



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Blame Republicans for Big Government **by Sheldon Richman**

Government power is growing, and unless President Barack Obama and the majority in Congress have a libertarian epiphany, it will continue to grow for years. If the expansion of intrusive government (a redundancy) gives you the willies — it should; the cost is freedom and prosperity — you may be tempted to direct your anger at Obama and the rest of the Democratic leadership. That would be myopic, however.

Blame the Republicans, beginning with former President George W. Bush. (We could go back further, but time and space are limited.)

The reason can be illustrated by an extraordinary moment that took place just after Obama unveiled his \$3.55 trillion 2010 budget. Contemplating the budget, Republican House leader John Boehner went before the media microphones and declared, “The era of big government is back.”

For Boehner to make such a statement suggests two possibilities, although both could be true: he thinks Americans are morons, or he’s been in a coma since January 20, 2001, when Bush took office.

Note that he didn’t say, “Uh oh, government is going to get even bigger than it is now.” No, he said, “The era of big government is *back*.” Back — as in: returned after having gone away.

When did it go away? And does Boehner really believe that the American people don’t realize how much government grew under Bush?

It was Bill Clinton who declared the era of big government over in 1996, more than a year after his party lost control of Congress to the GOP. He hadn’t become a libertarian, but he was lucky enough to be president during a period of economic growth, when the public wanted a balanced budget and some retrenchment of the welfare state.

But in fact, big government did not disappear in the Clinton years, even if the rate of growth slowed.

Under Bush and a Republican Congress we had an explosion of growth on all fronts: spending that put Lyndon Johnson to shame, huge deficits and a doubling of the national debt, corporate bailouts, further centralization of education, protectionism, expansion of Medicare, increased regulation, undeclared wars, civil-liberties violations and other unchecked executive power, and more. Bush did not veto a single spending bill in eight years. His cutting of tax rates in 2001 and 2003 has to be judged in the

context of growing spending. Milton Friedman pointed out that the level of spending, not taxation, is the truer gauge of the government burden. The money has to come from somewhere. Removing it from the economy through borrowing is as economically damaging as taxation — more so when you figure that the government will perpetrate inflation to manage the debt.

That was bad enough, but the Republicans added rank hypocrisy to the mix by claiming to favor free markets.

In light of this, Boehner's remark is more than a little absurd. It's dishonest, even demagogic.

And it will have consequences beyond the moment. Advocates of government control of the economy have a stake in persuading the public that the current financial turmoil is mostly the result of the Bush administration's alleged laissez-faire approach to governing. This is an outrageous lie. There was no laissez faire — quite the contrary. The Federal Register, which catalogues new regulations, grew apace in the Bush years. The last banking deregulation of any significance — repeal of the New Deal's separation of investment and commercial banking — was signed by Clinton while Larry Summers was Treasury secretary. Summers today is Obama's top economic advisor.

Boehner's statement, however, sounds as though he accepts the charge that our troubles come from too little government, not too much, in the Bush years. As a result, his words have the effect of making free-market, small-government rhetoric sound incredible, even ridiculous. Anyone who believes Boehner's (false) story would have to reject his opposition to Obama's program as purely political. After all, if big government really disappeared from 2001 to 2009, it can't be blamed for the economic meltdown.

But it didn't disappear, and it can be blamed for the meltdown. The Republicans' cynicism and lack of principle are as responsible for what's going on as any Democrat's — even more, because they have undermined sound economic reasoning by their hypocrisy.

*Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation, author of **Tethered Citizens: Time to Repeal the Welfare State**, and editor of [The Freeman](#) magazine. Visit his blog "Free Association" at www.sheldonrichman.com.*

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