

This Can Make the United States Stronger

Published in Bitterroot Star 4/8/2020 and Ravalli Republic 4/12/2020

During our “stay at home” confinement, I have been listening to the “radio” and “tv” more than usual, asking myself how long this will last and what should I be doing to prepare for the future when this is over?

The reality of the near-term is becoming clearer. To contain this virus, our lives will be turned upside down for at least the next two months. What our country, our state, and our community need to do long term is not so clear.

While observing the national tug of war between Washington DC and individual States over how to deal with Covid-19, I have concluded that we are witnessing the incremental breakdown of the working relationship between our local, state, and federal government that began with the Reagan inspired Republican ideology that “Government is the Problem”. The long-held Republican goal to dismantle the programs of the “New Deal” has resulted in the election of anti-government officials across the country and driven a gradual and purposeful erosion of the programs and services provided by all levels of government. States fighting over and being outbid to get the critical PPE and ventilators, inconsistent implementation of the CDC guidance, and lack of statewide resources are, I believe, a direct result of this anti-government propaganda campaign. This attack on centralized government continues and is widespread. An example in the Bitterroot is seen in the numerous Theresa Manzella campaign signs boldly proclaiming “Just Say Whoa to Runaway Government”.

In recent letters to the editor, several Republican State Leaders and Ravalli County Legislators have praised themselves how their party’s legislative priorities have worked to keep the state budget in a good condition capable of withstanding this near term disruption. But I fully expect that once they finish congratulating themselves, they will start blaming “the government” for any shortcomings or weaknesses revealed by battling this pandemic. It didn’t take long for them to claim in an editorial that “our greatest strength lies in our families, businesses, and communities- not in the government”. While I agree with the importance of families, businesses and communities, our legislative leader’s dismissal of the government is misguided. A strong government is essential in times of crisis. If the government response comes up short, we can only blame ourselves. After all, we are the government.

“No regulations, lower taxes, smaller government, and more local control” may be the battle cry of the Republican Party, but sound bites don’t solve problems. The fact that we are the “United” States means there is a necessary role for the government and we need to stop vilifying it as “the enemy”. Yes, businesses can be more creative and nimble and can deliver results faster and more efficiently. And yes, churches, organizations, volunteers, and local expertise are vital in keeping the community whole. But only government has the resources, manpower, and money to respond to an event of this magnitude. Only government has the authority and ability to provide consistent guidance, coordinate conflicting approaches, and control what otherwise can easily be unorganized, wasteful, and competitive chaos. Government is the hub that keeps all the spokes in the wheel turning on everyone’s behalf.

So when this tragedy finally plays itself out, I hope we realize that each level of government has its place. I also hope we can honestly look back on what policies served us well, which ones didn’t and make adjustments where needed regardless of party affiliation. Otherwise we will have squandered this opportunity to make the “United” States stronger after this is over.

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