

In Charge, Except They're Not

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

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Is President Bush the leader of our government, or is he just a right-wing talk-show host?

The question comes to mind after Bush's news conference this week in which he sounded like someone who has no control over the government he is in charge of. His words were those of a pundit inveighing against the evils of bureaucrats.

"Obviously," said the critic in chief, "there are some times when government bureaucracies haven't responded the way we wanted them to, and like citizens, you know, I don't like that at all." Yes, and if you can't do something about it, who can?

Bush went on: "I mean, I think, for example, of the trailers sitting down in Arkansas. Like many citizens, they're wondering why they're down there, you know. How come we've got 11,000?"

Bush was talking about 10,777 mobile homes ordered up to provide housing for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. As Rep. Mike Ross put it in an interview, most of these "brand-new, fully furnished homes are sitting in a hay meadow in Hope, Arkansas," and are "a symbol of what's wrong with this administration and what's wrong with FEMA."

Ross, a Democrat whose district includes that hay meadow, has been running a one-man crusade since December to get the homes moved to where they could actually provide shelter for those left homeless by the storm. The Federal Emergency Management Agency let the homes sit there because its regulations don't permit the use of such structures in a flood plain.

That raises at least two questions: Why did FEMA spend anywhere from \$300 million to \$430 million -- the numbers are in dispute -- to buy homes that didn't meet its own regulations? Alternatively, why can't it alter its regulations at least temporarily to use the homes where they are desperately needed?

Nearly three months after Ross first complained about the homes sitting in the field -- and nearly six weeks after Fox News reported the story and CNN broadcast an extensive account -- Bush seemed perplexed. He insisted that he was asking Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff to get to the bottom of the deal.

"So I've asked Chertoff to find out," Bush said. "What are you going to do with them? I mean, the taxpayers aren't interested in 11,000 trailers just sitting there. Do something with them. And so I share that sense of frustration when a big government is unable to, you know -- sends wrong signals to taxpayers. But our people are good, hardworking people."

Hold on: The president of the United States runs the "big government" he's attacking. This is mysterious. If Bush's "good, hardworking people" aren't responsible for the problem, the villains of the piece must be alien creatures created by some strange beast called Big Government.

Ross reports that 300 of the homes were finally moved last month and that 5,000 are supposed to be moved soon to Katrina victims. That still leaves a lot of homes. FEMA has said they will be stored for future disasters.

This episode is important because it is representative of a corrosive style of politics. Bush and many of his fellow Republicans have done a good business over the years running against the ills of Big Government. They are so much in the habit of trashing government that even when they are in charge of things -- remember, Republicans have controlled the White House and both houses of Congress for all but 18 months since 2001 -- they pretend they are not.

And when their own government fails, they turn around and use their incompetence to argue that government can never work anyway, so you might as well keep electing conservatives to have less government. It's an ideological Catch-22. Even their failures prove they are right.

On the same day Bush was pushing off accountability for the mobile home fiasco, another politician was giving his voters some very bad news -- and taking responsibility for fixing the problem.

Gov. Jon Corzine of New Jersey announced that his state's fiscal situation was a mess, and he proposed a budget that simultaneously raised taxes, cut programs and walked away from some of his own campaign

promises. "New Jerseyans believe that telling the truth is always better than hiding from it, even when it hurts," said Corzine, a Democrat. "And boy, does this budget hurt."

I'll leave it to New Jersey's budget experts to parse the details of Corzine's fiscal plan. But it's definitely bracing when a politician skips all the rhetoric about big or small government and just tries to fix the thing.

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