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# OPINION

## Last gasp for limited government?

BY RICH LOWRY

Republicans fought an inspired battle against the stimulus bill, holding all but three of their 219 senators and congressmen. And they still lost.

Some of the almost \$500 billion in stimulus spending will enter the permanent "baseline" of the federal budget, the starting point for all future budgets that, in the immutable law of Washington, always grow and never shrink.

From Ronald Reagan to Newt Gingrich, Republicans intent on limiting government during the past 25 years have succeeded in a limited way: From 1983 to 2000, the size of the federal government relative to GDP declined from 23.5 percent to 18.4 percent. Federal spending didn't shrink, but it grew at a slower rate than the economy, providing more breathing room for the private sector.

It had bounced back to 20.9 percent last year, and could conceivably go as high as 28 percent this year. According to Newsweek (cover: "We Are All Socialists Now"), in 2010 total U.S. government spending will be 39.9 percent of GDP, only about 8 percent less than the average in the socialistic Eurozone

countries. Is American exceptionalism about to be bundled off on a long trip to the Continent, never to return?

That's the momentous question posed by Barack Obama's presidency. Those who favor socialism of the creeping variety are feasting on a collapse of Wall Street's reputation as complete as that of the early 1930s, when one critic said of disgraced banker Charles E. Mitchell: "If you steal \$25, you're a thief. If you steal \$250,000, you're an embezzler. If you steal \$2.5 million, you're a financier."

The lost moral authority of the financial sector — and the market generally — has accrued to government, now on the hook for \$9.7 trillion worth of interventions in the economy. Whether this program is perceived to work, whether President Obama further nationalizes health care and how much of our wealth is claimed by looming entitlements will determine the country's future, and its nature.

The backdrop to the debate over these questions is a roiling, up-for-grabs populism. The ascendant left-leaning populism feeds off anger at the new "malefactors of great wealth." But a right-leaning populism is building. It takes the same anger but lumps govern-

ment in with the malefactors, through its bailout of failed industries and its self-serving irresponsibility symbolized by silly pet projects in the stimulus bill and burgeoning deficits (which Republicans are newly outraged about).

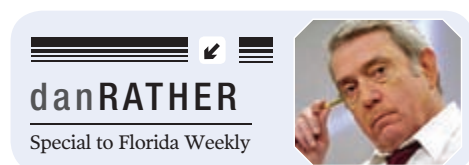
President Obama can't get on the wrong side of this populist sentiment. It is why he did his rapid about-face on the nomination of Tom Daschle (a liberal swell enjoying a privileged Washington lifestyle, while neglecting his tax bills), and won't yet ask for more spending as part of the latest financial bailout. President Obama's position gets more precarious if he ever imposes a broad-based tax increase to pay for an imminent deficit of nearly \$2 trillion, larger than the entire federal government a mere eight years ago.

If President Obama manages to cement an aggrandized government, his domestic political accomplishment will equal Ronald Reagan's — although, obviously, in reverse. The late sociologist Seymour Lipset wrote a brilliant book on why the U.S. didn't embrace socialism, called "It Didn't Happen Here." In a few years, its conclusion might look premature. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

## GUEST OPINION

### The births of the modern



Coincidences of the calendar don't have much real significance, but they do play a role in our national mythology. The most prominent of these, known to students of history, are the deaths within hours of one another of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams — the lead author and advocate, respectively, of the Declaration of Independence. The date they died? July 4, 1826 — the 50th anniversary of the declaration.

It was interesting to note, this week, a coincidence that had gone less noticed: the shared bicentenary birthday of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin. At first glance, these two men would seem to have little to do with one another. But what connects the American of humble birth and the son of a prosperous English doctor, the Great Emancipator and the groundbreaking scientist, is the world we live in today. Both these men played a profound role in shaping modernity, and the historical forces each set in motion reverberate still, 200 years after their births.

The Civil War over which Mr. Lincoln presided stands as such a stark dividing line that historians speak of antebellum America as a distinctly different place. Emancipation is the most obvious difference between what came before and after, but it is far from the only

one. Modern warfare, our national identity, our continent-spanning geographic unity and our conception of presidential powers — to name a few items on a long list -- all follow a trajectory traceable back to that divisive and decisive battle.

So complete was America's transformation under Mr. Lincoln that some speak of it in biblical terms, casting the Civil War as a redemptive scouring akin to Noah's flood, or the Crucifixion. This last notion was reinforced by another coincidence — that Mr. Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth on Good Friday, a fact seized upon by countless preachers across the land as they prepared their 1865 Easter sermons.

And then there is Mr. Darwin, a man popularly identified with religion primarily in opposition. As Mr. Lincoln unified the nation, in life and death, Mr. Darwin's work unified the life sciences upon a common foundation. Unlike Lincoln, who was unpopular in life but who has few detractors today, Mr. Darwin remains reviled by a segment of the population that sees an embrace of evolution as apostasy. Apostate or no, Mr. Darwin transformed our understanding of the world and its natural history. His descriptions of the mechanics of evolution continue to undergird biology and medical science.

If there is a lesson in the coincidence of the Lincoln and Darwin bicentennials, it may be that, in the words of William Faulkner, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past." In a nation not much giving to looking back, and in an

age when a minute often seems like a long time, 200 years can feel like an irrelevant eternity. Yet just a few weeks ago, an African-American president, who had declared his candidacy by invoking Lincoln,

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delivered an inaugural address in which he pledged to "restore science to its rightful place." He follows a president whose administration, in its defense, invoked Mr. Lincoln's wartime suspension of civil liberties.

The battle of evolution versus creationism, long settled in scientific circles, rages to this day in popular discourse. Our red-blue electoral divides echo the divisions of the Civil War. And in the debate over the future of Guantanamo Bay, Mr. Lincoln's legacy continues to stir controversy. We still live in the shadows of the world that two men born 200 years ago played a mighty role in bringing into being. ■