

The Delray Democrat

Good Government¹

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In the aftermath of the bloodiest battle of America's first Civil War, the man considered one of our two greatest presidents spoke with his characteristic eloquence of his hope that America would "have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." The words are as timely, and precious, today as they were then.

Abraham Lincoln founded the Republican Party, but it has been decades since Republicans evinced any interest in government, much less a government of, by, and for the people. We can actually date the transformation to January 20, 1981, when the man Bette Davis once called "little Ronnie Reagan" conned millions of Americans into believing that "Government is not the solution to the problem: government is the problem."

That depends on the governors, of course. "Republicans campaign on the theme that government is bad," as Al Franken once quipped, "and they can't wait to get elected and show just how bad it is." The most recent and horrifying example was Trump's grotesque mishandling of the pandemic, in which more than 400,000 Americans died of Covid-19 on his watch.

He ignored [warnings](#) from his own administration that the government was "underfunded, underprepared and uncoordinated for a life-or-death battle with a virus for which no treatment existed"; he allowed the virus to proliferate by failing to organize national testing and tracing; he abandoned those on the front lines by failing to use the federal government to organize the production and distribution of personal protective equipment; he ignored and ridiculed scientists; and he undermined governors who sought to contain the virus with closures and mask mandates.

Anyone who doubts that Trump is responsible for tens if not [hundreds of thousands](#) of Americans dying needlessly must explain how it came to pass that America has accounted for 20% of global Covid deaths despite constituting only 4% of the world's population. We are the richest country on earth and yet lead the world in Covid deaths.

Republicans Excel at Showing America How Bad Government Can Be

Trump is the poster child, but "bad government" has been the hallmark of every Republican administration over the last four decades. To be fair, of course, it's hard to provide for or protect ordinary Americans when you don't see that as part of your job description.

The AIDS epidemic began in 1981, but it was 4 years before Reagan even uttered the word publicly. His press secretary joked about the "gay plague" and 89,343 people died on Reagan's watch.

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George W. Bush launched a \$3-trillion war based on lies that killed thousands of Americans and untold numbers of Iraqi civilians. He then bungled the response to Hurricane Katrina and let the banks run wild, causing ten million Americans to lose their homes and precipitating what was then the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. As a result of Donald Trump's colossal incompetence, today that is only the *second* worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

When Democrats Govern

Albeit unwittingly, Reagan was prescient of Republican failure when he quipped, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are 'I'm with the government, and I'm here to help.'" When Democrats control the reins of government, however, Americans are grateful for the assistance, particularly when it arrives in the wake of yet another Republican disaster.

Franklin D. Roosevelt stands with Lincoln atop our presidential pantheon. FDR came closest to realizing Lincoln's invocation of a government of, by, and for the people. He lifted the country out of the Great Depression and created a middle class that was once the envy of the world. That changed when Reagan replaced FDR's New Deal with his own Raw Deal, and ordinary Americans have been suffering ever since.

Nearly 80 years after the Great Depression began, we almost fell into another, with 800,000 jobs being shed monthly when Bush left office. Within 10 months of Obama's inauguration, some 4 million jobs were lost. Despite the monolithic opposition of the same Republican Party responsible for the crisis, Obama added 11.5 million jobs during his two terms and averted another Great Depression. And now here we go again, with Joe Biden inheriting an economy that has lost 10 million jobs and a pandemic that has killed more than half a million Americans.

"To Promote the General Welfare"

Democrats are the party most associated with programs that "Promote the General Welfare," one of the goals of government identified in the Preamble to our Constitution. They created Social Security, unemployment insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act. There was a time, however, when Republicans actually believed in and heeded the constitutional command.

Teddy Roosevelt established the Food and Drug Administration to protect Americans from unsafe food and used the government to break the power of monopolies that held consumers and rivals hostage.

Dwight D. Eisenhower and even Richard Nixon used government on behalf of the people. Ike built the interstate highway system and Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency and signed the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the Clean Water and Clear Air Acts.

With Joe Biden in the White House and Democrats controlling Congress, there are signs the pendulum is swinging back, at least with respect to the public's desire for and appreciation of good government. Three-quarters of Americans support the American Rescue Act of 2021, including 60% of Republicans. The bill goes well beyond an economic stimulus, as it includes measures that will reduce income inequality and significantly cut child poverty.

Republican columnist David Brooks is already referring to Joe Biden as a “[transformational president](#)” and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 as “one of the most important pieces of legislation of our lifetimes.” Michelle Goldberg has suggested that the malignant shadow cast by Ronald Reagan is finally dissipating, referring to Biden’s as “[The First Post-Reagan Presidency](#).”

The Way Forward

This is only the beginning. There’s so much more to accomplish for an administration already channeling FDR. Passing an Infrastructure/Green New Deal bill is essential both as a jobs program and a matter of national security. The jobs created will pay part of the cost – call it “trickle-up economics.” The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act signed by Obama proved that “trickle-up” actually works while simultaneously (and once again) exposing Reagan’s “trickle-down” as a con game invented and espoused by professional liars for credulous fools.

Indeed, Trump’s tax bill may have finally driven the stake through the lie that wouldn’t die. Now even Joe Manchin is [talking](#) about repealing some of the tax cuts to the wealthy and increasing the corporate tax rate to help pay for the infrastructure bill.

Increasing IRS funding to pursue tax cheats and avoiders will pay for itself many times over. The IRS recently [reported](#) that nearly one million wealthy individuals had failed to file taxes over the prior three-year period, costing the government nearly \$46 billion in taxes. A recent [article](#) estimated that increasing the IRS budget by \$100 billion over the next 10 years would raise \$1.15 trillion.

So stay tuned. Republicans have not even paid lip service to good government in 40 years. The idea is so old (and venerable) that it’s become new again, and JRB is going to run with it.