

Report from the Center for

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Is the Least Government the Best Government?

To make its research easily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for “questions,” *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected philosophical work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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“That government is best which governs least” is the principle underlying many proposed changes in federal welfare programs. But leading arguments in defense of this principle may actually show why it should be rejected p. 1

Are human rights violations in our national interest? The crucial step in providing an answer is first understanding the question p. 6

Defenders of conscription claim that a draft fairly spreads the burden of military obligation. An argument is offered that we do not have any such obligation to be shared p. 9

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With the rallying cry of “getting government off the backs of the people,” the new administration has launched a comprehensive campaign to reduce the role of government and expand the domain of private enterprise. Thus the president has called for budget cuts of billions of dollars in Medicaid, food stamps, unemployment compensation, subsidized housing, and legal services for the poor. At the same time measures of economic rejuvenation are proposed to stimulate growth in the private sector, with attendant benefits predicted for affluent and indigent alike. Although a federal “safety net” for the very poorest will be retained, private remedies are in large part to replace public remedies for improving the condition of the nation’s needy.

The Reagan program has set off heated controversy on the proper role of government and the appropriate limits to its extent and authority. After nearly half a century of increasing responsibility by government for the welfare of its citizenry, the presuppositions of the New Deal are being radically reexamined. Advocates and opponents of more minimal government are debating: is that government best which governs least? This claim can be understood in two different ways. It might mean that minimal government is most *successful* in promoting the good of its citizens, that minimal government works best to provide its citizens with what they need for a satisfying life. It might also mean that any more extensive government oversteps its legitimate moral authority and trespasses on the rights of those it governs.

Minimal government as an economic remedy will be tested by the success or failure of the Reagan