

## **On Big Government**

It's an interesting contrast. On the one hand, we had Tea Party darling Rand Paul, Kentucky Senate nominee, criticizing the 1964 Civil Right Act for interfering with private business decisions, like whether to rent to, well, certain people. And on the other hand we had 3000 emails sent to Midwest realty Management, protesting that private business' threat to evict Dawn and Charlie Price for violating their rental contract by displaying a flag in their window.

Now, I don't want to defend Midwest Realty. I think their rule was stupid. But they are a private business. And by Rand Paul's logic, letting the government interfere with their private rental contract by extending existing Federal law – that already interferes with the private agreements of condo and homeowner associations – well, that's Big Government, isn't it? And if a private business decides it doesn't want to rent to flag wavers, or to the melanin endowed, isn't that their private business? Rand Paul apparently thinks so, anyhow.

We, as a society, are at sixes and sevens in terms of what we want the government to do or not do. Should government more heavily regulate oil companies that drill for oil? My guess is, all those folks who were chanting "Drill, Baby, Drill!" 22 months ago thought, like Rand Paul, that would be way too much government interference with private business. My guess, also, is that some of them have changed their mind since then.

And what about the big banks? Should government more heavily regulate their behavior, force them to hold more capital reserves, limit their use of credit default swaps? A recent Wall Street Journal article quoted Sen. Richard Shelby (R., Ala.) as calling a part of the bill before Congress "a massive expansion of government influence in our daily financial lives." Maybe it is, but look at the result of 20 years of banking deregulation: the Great Recession that we are just coming out of. Maybe a little more government influence here would not be a bad idea.

And what about cleaning up the oil spill? Myles Strasser, in a recent column, asked our President why he wasn't doing more to plug the gushing oil hole. But is that Big Government's job? If so, the Coast Guard or Environmental Protection Agency or someone else should have a team of oil drilling catastrophe experts on staff, permanently, with all the equipment and resources to take over and take charge and solve the problem.

We could have that. It would cost money, probably quite a bit of money, but if money is no object, that could be a regular government responsibility. But would that really be a good idea? Private oil companies have all the expertise on how to work with oil wells. Should we have government replicate that experience? Somehow, I don't think so. But should the government better monitor the oil companies, to prevent them from taking the drilling shortcuts that probably contributed to the explosion and resulting catastrophe? I would say most definitely yes.

The simple reality is that Big Government has its uses, but those uses are limited. Not all businesses should be regulated, but businesses that affect our financial markets and the environment should. And products that involve costly but vital information, like knowing whether the food you buy or the drugs you're prescribed are safe, need regulation too.

Of course, we all know that. But it's easy to forget, when the airways are filled with "Taxed Enough Already". But when you hear their ravings, just recall that it was Big Government that put all the snake oil salesmen out of business in the first place. And that it's generally the same snake oil salesmen who nowadays complain about Big Government the most.

