In his first inaugural address, Ronald Reagan declared, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." In the ensuing decades, this view has become the mantra of the Republican Party - and of a sizable segment of the American electorate.

In *American Amnesia*, Jacob Hacker, a professor of political science at Yale University, and Paul Pierson, a professor of political science at the University of California at Berkeley, provide an Everest of evidence that Reagan was wrong. Progress and prosperity in the United States, they demonstrate, have rested in no small measure on a constructive relationship between an effective public authority and dynamic private markets. We are now paying a terrible price for "forgetting this essential truth."

Although they do not claim government always works well, Hacker and Pierson provide example after example of public-sector policies and programs that have corrected market failures or addressed problems that profit-seekers have had no interest in addressing.

Water filtration, chlorination, and rerouting sewage, the authors remind us, saved millions of lives. Scientists working for the Department of Agriculture developed penicillin and other antibiotics. The G.I. Bill democratized higher education. The government built our energy grid and our highway system. Federal initiatives dating to the Clean Air Act of 1970 have reduced "negative externalities," including pollution. And the government financed breakthroughs that led to computers and the internet.

Hacker and Pierson maintain that seeing Democrats and Republicans as equally at fault for the current mistrust in and dysfunction of government "seems hardheaded, and superficially suggests objectivity, but it's an abdication of responsibility." They document the alliance between antigovernment billionaires, the Chamber of Commerce, right-wing think tanks, political action committees, radio and television "noise machines," and "the new, hyperconservative" GOP. The resulting crisis of public authority, Hacker and Pierson conclude, is having a catastrophic impact: "The government that governs least governs pretty badly." They hold out hope - if we find ways to move beyond a politics "dominated by narrow interests and riven by zero-sum conflicts." But they also know, all too well, that it won't be easy.

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