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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## The Government War

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In these columns I try to give voice to a philosophy you might call progressive conservatism. It starts with the wisdom of Edmund Burke — the belief that the world is more complex than we can know and we should be skeptical of handing too much power to government planners. It layers in a dose of Hamiltonian optimism — the belief that limited but energetic government can nonetheless successfully enhance opportunity and social mobility.

This general philosophy puts me to the left of where the Republican Party is now, and to the right of the Democratic Party. It puts me in that silly spot on the political map, the center, or a step to the right of it.

The center has been losing political power pretty much my entire career. But I confess that about 16 months ago I had some hope of a revival. The culture war, which had bitterly divided the country for decades, was winding down. The war war — the fight over Iraq and national security — was also waning.

The country had just elected a man who vowed to move past the old polarities, who valued discussion and who clearly had some sympathy with both the Burkean and Hamiltonian impulses. He staffed his administration with brilliant pragmatists whose views overlapped with mine, who differed only in that they have more faith in technocratic planning.

Yet things have not worked out for those of us in the broad middle. Politics is more polarized than ever. The two parties have drifted further to the extremes. The center is drained and depressed.

What happened?

History happened. The administration came into power at a time of economic crisis. This led it, in the first bloom of self-confidence, to attempt many big projects all at once. Each of these projects may have been defensible in isolation, but in combination they created the impression of a federal onslaught.

One of the odd features of the Democratic Party is its inability to learn what politics is about. It's not about winning arguments. It's about deciding which arguments you are going to have. In the first year of the Obama administration, the Democrats, either wittingly or unwittingly, decided to put the big government-versus-small government debate at the center of American life.

Just as America was leaving the culture war and the war war, the Democrats thrust it back into the government war, only this time nastier and with higher stakes.

This war is like a social script. Once it was activated, everybody fell into their preassigned roles.

As government grew, the antigovernment right mobilized. This produced the Tea Party Movement — a characteristically raw but authentically American revolt led by members of the yeoman enterprising class.

As government grew, many moderates and independents (not always the same thing) recoiled in alarm. In 2008, the country was evenly split on whether there should be bigger government with more services or smaller government with fewer services. Now, according to a Pew Research Center poll, the smaller government side has a 10-point edge. Since President Obama's inauguration, the share of Americans who call themselves liberals (24 percent) has remained flat, but the share who call themselves conservatives (42 percent) has risen by as much as 10 percentage points, according to a Washington Post/ABC News poll, as former moderates have shifted to the antigovernment side.

As government has seemed more threatening, moderates and independents have also fled from the Democratic Party. Democratic favorability ratings have dropped by 21 points over the past year, from 59 percent to 38 percent. Democrats are viewed less favorably than at any time in modern history.

These shifts in the electorate have had predictable effects on the two parties. During periods when the government war is at full swing, the libertarian/Goldwater-esque tendency in the Republican Party becomes dominant and all other tendencies become dormant. That has happened now.

During periods of government war, the Democratic Party also reverts to its vestigial self. Democrats don't want to defend big government, so instead they lash out at business. Over the past weeks, President Obama has upped his attacks on Big Oil, Wall Street and "powerful interests," sounding like an orthodox Reagan-era Democrat.

The government war is playing out just as you'd expect it to, strengthening those with pure positions and leaving those of us in the middle in the cross-fire. If the debate were about how to increase productivity or improve living standards, people like me could play. But when the country is wrapped up in a theological debate about the size of government, people like me are stuck crossways, trying to make distinctions no one heeds.

This is a disappointing time. The Democrats have become the government party and the Republicans are the small government party. The stale, old debate is back with a fury. The war, as always, takes control.

