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Thinking about government as it shuts down

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NCR Today

President Ronald Reagan in his first inaugural address in 1981 said, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."

Thus began our nation's struggle with its government. Yet Reagan was actually closer in practice to the New Deal president Franklin Roosevelt than he is to the current tea party types inhabiting the halls of Congress. Reagan worked with Democratic House speaker Tip O'Neill to achieve compromises on important issues. He was clearly in favor of less government, but he was not in favor of no government. It is interesting to note that he raised the debt ceiling 18 times during his two-term presidency.

Those members of the House of Representatives in charge of shutting the government down do not believe in government at all. They have moved way beyond the legacy of their hero, Ronald Reagan. Many wonder why they insist on demanding what they cannot get in their present minority status. It is because they don't believe government is necessary. They don't want to change government. They want to end it. We used to call such people anarchists, and indeed, if the government remains shut down and the debt ceiling is not raised, we may learn what anarchy really is.

Just in the state of Maryland, it is estimated that the economy could lose about \$15 million a day during the shutdown. The state would lose \$5 million a day in revenue. Maryland has about 300,000 federal workers, thousands of whom will be sent home without pay.

Tea party enthusiasts also believe the Democrats will blink before they do. The tea party and Ted Cruz might be right in this analysis because, in fact, Democrats do believe in government. At some point, they are going to decide to do what's best for the country under the circumstances. Since the tea party considers even possible catastrophic occurrences following a government shutdown as ultimately positive, they don't really care about solving the problem. Remember, President Reagan was actually

interested in solutions. He wanted to fix government, not end it.

What this group of congressional Republicans truly believes is that life will be better for them if the government simply goes away. In part, they are correct. This group already has health insurance. They have hefty bank accounts. They have provided well for their retirement, and their children are in safe, high-quality private schools. They basically have all their needs and wants met. They pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and everybody else needs to do the same.

Certainly we should all care about everybody else, and our Catholic social teaching demands a preference for the poor and government policies that take the poor in to account. What I want to talk about, however, is how misguided this group is even according to its position of looking out for its own self-interest.

Why is government important even for those only concerned about themselves? The reasons are endless. Here is a self-proclaimed incomplete list of 100 items that government does. Here is another more compact list of 10 major areas where government impacts us in ways we couldn't handle without government.

Let me mention a few of my own thoughts about the importance of government. Let's start with Social Security, Medicare, food stamps, and other government assistance programs. You may say I don't need them and I can take care of myself. When mobs of angry citizens start pounding on your gated communities and your hired security guards are unable to hold them back, you may start thinking about another form of government -- police protection. (Add fire protection to that.) The problem with thinking only about yourself is you don't live on a desert island. We will all prosper the most when every part of our society feels it is being treated fairly, has access to good jobs, and can provide a decent living for families.

Here are a few other functions that could be mentioned:

- federal, state and local transportation systems needed to get your products to market and yourself to the airport for that trip to Tahiti
- power grids to keep open the communications necessary to make those big bucks
- food safety to keep you and your family healthy
- disaster relief, which even New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie was thankful for during Hurricane Sandy
- garbage collection (self-explanatory)
- courts and the entire legal system, which provide a playing field in which you know what the rules are and what the consequences will be for certain actions (extremely critical for successful businesses)

I haven't even mentioned education, airline safety and the Federal Aviation Administration, or the military. We all interact with our government day in and day out. Is it perfect? No. Is it necessary? Absolutely.

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The tea party Republicans should think about some of these things during the next few weeks. When they talk cavalierly about a government shutdown, they need to think about what they are shutting down. Government can certainly be better than it is, but it has also provided solutions to many of society's needs over the years. It might be a good idea for politicians like Ted Cruz and Rand Paul to sit down and make their own list. If they are honest, they just might surprise themselves.

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