

# Government is Good

**An Unapologetic Defense of a Vital Institution**

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## A Day in Your Life

*Though we usually fail to notice it, government programs and policies improve our daily lives in innumerable ways.*

Ask yourself this question: “What has government done for me lately?” If you are like most Americans, you will probably answer: “Not much.” Many people feel like they pay a lot in taxes but don't really get anything back from government. Surveys show that 52% of Americans believe that “government programs have not really helped me and my family.”<sup>1</sup> But let's see if that is really true. Let's examine a typical day in the life of an average middle-class American and try to identify some of the ways that government improves that person's life during that 24-hour period.

**6:30 a.m.** You are awakened by your clock radio. You know it is actually 6:30 because the National Institute of Standards and Technology keeps the official time. And you can listen to your favorite radio station only because the Federal Communications Commission brings organization and coherence to our vast telecommunications system. It ensures, for example, that radio stations do not overlap and that stations signals are not interfered with by the numerous other devices – cell phones, satellite television, wireless computers, etc. – whose signals crowd our nation's airwaves.

**6:35 a.m.** Like 17 million other Americans, you have asthma. But as you get out of bed you notice that you are breathing freely this morning. This is thanks in part to government clean air laws that reduce the air pollution that would otherwise greatly worsen your condition.

**6:38 a.m.** You go into the kitchen for breakfast. You pour some water into your coffeemaker. You simply take for granted that this water is safe to drink. But in fact you count on your city water department to constantly monitor the quality of your water and to immediately take measures to correct any potential problems with this vital resource.

**6:39 a.m.** You flip the switch on the coffee maker. There is no short in the outlet or in the electrical line and there is no resulting fire in your house. Why? Because when your house was being built, the electrical system had to be inspected to make sure it was properly installed – a service provided by your local government. And it was installed by an electrician who was licensed by your state government to ensure his competence and your safety.

**6:45 a.m.** You sit down to breakfast with your family. You are having eggs – a food that brings with it the possibility of salmonella poisoning, a serious food-borne illness affecting tens of thousands of Americans every year. But the chance of you getting sick from these eggs has now been greatly reduced by a recently passed series of strict federal rules that apply to egg producers.

**7:00 a.m.** You go into your newly renovated bathroom – one of a number of amenities that you enjoy in your house. But the fact that you can legally own your own house is something made possible by government. Think about this: “ownership” and “private property” are not things that exist in nature. These are legal constructs: things created by laws that are passed and enforced by government. You couldn’t even buy your home without a system of commercial laws concerning contracts and a government that ensures that sales contracts are enforced. So the fact that you live in your own home is, in part, a benefit of government and the rule of law.

**7:01 a.m.** Government also helps you own your house in more than the legal sense. On a more practical level, the federal government actually gives you money every year to help pay for your house. It's called a mortgage interest tax deduction and it is one of the larger benefit programs run by the federal government – amounting to over \$60 billion dollars a year. You can also deduct any real estate taxes you pay. These largely overlooked subsidy programs have enabled millions of people to buy their first home or to move up to a larger home than they could afford otherwise.

**7:02 a.m.** Back in the bathroom. You use the toilet and flush it. Your local government then takes care of transporting this waste, treating it, and disposing of it in an environmentally responsible manner – all without a second thought by you.

**7:20 a.m.** As you are getting dressed, a glance outside the window shows some ominous clouds. You check the weather on your TV. All these weather forecasts are made possible by information gathered and analyzed by the National Weather Service, a government agency. Every day, on your behalf, it takes in 190,000 weather observations from surface stations, 2,700 from ships, 115,000 from aircraft, 18,000 for buoys, 250,000 from balloons, and 140 million from satellites – all just to help you plan what to wear and make sure you don't get stuck in a snow storm. And oh yes, this agency may save your life with its hurricane and tornado warnings.

**7:30 a.m.** Before you leave home, you take your pills to control your high blood pressure. But how do you know that this medicine is safe or effective? Without the testing required by the Food and Drug Administration, you wouldn't. And without the vigilance of the FDA, you could easily fall victim to unscrupulous marketers of unsafe and worthless medicines.

**7:45 a.m.** You put a couple of letters in your mailbox. For less than the price of a cup of coffee, a government employee will come to your house, pick up the letters, and have them delivered in a few days to someone on the other

side of the country. A pretty good deal.

**7:50 a.m.** You and your child walk across the lawn to your car and arrive without getting dog poop on your shoes. A small but welcome achievement that is made possible now by a local law that requires people to clean up after their pets. Also, the reason your neighborhood is not plagued by stray cats and dogs is that your local Animal Control officer is on the job dealing with this constant problem.

**7:52 a.m.** You help your young child into your car and you pull out of your driveway. You have now entered an experience that is improved by government in almost more ways that you can count. Driving your car is inherently dangerous. But it is made immensely safer by government laws and regulations, such as those mandating child safety seats and the use of seat belts – rules that have saved tens of thousands of lives. Driving down the street is also made much safer by a local government that enforces traffic laws and discourages people from driving too fast or driving drunk. Most state governments also minimize your risk of being run into by someone driving on bald tires or with faulty brakes by requiring regular inspections of all vehicles. And state driver's license examinations ensure that all drivers are at least minimally competent and can actually see the road. In addition, if you are hit by another car, the potentially disastrous costs of an accident are covered because the government requires that all drivers to have auto insurance. In fact, without this extensive network of government laws and regulations covering automobiles and driving, it would be foolish for us to ever venture out on the road.

**8:15 a.m.** You drop your child off at day-care. It took a long search to find a good program and it is an expensive one, but it is worth it so you can feel confident that your child is in a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment while you are at work. One of the reasons you can afford this program is the \$3,000 child care tax credit you get from the federal government every year. Equally important, your child benefits from the fact that most state governments now enforce day-care requirements for group size, ratios of children per staff member, teacher training, nutrition,

health, safety, and space requirements.

**8:35 a.m.** Your trip on the freeway is much safer due to federal restrictions on the number of hours that truck drivers can operate their vehicles without resting. Thousands of people die every year from truck-related traffic accidents, but it would be much worse without these regulations that keep sleepy truck drivers off the road.

**8:55 a.m.** You arrive at work and take the elevator. You just assume that the elevator is safe; and it is, thanks in part to the annual elevator inspections conducted by your state government. It is probably nothing you will appreciate until the next time the elevator breaks down with you inside, and that makes you think a bit more about the reliability of elevators.

**9:00 a.m.** While at work, your rights and wellbeing are constantly protected by a wide-ranging network of federal and state laws. The Occupation Safety and Health Act works to protect you from unsafe and unhealthy work conditions. Federal law protects you from workplace discrimination based on race, gender, religion, national origin, or disability. State laws may also require your employer to purchase worker's compensation insurance so that you are covered in case you are injured on the job

**Noon.** For lunch you have your usual sandwich and microwaveable cup of soup. But why did you choose that particular soup? Perhaps because it was low in salt and fat. But how do you know that? Because the government requires all food packaging to have a truthful and easily readable panel on the label that supplies you with the nutritional information necessary to make a good choice. Food companies tell you what *they* want you to know about their products, but the Food and Drug Administration's labeling requirements tell you what *you* need to know to eat in a healthy way.

How do you know the lettuce in your sandwich is not laced with unhealthy doses of pesticides? Because the

Department of Agriculture has developed and is enforcing uniform standards for pesticide residue on raw foods.

Microwave ovens are potentially very dangerous machines, but you can use this one with confidence because of detailed government regulations that limit the maximum amount of radiation leakage and mandate two different safety interlocks that prevent its operation with the door ajar or open.

**12:45 p.m.** After lunch, you walk to a nearby ATM and get some cash out of your account – and your money is actually there. That wasn't always true during the economic depression of the 1930s when many banks failed. But your money is safe -- as it was during the recent financial and banking crisis -- because the government guarantees your deposits. In addition, those pieces of paper you put in your wallet are only worth something thanks to the federal government. Our monetary system is entirely a government creation, and the value of money is only maintained because the government regulates the money supply and protects it from counterfeiters. Quite an important service really.

**1:00 p.m.** Back at work you hear rumors about a new downsizing plan being talked about by management – a fairly typical occurrence in these days of heightened national and international corporate competition. You know your job is one that could be lost, but you also know that you will be eligible for state-mandated unemployment insurance should that happen. This is just another way that government helps you to cope with the economic risks and uncertainties of a modern economy.

**3:00 p.m.** On a break, you call your elderly mother in the hospital to check on how she is recovering from her broken hip. Thanks to Medicare, her medical expenses are covered and she does not have to worry about this becoming a financial disaster for her. Thanks to the federal Family and Medical Leave act, you will also have the right to take several days off to tend to your mother when she comes home from the hospital.

**3:10 p.m.** You call to arrange for a physical therapist to work with your mother when she comes out of the hospital, and again this is paid for by Medicare. And you can be reasonably confident that she will get good therapy because your state Department of Health has a program of examining and licensing these therapists in order to ensure the quality of their work.

**5:00 p.m.** You leave work—thanks to the government-mandated 40-hour workweek. Labor Department regulations prevent your company from making you work past 5:00 unless it pays you overtime.

**5:15 p.m.** You stop at a local gas station to fill up. The very fact that this oil company offers this gas to you for sale is dependent on the existence of certain government laws. This company would not do business in your town without a legal system that assures them that you will pay for any gas you pump into your car. This economic exchange – like buying your house – would not be taking place without a system of statutory and common law that protects private property and regulates sales transactions. This simple sale is covered by Article Two of the Uniform Commercial Code – dozens of pages of laws that regulate every phase of a transaction for the sale of goods and provide remedies for problems that may arise.

**5:15 p.m.** You pump 15 gallons of 87 octane gas into your car and pay for it. But how do you know that you really got 15 gallons, and not 14½? And that the gas was actually 87 octane? This is only ensured by the presence of that little sticker on the gas pump that shows that a worker from your city's Division of Weights and Measures has inspected the pump and the gas. These public employees make sure that you get what you pay for – from a pound of sliced turkey breast to a carat of diamond – by constantly testing and inspecting all commercial meters and scales, and by verifying the accuracy of checkout scanners. This is a crucial service, since more than half of the income of the average family is used to purchase necessities bought by weight or measure or scanned at a checkout station.

**5:15 p.m.** How do you know the price you are paying for this gasoline is a fair and competitive one? In many states,

the Department of Attorney General has been responsible for finding and prosecuting cases of price manipulation and price fixing by oil companies and distributors.

**5:30 p.m.** As you drive home, you notice the tree-lined streets and the nice houses in your neighborhood – generally a pretty good place to live. Thanks again to government. Without zoning rules, you might have an auto body shop or a fast-food outlet move in next door. Or worse yet, a fertilizer plant or a toxic waste site. But there are no noxious smells in the air, no excessive and dangerous traffic on your street – thanks to your government. Pleasant and livable neighborhoods are only possible with extensive government planning and zoning regulation.

**5:35 p.m.** As you approach your house, you see your child coming down the sidewalk. The government-provided sidewalk. The sidewalk that allows your child to walk to the neighbor's house down the street to play with a friend without the risk of being hit by a car.

**5:45 p.m.** You go for a jog in your local public park.

**6:30 p.m.** You take your family out for dinner at a local pizza restaurant. You enjoy a good meal and no one gets sick from E. coli or other food-borne illnesses. This is in large part because your local government conducts regular inspections of all food establishments to protect the health of customers.

**7:30 p.m.** Back at your house. You settle in for a quiet evening at home – one that is undisturbed by those annoying telemarketers calling you up to try to sell you something. This is because you have signed up with a state or federal no-call registry – a government service now enjoyed by over 60 million Americans.

**8:00 p.m.** You do a quick check of your e-mail – just one of the many services you enjoy over the internet every day. We all tend to think of the internet as the product of those talented and imaginative entrepreneurs in the high-tech companies. But the internet actually began with government programs that created ARPANET and later



NSFNET, early computer networking systems that developed the software and networking infrastructure that form the foundations of today's internet. The government also helped to fund research that led to web browsers like Internet Explorer and search engines like Google.

**11:00 p.m.** You go to bed. During your sleep, you are protected by a smoke detector that your city requires to be installed in every residence. Maybe you would have bought one of these yourself, but this law helps to ensure that everyone is protected from the dangers of fire.

**4:00 a.m.** You are asleep in your comfy bed. Unlike that time you stayed in a small inn in Costa Rica, where you were woken up regularly at 4 in the morning by the roosters crowing in the neighborhood. By law, no one can keep roosters in your neighborhood and so you remain in blissful slumber.

### **Government: The Illusion and the Reality**

So goes your typical day as an average middle-class American – *if* you happen to be paying attention to all the different ways that government laws and programs help you lead a better life. For most of us, thinking about our day this way is a real eye-opener. We like to see ourselves as rugged individualists, leading our lives without any help from anyone, especially government. But this is an illusion. As we have just seen, the reality is completely different. We are constantly benefiting from a variety of government laws and programs. Federal, state, and local government employees are literally working around the clock to make our lives better in innumerable ways. Ironically, even those conservatives who complain that they don't want government "interfering" in their lives depend heavily and repeatedly on government throughout their day. And the examples described earlier are only a small sample of the many ways that government programs improve our lives. They do not even include many of the most important services of government, such as preventing economic depressions, catching criminals, caring for our fragile

ecosystem, dispensing justice, thwarting terrorist attacks, and eradicating deadly diseases. A detailed description of all the various ways that our lives are improved by the activities of local, state, and federal governments could easily take up hundreds of pages.

Many conservative critics of government like to portray it as a malevolent force whose extensive network of laws and regulations are increasingly invading our lives in harmful ways. They have it half right: government policies do affect our everyday lives in many ways, but these efforts are usually beneficial. For most of us, most of the time, government is not some faceless bureaucrat who is constantly ordering us around; it is more like a guardian angel: an invisible benevolent being that accompanies us throughout their day, easing us through potential difficulties and protecting us from impending harms. Admittedly, the angel analogy is a bit exaggerated, but the underlying truth is not: government has an extensive and overwhelmingly positive effect on our everyday lives.

SEE SUE.



SEE SUE RUN.

SEE SUE RUN TO PUBLIC SCHOOL.



GO, SUE, GO!

SEE SUE'S DADDY TAKE A CHILD-CARE TAX CREDIT.



MAYBE DADDY WILL USE IT TO BUY SUE MORE TOYS!

SEE SUE USE FEDERAL STUDENT LOANS TO ATTEND COLLEGE.



GOOD GOING, SUE!

SEE SUE LOWER HER TAXES WITH THE LIFETIME LEARNING CREDIT.



CLEVER SUE!

SEE SUE GET A JOB.



SEE THE EMPLOYER TAX EXCLUSION MAKE SUE'S HEALTH CARE CHEAPER.

SEE SUE BUY A HOME.



SUE CAN AFFORD IT BECAUSE OF THE MORTGAGE DEDUCTION!

SEE SUE HAVE A BABY.



SEE SUE TAKE THE CHILD-CARE TAX CREDIT.

SEE SUE SAVE FOR HER KID'S COLLEGE WITH A TAX-FREE EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNT.



GOOD PLANNING, SUE!

SEE SUE RETIRE.



NOW SUE WILL COLLECT SOCIAL SECURITY!

SEE SUE GET SICK.



GOOD THING SUE HAS MEDICARE!

SEE SUE FAIL TO SEE.



FUNNY SUE!

### Why We are in Denial About the Value of Government

So why are most people in denial about the beneficial roles that government plays in their lives? There are several answers. First, most Americans have become so used to the benefits of government that they simply take them for granted. Benefits that are provided reliably for long periods of time – such as clean water and a stable currency system – tend to fade into the background and to not be considered benefits at all. They disappear from our consciousness.

Our failure to notice or appreciate what government does for us also has to do with the unique and peculiar nature of many government benefits. The benefits we get from paying our taxes are usually not immediate, and they are often not particularly tangible either. They can be remote and elusive. This is easy to see if we contrast government benefits with the benefits we receive from exchanges in the marketplace. When we go to the store, we hand over our money and immediately get something very concrete in return – a candy bar, a blouse, some groceries. This kind of exchange is very satisfying; we see what we get for our money right away.

Not so with many of the exchanges we have with our governments. We shell out money for our taxes, but what we gain in return is frequently delayed or remote. For instance, we pay our local government to treat our sewage, but the environmental payoffs may not be immediately obvious to us. When we later go fishing or swimming in our local lake or river – waters whose purity depends upon adequate sewage treatment – we probably do not see this enjoyable experience as a result of our sewer tax. When benefits are remote like this, it is hard to make the connections between them and the taxes we pay. It is unlikely, for example, that we associate sending our check to the IRS with getting reliable weather forecasts every morning, or with the purchase of a flack vest that saves a police officer's life in Los Angeles, or with badly needed emergency aid that goes to a hurricane victim in Florida.

Government benefits are also different because they are often less tangible than the goods we get from a store. These benefits frequently take the form not of the presence of something, but of the absence of something. Think of it this

way: much of the job of government in our lives is to ensure that bad things don't happen to us. We pay taxes so that our homes don't get burgled, and our food doesn't make us sick, our banks don't fail, and our bridges don't collapse. In other words, often when people in government are doing their job right – *nothing happens*. No wonder no one notices. So while we really do get a lot for with our taxes, we often get it in a form that is largely invisible to us. This is one of the reasons why we too easily fall for the illusion that government is doing nothing for us.

## **The Conservative Campaign Against Government**

There is, however, another much more disturbing reason that most of us mistakenly believe that government doesn't do much for us: it's because this is what we are being constantly told. One of the most consistent political messages promoted by conservative pundits and politicians in this country is that our governments are essentially thieves – that they take our taxes but rarely give us back anything of value. The political right is continually telling us that we benefit little from public programs. Here's how Dick Armey, former Republican House Majority Leader, used to drive this point home: "I don't want to give the impression that most government programs are designed, even ostensibly, to help families with the needs of everyday life. Most government programs don't even pretend to do that, and very few American families would notice their disappearance."<sup>2</sup>

This idea that government programs do not benefit the average American is simply one part of a larger smear campaign against government being waged by the right-wing in the country. During the last 30 years, conservatives have spent a great deal of time and money trying to convince Americans that government is bad. They have relentlessly promoted a series of negative stereotypes about government, invoking ominous images of "Big Brother" and the "Taxman." They have blindly ignored everything that is right with government and aggressively advanced a vision of government as a dark force in society. We have been continually told that government is inefficient, ineffective, corrupt, oppressive, overly expensive, and bad for business. The core message has been clear:

government doesn't help us, it hurts us; it doesn't solve problems, it is the problem. This claim that "government is bad" has been a central political theme in virtually every Republican election campaign during the last three decades. Americans have always been somewhat suspicious of government, but this tendency has been greatly exacerbated and exaggerated by a steady diet of anti-government rhetoric coming from the political right.

The media often go along with the conservative smear campaign against government – sometime intentionally, sometimes not. Explicitly right-wing media outlets like Fox News are full of daily diatribes against big government. Conservative commentators lambaste "wasteful" social programs, "ridiculous" regulations, and the "stupid" liberals who support these things. Even the more neutral mainstream news outlets inadvertently convey an almost entirely negative view of government to the public. It is not news when government works well, only when it fails. So news stories focus on policy blunders, government waste, and corrupt politicians. When is the last time that you heard something positive about government in the media – something about how government is working to improve people's lives?

In this context, it is hardly surprising that most of us mistakenly believe that government programs do little to benefit us – that is what we are being constantly told. Every day we are hearing about what is wrong with government, so it is inevitable that we tend to develop an incomplete, distorted, and negative view of the public sector. But it is time to set the record straight about this much-maligned public institution. That is the purpose of this website.

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To see more about how government works for the common good, see ["The Forgotten Achievements of Government."](#)

To see why we should not be complaining all the time about taxes, see ["Taxes are Good."](#)

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1. Meg Bostrum, *By, or for, the People: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion of Government* (New York: Demos, March 1, 2005) p. 34.
  2. Dick Arme, *The Freedom Revolution* (New York: Regnery Publishers, 1995), p. 293.

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