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Rethinking Government

Drew Westen | September 30, 2009

In his September speech on healthcare to a joint session of Congress, President Obama invoked the spirit of Ted Kennedy to make some modest steps toward almost, sorta, kinda saying that maybe we ought to rethink the role of government. Unfortunately, since taking office Obama has largely reinforced the conservative "brand" made so popular by Ronald Reagan. In explicitly discussing the role of government in a recent *Meet the Press* appearance, Obama offered a juxtaposition that would have made Reagan proud: "How do we balance freedom with our need to look after one another?" In fact, perhaps the biggest difference between progressives and conservatives is that one believes that government inherently infringes on freedom and the other believes that government creates the conditions for it.

If there was a silver lining to the state of the union Obama inherited from his predecessor, it was that George W. Bush and the Republicans had so thoroughly discredited the ideology of unregulated greed and hands-off government in matters of financial security that at no time since 1933 was the public more ready for a new narrative about what government should and shouldn't do. Americans were so frightened and angry about what was happening to their 401(k)s, their housing values (if they still had a home), their health insurance (if they still had or could afford it), their inability to know which of their kids' Chinese toys was filled with lead, and the fine print in their credit card bills that they were ready for a progressive alternative to the mantra "Government is the problem, not the solution."

There is probably still time to begin offering that narrative. But the president needs to recognize that the pragmatic problem-solving that Americans so desperately want from their government presupposes a coherent narrative about the role of government. And he needs to recognize that the direction that problem-solving takes us (e.g., either toward healthcare reform that cuts into the profits of pharmaceutical and insurance companies and offers some variant of Medicare as at least one choice to people under 65, or toward reform that taxes and ultimately eliminates the better plans offered to working Americans by their employers) depends on which narrative you offer.

It isn't hard to construct one (FDR wrote a pretty good rough draft), but the president needs to tell it--and tell it over and over, until it can compete with the well-branded conservative narrative. A progressive narrative that could move the political center the way Roosevelt did isn't that difficult to tell: we've been told for years that we face a choice between the free market (capitalism) and tyrannical government (socialism), when that's not our choice at all. The choice is between unregulated greed, which leaves none of us free, and responsible, effective leadership that protects our freedom. We just saw what happens when we embrace the ideology of unregulated greed--the idea that if we just trust our financial futures to big businesses pursuing *their* interests, we'll all end up better off. If you want to lose your financial

security, your job, your house and your healthcare, it's a great ideology. We just relearned the lesson of our grandparents, who lived through a time when Republicans preached the same philosophy in the run-up to the Great Depression.

The alternative to government for the sake of big business isn't government for the sake of big government. It's government for the average person, who actually creates prosperity by working for a living. No one doubts that we need government to protect our national security. But what we just learned so painfully is that we also need government to protect our financial security--just the way we need government to protect the quality of our air, our drinking water and our bridges and levees. And it's no different for energy, education or healthcare.

Sometimes the best role of government is to partner with business (e.g., to invest in wind and solar energy, so we're not at the mercy of governments that are hostile to us). Sometimes it's to regulate it (e.g., to prevent Wall Street sharks from using our money to speculate away our security--and then expecting us to bail them out and pay them bonuses for their bad judgment). Sometimes it's to compete with big business to make sure the "free market" is really free and competitive and that it extends opportunity and prosperity to all (e.g., in higher education, where our public universities are not only some of the best in the nation but the most affordable, and in healthcare, where the best way to keep insurance companies honest is to make them compete with a plan or two that they don't get to control). Sometimes it's all of the above, and sometimes it's none of the above.

There isn't a piece of progressive legislation the president can pass without making unnecessary concessions to a weak but determined opposition, and without creating tensions within his own party and unnecessarily losing seats in 2010--*unless* he enunciates an alternative vision of government. Our founders believed we could govern ourselves effectively, and that doing so was the precondition of freedom. Let's prove them right.

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