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George Bush, Big-Government Man **by Sheldon Richman**

In an unscripted and candid moment, a top spokesman for President-elect Barack Obama let the cat out of the bag. On *Meet the Press*, interviewer Tom Brokaw asked transition co-chair Valerie Jarrett, “I wonder if, as a Democrat, which has always represented the party of big government, . . . there will be a kind of paradigm shift this time, that you’ll take the [Chicago mayor] Rich Daley model and shift more money and more responsibility to municipalities and the state government.”

To which Jarrett replied, “It’s ironic that you would say that it’s the Democrats that are responsible for big government because government has grown enormously over the last eight years.”

That was a significant concession from the Obama camp because the advocates of activist government like to portray the Bush years as “laissez-faire” and “do nothing.” Obama surrogates spent much of the campaign saying that it makes no sense to put people who hate government in charge of it.

Occasionally, the Obama campaign would shift gears when convenient and rail against the mounting national debt and budget deficits that are likely to exceed half a trillion dollars. But the dominant knock against Bush and, hence, Republican candidate John McCain was that they didn’t want the government to do much.

The Democrats can’t have it both ways. “Big-government laissez faire” doesn’t make sense. The fact is that George W. Bush has presided over the largest expansion of government since Lyndon Johnson, who was no piker. Spending under Bush doubled the national debt to \$10 trillion (which doesn’t count such things as the unfunded liabilities of Social Security and Medicare). His veto pen was not to be seen for most of his administration. All kinds of spending soared, including domestic discretionary spending. “Entitlements” are out of control, helped along by Bush’s prescription-drug add-on to Medicare. Of course his occupation of Iraq costs \$10 billion month, not to mention the billions being sunk into the bottomless Afghan hole. Overall,

military spending, most of which has nothing to do with true defense, dwarfs what the rest of the world spends.

And that isn't all. One of Bush's proudest achievements was the further centralization of education with the No Child Left Behind Act. Republicans used to promise abolition of the Department of Education, but that idea has long been trashed. Same with abolition of the Department of Energy. Anyone who supports those departments can make no claim to favoring free markets.

It should go without saying that Bush's myriad taxpayer bailouts of investment bankers and automakers are further proof that he has no commitment to limited government.

Bush has also presided over a dramatic and ominous expansion of executive power in the name of national security. On the basis of a novel legal theory, his administration claims that the Constitution delegates all sorts of implied autocratic powers that may not be checked by the other two branches of government. They include everything from the authority to wiretap without warrant, to setting up secret CIA prisons, to sending detainees to foreign countries for torture, to holding "unlawful enemy combatants" forever — subject to torture — without charge or right of habeas corpus. Bush has also repeatedly signed bills into law with caveats (signing statements) that he refused to enforce the parts that limited his power. This non-veto veto is just another way to get around the Constitution. A veto can be overridden by Congress; a signing statement cannot be.

One of the most disappointing aspects of Obama's campaign was that he did not criticize Bush's unilateral expansion of executive power. How refreshing that would have been. But he voted for the administration's wiretap bill. It is perhaps unsurprising that a man seeking the presidency would abstain from criticizing the growth of presidential power. But it is not a good sign for those who cherish individual liberty.

So Jarrett is right. Bush has been a big-government, not a laissez-faire, man. Since government created the mess we're in, we can hardly expect it to get us out.

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