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REAGAN'S PLAN TO RETURN MONEY AND POWER TO THE STATES

Eighty generally conservative organizations have formed an ad hoc coalition to support and push for passage of President Reagan's "block grant" program. This is the first time that business, religious, social-issue, and economic-conservative groups have united to support a single program.

Although other parts of the Reagan-Stockman program involve conservative changes in the federal government and tax structure, block grants are the only part of the program that would change the institutional framework of government. This change would mean bringing the decision-making authority over governmental programs closer to the people by giving partial authority to states and/or local governments.

If enacted by Congress, the block grant proposal would reverse a 50-year trend and help to fulfill Ronald Reagan's campaign pledge to get the federal government off the backs of the American people. As he said in his Inaugural Address: "We must remember that it was the states that formed the federal government, not the other way around."

The block grant proposal would shift authority over 87 programs to the states. This would bring about an immediate reduction in the federal bureaucracy and the federal paperwork it requires. Additional savings will come about because of closer scrutiny by state and local programs of the programs folded into the block grants.

The Reagan plan would cut federal funds involved in the block grants by 25 percent. It is probable that the taxpayers would get more for the lesser amount of money because of the savings in federal overhead, red tape, waste, fraud, and abuse.

One of the main advantages of the block grant program is that, by shifting the decision-making authority out of Washington to the states, it would unplug the pipeline into the federal treasury long enjoyed by the special-interest groups. This would require them to work in 50 state capitals instead of in Washington, D.C., alone.

One great advantage of the block grant program is that it would substantially reduce

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the power of special-interest groups to obtain tax funds to finance their left-wing agendas. At the federal level, the funding of left-wing programs gets hidden from sight because of the large amounts of money involved; at the state level, it will be more visible and it will be easier to assure that tax funds are spent on worthy causes.

Several weeks ago, 63 liberal groups announced that they are working together to defeat block grants. Most of them have their hands in the federal till and oppose block grants because they know that they will never be able to get their left-wing spending programs approved by 50 state legislatures as easily as they can get them passed by Congress. The extravagant rhetoric used in press releases by these 63 liberal federal-handout-hunting organizations includes dire warnings of "devastating consequences" and "brutal political struggle."

It is really a conflict of interest for most of these groups to lobby against block grants because they would be financial beneficiaries if block grants are defeated. On the other hand, the 80 generally conservative organizations which have formed a coalition to support President Reagan's economic program do not accept federal funds.

The shenanigans going on in the Congress in regard to the block grants are difficult and perhaps impossible for ordinary citizens, and even for most reporters in Washington, to understand. But despite apparent early parliamentary defeats of the block grant program, Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker has pledged to find "an appropriate vehicle to attach the remainder of the proposal."

"I regret that the reconciliation bill did not include the entire block grant and did not allow the Senate to vote it up or down," Baker said. "I am committed to finding another vehicle to attach the remainder of the program and have the issue fully debated by the Senate."

If President Reagan continues to show the kind of leadership that persuaded the Congress to pass his budget-cutting resolution, and if Majority Leader Baker does his job in the Senate, there is no reason why the block grant proposal cannot be passed. It is the most innovative and positive of all the Reagan proposals, and the one that has the most hope of fulfilling the mandate of Reagan's election victory last November.

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