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# EDITORIAL

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**A**nyone who is committed to the revitalization of democratic institutions will probably have had some moments of confusion and uneasiness during the past several months while listening to Ronald Reagan criticize the federal government for its bloated size, wastefulness, and meddlesome habits, and promise that during his administration national power would be scaled down and government “returned to the people.” While the rhetoric might seem redolent of some of the sentiments voiced during the era of Vietnam and Watergate, the actuality of the Reagan programs is far different. Reagan spokesmen point to the “new federalism” as a major step toward reducing the size, scope, and cost of the national government. The centerpiece of the Great Reversal is the highly publicized (and obscure) system of block grants that the administration hastily inserted into the budget. In theory, the arrangement would allow the individual states greater discretion in spending federal funds earmarked for certain broad substantive areas, such as secondary education. It is anticipated that most of the grants will represent substantial reductions from previous levels—some estimate more than 25 percent—and so the implication is that if state and local governments want to continue present levels of services and benefits, they will have to exploit their own tax resources, which is not a warming prospect in the aftermath of Proposition 13. In adopting this course of action, the administration also suggested that for some programs, additional funding might be sought from corporations and other private benefactors.

The most charitable thing to be said about these policies and proposals is that, literally, they are a hoax. The “new federalism”—Richard Nixon had a program by the same name, as did Nelson Rockefeller—is, at best, a method of decentralizing the administration and, in some cases, the formulation of programs. Decentralization does not bring government “closer” to the people in any save a metaphorical sense. It represents, instead, an administrative reform that may very well reduce costs by eliminating a layer of government. It does absolutely nothing for democracy, except to offer substitute gratifications. The substance of democracy does not materialize simply because programs are being decided down the turnpike instead of in Washington. What is implied by saying that government is “close” to the people is that there is a greater likelihood of it being “responsive.” But this claim no longer makes sense when public opinion is easily manipulated and information is typically withheld when it isn’t being doctored. But above all, the claim implicitly presupposes the continuation of the gap between government and governed. Democracy, in contrast, requires that the sep-

aration be dissolved and replaced by the recognition of a variety of institutions, from official to informal, spontaneous, and temporary ones, in which people participate because there are things being considered and decided that are of importance to their lives. This is why the mere quantitative increase in the size, functions, and budgets of state and local governments is not a reliable index to the vitality of democracy.

It is not merely that, historically, many states, cities, and counties have, at one time or another, been pushovers for corporations and other powerful economic groups, but that it makes no difference at what level of government programs are formulated, legislated, and executed, if access to these processes depends primarily on having large amounts of money to purchase information, skill, influence, and votes. Power is not choosy about the level of government it seeks to influence. As long as the effort is worthwhile to a corporation, for example, there is much to be said for operating at the local level, where the media are apt to be less enterprising.

If, then, the new federalism is utterly without redeeming democratic significance, why pay any attention to it? There are two good reasons. One is that it is a reminder that democracy cannot be reconstituted by administrative solutions that simply substitute one set of bureaucratic institutions for another. If democracy is to work, political experience must be accessible to the vast majority of people. That is what democratic politics is about. Democratic politics does not exist simply because no formal legal barriers to political experience exist. Politics is democratically meaningless if access to it depends on having unusual amounts of money.

The second reason why the Reagan program is worth looking at is that instead of encouraging greater freedom, as its proponents contend, it promotes dependency. When announcing its intention to curtail various programs, the administration has characteristically invited "the private sector" to assume the costs. Not surprisingly, corporations have reported a dramatic increase in grant applications from antipoverty groups, cultural agencies, universities, and other non-profit organizations. The most highly publicized target of the new approach has been the existing federal program for subsidizing the arts and the humanities. It was clear before Reagan was sworn in that this federal program was doomed on ideological grounds. The Heritage Foundation, which prepared the hatchet job, criticized the National Endowment for the Humanities for its "political and ideological bias" (e.g., "affirmative action quotas") and offered this (nonpolitical and nonideological) guideline:

As a true friend of democracy, the NEH can teach the nation the limits of equalitarian impulse. . . . [NEH should] exercise continuous political skills to avoid entanglement in [democracy's] powerful leveling forces.

Although one fervently hopes that NEH will somehow find the funds to educate the prose writers of the Heritage Foundation in the rudiments of felicitous writing, the clear intention is to use private funding to discipline the arts and humanmanities in much the same way that public television has become the bland medium for disseminating a gentrified culture subsidized by large corporations. It is a beautiful system for controlling culture, not by intimidation but by corruption.

The biggest hoax of all is the claim of the Reaganites that by stripping from the national government many of the programs that had allowed it to regulate and interfere in the daily lives of individuals and businesses, they are substantially reducing the power of the state. A reduction in programs, however, is not necessarily a reduction in state power. When power is overextended, it is more apt to be vexatious than tyrannical. More businesses, one suspects, have been destroyed by tight money policies than by OSHA and the EPA combined. One thing is certain: when the scope of power is reduced and its operations rationalized, the more effective it will be. It is the vision of a leaner, meaner state, not a withered one, that exercises the imagination of the present group of power holders. For some time now the realists on foreign policy and defense have been insisting on the need for an executive establishment that can act quickly, effectively, and flexibly, which translates: Too many domestic programs that tie up scarce resources and too close dependence of government on public opinion, free elections, and a free press are a drag. A reduced, more efficient government, its attention focused primarily upon defense, internal security, foreign policy, and the control points of the economy, is the ideal.

The truly ingenious part of the vision is that while the state is being strengthened as an instrument of struggle within the international political economy, there is a concerted propaganda campaign to discredit the state as an instrument of social reform and mass welfare. Reagan has repeatedly ridiculed what he once called "‘trust me’ government." America will only become great again, he has declared, "if our government will stop betraying the trust and good will of the American workers who keep it going." The point to this rhetoric, beyond the shameful spectacle of the highest official in the nation encouraging contempt for and distrust of the power organized to effect the common good, is to discourage "the workers" and ordinary people from looking upon government as the instrument of their needs. "Government is never more dangerous," the President has taught us, "than when our desire to have it help us blinds us to its great power to harm us." A prescription, one might suggest, that ought to be tried for size on the national defense budget.

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