



Big Government Still Bipartisan

Remember the famous declaration of victory in the never-ending battle against Big Government? It was made by none other than Bill Clinton himself: "The era of big government is over," the President said in his State of the Union address early in 1995.

Members of Congress stood and cheered. The *Weekly Standard*, a neoconservative journal opposed to any big-government programs unless the programs kill people or rob them of their liberties, ran a celebratory cover in its next issue: "We Win!"

It was not an end to big government, which stretches like the Sahara, far beyond the distant horizon. It was not even an oasis. It was more like a mirage. Soon the world of conservative punditry returned to reality, a reality best expressed by George Will's sober assessment: "The era of saying 'the era of big government is over' is over."



Sure was a short era. But that is actually a blessing. If we must suffer illusions, let them be brief. Illusions, both of the liberal and conservative variety, usually end before the first year of a new presidency has run its course. Already we are hearing the prognosis: America is suffering from Obama fatigue.

Surely the *Weekly Standard* will second that observation. Writers there and in *National Review* and other important conservative journals have been warning for a long time that Obama's success lay not in the cogency of his policy proposals or his sense of history or his ability to come to grips with complex national and international problems that require complex and resourceful conclusions. No, they have said repeatedly, Obama's political successes have been affirmations of the cult of his celebrity. Republicans were very clever in caricaturing that celebrity in the '08 campaign, but it did the Party and its candidates little good. Not many voters were inclined to turn away from Oprah's choice for President because he reminds Republican ad men of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. And the Party of the rail-splitting hero, the great soft-walking, big stick-carrying Rough Rider, and the great Gipper of the silver screen are not in the best position to protest the cult of celebrity in presidential politics.

Let us remember why President Clinton felt it incumbent on him in early 1995 to declare the end of big government. He was freshly bruised and battered in the congressional and gubernatorial elections of 2004, sometimes called the Tsunami or the Gingrich Revolution. Republicans won control of both the House and Senate for the first time in 42 years. No Republican incumbent member of Congress lost. Few Democrat incumbents survived. And it was neither an economic collapse or foreign policy disaster that turned the tide against Clinton's party. No, it was the overly ambitious Hillary healthcare reform, which resembled a rat's maze drawn up by a committee of commissars and had *big government* written



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 30, 2009

all over it.

Now, it may be belaboring the obvious to say that the bigger the government, the more lobbyists it will attract. But then maybe not. It appears not that obvious to many liberals. They often promise, as Obama did, to reduce the influence of lobbyists at the same time they campaign on promises to create a national healthcare program, cap-and-trade programs to reduce carbon emissions, reduce the rise of the oceans, harness the wind, clean the air and the water, combat the nefarious influence of second-hand smoke, and fine tune population growth. And that is but a partial agenda.

So Obama has gone down the Clinton road of healthcare reform, but rather than put it in the hands of a busybody wife of the President, he left the details pretty much up to Congress. Meanwhile the number of lobbyists defies all concepts of population control. According to an ABC News report, based in turn on a report by the Bloomberg News Service, more than 3,300 lobbyists have enlisted for service in the healthcare reform debate, or roughly six lobbyists for every member of both the House and Senate. That was in August of this year. The ranks have swollen since then, since the same ABC report said three new healthcare lobbyists were signing up every day. At the time of that mid-August report, the lobbying organizations had spent on the healthcare battle a reported \$263 million — and rising.

It does not mean that all these lobbyists and their clients want a national healthcare program. Some do. Some large insurance companies, for example, are obviously in favor of legislation that would mandate the purchase of health insurance by individuals or their employers and would require all but very small employers to purchase health insurance for their workers. It is not hard to see why insurance companies would say "Yea" and "Amen" to that kind of "reform." We might easily imagine the lobbying effort Anheuser-Busch might mount if there were any chance of legislation passing, or even being seriously introduced, that would require all Americans to either buy beer or have it bought for them. The advertising and lobbying campaigns would have us believe that beer is the ultimate health food, better than Wheaties and darn near as good as a soybean substitute for ground beef.

But consider all the businesses that will be affected by healthcare reform. Not only insurers, but all sorts of healthcare providers-hospitals, clinics, doctors, pharmacies, perhaps even health clubs and fitness centers. And all kinds of workplaces. Many who are concentrating lobbying efforts on healthcare reform do so not because they want healthcare reform, but they sense it is coming, whether they like it or not, and they want legislation that will do them the least harm. It is somewhat like the gangland practice of "selling protection." Spend tons of money on "access" to key Congressmen and expect they will do their best to keep their colleagues from fleecing you. If you can't remove the weight and burden of the legislation, perhaps you can at least keep a thumb on the scales.

Against all that institutional weight, conservative and libertarian lobbies like the Cato Institute have a minimal impact, save in the debate on the Internet and on public and cable television. This is something that conservatives and even neocons understand, as Fred Barnes, executive editor of the *Weekly Standard* points out. Busy-bee legislation promoted by Obama and Democrats in Congress draws lobbyists like honey draws flies. The front page of *USA Today* recently carried the headline: "Health care fight swells lobbying. Number of organizations hiring firms doubles in '09." And as Barnes noted in an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal*, the Congress has at the same time become more polarized along partisan lines, with all Democrats voting for White House initiatives and all Republicans voting against.

But that is not the end of the sad story. Because what Barnes neglects to say is that the K Street homes of Washington lobbying firms were not vacant or up for sale during recent Republican administrations.



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How many lobbyists, one wonders, were involved in the passage of the prescription drug benefit in the Medicare program, championed by President George W. Bush. Or the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. Or on all the military spending, none of which is ever wasteful in the eyes of either conservatives or neocons.

Yes, big government is in the eye of the beholder. But however polarized the political establishment may appear, one constant remains: Big Government, in all its expensive varieties, is forever bipartisan.



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