

Excerpt from the Newsletter of the State, Court, and County Law Libraries Special Interest Section of the American Association of Law Libraries, v. 31, #3, Fall 2005:

Charley's Corner

Starving Government Is a Failed Policy

by Charles R. Dyer, Retired Director of Libraries, San Diego County Public Law Library.
All opinions in this column are strictly my own. None are necessarily the opinion of either the San Diego County Public Law Library or its board of trustees. This column was written on September 15, 2005.

The disaster of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath are the news of the day, and no column can be written without making note of those events. I join the millions of others who wish our counterparts in the affected areas our best hopes for some sort of recovery from the tragic events. Nearly everyone has dear friends or relatives in the affected areas. My heart goes out to all the law librarians there. Not only have you lost homes and possessions, but also the accumulated work effort of years and years. I wish you the best in making what you can of this life-transforming experience. I take heart in knowing that several of my closest friends there are strong-willed and positive people.

As of this writing, it appears that the body count from Katrina is not as bad as was first contemplated. But sadly, the body count was undoubtedly increased due to the belatedness of response of government officials. In the face of reporters, many of the officials seem to wish to hide behind the obvious need we have to pull together to face the crisis and to be properly reverential toward the tragedy with such comments as, "I don't want to play the blame game now. There is time for that later." Undoubtedly, much governmental effort is being spent on thinking out the spin to give this, rather than actually spent on the problems themselves.

After 9-11, President Bush and the Congress saw fit to alter the mandate of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA). Rather than add funds to cover the risks posed by terrorism, 75 percent of the funding was redirected from regular disaster relief and efforts to prepare for and prevent damage from natural disasters. (Some of the preventative funds lost would have been used to support the efforts to improve the levees in New Orleans.) Some cynics have noted that these changes occurred after 2004, so that there was better and more prompt aid for Florida for the hurricanes that year just prior to the presidential election. President Bush had also appointed a head of FEMA who had no disaster relief experience, but who was a loyal party follower who would not complain with the redirection of FEMA.

These changes are reflective of Republican efforts to run government according to the prevailing ideological theme of the moment: that government should be run with minimal cost to the taxpayer, and most efforts should be spent only on the presumed evil problem of the moment. The ongoing regular work of the government is diminished. Infrastructure suffers. Experienced government employees are treated shabbily, and their numbers are reduced, because their work is devalued. Even the grunts fighting in Iraq are treated shabbily, short on armor and supplies. The phrase used by Republican think tanks is "Starve the beast."

At this point, I want to digress from my theme slightly. There are some things that are or will receive huge amounts of funding, such as the recovery efforts in Iraq and soon in the Katrina disaster area. Most of this is being done by granting government largesse to private corporations, and the work is being dispersed through Cronyism. That Haliburton received the first big contract for Katrina relief does not surprise me. That the company received it prior to Katrina's actual landfall while government response was still nowhere to be found is bizarre, but I would not be surprised to see some government officials twist Haliburton's enterprising initiative as proof that FEMA should be privatized. The Cronyism is not a part of Republican ideology *per se*, but it is representative of what the Bush Administration really considers important: their friends.

The federal government is not the only government that is caught up in this "Starve the beast" mentality, coupled with Cronyism. The City of San Diego has made national news as it inches toward bankruptcy because of its underfinancing of its pension system. While that was going on, the City managed to extend the football stadium and build a new baseball park, centered in a redevelopment zone enabling substantial private investment. Would it shock you to learn that San Diego's sports teams are owned by real estate entrepreneurs who give substantial political contributions. (The new main library is on hold, as it has been for some time.)

A conservative columnist in the San Diego legal newspaper recently remarked that he found it surprising that the City of San Diego and the County of Orange (both Republican strongholds) had huge deficits in their pension systems, while the City of San Francisco (a Democratic stronghold) had a well-funded pension system. Evidently, as a traditional fiscal conservative, he had assumed that the "tax and spend" liberals would be the ones to run up debts, forgetting that those liberals actually do collect taxes to pay for what they spend. I would further note that those liberals must actually care for their public employees and respect them enough to see that the pension system is there for them.

And now we hear that Florida Governor Jeb Bush has decided to create a library in the Governor's office, after having defunded and destroyed the State Library and participated in the loss of civil fees for the county law libraries there. It seems the office cannot do completely without library services. It makes you want to shake your head.

Why do Americans put up with this? More fundamentally, why do they deny themselves better solutions to our most vexing ongoing problems. It has been shown that a government-run defined benefits program is cheaper and provides more stable benefits than a defined contribution program. It has been shown that a national single-payer health insurance system is about one half as expensive per capita than our present American system and that everyone would be covered. Yet we refuse to let government do what government does best.

As an aside, I recently used an urgent care service here in my new home in Bellingham, WA, while waiting to get in with a new doctor. The doctor there had been in private practice for years, but gave it up because the paperwork was getting in the way of what he wanted to do, i.e., practice medicine. He said that many Canadian doctors have come to the United States, seeking greater wealth, only to decide to return to Canada because they hated the paperwork. Yet American doctors fight nationalization while they spend so much time at the office, they can't

even enjoy the wealth they accumulate.

In San Diego, the ball park proposition received 60 percent of the vote, even in the face of major opposition. We do love our sports teams.

In the last twenty-five years, only the Democratic administration under Bill Clinton made a serious dent into the federal deficit. All the Republican administrations added to the debt in a big way. Yet in the minds of people, the Republicans are thought to be the more fiscally conservative. Of course, those are not the issues that shape elections. Instead, such hot spot issues as gay marriage and love of sports teams swing votes.

In my opinion, public law libraries, like the levees around New Orleans, require adequate funding and constant attention in order to remain (or become) effective. While the lack of support over time for law libraries would not result in the huge disaster that we saw with Katrina, every day that someone is denied justice because he cannot get the legal information he needs, another tragedy occurs. These build and accumulate over time, and the American population suffers for it.

The conservative humorist P.J. O'Rourke once said, "The problem with Republicans is that they think that government can't do anything, and the problem with Democrats is that they think that government *can* do anything." To me, it is clear that there are many things that the government must do, and there are a number of things that the government can do better than anyone else. I would rather have a government that tried and occasionally failed than one that never tried at all. The Great Society's welfare programs may not have worked as well as some would hope, so the programs needed to be adjusted. But Social Security has worked very well, and that program needs to be extended, not contracted.

It may well be that government's best efforts are with long-range problems, ones that require constant care and long-term commitment. Governments do not have the quarterly earnings issue that forces immediacy upon corporations, although elections do add some of that element.

Perhaps, if there is any good to come from the Katrina disaster, it would be in returning Americans to some sense of reality. Perhaps we would vote for the long-term health of our society and its infrastructure, rather than the cause du jour. Perhaps we would consider our children's welfare, rather than the net income from next week's paycheck, when voting.

The current prevailing attitude reminds me of the kid who wants to get all the marbles. Once he has accomplished that, then the game is over. The other kids can't play anymore, but then again, neither can he. So it is that, if we continue with this process of denying the value and utility of government and the legitimate directing of funds in order to help maintain order and democracy, we will all lose. The corporate bigwigs will have accumulated all the wealth then available, but, without able workers earning a decent wage and living somewhat well, the ability to generate wealth after that will be gone. The oligarchy will effectively seed its own destruction, but destroy most everything else in the process. As we watch companies bankrupt their pension programs or commit outright fraud against their own shareholders, why do we turn to these supposed leaders to lead our governments. Is it that in this age of celebrity, we envy them and want to be like them?

Fortunately, not all corporate leaders think like that. Some become philanthropists. Others, and these I respect even more, use their wealth to promote a revitalization of government through the political process. They speak up and say that the wealthy should be taxed more than the poor. They push for sensible long-range government action, such as supporting national health insurance. They understand the need to keep a middle class work force. Some even respect their workers.

I would like to see a return to traditional values, but not to the values of “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” or “the government should not help people through disasters, or in old age, or in ill health.” Rather, I would like to see us return to the cooperative, communal sharing that is the hallmark of civilization, the building of structures for all, not just the few.

Just as Marxism sounded good in theory, but now has been proven to be wrong in application, so it is that Milton Friedman’s supply side economics and its neo-conservative offspring looks good in theory, but is leading us to disaster after disaster. I say, get off the theory, get off the “message”, and get back to reality. See facts for what they are, instead of things to spin. Grow up.

For those of you interested: My new address is 808 East Maple St., Bellingham, WA 98225. I am still at cdyer@sdcp11.org as the San Diego County Public Law Library is letting me use the email address until I get more situated. I am also pleased to report that my library’s pension plan is fully funded and that my library’s board (mostly Republicans) respects and values its employees.