Is the Least Government the Best Government?

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...