

Anti-Government - Nonsense

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Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

It is high time to put the anti-government position of many in the conservative movement permanently to rest. This perspective just plain has no foundation, it undermines constructive participation in the electoral process, and it ends up wasting a lot of our time and energy that should be devoted to addressing our real concerns. It seems that some among us want to operate within the fantasy that we still live in a frontier condition where each separate homestead provides for nearly all of its own needs with a gun at the door to assure security. But even that fanciful picture of the frontier was never real!

In the world of frontier settlement, individual mountain men as hunter-trappers are as close as we get to humans living outside of government, and even these individuals depended upon an extensive network of trade and supplies to sustain them – a network “guaranteed” by business enterprises that received their authorization from government. Frontier settlements arose out of communal wagon trains of families cooperating among themselves and frequently settling on homesteads adjoining one another where they relied on each other for labor, security and all kinds of social activities. And as soon as they were able, most of these homesteads organized themselves as communities and very quickly evolved to create the rudiments of government so they could hire teachers, build schools, elect and pay for sheriffs, and support volunteer fire companies. To the extent it existed at all, the period of relatively isolated frontier homesteads was short indeed. And the impression of such relative independence only reemerged later in the form of large farms and ranches once federal, state and county government provided the necessary security umbrella and the legal, judicial and financial apparatus to assure property ownership along with freedom of movement sufficient to participate in the larger economic system. Community cooperation and government at some level was always present from the very time government opened the frontier for settlement. The idea that modern humans, even frontier settlers, did or can exist without government is simply erroneous.

In the modern context, government is flat out essential, and it should come as no surprise that it has continued to grow in importance as our numbers escalate and we find it necessary to live in more and more concentrated “settlements.” Today only about 20% of the American population live outside of cities, towns and villages and their immediately surrounding associated areas, and more than

50% of Americans now live in full blown cities. And these urban concentrations of people are expected to continue to grow worldwide to 70% by 2050. The world is becoming an urban place to live, and urban life is impossible without government and the services that it provides.

Let's look at what functions the government performs for 80% of Americans with the rest of the population sharing in the benefit umbrella of most of these same services, even when they do not recognize or appreciate this fact!

As Americans do we think that we can get along without the following public services, which are administered by government at the federal, state, county, and/or municipal level: 1) national and state security [combined military forces], 2) law enforcement [police and district attorneys], 3) judicial [judges, courts and incarceration facilities], 4) official records [clerks], 5) planning and building [codes to assure safety and appropriate land use], 6) public works and infrastructure [transportation – streets, roads, highways, bridges, airports, railroad terminals and rights of way; water and sewer systems; public buildings and structures to support all services], 7) public education [schools, junior colleges, universities], 8) fire protection and ambulance service [staff and equipment], 9) tax assessment and collection [to finance services], 10) public health [care for the aged and indigent [Medicare and Medicaid], 11) public utility administration [to oversee monopoly electrical, communications and internet services], 12) public lands and parks [sustainable management of resources for public use and benefit], 13) libraries and museums [information, art and history]; 14) retirement security [public pensions and Social Security]. No doubt there are other government sponsored services that I have missed.

The array of government sponsored services listed above are all services that collective past experience among all developed nations has proven are better supported by taxation and delivered within the public domain rather than by private competing enterprises with their individual charges to their subscribers. In this regard, imagine competing private fire departments! So, how many of these public services do Americans really think they can do without or reduce in scope without negatively impacting their lives or their communities?

Anti-government devotees tend to focus on one area when they pronounce their general position while they typically overlook all the other essential government sponsored services above. This is the area of public assistance [social welfare and subsidies]. And this is the area where there is the greatest real difference of opinion among the members of the public on the value of such assistance.

Moreover, anti-government devotees tend to focus on social welfare and forget about corporate welfare [tax subsidies], which is at least equal to the cost of social welfare! But regardless of one's views on this one area of government based public service, it is absurd to overlook all of the other key public services upon which all Americans depend. It is beyond foolish to commit the horrendous error of throwing out the baby with the bath water because we do not like the brand of soap in the soap dish. At the same time that all Americans depend to a very significant degree on government sponsored services, for any Americans to portray themselves as being "anti-government" is an extreme overreach. At a minimum such declarations are inherently hypocritical. This is childlike behavior that has virtually no justification in fact.

Anti-government proponents need to reign in their gross over generalization, and advocate for what they really want – to restrict support for SOME government services. This is a legitimate position to take and the discussion can ensue on what specific services are proposed to be limited for what reasons. Such discussions are appropriate at all times, especially when new government services are being proposed or existing services are recommended for expansion. The level of economic commitment to particular services or areas of service can be expected to change over time, and the first order obligation of those in government is to assure that what government services are offered are needed, effective, efficient and fair. And there are no doubt areas of government service at all levels that do not meet these requirements. Self interest in protecting the subsidized status quo when it is no longer justified is unfortunately common. Carefully evaluating the need for government services and assessing the efficiency of these services are laudable goals and must be ongoing and rigorous. But there is no justification for condemning government in general because some services may not be needed any longer, need to be reduced, or need to be managed more efficiently.

Promoting an anti-government agenda in the context of what currently passes for political conservatism, besides being a huge overreach, is detrimental to the nation politically. Anti-government pronouncements motivate withdrawal by the public from involvement in government, as if government is not important. In America we have a problem with the low level of participation by the public in the electoral process. Too many people ignore the importance of exercising their right of political enfranchisement and denigrate the value of voting. Among developed and democratic nations, the United States has one of the lowest citizen participation rates in elections at all levels [60% is a high rate in the U.S.]. Anti-government attitudes and pronouncements support this non-participatory

behavior. Ironically, the very politicians who love to slam government and who love to arouse the anger of the public on this issue are in fact promoting overall withdrawal of the public from voting. Government is regarded as so worthless there is no point in voting; the view is that “my vote doesn’t count for anything.” But many in the world die seeking the privilege to determine their future by voting, and everyone needs to keep in mind that voting is the alternative to revolution that permits us in a democracy to seek orderly change. Hopefully, voters take their voting privilege seriously and become independently well informed and avoid becoming the pawns of populists and simplistic opinion mongering bloggers and talk show hosts. Anti-government blather is one of the simple minded views that voters need to reject as they exercise their task in voting with critical acumen.

Anger is not a positive or constructive motivator, and anti-government conservatives exploit the current frustration and anger of the middle class over their stagnant economic condition – as if eliminating or privatizing government services somehow constitute solutions to the problem [see my related essay “Frustrated American Middle Class: Real Causes and Real Solutions” on my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com].

It is high time to recognize both the fallacy of the anti-government argument within political conservatism and the negative effect of this point of view on the public's involvement in the political process.