



How Not to Waste a State Budget Crisis

Shortly after the 2008 Presidential election, President-elect Barack Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, told the Wall Street Journal, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." He explained to the WSJ: "Things that we had postponed for too long, that were long-term, are now immediate and must be dealt with. This crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before."

Emanuel was roundly and rightly criticized for the opportunistic nature of his comments. He was, after all, speaking of the economic crisis as an opportunity for the incoming Obama administration to expand the federal government as never before. However, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm recently echoed Emanuel in a good way, explaining that other states need to follow her state's lead in drastically cutting government. Granholm, whose state has, [according to the New York Times](#), "dropped a quarter of all state departments and 11,000 workers, closed 8 prisons and 10 prison camps, and drastically decreased funds for services like the arts and dental care for adults," said, "People who don't take advantage of the crisis to cross over to a new model are wasting the crisis."



Indeed, as the *Times* opens its story:

As states around the country gird for another grim budget year, more leaders have begun to talk not of nipping, not of tucking, but, in essence, of turning government upside down and starting over. Ever growing is the list of states, municipalities and agencies with blue ribbon committees aimed at reconsidering what government should be.

Most of these ideas are good; a few are debatable.

Among the good: In Missouri "lawmakers agreed to merge the state's water patrol with its highway patrol (saving about \$1 million a year) and to stop printing copies of the state's 'blue book' guide to politics and statutes (saving \$1.7 million)." The Show-Me State is also considering "merging the agencies that oversee secondary and higher education, providing incentives to counties for combining services, even turning to a four-day state workweek." The Georgia House of Representatives "voted to end financing for the state's Council for the Arts," though they restored about a third of the funding



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after “artists, musicians and dancers” who were used to living off the taxpayers protested. In “Pewaukee, Wis., a city of 12,000 that found itself with a \$1.8 million deficit and the need to replace two broken-down fire trucks,” local leaders “decided to close the Police Department in January and sign a contract with the local sheriff’s department.” The Mayor who oversaw that move “won re-election last month over an opponent who had promised to reopen the Police Department.” Also in Wisconsin, “Scott Walker, the county executive of Milwaukee County” has “suggested the possibility of eliminating county government.”

Among the debatable: plans to reduce the number of counties in Nebraska and the system of township boards in Indiana. While these may be good in the short run for saving taxpayer dollars, there is a concomitant danger of eliminating local levels of government that are closest to the people they are governing and of centralizing power in state capitals, where accountability is much lower.

Unlike the federal government, which can print its own money to cover its budget shortfalls with little regard for the perils of inflation, state and local governments are forced to adjust to economic reality. This is good news for the citizens of those states; although, as in Georgia, those who are net tax-eaters don’t see it that way. Government at every level has for years been bloated far beyond that which is necessary to secure our “unalienable rights” to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” As painful as the recession is, each day it continues Americans regain a little bit of the liberty lost to their state and local governments.

Talk to any person who converted to another religion as an adult, and you will likely find that a crisis precipitated his conversion. Let us not, then, let this crisis go to waste, but let us use it to convert Americans from statism to a love of liberty. Then, when the crisis is over, perhaps we will not once more foolishly tread the same broad path that leads to destruction.

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