

December 26, 2008

Surprise! Conservatives can be Generous, Too

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A Christmas Carol, a great morality play, is a staple of December, so let's address morality and public policy. Are tax cutters today's equivalent of the uncharitable and selfish Ebenezer Scrooge?

Along with a dozen other people, I'm part of a featured panel of bloggers hosted by a major newspaper. To paraphrase one of my co-panelists, "Some of us actually think that we ought to care for each other and be willing to pay taxes for public services that help people. Tax-cutters are simply being selfish."

New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristof, meanwhile, recently opined that "liberals show tremendous compassion in pushing for generous government spending to help the neediest people."

Kristof made the mistake of thinking that it's possible to be compassionate with other people's money. My debating partner, meanwhile, committed another error—found among advocates at all parts of the political spectrum—that you can easily infer someone's personal qualities from his or her political views. Liberals seem to think that conservatives aren't simply misguided, but evil, or at the last ethically challenged.

Both conservatives and liberals can be accused of wanting to impose their vision of government on everyone else—imposing visions is what government is all about. So both sides are selfish, in that they say "let's do things *my* way."

There are several important reasons, selfishness aside, to favor smaller and more focused government. Some of them are even grounded in concern for others. In fact, I'd say that all of them are.

If giving money to the poor is your primary concern, government is an ineffective tool. Much of the federal budget is spent on the military, not the homeless or the down-and-out. State budgets, meanwhile, are filled with appropriations for the middle and even upper class, such as bonding projects for elite arts institutions.

Often, public programs are inefficient, since spending levels are based on clout and connections rather than performance. Billions of dollars of increased spending on schools

over the last 30 years, for example, have not significantly boosted student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

At some times and in some places, public agencies and legislatures do get things right. New York City has made a serious dent in crime. For a while, the Federal Reserve kept inflation under control. Congress even got our money back from the loans it guaranteed for Chrysler in the 1970s.

But modest successes deceive our leaders into thinking that if government can get some things right, it can get many things right. Witness, for example, recent municipal forays into providing broadband service, even though businesses are rolling out broadband all the time. Several municipal plans, by contrast, have ended badly.

Wisdom borne of failure is one reason for opposing a more active government. Another is to adhere to a reading of the U.S. Constitution that finds it limits government power. It's not a stretch to think that since the U.S. Navy is constitutional, so is the U.S. Air Force. But No Child Left Behind? That's a stretch, considering that the Constitution says nothing about education, let alone a federal role for schools.

Expanding government is also unwise because it causes the poor and weak to suffer at the hands of the strong and well-connected. Every day, businesses get by without government, some with great effort. But now, waitresses earning a sub-minimum wage, registered nurses and line workers at Toyota's assembly plant in Kentucky will pay an economic price to "be compassionate" to the well-connected UAW and Detroit's Big Three automakers. Their tax dollars will be diverted into welfare for corporations that have failed.

So there are at least three reasons to favor putting government on a diet: Stop wasting money; adhere to the constitution, and avoid politicizing life any further.

Still, what about the personal qualities of conservatives and liberals? Who is more generous in their personal lives?

Two years ago, Arthur C. Brooks, an economics professor at Syracuse University in New York, touched on this question in his book "Who Really Cares?" He poured over data from academic surveys such as the General Social Survey, looking for factors that divide conservatives from liberals.

Brooks found that as a rule, conservatives are not richer than liberals. But they are more likely to donate money to charities and to give more as a portion of their income. This is true even after factoring out religious causes.

This isn't to say that liberals are bad people and that conservatives are good. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

But it does suggest that a person's view on the size of public budget is not an accurate gauge of their generosity.