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States' Rights Redux for Conservatives

On February 9, 1861, a West Point graduate and former U.S. Army officer from Kentucky who went on to become a U.S. senator from Mississippi, Jefferson Davis, garnered every vote cast at a constitutional convention in Montgomery, Alabama, becoming the president of the Confederacy.

Davis' election, a provocative development that ultimately brought on the bloody Civil War, didn't happen spontaneously. A series of lesser events in southern state legislatures led up to it. One by one, lawmakers in the soon-to-be-breakaway states expressed outrage over what they perceived as an overreaching, liberal federal government in Washington. They feared an end to their way of life (read: slavery) and, for the most part, acted in concert with the popular will of their states' electorates.

This month, a century and a half later, conservative statehouse lawmakers are on a similar march, reflecting a dubious perception that state officials—not the federal government—ought to have the ultimate say in politically charged social and budget matters of national consequence. And, as it was long ago, race is the unspoken and largely denied point of contention.

The most out front in this debate today are Civil War revisionists, who argue that slavery had little to do with the War Between the

AMERICAN PROGRESS

Sam Fulwood III

States because the conflict was about allowing Southerners the right to determine their own affairs without meddling from unsympathetic and hostile liberals in the North. They and other modern-day states' rights activists are making the same argument today in state legislatures—and not just in the former Confederacy—not about

to repeal, restrict and repress,” he notes in his column.

And these states' rights champions believe they have a new mandate to do so. On the heels of their sweeping victories in last year's midterm elections, Republicans swelled their ranks by some 700 seats in statehouses across the country, a figure that Reuters News Service tallied as the “largest numbers since the Great Depression.” As this fresh crop of conservative lawmakers takes power, many of them express feel-

ers of their community's way of life. The fact of the matter is that such an argument is shortsighted and potentially suicidal politically, especially in Arizona, California, Florida, and Texas, where the Latino population is the single-largest ethnic group.

Meanwhile, conservative legislators in Kentucky, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oregon think it's a good idea to defy common sense and court edicts to propose bills that would require drug testing of all public assistance recipients. The 1996 Welfare Reform Act authorizes—but expressly didn't require—states to impose mandatory drug testing as a prerequisite to receiving state welfare assistance. But the one state that tried to test welfare recipients, Michigan, saw its effort struck down as unconstitutional in 2003.

Blow makes a compelling case that conservatives have their sights on rolling back recent gains by gay-rights activists, antideath-penalty advocates, abortion-rights defenders, and other socially progressive causes.

I'm only asking the obvious questions: Why fight old, lost causes? And haven't these conservative statehouse lawmakers learned anything about U.S. history over the past 150 years?

Sam Fulwood III is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress.

Sam Fulwood III draws the parallels between the reasoning of the Confederacy 150 years ago and the misguided righteousness of some conservatives today

slavery but rather new conservative causes.

As *The New York Times'* Charles Blow made clear in a recent op-ed, statehouse conservatives are declaring war on minorities, women, immigrants, and the poor by proposing harsh legislation targeted specifically at them. “In the first month of the new legislative season, they have introduced a dizzying number of measures on hot-button issues in statehouses around the country as part of what amounts to a full-throttle mission

ings of oppression by lawmakers on Capitol Hill and the Obama administration. They are taking out their frustrations on the powerless and underrepresented people of their respective states.

A key flash point is immigration, where some 15 states are debating copycat anti-immigrant bills, following in the spurious shoes of lawmakers in Arizona. Immigrants, it seems, are the political straw men for conservative legislators to beat their breasts and appear to be all-powerful defend-

Obama Budget: Valentine's Day Massacre

President Obama released his \$3.7 trillion budget proposal for fiscal 2012 on Valentine Day and it immediately became the object of a Valentine's Day Massacre by Republicans in the House and Senate who want deeper budget cuts.

Lost amid the GOP criticism was that President Obama proposed \$61 billion in cuts. His plan includes a 50 percent cut (\$2.5 billion) in the government's program to help low-income people pay their heating bills and slicing \$300 million in community development block grants. At a time Obama is highlighting the need for infrastructure spending and a clean environment, he is proposing eliminating almost \$1 billion from grants that go to states for water treatment plants and infrastructure programs.

Republican leaders say that Obama's budget was dead on arrival. GOP leaders have proposed returning federal spending to 20.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), the average of federal spending from 1970 to 2008.

“Limiting spending to a historical average of some kind has been a longstanding goal of very conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation,” noted a report by Paul N. Van de Water of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a non-partisan think tank in Washington, D.C. “The reality is, however, that policymakers will find it virtually impossible to maintain federal spending at its average level back

THE CURRY REPORT

George E. Curry



to 1970 without making draconian cuts in Social Security, Medicare, and an array of other vital federal activities.”

Trying to peg federal spending to an arbitrary figure from the past ignores the enormous changes in American society that ranges from increased federal responsibility in the post 9/11 environment to a flood of baby boomers reaching retirement age. There are three key reasons why trying to roll back federal spending to 1970 or even 2000 levels ignores today's reality, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report:

The aging of the population – the percentage of Americans aged 65 and older will grow by more than half during the next 25 years – and that growth will increase the cost of the three largest domestic programs: Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security.

Federal responsibilities have grown. Since 2000, for example, federal responsibilities have expanded in the aftermath of the September 11, 2002 terrorist attacks; aid to veterans has increased as a result of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars; the Medicare prescription drug benefit

added by Congress in 2003 along with health care reform will also expand federal spending, even though health care will eventually lower the deficit.

Spending on federal debt will be substantially higher than it has been the past 40 years. The combination of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the Bush-era tax cuts and their extensions and a severe recession have contributed to the public debt being almost twice as large (as a percentage of GDP) as it was in 2001.

The budget debate isn't just a matter of numbers. The budget also defines us as a country.

“There are limits to how much Social Security can be cut without undermining its crucial role in reducing poverty and replacing income lost when a wage earner retires, dies, or becomes disabled,” the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report states. “Social Security benefits are quite modest, averaging only \$1,175 a month (or \$14,105 a year) for a retired worker. Social Security checks now replace about 37 percent of an average worker's pre-retirement earnings—one of the lowest of any western industrialized country—and that figure will gradually fall to about 32 percent over the next two decades, largely because of the scheduled increase in the full retirement age to 67.”

Obama's pledge to freeze the pay of federal employees and any tampering with Social Security would have a disproportionate impact on people of color.

According to the latest “State of the Dream” report by United for a Fair Economy, 59.1 percent of Blacks and 64.8 percent of Latinos depend on Social Security for more than 80 percent of their family income. And, African-Americans are 70 percent more likely than Whites to work for the federal government.

In his budget, Obama proposed allowing the Bush tax cuts to expire in 2012, ending subsidies to oil and gas companies and eliminating tax breaks for companies that do business overseas. Unfortunately, Obama provided no details or specific proposals. GOP leaders who insisted on extending the Bush era tax breaks for the wealthy are unlikely to favor curbing corporate welfare.

It is clear that neither Obama nor Republicans will on their own volition protect the interests of the truly needy in the budget debate. That's why Americans need to mobilize to force them to make more sensible decisions. It's easy to admire how protesters in Egypt and Tunisia have rallied in recent weeks to force a change in their government.

It's time to raise our voices in the U.S. We have social media and technology at our disposal. Let's use it to now let our elected officials know we want them to protect average Americans, not big business and the wealthy.

George E. Curry is former editor-in-chief of Emerge magazine and the NNPA News Service.