

A theological rationale for government: Human depravity necessitates accountability

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [November 18, 2008](#) issue

The frightening downturn on Wall Street has caused even some staunch antigovernment pundits to begin rethinking their assumption that all government regulation is bad. That is a rethinking this country desperately needs.

In the early 1980s I worked with a man who would go on to be a prominent figure in the Christian right. He was my first close acquaintance who believed that all taxation was suspect. Indeed, for him the very idea of government was suspect.

This was not what I had learned in my high school civics class. You couldn't come of age in the post-Vietnam and Watergate 1970s and fail to know that government could be corrupt, but it was still widely accepted that government had real and even noble potential. Government could serve the common good not only by providing for national defense but by providing education for all citizens, organizing energy and transportation infrastructures and watching out for the interests and dignity of the little guy. As Thomas Frank recalls in his book *The Wrecking Crew*, it wasn't all that long ago that a widely adopted civics textbook bore the title *We Are the Government*. It told students on its dust jacket, "The White House belongs to you. So do all the other splendid buildings in Washington, D.C. For you are a citizen of the United States."

So when I heard my co-worker talk about taxation as expropriation, and otherwise express a kind of principled cynicism about the potential of almost all government, I chalked these up as basically fringe notions. How wrong I was. These ideas spread and now pervade the American psyche, epitomized by tax-cutting activist Grover Norquist's remark that the ideal government is one small enough to drown in a bathtub.

As the conservative theorist Richard Weaver asserted, ideas have consequences. If we assume that government is basically ignoble and odious, it shouldn't come as a surprise that government will sooner or later prove to be exactly that. Only in the American politics of the past few decades could important positions be won by those who deplored the offices they wanted to occupy. Imagine a business executive who said that the world of business is fundamentally inept and malignant. What self-respecting company would hire him or her? At the very least, we can't expect the best and the brightest to pursue government service when we consistently tell them that government work is bumbling, demeaning and insidious.

Don't mistake my meaning. It's the church, not any national government, that is the theopolitical center of Christian life and the premier social agency of witness to the kingdom of God on earth. But what needs underscoring now is that while for Christians government work can never claim the highest or primary allegiance, government can serve as a real—if secondary—good. Politicians, like physicians, are never perfect. Like physicians, they can do serious harm. Like physicians, politicians can tempt us to idolatry, and in that sense they can be at their most dangerous when they are most effective. But also like physicians, politicians can do genuine good.

The disastrous consequences of fundamental cynicism about all potential of government came clear during and after Hurricane Katrina. What is not so often remembered is how government responded to an earlier hurricane. When Betsy struck New Orleans in 1965, President Johnson flew there the next day. Upon landing, he shouted over the wind, "I am here because I wanted to see with my own eyes what the unhappy alliance of wind and water have done to this land and its people."

The idea that government can be a genuine good is not a partisan notion, exclusive to Democrats. After all, it was John McCain's hero, Teddy Roosevelt, who was the first president to champion natural conservation and established the national park system.

The theological rationale for the necessity (and the potential nobility) of government can be summarized in two words: original sin. Each and every person and institution is prone to self-deception and destructive self-interest. We all need to be accountable. If original sin truthfully addresses the human condition, we can't simply trust ourselves or our cronies with power. There is no such thing as sufficient self-regulation on Wall Street, on Main Street, in our churches or anywhere else.

Government is an important means of holding ourselves accountable to one another.