



OpEd Contributor

Daniel J. Popeo: Bigger government is not better, just bigger

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Whatever their philosophical stripe, Americans seem united in their disillusionment with government and its consistently dysfunctional performance. Lately, much of this frustration has focused on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. This catastrophe offers the public a valuable lesson – bigger government isn't necessarily better government.

While devotees of government activism have expressed shock over federal officials' response to the spill, such incompetence and inefficiency is far from an aberration.

On the federal government's watch, up to 20 million illegal immigrants, including drug dealers, criminals, and potential terrorists, have flowed over America's porous borders. The process to deport illegal aliens, if they happen to be caught, is also woefully inadequate.

In the past 12 years, U.S. immigration courts have allowed 1.8 million illegal immigrants to remain free on the promise that they would show up for their court hearings. At least 736,000 of them never returned. Incredibly, last August, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced it would no longer remove illegal immigrants who failed to show up for their hearing.

As Washington continues to fiddle, some states have been forced to take action. Instead of addressing its own shortcomings, the federal government threatens these states with litigation.

On national and homeland security, even though countless billions of dollars have been devoted to forestalling the next terrorist attack, glaring gaps remain in the system. *The New York Times* noted recently that many of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations remain unaddressed six years after its report.

An internal Department of Justice inspector general's report on DOJ's lack of planning for a Weapons of Mass Destruction event highlighted how "everybody would be winging it" at the agency if terrorists attacked America with biological or nuclear materials.

Another inspector general, at the Department of Homeland Security, reported last week that the U.S. Computer

Emergency Readiness Team is far from ready for its critical mission of coordinating national cyber-defense.

When our heavily regulated credit markets imploded, federal officials and activists argued that America's financial system suffered from too much economic freedom and not enough government.

Their immediate response – pouring billions into “too big to fail” banks and other institutions – has failed to inspire much new lending over the past two years and our economy remains in recession.

Politicians' longer-term response – a wholesale “re-regulation” of Wall Street – suffers from enormous unplugged holes. This “reform” ignores the core role government itself played in the credit crisis.

Federal officials have obsessively attempted for decades to increase home ownership, to the point of compelling banks to make risky loans and empowering government-sponsored enterprises Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to essentially guarantee such lending.

The result: ownership rates have increased a scant 6% in 40 years, and taxpayers are on the hook for trillions of dollars in bailouts as well as the \$160 billion (and growing) in liabilities held by the now wholly government-owned Fannie and Freddie.

Recently implemented federal policies meant to help mortgage holders and prospective home buyers have been bogged down by government's ineptitude. Of the 1.2 million owners who sought \$50 billion in federal mortgage payment assistance, 35% have had to drop out because they couldn't document their income.

Meanwhile, a Treasury Department investigator has discovered that over 14,000 people have improperly received homebuyer tax credits, including nearly 1,300 prison inmates.

Advocates of bigger government pledged to create more jobs, but the vast expansion of federal regulations on commerce belies this rhetoric. In recent days, major business leaders have expressed frustration with government policies that chill economic growth.

They should have also noted how the only jobs those policies create are government jobs. There's never been a better, or more lucrative, time to be a bureaucrat. In the midst of a downturn, the average government worker makes 77% more than the average private-sector worker.

The number of civil servants who make six-figure salaries has jumped 5% during the recession. As a recent *Examiner* editorial related, “Last year, Uncle Sam paid out \$408 million in bonuses to 1.3 million federal workers.” What does this all mean? – more regulators spending more of their time and our money gumming up the free market.

Public officials' and politicians' empty promises about government's ability to solve all of our problems will only breed further skepticism and even cynicism in a wary and weary populace.

Given its inability to competently manage current crises or enforce existing laws and rules, can we really trust that bigger or more expensive government will prevent the next market crash, oil leak, or coal mine collapse with more controls and tax money?

It's never been clearer: Bigger government isn't better government; it's just more.