

# Federal

## THE STEAMROLLER

# Spending

By Peggy Noonan

The problem with government is that it is run by people, and people are flawed. They are not virtue machines. We are all of us, even the best of us, vulnerable to the call of the low: to greed, conceit, insensitivity, ruthlessness, the desire to show you're in control, in charge, in command.

If the problem with government is that it is run by people and not, as James Madison put it, angels, the problem with *big* government is that it is run by a *lot* of people who are not angels. They can, together and in the aggregate, do much mischief. They can and inevitably will produce a great deal of injustice, corruption and heartlessness.

People in government—people in a huge, sprawling government—often get carried away. And they don't always even mean to. But they are little tiny parts of a large and overwhelming thing. If government is a steamroller, and that is in good part how I see it, the individuals who work in it are the atoms in the steel. The force of forward motion carries them along. There is inevitably an unaccountability, and in time often an indifference about what the steamroller rolls over. All the busy little atoms are watching each other, competing with each other, winning one for their little cluster. And no one is looking out and being protective of

what the steamroller is rolling over—traditions, shared beliefs, individual rights, old assumptions, whatever is being rolled over today.

This is essentially why conservatives of my generation and earlier generations don't like big government. They don't even like government. We know we have to have one, that it is necessary, that it can and must do good, that it has real responsibilities that must be met. Madison again, in Federalist 51: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself."

These are wise words.

But conservatives are not supposed to like big government. It's not our job. We're supposed to like freedom and the rights of the individual. (Individuals aren't virtue machines either, but they're less powerful than governments and so generally less damaging.) We're supposed to be on the side of the grass the steamroller flattens.

Twenty-five years ago the conservative movement came to Washington, and much

good came of its arrival. The argument against big government—its big taxing and big regulating, its bias toward a kind of enforced cultural conformity—was made again and again. The growth of government slowed, its demands to some degree beaten back.

The leadership of the Republican Party was now, in its avowed aims if not its daily practices, antigovernment. The party that was, in its daily operations if not always its avowed intentions, pro-government, the Democrats, remained in effective control of Congress and the courts.

There was progress in the 1980s. The steamroller slowed.

Eleven years ago came the Gingrich revolution and the Contract With America. That contract could be boiled down to these words: Stop the Steamroller. Take away its gas, make it smaller, term-limit it. Be on the side of the grass. This movement too did good work—it actually forced upon the federal government a balanced budget—but in the end results were mixed, as political results tend to be. The steamroller rolled on.

What followed was the trauma of the end of the Clinton years, the 2000 election, the Bush administration, and the historic rise in the antisteamroller party of a new operating assumption: that the steamroller will always be with us. And that if it is destined to become always and every year bigger, heavier and more powerful, then you might as well relax and learn how to run it, how to drive it and direct it. Make friends with the steamroller. Run it to your own ends and not the other team's.

This was understandable, especially after 9/11. Defense is expensive; technology has its own demands; the stakes are high.

And yet. All other parts of the government grew. The size and force of it grew in ways that were not at all necessary or crucial.

And learning to accept the steamroller, learning to direct the steamroller, learning in

fact to love the steamroller, can get you to some bad places. To more size, more action, more corruption. To flawed people who are essentially unaccountable and busy winning their own victories for their own cluster. "I got mine. You got yours?"

Political corruption is always more likely when you fall in love with the steamroller. Or if not loving it accepting it, being "realistic" about it, embracing it.

There's a lot of talk among Republicans that since recent scandals involve politicians and staff on both sides of the aisle, the public will not punish the Republicans. This assertion is countered by the argument that while the public will likely see the story as one of government corruption, Congress and the White House are run by Republicans, so Republicans will pay the price. I think this is true, but I think it misses a larger point: In some rough way the public expects the party that loves big government to be pretty good at finagling government, playing with it, using it for its own ends. That's kind of what they do. They love the steamroller, of course they love the grease that makes it run. But the anti-big-government party isn't supposed to be so good at it, so enmeshed in it. The antigovernment party isn't supposed to be so good at oiling the steamroller's parts and pushing its levers. And so happy doing the oiling and pushing.

It isn't good to love the steamroller. In the end it can roll right over you, and all you stand for, or stood for.

Is there a way for Republicans to go? Stop trying to fit in. Stop being another atom in the steel. It does no good trying to run a better steamroller. It won't work. Steamrollers are not your friend.

*Peggy Noonan is a contributing editor of The Wall Street Journal. Reprinted from The Wall Street Journal (c) 2006 Dow Jones & Company. All rights reserved.*

