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An Unlimited America

By Senator Sam Brownback



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An Unlimited America

The Honorable Sam Brownback

The era of big government is over. May it rest in peace. In its place, a new era is about to unfold: an unlimited America with a smaller federal government, economic opportunity for all, and a renewed culture.

An unlimited America was the vision for the nation set forth by our Founding Fathers. It is the vision enshrined in those two great charters of freedom: our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Many of America's most intractable problems stem from the fact that we have strayed from that vision—and lost direction. But I have no doubt that, if we can recapture the Founders' vision of limited government, personal responsibility, and economic opportunity, America's greatest days will be yet to come.

"WE THE PEOPLE"

The Founding Fathers of our nation believed in the people. They created a new nation based on the radical notion that the people could be free and trusted—that the nation would be great if you trusted the people to be good. Before the birth of America, individual rights existed only insofar as the grace of the dictator or monarch allowed. Those who governed were believed to have a divine right to rule, because it was thought that the people could not be trusted to rule themselves.

Our Founders believed that the people had the right to govern themselves and that government derives its power from the consent of the governed. But this right also imposed a requirement on "We the People:" We must be a moral and just people. John Adams put it this way: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."

Yet today, we have placed the government in the role that was reserved for citizenship. We have gone from "We the People" to "They the Bureaucracy."

In our recent efforts to create a more perfect Union, we have relied too much on the government and too little on ourselves. We have forgotten that self-government demands the habits and virtues required for such a government. "Republican government," James Madison noted, "presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form." At some point, we decided that goodness for the nation simply came from the greatness of government. But the greatness of our nation can never be measured by the size of our GDP, or even the strength of our armies. National greatness rises from personal goodness.

That is the starting point for ending the era of big government and beginning the era of an unlimited America. Our mission is to re-limit the federal government, to release economic opportunity for all our citizens, and to renew our families and our culture. In my view, these

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principles are not divisible; if any one is missing, the old era will not give way to the new, and America will not return to the straight path—the only path that leads to national greatness.

RE-LIMITING GOVERNMENT

Fifteen years ago, President Ronald Reagan spoke before the British Parliament and made a prediction that shook the world. We were witnessing, he declared, a “great revolutionary crisis—a crisis where the demands of the economic order are colliding with those of the political order.” The Soviet Union, which seemed at the height of its power, was running “against the tide of history by denying freedom and human dignity to its citizens.” Despite all its tanks and missiles, the Soviet Union would soon be swept aside by the “march of freedom and democracy,” leaving “Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history.”

Many of Reagan’s listeners thought he was dreaming. But Reagan had faith in freedom. He knew that communism, although militarily powerful, was ideologically dead. He knew what our Founders knew: that, in a truly legitimate government, power does not come out of the barrel of a gun, but only from the consent of the people. In a few years, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and the Evil Empire crumbled with a suddenness that astonished supporters of freedom and rocked the world’s remaining tyrants.

Today, big government is facing the same internal crisis the Soviet empire faced in 1982. Big government is institutionally strong but structurally weak. It is backed by armies of special interests that ferociously protect their budgets and intimidate anyone who challenges their subsidies, but it has been abandoned by the American people.

Our mission is to implement big government’s replacement—to unite the principles of economic freedom and the cause of cultural renewal to forge a new governing consensus that will lead America into the 21st century. Conservatives sometimes forget that limiting government is not an end in itself, but a means to a better society.

We must remember that our federal government has helped America achieve many great things in this century. Along with our allies, we defeated two potentially mortal threats to freedom: fascism in World War II and communism in the Cold War. Government built the interstate highway system that helped create our modern economy. It established Social Security and Medicare systems, which have sharply reduced poverty in old age and enabled senior citizens to live longer and in better health. Through student loans and the GI Bill, it offered educational opportunity to those who might otherwise have been denied. And it enforced civil rights laws in the 1960s when it was clear that state governments could not protect the civil and political liberties of all Americans.

But today, America’s problems are different, and they require a different response by government.

Unlike 50 years ago, our most difficult problems cannot be solved by the benevolent hand of a powerful centralized bureaucracy. We can still have an effective government without a big government that takes away our freedoms and degrades our values.

UNLEASHING AMERICA’S ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

As I stated, our mission is to implement the replacement of big government—to unite the principles of economic freedom and cultural renewal to forge a new governing consensus that will lead America into the 21st century.

The principles of economic freedom are the very same principles that will bring forward a renewed culture and a society of limited government. Faith, family, and freedom: These are the values that make both our national economy and our national character strong. When government undermines these values, it hurts our families and our economy. Today, big government is holding back our economy and preventing our people from reaching their full potential.

Perhaps the most obvious evidence is the fiscal bankruptcy of the federal government. Today, we are more than \$5.3 trillion in debt—a crushing burden that amounts to over \$20,000 for every man, woman, and child. We are broke, and the budget deficits of today are minor compared with the fiscal disaster that will confront us in the early 21st century when Social Security and Medicare are unable to pay their bills.

But huge deficits and skyrocketing debt are just one problem.

Americans currently labor under a tax code so complicated that even tax lawyers and accountants can't understand it. We tax personal income two and three times before a citizen can see a return on his work or investment. Our people must work until May 8 just to pay their taxes to the government before they can earn a penny to support their families.

Our tax code is one of the greatest remnants of an over-intrusive big government. It is perhaps the single greatest obstacle to greater individual freedom and prosperity. Reagan made enormous progress during his presidency, scaling the top rate down from 70 percent to 28 percent. But since then, taxes have gone up—under both Republican and Democrat Presidents.

The power to levy and collect taxes was meant to fund a constitutional government, not to become a political device in and of itself. Today, our central government discourages certain behavior and rewards others based purely on the whims of those who control the tax monster. As long as the current tax system exists, we will not have met the challenge of replacing big government, and America's potential will never be fully reached.

Today, we have over 340 federal "economic development" programs that redistribute capital from productive citizens to bureaucratically favored entities. Our regulatory state imposes hidden taxes on our families, our businesses, and our dreams without truly measuring the consequences and weighing the alternatives. Our political class has become satisfied with expanding our economy at a lethargic pace. Meanwhile, entrepreneurs are being denied capital for their innovative ideas, parents are spending more time at work and less at home, and the American dream is slipping away from more and more families.

Many of these barriers are left over from the great experiment with big government that is entrenched in our system. Defenders of this system may be winning the battle, but they cannot win this war of ideas. The economic future of our country is inextricably tied to our people.

This is why I am optimistic that we will break the bonds that are stifling the innovation and creativity of our people. As this new wave of information technology grows into each household and every new child's mind, the system that relied on government experts to guide our economy will be washed away in a tide of entrepreneurial capitalism that will make the Industrial Revolution pale by comparison. Legions of entrepreneurs with innovative ideas, exciting energy, and new talents will bring forth the inevitable implosion of today's redistributive and elitist economic policy. Our job as people who love freedom is to do everything we can to help advance this process.

RENEWING AMERICA'S CULTURE

We also must not forget that a nation must be full of good people before it can be a great nation. George Washington, in his First Inaugural, said that there is “no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage....” As a result, he predicted that the “foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality.”

If this is true—and I believe it is—then certainly the best predictor of future greatness is current goodness.

Where are we today on the goodness of the nation? Ideally, if we were to measure gross domestic piety in America, we would view the nature of each person's heart. Since we cannot measure another's soul, we are left to measure actions and extrapolate goodness from it.

The number of crimes committed does tell us something about the soul of the nation. So does the number of abandoned households, the divorce rate, the rate of teenage suicide, and the rate of abortion. If these are extraordinarily high, can anyone disagree that the goodness of the nation has declined and that its long-term success is in jeopardy?

But let me make a bold statement here: America is in ascent again. Although I have just spoken about the many terrible and vexing problems of our nation, this nation has always shown an ability to deal with its problems once it focuses on what those problems are.

I believe today we are focused on the problems of America. We are seeing the limits of government and the needs in the hearts of our people. Many of our citizens are realizing that in their individual actions—each and every day touching, loving, encouraging, and caring for their fellow man and woman—they have the power to make America once again a great nation.

The good news is that, whenever the politicians let them, Americans are showing that they are anxious to take responsibility themselves. Americans are not waiting for the federal government to solve their problems; they are stepping up to the plate themselves.

A NEW GOVERNING CONSENSUS

Men and women across this nation are mending America's social fabric by reviving the families, civic organizations, and faith-based institutions that teach character and nurture the soul. They may not all think of themselves as conservatives, but they embody the conservative way of thinking, and they are rediscovering the principles of limited self-government, personal responsibility, and entrepreneurial capitalism that the Founders envisioned for America.

This is what conservatives want. We want to return to a free society in which, as Americans, we take responsibility for the economic and social condition of our own families and neighborhoods and communities without bureaucrats in Washington telling us what to do.

The restoration of America's civil society has replaced the fight against communism as our central need and our central focus. These principles unite libertarians with their emphasis on a free society; cultural conservatives with their emphasis on faith, family, and responsibility; and “pro-growth” conservatives who want to free up the genius of the American people through entrepreneurial capitalism. This vision—a vision of freedom, responsibility, and growth—can form the core of a new conservative governing consensus.

Our cause should be unified, not fractured. Americans of all sorts should work together to restore this common vision of a limited government so we can open markets, free up individual creativity, and above all else renew the American culture. Indeed, the sum of these goals is essential to the whole of our destiny as a nation. These ideas appeal to many honest liberals and centrists as well.

This is not a utopian fantasy or wishful thinking. Americans and our government have practiced these principles before, and we will do so again. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in the 1830s, he discovered the most democratic, most egalitarian, most religious, most prosperous, and most charitable country on Earth. It was a country of limited national government and active citizen participation in local government. Every community had newspapers describing how citizens formed voluntary associations to solve problems instead of expecting them to be solved by politicians.

The Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century and the early 20th century was a time of rapidly growing entrepreneurial capitalism and great personal achievement. It was no coincidence that this period also saw the creation of the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, YMCAs and YWCAs, hundreds of private colleges and universities, and countless other organizations that strengthened character and addressed the problems of their communities.

This explosion of community organizations and faith-based institutions coincided with an economic, cultural, and moral reawakening that touched America in many ways. As the great scholar James Q. Wilson has written, crime went *down* in the second half of the 19th century even though this was a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The rate of abortions fell in half during this period. Again, government did not create this development; people did.

Today, there are signs that America is entering another great revival of civic, voluntary activity. In the tradition of Jews, Mormons, and other religious groups with strong charitable traditions, conservative Evangelicals and Catholics run schools for low-income children. They operate maternity homes that give unwed mothers the love and support they need to choose life. They go into our cities' meanest streets and prisons to rescue gang members, drug dealers, and prostitutes from lives of violence, addiction, and desperation. Name a social ill afflicting our cities—poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, illegitimacy—and you will find a self-selected, religiously affiliated program attacking the problem with prayer and sweat and a small army of volunteers.

Some scholars say that America is entering a Fourth Great Awakening—a revival of religious faith and fervor. In the American political tradition, freedom and religious revival have always gone together. The First Great Awakening helped inspire the American Revolution, and religious faith was at the center of the anti-slavery and civil rights movements. As the call for freedom grows with this revival, we will have the chance to restore an unlimited America in which government will focus on its limits, people will focus on governing themselves, and our society will grow and prosper both economically and culturally.

CREATING THE ERA OF AN UNLIMITED AMERICA

I have no illusions about the problems we face. Ours is the work of generations. But today the American people have a choice to make. Either we can continue along the path of administrative, bureaucratic government and follow the tired mediocrity of big government, or we can begin the long and difficult task of rebuilding an America that knows no limits.

To follow this path, we must do two things:

First, the creed of America is to be found in the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson called an "expression of the American mind." We must renew our commitment to these principles, return to our Constitution, and reassert ourselves as a free, self-governing people.

Second, America has always had within itself a deep source of regeneration. It gains nourishment from its many, varied roots, its history, its religious faith, its free market, and its immigrant heritage. What holds us all together is America's love of liberty, deep in the hearts and minds of the American people. We must renew what Washington called the "sacred fire of liberty" and set it ablaze across the land.

These are not easy tasks. Yet I remain an optimist, for these are powerful forces on the move in our society. I don't know about you, but I have every confidence that Americans will choose the right path for themselves and for future generations that have yet to enjoy the blessings of freedom. And as we do, we will establish the era of an unlimited America.

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