

In Defense of Government

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The following is the opinion of the author and does not reflect any policy or position of the New York Rural Water Association

It seems as if we cannot listen to radio or television or read a newspaper without hearing or reading of another attack on government. Any coffee shop or barbershop conversation will undoubtedly include an assault on some form of government. We constantly hear the cry about high taxes and over regulation. We've just come through a national election cycle where, once again, one of the underlying issues was "big" government versus "small" government. We continue to see politicians at all levels attempt to sell us a free lunch, that we can have something for nothing and many of us buy it. It seems as if all the evils of government are emphasized and very little of the good that government does is ever mentioned. We've reached the point where government officials and politicians are looked on with disdain, where it's getting harder and harder to get good people to accept the responsibility of public office. Many of us seem to think we'd be better off without government. While government is far from perfect and many mistakes are made, I think it might be time to review some of its positive aspects.

To begin with, almost 300 million people live together in this country. Over 19 million of us live in New York State. When we see how difficult it is sometimes for even small groups, like a family, to live in harmony one can understand the challenges of government. But, "No man is an island", and if we are to grow and remain civil, we need to build upon our relationships to one another. The most practical way to accomplish this is through government. To quote from the textbook *Government by the People* (Burns, Peltason, Cronin), "Politics (government) is the process by which people who live together make decisions about how to meet their basic needs, solve common problems, organize for safety and security, even realize the good life." Helping bear one another's burdens and sharing one another's strengths has been a human tradition ever since primitive times. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A team can accomplish what an individual can't. The founding fathers of our government certainly felt that way. They didn't look on our government as some kind of third party, apart from us. It was, "We the people." They intended that our government be our responsibility and we need to agree on some basic ideas of what our government is and what we want it to do for us. Abraham Lincoln said, "The legitimate object of government

is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do for themselves in their separate and individual capacities."

So what has our government accomplished? So much of what it has done is so obvious, so accepted as our way of life, that we hardly think about it anymore. Our government provides a national defense, secures our borders, mints a single currency, offers banking protection, fights crime, provides old age insurance, protects our food and medicine, controls pollution, promotes clean water and air, and provides public parks. It protects job safety, workers rights, fair wages, and assures decent hours. It offers capital to help business growth and loans to new homeowners. It supports a public education system where every child has that opportunity, helps college students, and even supports local libraries. It offers medical assistance to those in need, provides a safety net for the poor, the old, and the infirm. And it builds roads and highways, water systems, wastewater systems, airports, and train stations. If you think about it, that's just the tip of the iceberg. We can argue that all governmental decisions have not been perfect but we have to agree that without government, none of it would have gotten done.

We seem to think that only government is imperfect, that the private sector can always do it better, faster, and cheaper. The truth is that businesses make occasional mistakes also. Remember the Edsel? How many of our old local factories are gone due to poor management rather than globalization? I remember a marketing course in college where we studied how railroads never felt themselves as part of the transportation industry but only as railroads. Our local typewriter company didn't realize the importance of computers until it was too late. Even IBM misread the strength of personal computers. The Red Sox let Roger Clemens get away. Businesses are sometimes wrong also, but we don't skewer them like we do government.

When I got my local town and county \$1400 tax bill last fall I started to think of what that bought me. It got my road plowed and repaired, fire and police protection, zoning laws that protect my property, use of the library, a streetlight, a district attorney and a jail to keep the bad guys away from me, an environmental protection program that watches out for my water and air, a veterans office where I can check out my benefits, a landfill and a recycling program, an elections office to make sure my vote counts. It helped fulfill some of my personal obligation to assist the poor, the old, and the sick. It even assures me that when I buy a gallon of gas or a pound of meat that I get a full gallon or pound. I can feel safe in a local restaurant knowing the kitchen has been inspected. I'll bet I

bought a lot more that isn't listed here. And when compared to the annual "TV cable" bill of \$1200, my taxes were a pretty good buy.

My fear is that the current assault on government harms our progress as a nation, state, and society. Individual freedom at the expense of government sounds like a great idea but absolute freedom will only allow the rich and powerful to control the poor and weak. Decreased regulation will lead to weaker protection of our environment and our people. We can all agree on the need to reform parts of our government and the regulatory process. But let's work to make the necessary changes and not, "Throw the baby out with the bath water."

"Democracy" Winston Churchill said, "is the worst system devised by the wit of man, except for all others." ♠

