COMMENTARY: BIG GOVERNMENT CONSERVATISM IS AN OXYMORON By Tom Pauken

Contributed by Tom Pauken
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Tom PaukenGEORGE W. BUSH was lauded in the pages of the Wall Street Journal in the summer of 2003 by Fred Barnes, the editor of the Weekly Standard, for promoting a new brand of “conservatism.” According to Barnes, President Bush is a “big government conservative,” and his administration believes “in using what would normally be seen as liberal means–activist government–for conservative ends. And they’re willing to spend more and increase the size of government in the process.” Later, in the same article, Barnes noted that “big government conservatives are favorably disposed toward what neoconservative Irving Kristol has called a ‘conservative welfare state’”. Then, in an understatement, Barnes added: “Neocons tend to be big government conservatives.”

A cynic might suggest that what Barnes was really saying was that there is nothing wrong with big government so long as “our guys” are in charge.

To give Fred Barnes his due, he did acknowledge that there had been a “surge of federal spending” during Bush's presidency resulting in “swollen deficits.” (A Cato Institute study refers to Bush as “the biggest spending President in 30 years.”) Moreover, Barnes pointed out that President Bush had failed to exercise his veto power during his first term in office. (More than two years later, Bush still has not vetoed any spending bills.) Barnes even mentioned the President's alignment with Teddy Kennedy on education legislation and the expansion of medicare entitlements.

Yet, back in 2003 none of this seemed to trouble Barnes or his fellow neoconservatives, who appeared just as comfortable with the President's big spending policies as they were with his decision to go to war with Iraq .

The Economist had a very different take on the President a few months later when it asked on its cover, “Is George Bush a socialist?” The article compared Bush’s spending policies to the “guns and butter” spending excesses of Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration.

What was surprising at the time was how little outcry there was about all this from the Beltway conservative establishment, even after Congress narrowly passed (at the President's insistence) a huge new medicare entitlement. The Republican establishment made the case privately to conservative leaders that this was the price we had to pay to ensure George W. Bush's re-election in 2004.

Of course, there was a vigorous dissent to what was perceived as a “go along, get along” mentality on the part of mainstream conservatives. The dissent came from traditional conservatives and libertarians who recognized this bogus brand of conservatism for what it was–a watered-down version of big government liberalism that would have made Nelson Rockefeller proud.

Until recently, Republicans in Washington didn't pay much attention to the critics of “big government conservatism.” All of that has suddenly changed.

The Bush administration's decision to spend $200 billion in tax revenues that we don't have to fund the Katrina clean-up (without cutting federal spending elsewhere to help pay for the costs) has enraged fiscal conservatives who view this excessive spending as an all too obvious ploy to make amends for FEMA’s abysmal response to the Katrina disaster. George Bush and Karl Rove may have taken their conservative base for granted one time too many.

The numbers are scary when you start adding up the spending excesses of this administration. We have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on the war in Iraq with little to show for it. Congress recently passed, with the President's support, a $286.4 billion transportation bill stuffed with pork. Our annual budget deficits, already in excess of $500 billion, are on their way to $800 billion if current trends continue. A new entitlement benefit kicks in this January that the financially strapped Medicare system cannot afford and that will lead to massive new shortfalls in funding going forward. Our trade deficit is approaching $800 billion annually.

To put it bluntly, these guys in Washington are bankrupting our nation. If this is what “conservatism” has come to–i.e., doing whatever it takes to get and maintain power–then I, for one, want no part of it. Finally, the grassroots conservatives are beginning to wake up and realize that they have been had by the political hacks in Washington . Let's just hope that it is not too late for our country.