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## **Leviathan and Big-Government Conservatism** **by George C. Leef**

*Leviathan on the Right: How Big Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution* by Michael D. Tanner (Cato Institute: 2007); 321 pages; \$22.95.

My first experience in politics was as a teenager during the 1964 campaign pitting Lyndon Johnson and his band of tax-and-spend-crazy Democrats against Barry Goldwater and his Republican compatriots. I was as sure as I could be about anything that the election *really mattered*. A Democratic victory would mean a vast expansion of government spending to pay for an array of unconstitutional, socialistic special-interest programs that would hamstring capitalism with ruinous taxes and regulations. On the other hand, I was equally certain that if Goldwater and the GOP won, the result would be exactly what the Democrats said we should fear — “turning back the clock.” Oh yes! Let’s go back to the days before the New Deal! Under Republican leadership, taxes would go down, the welfare state would shrivel, and government would be pared back to its proper constitutional dimensions.

Sure, I was a naive kid to think that Goldwater plus a Republican Congress would drastically scale back the welfare state, but had Barry taken over the White House, the country would have been spared the orgy of government intervention called the Great Society. I have no doubt that Goldwater meant it when he said, “I have little interest in streamlining government or making it more efficient, for I intend to reduce its size.”

Johnson triumphed, of course, and the Democrats had huge majorities in Congress. The worst fears of Americans who desired a minimalist government were realized. New socialistic programs such as Medicare and Medicaid were passed over the opposition of most — but not all — of the remaining Republicans in Washington. As of the mid 1960s, it certainly appeared that there was a huge philosophical chasm between the two parties, the Democrats trying to turn the United States into an egalitarian paradise and the Republicans trying to restore the nation to freedom and individualism.

Now let's move ahead to 2006. There is a Republican president and the Republicans control both chambers of Congress. It has been that way most of the time since 2001. Has the size of government been shrinking? Are federal agencies being abolished? Are laws that unconstitutionally meddle in the private affairs of American citizens being repealed? That's what a Rip Van Winkle who had dozed off in 1965 might expect, but he'd be wrong. Way wrong. In fact, the size and power of government have been growing more rapidly than at any time since the administration of Lyndon Johnson. This turn of events has quite a few people asking what has happened to the Republican Party. Are we in a real-life "Invasion of the Body Snatchers"?

### **A conservative metamorphosis**

In his book *Leviathan on the Right*, Michael Tanner attempts to explain the Republican metamorphosis. His thesis is simple — a new brand of "conservatism" has become dominant among Republican officeholders and their intellectual devotees. Whereas in Goldwater's time, to be a conservative meant to oppose the expansion of government and to approve of capitalism, today many "conservatives" espouse "big government conservatism," a philosophical jumble that applauds the growth of state power as long as it is for (supposedly) good reasons and often looks askance at capitalism. Tanner observes that we have a Republican president who says that it is the government's duty "to step in whenever anyone hurts" and a recently defeated Republican, Sen. Rick Santorum, contends that real liberty doesn't mean being left alone to make one's own choices, but rather "the freedom to attend to one's duties to God, to family, and to neighbors." Those are sentiments that almost any big-government advocate in the Democratic Party would approve of. Tanner correctly concludes that "all this brings big-government conservatism full circle to where, as far as the size and scope of government are concerned, little difference exists between them and modern liberals."

Quite so. How did it happen?

Our author makes it clear that the Republicans were never a party with a real commitment to classical liberal principles, but, in the post-World War II years it consisted mostly of two camps — the "Old Right" and the anti-communists. They had enough in common to make a fairly durable alliance. The Old Right liked the idea of government that stuck to its proper, constitutional limits and otherwise left people alone, but they hated communism for the same reason. The anti-communists were mainly afraid of the Red Menace around the globe, but had little liking for the expanding welfare state domestically. The likes of Eisenhower and Sen. Robert A. Taft weren't gung-ho libertarians, but neither did they want to use federal power to "do good."

In contrast, today's Republican Party has a large contingent of people who either actively promote or are indifferent to the expansion of governmental power. Tanner lists just some of the "accomplishments" of these folks during the George W. Bush administration:

- The largest new entitlement program since the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, the prodigiously expensive Medicare prescription-drug benefit.

- A dramatic increase in federal control over local schools.
- Enactment of “campaign finance legislation” that greatly restricts freedom of speech.
- Federalized airport security and the cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security.
- An additional 7,000 pages of new federal regulations.
- A federal program to promote marriage.
- Costly new controls over corporate governance.
- An explosion of “earmarked” federal spending.

Mighty impressive — if you don’t care about the Constitution, personal liberty, or allowing individuals to keep as much of their earnings as possible.

As Butch Cassidy said to the Sundance Kid, “Who *are* those guys?” Tanner identifies several groups that exert strong influence in the contemporary Republican Party, all of them perfectly comfortable with big government.

### **Big-government conservatives**

First and foremost, there are the neoconservatives. The “neo-cons” are former Democrats and their intellectual descendants who broke with that party in the 1960s and 1970s over foreign-policy issues, wanting a more aggressive U.S. stance than many “dovish” Democrats favored. Tanner writes of them that they have a “lingering affection for FDR and the New Deal” and besides advocating U.S. military intervention abroad, push for welfare programs that “encourage bourgeois virtues.”

Second, there are the “national greatness conservatives.” Their Big Idea is that Americans need to unite behind great national projects, whether it’s building democracy around the world or compelling Americans to do more to help others here. One of their suggestions is that we need a mandatory “national service” program that will dragoon all young people into some kind of service, military or civilian, so they will get the feel for doing things that are “bigger than themselves.”

Third, there is the Religious Right. Initially allied with the Republicans because they so disliked the leftist moral agenda of the Democrats, the Religious Right eventually figured out that they could do much more than just oppose the Democrats on issues such as abortion and gay rights. With Republican help, they could use government power to advance their own vision of a good society; hence the recent federal crackdowns on pornography and gambling. Many people in the Religious Right have no objection in principle to governmental coercion, but just don’t like certain kinds of it.

Fourth, there is the “technophile” segment, whose best-known member is former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. They envision a future made far better by technology and want

government to wisely invest in and use technology to solve social problems. Battling to down-size the federal Leviathan is far down the list of priorities with them.

Finally, there is a “supply side” faction affiliated with the former congressman Jack Kemp. What those people believe is that with intelligent tax cutting to spur the economy, there would be no need to fight to reduce the size of government, and might even be sufficient revenue for some politically popular growth.

With that cast of characters egging them on, it’s hardly surprising that Republican politicians have, for the most part, abandoned the limited-government philosophy of Goldwater in favor of big-government conservatism. Overwhelmingly, they are just the same as their Democratic counterparts — they enjoy spending the billions taken from taxpayers on programs and projects that help them get reelected. They have no commitment to liberty or the Constitution but simply like the powers and perks of office. So the government keeps growing, no matter which party is in power.

Tanner doesn’t hesitate to name names and give quotations to prove his point that many people with influence in the Republican Party are remarkably hostile to individual liberty. David Brooks, for example, writing about the glories of national service, says, “Today’s children ... would suddenly face drill sergeants reminding them they are nothing without the group.” Yikes! Gary Bauer contends, “The question is not whether you legislate morality. The question is whose morality you’re going to legislate.” After reading *Leviathan on the Right*, it’s just impossible to entertain the notion that the Republicans are interested in maximizing freedom and minimizing government.

One conclusion we should draw is this: The term “conservative” has now lost all meaning and ought to be retired once and for all.

### **The politics of big government**

What are the Republican leaders themselves concluding? In the 2006 midterm elections, they were clobbered. Many voters who were polled agreed with the statement “The Republicans used to be the party of economic growth, fiscal discipline, and limited government, but in recent years, too many Republicans in Washington have become just like the big spenders they used to oppose.” Those sentiments were no doubt widespread, but it is hard to believe that the neocons, national-greatness crusaders, leaders of the Religious Right, and other big-government types are going to say, “We’re sorry we led you off a cliff and it won’t happen again.” If the Republicans are going to become a limited-government/individual-liberty party, it will take a “grassroots” revolt, with GOP primary voters turning thumbs down on big-government types and nominating slates of candidates who are committed to chopping away at the federal Leviathan.

If that doesn’t happen and big-government conservatives remain in control, Tanner says that we’ll “end up with nothing in Washington but a debate between big government and bigger

government,” with the result that “our children will inherit an America that is less prosperous and less free.”

True, but we had better not place too much confidence in a dramatic turnaround for the Republican Party. For one thing, its history as a party committed to limited government is pretty spotty. Its recent embrace of government power as the solution to just about everything may seem like an anomaly, but arguably Goldwater was the anomaly. Throughout most of its history, the Republican Party has been a congenial home for big-government advocates.

And here’s a really depressing thought — what if the Republican politicians have correctly read the electorate? What if it’s the case that most Americans now think that — contrary to all reason and evidence — government really should be doing more? What if most of our fellow citizens just don’t care that current and proposed government actions violate both the Constitution and the libertarian idea of individual rights? What if, in short, most people are statist of one kind or another? If so, then even if limited-government stalwarts were to take control of the Republican Party, the results would be the same as in 1964, or worse.

Just as businessmen usually assess market demand pretty accurately and offer customers the products they really want, politicians are pretty good at figuring out what ideas voters will buy and what ideas they won’t. Therefore, it would be a mistake to see the 2006 election as a repudiation of big-government conservatism, however comforting that idea may be. It was a vote against a scandal-plagued party that had begun a protracted, unpopular war, not a vote against big government.

Tanner mentions recent polling that shows no more than 20 percent of Americans holding generally libertarian views, and perhaps it’s closer to 10 percent. The media, the education system, and nearly all politicians constantly propound the message that government action will make things better. They’re clearly succeeding in convincing people that they should trust in the state rather than in voluntary efforts. If no more than a fifth of the electorate opposes big government, does it really matter very much how the statist factions align themselves within the two major parties?

The lesson to take from *Leviathan on the Right*, I believe, is that we libertarians face an enormous challenge. It’s not to tilt the Republican Party back towards its Goldwater days, but to convince far more Americans that big-government liberalism and big-government conservatism are both disastrous.

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