

The Changing Role of Government: A Federal Perspective

Senator Harry Reid

Senator Harry Reid earned his bachelor's degree from Utah State University and his law degree from The George Washington University School of Law. He served in the Nevada Assembly from 1968 to 1970, when he was elected the youngest Lieutenant Governor in Nevada's history. Senator Reid served Nevada's first congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1983 until his election to the U.S. Senate in 1986. Since being elected to the Senate, he has authored the 1988 "Taxpayer Bill of Rights," co-authored the "Children's Bill of Rights," and co-sponsored the "Violence Against Women Act." Senator Reid is a member of the Committee on Appropriations, the Environment and Public Works Committee, the Select Committee on Ethics, the Committee on Indian Affairs, the Special Committee on Aging, and is co-chair of the Democratic Policy Committee.

In my hometown of Searchlight, Nevada, where, in an emergency, a police officer named Big John had to drive 30 miles to radio to Las Vegas for help, regular medical attention was not very accessible. It was the federal government which took the initiative to come to Searchlight, toting a chest x-ray machine, to screen for lung cancer, tuberculosis, and other ailments. Although states and localities often know what is best for their communities, they frequently do not have the means to provide such services. The federal government has the means and the will.

Instead of denigrating government, we should work to improve our system of government which is the envy of the world. Unquestionably, the federal government needs to streamline, reform, and change. Burdensome regulations and unfunded mandates must be eliminated and ridiculous paperwork requirements must go. However, government oversight is not innately evil and can be designed not as an intrusive control mechanism over the states but as an insurance policy to guard against Americans falling through the cracks. Our goal should be a more effective federal government, not one that is useless or so reduced that our citizens are the ones who suffer. As a nation, we cannot afford to have a federal government that is unable to provide for Americans or defend our interests in the world.

Nevertheless, we must reorient our intergovernmental relations and provide states with greater responsibility and flexibility to tailor programs to their needs. No general rule can satisfy the diversity of our vast nation and, inarguably, states and localities are often most capable of assessing the needs and priorities of their citizens. Yet the citizens of counties and states are also citizens of the United States, and the federal government has obligations to the people it serves. Reform, rework, ask the states to do more, but do

not remove the federal safety net.

We can and must expect more from the federal government by raising our standards and seeking advice from the people and the government entities who are getting it right. There is much the federal government can learn from states that have found better ways to administer government programs and have provided opportunity for their citizens. States and the federal government alike can also glean much from private sector practices. Most of all, we can learn from the people—those who are in the programs, those who administer the programs, and those who recognize a need not being met or a problem that cries out for a solution. Our mantra should be to reinvent government, but not demolish or disparage it.

The Federal Government

The role of government is to provide opportunity for all citizens and lend a hand to those who want to help themselves have a better life. The national government is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, which treats every citizen as worthy of the very best. Due largely to the federal government, America has the safest and most abundant food and water supply in the world, and when something has gone wrong in the past, the federal government has taken swift corrective action. When our senior citizens had no health coverage and could no longer work to earn income, the federal government stepped in and provided assistance and the best health care in the world. Federal programs like the G.I. Bill of Rights and land grant colleges have increased access to higher education and enabled people to reach their full potential. Washington has also invested in the nation's children, from Head Start and school lunch programs to stu-

dent loans and job training. Such investments have tenfold returns and are the best tools we have to make our nation productive and successful.

The federal government's power of oversight is also a very important tool. Effective federal environmental regulations are crucial. Air and water do not stop at state borders and it is imperative that we maintain uniform standards, rather than a patchwork of differing and perhaps contradictory environmental policies.

Further, for our national well-being, we must acknowledge the positive role of the federal government and keep some of its greatest hits in the forefront of our consciousness. Such federal success stories include:

- **Social Security** which has dropped the poverty rate among America's elderly by more than 17 percent. This government contract ensures that our seniors have a source of income after paying into the system throughout their working years.
- **Medicare** has helped give America's seniors the highest rate of life expectancy in the world. Before this program and the subsequent coverage of 99 percent of senior citizens, more than half had no health coverage.
- **Head Start** gets millions of children off on the right foot by providing health, nutrition, and social services while teaching the basic skills needed for school success. The fruits of this productive investment are healthier children, who are less likely to be held back in school or have discipline problems, and more likely to graduate from high school.
- **The Earned Income Tax Credit** lends a helping hand to working families and gives millions of Americans the help they need to avoid poverty.
- **National Parks** have not only preserved some of our nation's most extraordinary natural areas but have brought millions of visitors from across the nation and around the world.
- **The Clean Water Act** is an effective law whose successful results are visible, swimmable, and drinkable. This Act has substantially improved and increased treatment of sewage, controlled industrial pollutants, and reduced the destruction of wetlands.
- **The Interstate Highway System** has successfully facilitated our nation's commerce and vastly increased our ability to travel.

The federal government's successes are extensive, but we

have much more to accomplish. Accordingly, it would be a tragedy to diminish the federal government so that it could no longer fight for all the citizens it was designed to protect and serve.

The States

There is much that can be done to expand states' flexibility and authority to administer federal programs according to their needs. It is poor reasoning, however, to purport that states can suddenly solve the problems the federal government has been struggling with for years. Many states do not presently have the managerial or financial resources to run these federal programs and are not seeking to cut the safety line from the federal government just yet. If our goal is to make individual programs more effective, this will not occur by simply placing the onus on the states. States need to develop better programs and have a stronger infrastructure than that already in place. A 1995 *Issue Brief* by the National Governors' Association on "New Opportunities in Federalism," stated:

Increased flexibility and fiscal belt tightening do not automatically provide a more effective or efficient state government. Left alone, systems tend to perpetuate themselves. If new federal legislation is to change service outcomes and increase public satisfaction, Governors will need to translate that legislation into new delivery systems and better programs. Such changes will not be easy.

With so much still to be resolved, it is simply not the time to dump everything on the states. Using caution and foresight, we should devolve wherever plausible and look pragmatically at what has a real chance of working and will most benefit our nation.

Federalism

Our system of government was designed to combine the best principles of a large and small republic. James Madison talked of a "compound republic" most keenly manifested in the national legislature, where one body directly represents the people according to their numbers and the other body provides equal representation for each state. Madison also wrote wisely of the need to "extend the sphere" and increase the number of participants in government and thus the variety of interests represented. Fearing that a government too small or too specialized would be susceptible to the worst influences of dangerous enthusiasms, the Founding Fathers designed a government that

ameliorated the negatives and accentuated the benefits of both local and national representation. Although they were ever cautious of retaining states' power and providing a government closely connected to the people, the Founders were apprehensive about the ability of a small group to have a fatal grip on the nation. Madison knew that a faction might succeed in sparking "a flame within their particular States" but would not be able to "spread a general conflagration" across the nation. Special interest groups are our factions of today and we must maintain a strong federal government effective enough to counter any pernicious influences. The Founders sought to form a strong union, which has stood the test of more than 200 years. Today, the states and the federal government are striving to create a workable balance where federalism can thrive.

For evidence of federalism in America, one need only examine the tremendous diversity in how federal programs are administered from state to state. When Congress fashions new programs, it relies on the cooperation of the states who vigorously exercise their leeway within these programs. President Clinton has also instituted a waiver program, allowing states to experiment with federal programs without losing the federal nexus. Further, states negotiate with the federal government, assert their role in federal programs, and rely on federal funding for their own projects and needs. This has resulted in a partnership between the two governments, continually redefined by a push and pull that, at some periods in history, increases the responsibilities of states and, at other periods, favors the federal government. Such redistribution addresses the specific needs of the nation at each moment in history.

The United States

In the current climate of reform and fiscal restraint, it is essential that we maintain our unity as a nation and seek out our common purposes and areas of greatest need. We need a fostering of positive participation in government,

not government bashing. To maintain an effective government, fresh ideas and innovative people who are willing to serve their country are essential. If we keep defaming government and reducing the public's confidence in its ability, no one will want to run for office and the quality of legislators and public officials will plummet. One need only examine the abundance of beneficial government programs and laws to understand that there is much the government does well. Much of our negative views of the federal government arise precisely because it has been so successful and we have come to expect so much. We must continue to challenge the federal and state governments to do their best.

Regardless of what results from the give and take between states and the federal government, the goal of both should always be to fulfill our obligations to our children and our grandchildren by continuing to provide valuable government service. I am confident in the ability of the federal government to continue to improve itself while bettering the lives of its citizens.

Ultimately, however, the power to change the government and choose representatives lies with the sovereign power—the people. The citizens of the United States need to make these changes based on the common purpose that once united us. Providing opportunity and giving everyone a fair chance are the principles upon which this nation was founded. Room for difference of opinion is built into our system, which is characterized by our ability to disagree without rancor and argue without malice. We are a diverse nation and we need this diversity to protect our freedom. Nonetheless, we must unite in the positive spirit that binds us together as Americans. It is imperative that we have faith in our ability as a nation, and in the ability of our elected officials at every level of government, to work together and bring us successfully into the twenty-first century and beyond. ★