blocked Gingrich from enacting meaningful cuts and reforms.

Under George W. Bush, Republicans abandoned whatever commitment they had to downsizing D.C. 9/11 produced massive expansions of government. But the tale Samples tells of Bush's 2003 prescription-drug program is especially chilling. AARP's support was a given. The pharmaceutical industry was bought off with the defeat of price controls and foreign competition. Other lobbies refused to be left out: "Managed-care firms and private insurance companies won a larger portion of the Medicare pie and more subsidies to participate in the growing Medicare market.

Employers received more than \$70 billion in subsidies to maintain retiree insurance for prescription drugs. Physicians had been set for a 4.5 percent reduction in payment rates; instead, they obtained a 1.5 percent increase. Small business owners and advocates of consumer-driven health care obtained expanded health savings accounts. Hospitals won higher reimbursements for care and a halt to constructing specialized hospitals that might effectively compete for the same patients. Health care providers in rural areas received hefty subsidies."

On the cultural front, progressives failed. Americans don't have a unifying goal. We still chase wealth in businesses, workplaces and the investment markets, pursue a plethora of hobbies and diversions, and stubbornly ignore calls for a "national purpose," be it left or right.

Nonetheless, "The Struggle to Limit Government" is sober reading for anyone seeking to deflate Washington's cost and scope. With the recent finding by The New York Times that 62 percent of tea-party supporters think "the benefits from government programs such as Social Security and Medicare (are) worth the costs," it's easy to see why the progressive regime persists.

Several years ago, political scholar Thomas G. West observed "people who call themselves conservatives and liberals alike accept much of the progressive view of the world." Until enough voters recognize the totalitarian and no-longer-affordable manifestations of Crolyism, America will remain a nation that has betrayed its founding principles.

D. Dowd Muska (www.dowdmuska.com) is a writer, commentator and lecturer who lives in Connecticut.

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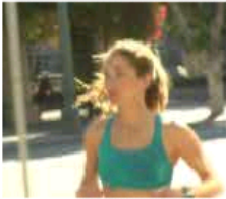
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 Event Date: June 2nd, 2010 Event Time: TBA - TBA

CALLING ALL POETS
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JOHN CASKEY MEMORIAL ART CLASS EXHIBIT
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SWING! SWING! SWING!
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