



Disunited States: What's At Stake As Washington Fades And The States Take The Lead

John D. Donahue

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American government is in trouble. It seems to cost more, deliver less, and inspire deeper cynicism year by year. Some say the only solution is to shrink the public sector down to a competent core. Others call for restructuring, reinvention, and reform at the federal level. But the most popular prescription is to shift the public sector's center of gravity away from Washington and toward the separate states. Democrats and Republicans alike have celebrated devolution as a return to America's Federalist roots, a spur to efficiency, and a remedy for the rigidity, waste, and arrogance that alienate citizens from their government. They contend that the fifty state governments—small, flexible, “close to the people,” and disciplined by competition—will be more efficient and more responsive than the lumbering federal bureaucracy. But will devolution deliver? In *Disunited States*, John D. Donahue contends that despite its broad appeal, letting Washington fade and the states take the lead is a dubious strategy for reform. It reflects a misreading of America's history, a warped view of its bedrock values, and a false analogy to the virtues of competition and decentralization in the private sector. At worst, he argues, America's willing disintegration within an integrating world economy will be recorded among history's monumental follies. At best, devolution will prove to be a detour on America's path to renewal. Donahue shows that shifting power toward the states will do much less than advocates promise to boost efficiency and accelerate innovation—and much more than they admit to undercut national interests and corrode America's sense of commonwealth. Addressing controversial topics as diverse as welfare reform, school funding, legalized gambling, and interstate bidding for business investment, he weaves a coherent case that isolated action by competitive state governments, not excessive centralization, poses the graver threat to Americans' most cherished goals. The ascendancy of the states cannot relieve us of the need to confront our problems—growing inequality, eroding trust in government, and an imperiled middleclass culture—as a nation. Indeed, the proponents of shifting power to the states fail to account for the fact that America retains national interests and national values that will get short shrift in an unregulated environment where states accelerate their competition to attract business investment and capital while simultaneously competing to reduce the costs of social welfare programs. The genius of the founders was to forge a single vital nation out of the several separate states, and *Disunited States* reveals that the road to national division—the road not taken by Madison, Hamilton, Jefferson, or Washington—may turn out to lead us not toward restored greatness, but away from it.

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