

Introduction

Do we really want government off our backs?

The call to “get government off our backs” grew louder during the late 20th century and soon rose to a full-throated roar. The prevailing belief seemed to be that private industry and “the markets” were better able to deliver just about anything citizens might want or need, if only government would get out of the way.

“Government is not the solution to our problem,” President Reagan told us in 1981, “government is the problem.” Fifteen years later, President Clinton declared “The era of big government is over.” And in 2001, antitax activist Grover Norquist insisted that he didn’t want to abolish government but simply “reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

Surprising? Not really. America, after all, was founded by people wary of concentrated government power. To this day, we pride ourselves on our self-reliance and rugged individualism. Ours is a country where we “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.”

But what would our economy be like—what would our lives be like—without government involvement? Do we really want government off our backs? We examine these questions in this issue of *The Ledger*.

“You can have a market economy, but not a market society.”

Ricardo Lagos
Former President
of Chile

We’re not out to convince you that more government is better government, nor are we saying that government should be the default for addressing the challenges we all face. But in this day and age, when so many people seem to have lost faith in government’s ability to do anything of value, we figured the time was right to look back at some of the positive contributions government has made to the lives of so many Americans.

One last thing: The government programs and initiatives we’ve chosen to highlight do not represent a complete list, and you may not agree that those we’ve selected have had a positive impact. In either case we’d enjoy hearing your thoughts. Because as Thoreau wrote in *Civil Disobedience*, “Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.”