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## GOVERNMENT, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?

*Tracy Provo Knight\**

TO PROMOTE THE GENERAL WELFARE THE CASE FOR BIG  
GOVERNMENT.

By *Steven Conn.*

New York: Oxford University Press. 2012. Pp. ix, 265. \$19.95.

Americans like to believe that we share the same strong, persevering spirit possessed by our pioneering ancestors; yet, we are often quick to forget that our modern government has played an integral role in enabling us to grow and prosper. According to Dutch organizational studies researcher Geert Hofstede, Americans in general tend to lean toward individualism, preferring to act as an individual rather than as members of a group.<sup>1</sup> We are a society of people with each person looking out for number one. Hofstede's studies further illustrate that Americans tend to favor values such as assertiveness and the acquisition of material goods and money over

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<sup>1</sup> STEPHEN ROBINS & DAVID DECENZO, FUNDAMENTALS OF Management 36 (7th ed., Prentice Hall 2010); ANGELO KINICKI & BRIAN WILLIAMS, MANAGEMENT A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION 123-24 (5th ed., McGraw-Hill Irwin 2010)

relationships and sensitivity.<sup>2</sup> Like small children, we desire material things, but we often have a difficult time sharing with others. We are a society which teaches its members that protection of self is paramount, yet we are quick to forget the constant, behind the scenes, role government plays in our lives. Instead, we are apt to question our government: "What have you done for me lately?" In *To Promote the General Welfare*, Steven Conn presents a series of essays which serve as reminders of the many and varied ways in which government has served as the "boost" Americans have needed in our effort to climb the ladder of what we perceive as individual success.

From the birth of this nation, Americans have relied upon government for growth and improvement. In order for us to maintain a free country, it has been essential that we have an active government which has operated in a manner that allows its citizens to prosper and grow. By our very nature, as outlined in Hofstede's research, we do not like to rely on others.<sup>3</sup> How foolish we have been. We are not a nation of individuals who have worked alone for what we have; instead, we each have relied upon the government for assistance in one form or another. Because government in the United States has a long history of functioning in a manner which is hidden within the economy, Americans seem to have forgotten that the free market we so adore depends greatly upon the government. The government provides the federal and state-funded infrastructure upon which we rely, as well as initiatives sponsored by federal, state, and local governments. Our founding fathers were so distrustful of a large, centralized government that they created a federal system of government that gave significant power to state and local government. From the interstate system upon which we travel to the public school system that educates the vast majority of us, each of us has been touched in some way by a program or initiative which has enriched our lives either directly or indirectly. For most Americans, college education and home ownership would not be possible without federally subsidized higher-education loans and federal

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

housing programs. Conn's essays, presented in *To Promote the General Welfare*, illustrate the myriad of ways in which government programs have permeated and enriched each of our lives.

For many years, Americans have regarded the transportation infrastructure not merely as a means for facilitating the economic growth of our country, but as a vital system upon which the nation as a whole depends and a system in which government has played a significant role. As early as the completion of the Erie Canal by New York State and the railroad boom in the 1820s, the federal government has sought to address the challenge of connecting this broad nation together through webs of waterways, rails, and roads. In the 1820's, the federal government started granting federally owned land to states, enabling the states to utilize that land for roads and railroads. In 1824, Congress authorized the President to provide army engineers trained at the US Military Academy at West Point for civilian projects. Following WWII, the National Interregional Highway Committee, appointed by the President, recommended the construction of a system of nearly 34,000 miles of interstate highways to connect our states. Today, we are reliant upon both this transportation system which united our many states and the governmental investment which made it possible.

According to U.S. Census Bureau records, from 1900 to 1940 fewer than 50% of Americans were homeowners. That percentage has jumped to nearly 70% due to federal programs which have extended mortgage assistance to military veterans, set standards for home construction, created a secondary market for mortgages, and allowed for the deduction of home mortgage interest payments.

Although American education is primarily a local and state undertaking, the Federal government has played a major role in its development. The Morrill Act of 1862 allowed for the distribution of 17 million acres of land for colleges and universities. The New Deal legislation of the 1930's marked the first significant influx of federal government involvement in the educational sector. In the years of economic decline during the great depression, local school districts

found that they were no longer able to support their schools. President Roosevelt and his “alphabet agencies” stepped forward to fill the void that economic decline had created. For example, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration allocated monies to employ teachers, allowing many rural schools to remain open. The New Deal not only served as a reactionary measure which allowed schools to remain open but also created many educational innovations. The Emergency Education Program, and later the Lanham Act, allowed for the creation of public nursery schools. In 1946, the GI Bill of Rights provided not only federal assistance for veterans returning from WWII but also provided federal assistance allowing those veterans to attend colleges and universities. The Higher Education Act of 1965 and the Pell Grant program of 1972 allowed larger segments of the population to attend colleges and universities. While Roosevelt’s New Deal focus was mainly on improving school structures and preventing teacher layoffs in rural areas, President Johnson’s “War of Poverty” took aim at the education received by the poor in our country. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided poor school districts with books, teacher training, and equipment needed in the classroom. Again, each American has been touched in some way by federal government’s involvement in the education.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the life expectancy of the average American increased by 28 year, due in large part to the federal government’s role in advancing medical research and medical and public health progress. The Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control, and Public Works programs greatly contributed to a more expansive distribution system of vaccinations, furthered research on diseases, and advanced proactive plans for disease prevention. Again, the New Deal allowed for federal funds to construct thousands of miles of water and sewer line, as well as allowing for the construction of water treatment plants to combat the sanitation problem which plagued our nation. The Social Security Act of 1935 proved to be legislation between state and federal government, which relied heavily upon federal support. Though most Americans view the Social Security Act

as merely a form of retirement supplementation, Titles V and VI provide aid for mothers and children and allow for the matching of grants for health departments as a method of stimulating spending at the state and local levels. The 1965 Medicare and Medicaid amendments to the Social Security Act aided in extending medical care to those who lacked the financial means to access private sector health systems. Since the inception of Medicare, physicians have spent much time and money lobbying for the preservation of the rates of reimbursement on which they have become so dependent. This is in stark contrast to the stance taken by the American Medical Association in the early 1920s, when the organization was in support of a universal healthcare program for Americans. Interestingly enough, since 1939, the AMA has opposed every proposed national health care bill.

In this collection of essays, Steven Conn reminds us of the many and varied ways in which the government has enriched our lives though an often unassuming manner. Conn presents an America which differs greatly from the one presented in John Steinbeck's depression era work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Upton Sinclair's 1906 work, *The Jungle*. Both Steinbeck and Sinclair opened America's eyes to the absence of social programs, substandard health and medical care, poor working conditions, and the cloud of hopelessness which held firm above the working class of that era. Perhaps these works served as a catalyst for many of the programs discussed in *To Promote the General Welfare*. From the miles of interstate highways that have facilitated interstate commerce and travel, to Medicaid, Social Security, government-subsidized student loans for higher education, home loan options for United States veterans, a secondary market for home loans, and a plethora of other endeavors, we have each been touched in some way by a federal program. Rather than ask what has the government done for us, Conn's collection of essays reminds us, instead, to marvel at all that this comparatively young government has done to improve the lives of its citizens.