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# **On the Conservative View of Government**

George H. Blackford (2010)

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"Every man for himself and God for all of us!" the elephant said as he danced among the chickens. We live in a strange world. A world in which we are all dependent on society for our economic wellbeing, indeed, for our very existence, and at the same time many of those who benefit the most from this symbiotic relationship think they deserve whatever they are able to get their hands on because in some mythical way they got it on their own. There seems to be no recognition as to how different their lives would be if they had been born to poor parents in some rural village or urban slum in Latin America, the Caribbean, or Africa. Where is it written that freedom means one can take from society anything within reach without having any responsibility toward the society as a whole? I fear the "I got mine, screw you" attitude that has dominated the political debate in our country for the last forty years is destroying the very society on which we all depend.

For the past forty years the Conservative Movement has incessantly attacked the American government as if the solution to all of our problems is to be found in lowering taxes and government expenditures and in getting rid of government regulations. This is the same government that has created the Social Security system to provide old age and disability insurance; Medicare and Medicaid to provide health insurance for the aged and the indigent; the Veterans Administration to serve our veterans; unemployment insurance to soften the blow of unemployment for the unemployed; the Food and Drug Administration to protect us from tainted food and worthless or dangerous drugs; the Security Exchange Commission to fight fraud in the financial sector of our economy; the Federal Reserve System to regulate banks and provide for economic stability; the Consumer Protection Agency to protect us from dangerous consumer goods; the Environmental Protection Agency to prevent the poisoning of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the very ground on which we live; the

Occupational Safety and Health Administration to provide for a safer workplace; and countless other institutions and regulatory agencies that provide for the common good as is called for in the constitution. ([Kuttner Amy](#))

It is also the same government that created the transcontinental railroad and interstate highway systems along with all of our state highways, county roads, and city streets; the military that provides for our national defense; the police and judicial systems which provide for law and order within society; our firefighters; our national, state, and local park systems; our system of public health departments that has been so effective in controlling the spread of infectious diseases; and our land grant college system and other public college, university, secondary, and elementary school systems devoted to the concept of universal education that has proved to be the backbone of economic and social development within our society for the past 150 odd years. And this is the same government that won World War II and the Cold War and that has fueled the most powerful economic engine in the world. These are all the products of our government, and it is this government Conservatives have been attacking for the past forty years--the government of the United States of America as defined by the Constitution. ([Kuttner Amy](#))

The free market ideologues who dominate the Conservative Movement believe that all we have to do is stop our government from doing the things it does and unregulated free markets will solve all of our problems. They live in a delusional world. ([Utopian](#)) In the real world unregulated free markets lead to dangerous foods, drugs, and other goods being fraudulently or negligently foisted on an unsuspecting public; unrestrained pollution of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the ground on which we live; increasingly dangerous and harmful work environments; an inequitable distribution of income and wealth; and fraudulent and reckless behavior in the financial markets that bring about economic catastrophes that threaten the wellbeing not only of those that participate in these markets, but of innocent people that have no direct involvement in these markets at all. This is the history of unregulated [free market capitalism](#), and this history is absolutely undeniable. It is the presence of government that moderates these forces within a capitalist system, and it is the height of foolishness to think that

somehow life would be better if we did away with government programs designed to provide for the common good or to think that somehow we can have the benefits of government without paying for them.

The rightwing Conservative philosophy that embodies this foolishness and that has dominated the political debate in our country for the last forty years has led to a set of policies that have been disastrous for our country. ([Blame](#)) Their deregulatory legislation, defunding of regulatory agencies, and refusal to enforce existing regulations has led to the worst economic catastrophe since the Great Depression. ([Past](#)) The consequence of their exorbitant tax cuts in the face of their build up of national defense and increases in the funneling of government monies to private corporations led to an explosion in the national debt even before the economic catastrophe they created came into being. This explosion threatens the economic foundation on which our government is based, and in the presence of a pigheaded unwillingness to acknowledge the essential nature of government benefits and that *these benefits must be paid for with taxes*, it is virtually impossible to raise the taxes that are necessary to stop this explosion. And if this explosion is not stopped it will bring down our entire economic system. ([Primer](#))

The current healthcare debate is clearly another aspect of the debate that has been going on in our country since the latter half of the 19th century between those who believe the purpose of government is to serve the common good and those who believe its purpose is to serve the corporate interests. The simple fact is that the United States has the single worst healthcare delivery system among the developed nations of the world. We pay more for healthcare than any other country--both on a per capita basis and as a percent of our national income--and our people are sicker and less healthy than the people of any other developed nation. ([Kaiser CF](#)) This is so in spite of the fact that we are, by far, the richest country in the world in terms of total output and among the richest when it comes to per capita output. There is one simple reason for our dismal performance in this regard--we are the only developed nation that does not have a comprehensive government run healthcare system. Unlike every other developed nation we put corporate interests in healthcare ahead of the common good, and the

result is the mess we find ourselves in today. Given the kind of [fee for service, third party payment system](#) we have the economic incentives in our healthcare system are aligned in such a way that this mess is inevitable. ([Kuttner](#))

I would note that simply forcing everyone to purchase health insurance in the absence of some way to control costs is not the solution. This would only serve the corporate interests as healthcare costs ballooned even worse than they have over the past sixty years as our existing fee for service, third party payment system took its toll on the health status and pocketbooks of ordinary people. To control costs in this kind of system there must be some kind of single payer arrangement whereby the single payer has the ability to negotiate costs, or at the very least there must be some kind of robust government insurance plan (public option) to compete with the private insurance plans. Even here it is not certain how effective a competing government plan would be at cutting costs in the absence of a single payer. (cf. [CIVITAS](#))

You do not have to be an economist to look around the world and see that free market capitalism is not the *sine qua non* of economic prosperity and social wellbeing. All of the most prosperous countries of the world, especially in North America and Western Europe, contain significant and essential elements of socialism. At the same time, the vast majority of people who live in what we euphemistically call the Free World—the Caribbean Island nations, Latin America, and much of Africa and Asia—live in abject poverty. The fundamental difference between the prosperous and free, and the impoverished and enslaved throughout the world is the quality of their governments. When markets fail there is a chance that government can do something about it. When governments fail all is lost. The single most damning failure of the [free market ideologues](#) who have driven the Conservative Movement for the past forty years is their failure to grasp this obvious and simple fact along with the equally obvious and simple fact that the benefits of good government are not free, but must be paid for with taxes.<sup>1</sup>

## Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup> See also [Where Did All the Money Go?](#), [The Rise of Utopian Capitalism](#), [Some Notes on Republicans and Torture](#), [It makes Sense if You Don't Think About It](#), [How Propaganda Works](#), and [Some Notes on Rightwing Propaganda](#).