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Big-Government Republicans **by Sheldon Richman**

If that was the small-government party we saw in action at the Republican National Convention in New York City, who needs a big-government party?

In fact the Republicans have been a big-government party for many years, but at least they used to *try* to sound like they favored small government. Now they don't even try. The convention throng went wild every time someone mentioned that President George W. Bush has set records for federal education and Medicare spending. I half expected the crowd to blow the roof off Madison Square Garden after being reminded that the federal budget deficit has approached half a trillion dollars. I'm sure one of the cable networks could have found a conventioneer decked out in silly regalia to say, "Woo hoo! Republicans do *everything* big!"

Where was the praise of self-reliance and criticism of dependence on government? The only allusion to independence came when Bush touted his plan for government to make the down payment for people who can't afford to buy homes. That's self-reliance?

At least Ronald Reagan used to say that government was the problem, not the solution. Couldn't we have had a little of that?

Then I remembered that two Bush presidencies have been built on repudiating the anti-government image of the Republicans' beloved Reagan. (Alas, it was more image than substance.) When Bush the elder promised at his inauguration "a kinder, gentler America," he was reverting to form and throwing rhetorical Reaganism on the ash heap of history. When Bush the younger campaigns as a "compassionate conservative," he's doing the same thing. It's amusing to see devout Reaganites prostrate themselves before a man who either despises what they believe in or is too cynical to embrace it publicly.

Maybe the core of Bush's stance was expressed in this line: "I am running with a compassionate conservative philosophy: that government should help people improve their lives, not try to run their lives."

Convention delegates can't be expected to listen to speeches with too fine an ear, so they very likely thought the president was making a profound distinction between themselves and the

Democrats. He did nothing of the kind. In practice, there's no big difference between a government that does things to "help people improve their lives" and one that "run[s] their lives."

For one thing, the government decides what improvement means. That should be left to individuals. But if the government doesn't do it, how could politicians characterize themselves as "compassionate" ? Under Bush the government extracts \$2 trillion from the American people. (That doesn't count unbudgeted items, including the costs of regulation, protectionism, and compliance with the impossible tax code.) Think how much people could improve their own lives, without government help, if that money were left in their pockets. Yes, Bush has reduced tax rates, but the intrusive, distorting American welfare state, co-sponsored by the Republican and Democratic parties, is not going to be eliminated by piddling tax cuts, especially when they are unmatched by spending cuts. The Republican Politburo, of course, knows this.

Only ignorance of political economy could lead one to think that greater federal control of education and retirees' medical care will improve people's lives. Where there's a government program, there are bureaucrats deciding what's good for people, rather than people deciding for themselves. As George Washington is reputed to have said, "Government is not reason; it is not eloquence. It is force." Even Bush's most "radical" suggestion — to let people privately invest a small part of what is now taken in Social Security taxes — would be under the heavy hand of government regulation.

Today's Republican Party is incapable of thinking in terms of liberty and self-responsibility. So no one should have been surprised when Bush's chief of staff, Andrew Card, said after the convention, "[This] president sees America as we think about a 10-year-old child." That explains it all.

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