



THE VIEW

Issue #15

July 27, 2009

A WHOLE LOT OF GOVERNMENT GOING ON

BY

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It's currently all the rage to be enraged over government. Nowadays when any group gathers to talk politics and there is a lull in the conversation one cannot go wrong by thoroughly bashing government at any level. In fact, this is to be expected. It is only when one comes to the defense of government at the federal, state, or local level that a hush falls over the crowd as they await an explanation for such an outrageous opinion. Furthermore, one will discover that there is plenty of government to bash. A fairly well accepted estimate places the number of units of government at all levels in this country at 82,000.

Among the list of things in the "Preamble" to the United States Constitution are the promises to "...establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, and promote the general welfare..." We discover anew every day what a prescription for heavy lifting this list entails.

My recent schedule, as is often the case in the summertime, ensured that I would spend ten days out of a twelve day period rediscovering just what is expected of government. From the outset it struck me as odd that for government to be the object of so much contempt of late there certainly were a lot of meetings to discuss the means of doing what they are expected to do.

First, I was in New Orleans for the long awaited rollout of the Citizen's Leadership Corps' Children's Defense Fund sponsored report entitled "What It Takes to Rebuild a Village: Stories from Internally Displaced Children and Families of Hurricane Katrina and their Lessons for Our Nation." One of the highlights of this meeting was the appearance and participation of New Orleans Katrina hero General Russell Honoré. The report encompasses a comprehensive effort to address the roles of federal, state, and local levels not only in mitigating disasters of the magnitude of Katrina but in making the case that the disaster does not end once the wind quits, the water recedes, and the streets are once again passable. At the conclusion of this meeting I traveled across to the Mississippi Gulf Coast where some 2,500 municipal officials gathered for the Annual Convention of the Mississippi Municipal League. Since this is an election year there were a number of newly elected

officials and by all accounts there seemed to be more than usual incumbents who met defeat in towns all over Mississippi. New and old alike seemed to be clearly mindful that local constituents had expectations of their government and they are quite willing to evaluate at the ballot box how well those expectations are met.

As the mayors, alderpersons, and councilmen were leaving town, over half of the nation's Governors were arriving for the Annual Conference of the National Governors Association. I was somewhat struck by how similar, only larger, were the topics discussed by the governors. Energy, Disaster Planning, Home Land Security, the Environment and Natural Resources on the agenda for the Governors had their related counterparts as topics for municipal officials and the citizens groups represented in New Orleans. At the end of the week I felt as though I had been absorbing governmental issues in a manner akin to drinking water from a fire hose. Over the ten day period, as a student of Federalism, I could not help but be struck by the pressure on governments at the federal, state, and local levels being brought to bear by their millions of constituents. The current deficit crisis at the federal level is well known. States and local governments are clearly enduring their own frightening versions of this situation but with most lacking the constitutional or statutory authority to do any thing other than balance their respective budgets. Yet the discussions from the various rostrums and the conversations in the halls were not of how to retreat but of how to meet the demands of citizens which have not diminished but in many cases have grown in the face of financial hard times. In fact a number of Governors who had registered for the conference were last minute no-shows due to budget stalemates in the eleventh hour in their states. Included in this number was Governor's Association Chairman, Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell.

It was impossible not to wonder how many of those citizens who were vigilantly keeping the pressure on state and local government were the same ones who voice their disdain for government in the coffee shops and around the water coolers. Washington tax expert Grover Norquist once said that it was the goal of the Bush administration to "shrink government until we can drown it in the bath tub." If citizens despise government the way they claim and if they abhor taxes even more wouldn't they be happier with the cessation of most government programs all together? Life for those responsible for "promoting the general welfare" at the federal, state, and local levels and also finding ways to pay for it would be made significantly easier if that were the case. It is clear, however, that the demand for government to "do something" on the part of citizens is greater now than ever.



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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

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