



A Time for Reckoning

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Conservatives are at a critical juncture in their movement's long march since former Senator Barry Goldwater's defeat in the 1964 presidential contest. Conservatives start 2006 facing a dreadful question: Is the public rejecting a central tenet of fiscal conservatism – limited government – or have politicians who campaign as fiscal conservatives simply lost the faith?

In Colorado, voters accepted a weakening of their widely acclaimed spending limitations measure – known there as TABOR (Taxpayers' Bill of Rights). Meanwhile, Californians rejected a ballot proposition giving the governor authority to cut spending in a time of crisis.

Given that voters in Colorado and California seemingly are embracing big government, the easy answer is to assume voters are getting what they want. Of course, the success or failure of a ballot proposition often is influenced less by philosophy than by the public relations campaigns employed.

The real problem is the politicians who, while espousing fiscal conservatism, either through timidity or temerity have lost faith in the philosophy. And with a nascent effort underway to strengthen taxpayer protections in Texas, the connivance of Colorado conservatives like Governor Bill Owen, former Senator Hank Brown and former Party Chairman Bruce Benson in undermining the Colorado TABOR suggests the taxpayer protection movement in Texas faces an uphill battle.

An honest reckoning is due. Other than a precious few governors like our own Rick Perry, South Carolina's Mark Sanford, and Florida's Jeb Bush, as well as a few congressional leaders like Mike Pence (R-IN) and Jeb Hensarling (R-TX), an aversion to cutting budgets and articulating a concise defense of limited government has infected politicians of all parties to the detriment of taxpayers across America.

Stephen Moore of the *Wall Street Journal*, and other commentators from across the conservative and libertarian spectrum, have posited that one cause, if not the chief cause,

of this fundamental shift stems from Republican complacency as a result of holding all levels of power in Washington and many states.

Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich suggested in an interview that the remedy is “divided government.” In other words, there is more fiscal discipline when, for instance, Republicans control Congress and a Democrat occupies the White House.

But divided government didn’t lead to limited government from 1993-2001, despite President Clinton’s decade-old claim that “the era of big government is over.” While the Republican Congress helped balanced the budget during the Clinton presidency, government grew enormously despite a general peace, the collapse of the Soviet threat, and passage of welfare reform. The budget was balanced, certainly, but divided government didn’t lead to smaller government.

Since 2001, federal spending has greatly accelerated under President Bush due not just to the cost of the war in Iraq, but also to the ill-conceived prescription drug benefit, the pork-filled energy and highway bills, and now the blank check to rebuild New Orleans.

In fact, both one-party and divided governments have led to dramatic increases in new spending. One reasonably could conclude that government inexorably grows, no matter which party is in power.

In Texas, appropriations have approximately doubled every decade since 1975, whether the legislature or governor’s mansion was controlled by Democrats or Republicans. Except for the 78th Session when a focused and determined Legislature, encouraged and cajoled by Governor Perry, reduced spending and balanced the budget without raising taxes, Texas has suffered the same spending fever infecting Washington.

One need only consider that the tax and expenditure limitation proposal filed by Rep. Carl Isett (R-Lubbock) didn’t even receive a committee hearing as evidence that fiscal conservatism has atrophied in Texas, and helps explain why state spending increased by 18.7 percent increase in the last Appropriations Act with nary a whisper of concern.

At the root of all this is one of the seven deadly sins of politics: fiscal gluttony. The spending of other people’s money is pure self indulgence. The aim of most spending is either to curry favor with a special interest deemed necessary for re-election (such as the public school lobby), or to placate the media (by pouring more money into CHIP) in an effort to avoid negative headlines that might appear in campaign attack ads.

The philosophy of limited government articulated by Goldwater, Reagan, Arney and Buckley is not in practice today. If Texas conservatives are to regain credibility on fiscal matters, lawmakers must endorse, defend and pass a true taxpayer protection bill in the next 80th Legislature. Otherwise, conservatism as a governing philosophy is on a long, slow burn to self-immolation.