



Written by [Laurence M. Vance](#) on February 5, 2018

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## Hey There, Big Spender

*From the print edition of The New American*

### ***Eleven Presidents: Promises vs. Results in Achieving Limited Government*, by Ivan Eland, Oakland, California: Independent Institute, 2017, 370 pages, hardcover.**



Republicans claim to be the party of the Constitution. They have since the early 20th century cultivated the image that they and their presidents are in favor of limited government while the Democrats and their presidents are in favor of big government.

Ivan Eland (shown), in his new book *Eleven Presidents: Promises vs. Results in Achieving Limited Government* (hereafter *Eleven Presidents*), is an iconoclast. He shows, conclusively, that from the Eisenhower administration on:

- Republican presidents, compared to Democratic ones, have generally presided over greater average annual increases in the federal government's spending as a percentage of GDP;
- Such greater government spending includes more spending on welfare and social programs as a portion of federal spending by Republican presidents than by Democratic chief executives; and
- Republicans have greatly increased public debt accumulation as a portion of GDP, while Democrats have substantially decreased it.

He concludes that "Republican presidents in the last hundred years have often failed to limit government." Only three Republican presidents — Harding, Coolidge, and Eisenhower — "had much of a record of doing so." And surprisingly, the Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton "actually have not received enough credit for their efforts to limit government." The omission of the name of Ronald Reagan is no accident. Eland maintains that Reagan, whose "championing of limited government was mostly rhetorical," converted the Republican Party "into a more statist political organization."

Eland is senior fellow and director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at the Independent Institute in Oakland, California. He holds a Ph.D. in public policy from George Washington University. His forte is foreign policy. He worked for Congress and the GAO, and testified before Congress on national security issues. Aside from several books and numerous scholarly and popular articles in a variety of publications, Dr. Eland is the author of 45 in-depth studies on national security issues. This is Eland's second book on U.S. presidents. His first, *Recarving Rushmore: Ranking the Presidents on Peace, Prosperity, and Liberty* (2009, updated 2014), is essential reading for any study of U.S. presidents, as is his new one.



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Although there have been more than 11 presidents over the past 100 years, Eland limits his study to “only certain chief executives who served during the last hundred years — the age of big government, which began with World War I and has lasted to the present — who promised to constrain government.”

Eland focuses on the objective of limited government because he believes that “limiting government and letting the private sector flourish are the best ways to promote peace, prosperity, and liberty in the United States.” Therefore, “for the most part, with a few exceptions,” his discussion is about the “‘limited government’ hypocrisy of Republican presidents in the last hundred years.” He classifies the 11 presidents of the last 100 years into three groups. Proto-libertarians or libertarianesque are Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton. Moderately progressive are Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford. Big government hawks are Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush. The book obviously doesn’t have anything to say about Donald Trump.

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The book has neither preface nor introduction — the first chapter functions as an introduction. The last chapter serves as the book’s conclusion. Chapter two, “Years of Normalcy and Restraint,” covers both Harding and Coolidge, while chapter five, “Watergate and a More Restrained Foreign Policy,” covers both Nixon and Ford. Each of the chapters devoted to a president (or presidents) has a nice conclusion. The book itself concludes with copious endnotes for each chapter, a bibliography, an index, and a very detailed “about the author” page.

The “Harding-Coolidge years from 1921 to 1929 were the only time during the twentieth century that the federal government reduced its absolute level of nonmilitary spending.” Both men “were for limiting government, mostly promoted free markets, restrained their actions as chief executives, and reined in much of the foreign interventionism of the Wilson era.” Conservatives should make Harding and Coolidge their role models instead of Reagan, “who waged war (overtly and covertly) and almost caused a nuclear war with overheated rhetoric, ballooned budget deficits by cutting taxes while increasing government spending as a portion of GDP, and dangerously expanded executive power by unconstitutionally funding a secret war against a congressional prohibition.”

After the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, Hoover “tried many new and innovative government stimuli to spur the economy but ended up making the economic situation worse.” He, in fact, “took much more government action to counter an economic downturn than any prior president in American history.” Hoover’s was the first administration “to use federal power to intervene directly in the economy during peacetime.” He increased both taxes and tariffs “in the middle of a drastic economic downturn.” Yet, in spite of his disastrous economic policies, “Hoover had the best foreign policy of any president in the twentieth century and so far, in the twenty-first century.”

Eisenhower did not dismantle FDR’s New Deal, but was certainly “a budget hawk.” Next to Clinton, Ike “has the best fiscal record of any post-Truman president in cutting federal spending as a portion of gross domestic product.” And although he relied “too much on covert operation to overthrow foreign leaders he did not like” and didn’t dismantle the military-industrial complex he would complain about in his famous farewell address, Eisenhower “limited overt US government military interventions overseas and cut the defense budget.” Under Eisenhower, the federal government ran a budget surplus in three years.



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Eland sees Nixon as a “political opportunist” whose “conservative rhetoric belied a leftist policy record.” He “spent at a greater rate on social programs than Lyndon Johnson,” adopted wage and price controls, raised tariffs, increased federal regulations, established “almost 650 new national parks,” created the EPA and OSHA, and began the war on drugs. And then there was Vietnam and Nixon’s “secret wars in Laos and Cambodia.” About the only good thing that Eland says about Nixon is that he abolished the draft. Ford was only president for two and a half years. Although less interventionist overseas than most presidents, Ford was a moderate progressive domestically, like Nixon.

The longest chapter in the book (double or triple the length of every other chapter but the one on George W. Bush) is the chapter on Reagan. And rightly so, since he has been beatified by conservatives for much too long. Reagan was “the king of ‘small government’ hot air.” The chapter title says it all: “Busting the Myths.” This chapter is certainly the most important one in the book, and by itself is worth the price of the book.

Bush the elder had a disastrously hawkish foreign policy. On the domestic front, he continued the war on drugs “and the mass incarceration policies it required,” signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act, increased funding for the Department of Education and Head Start, and “became involved in a bidding war with the Democrats to see who could militarize the police, build more prisons, and enact long mandatory prison sentences.” The only good thing that came out of his presidency was the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court.

The second longest chapter in the book is on Bush the younger. The chapter title sums it up: “Big Government at Home and Abroad.” Bush expanded executive power; had “policies that were very similar to his successor, Barack Obama”; created the TSA and Department of Homeland Security; and “used 9/11 as an excuse to invade and conduct nation-building occupations in two Muslim countries.”

The biggest surprise to most conservatives in *Eleven Presidents* will be the chapters on Carter and Clinton. Carter “was a pioneer in fully or partially deregulating four major industries — transportation, communication, finance, and energy.” He “set many of the precedents for limiting government and deregulating the economy that Reagan unjustly was given all the credit for.” Clinton “promised small government and delivered more of it than most of the Republicans” discussed in the book. Clinton “was the champion at slashing federal government spending as a portion of GDP.” In fact, he “actually cut the budget at a greater rate during the first two years of his presidency, when Democrats controlled Congress,” than “in the last six years,” when Republicans controlled it. Clinton had “the largest annualized decrease in civilian federal executive branch employees as a percent of the population.” And of course, it was Clinton who “signed an end to the national maximum speed limit of fifty-five miles per hour.” This doesn’t mean that Eland glosses over Clinton’s unnecessary military interventions or any of his other blunders, for he certainly doesn’t.

An added benefit of *Eleven Presidents* is that the book serves as a primer of the evils of U.S. foreign policy in the 20th century, beginning with “the unnecessary US entry into World War I” that “tipped the balance in the war to Germany’s defeat and humiliation, laying the seeds of World War II and the Cold War.”

I cannot recommend *Eleven Presidents* highly enough. There is nothing else like it. May it ever serve to demolish the myth that the Republican Party is the party of the Constitution and limited government.



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