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Tough Choices? What Tough Choices?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

It is not a good sign when even the words politicians use to dodge issues are not merely cloudy, but deceptive. Both the President and those who have been responding to his State of the Union address have adopted the language of "tough choices" facing the nation.

These impending "tough choices" will only become more prominent as the news sinks in that the federal deficit is now projected to be even higher next year than previously thought. The Congressional Budget Office, yesterday, announced that with the lame duck session of Congress's agreement to extend all the Bush tax cuts, the federal deficit this year is projected to be a whopping \$1.5 trillion. That's a big chunk of change.

But, is the deficit cause for such tough talk about tough choices? Back in 1992, the entire rationale for Ross Perot's candidacy was the exploding federal deficit. His solution was to look under the hood of the federal government and fix it. Thankfully, it was not Perot, but Al Gore who looked under the hood and by means of his Reinventing Government program, reduced government operating costs enormously while achieving major efficiencies as well. Bill Clinton also passed a responsible tax policy in 1993. More importantly, in terms of the deficit, the creation of wealth generated by the explosion of the Internet and its related businesses, produced such explosive economic growth that the government was running a surplus by the end of the decade.

That surplus was used to justify both the Bush tax cuts and the Prescription Drug Benefit which, unlike Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, had no distinct funding source. Then, along came two wars, one unnecessary, and then the economic meltdown brought to you by the smart people on Wall Street who invented derivatives and the like. Now, we are in a fiscal mess, in ten short years, the likes of which we have never seen.

But, I fail to see how this mess, and a mess it is, really presents the nation with "tough choices." As the economic recovery takes hold, revenues will increase from their historic lows of the past two years during the recession. That, more than anything, will help refill the government coffers. The war in Iraq is winding down, removing an enormous expense from the federal ledger. The president's proposal to freeze domestic discretionary spending will save \$40 billion per year and, if he were to extend that freeze to the Pentagon budget, yet more savings could result. It remains a mystery to me why we still need so many Air Force bases in Europe. Not only is Russia no longer the existential threat those bases were designed to confront, but with long range aircraft and drones and the like, I do not see why Ramstein's facilities cannot be relocated to, say, Ohio.

Yes, the entitlement programs, which are a hallmark of decency in an often indecent society, are costly. Efforts to restrain the rising costs of Medicare are especially needed, but also especially available: No other country spends so much on health care as we do, and surely there are ways to bring those expenses into line with reality. It is also the case that the entitlement programs are facing demographic hurdles: As the Baby Boomers age, they will be a great drain on those programs, but after the Baby Boomers, those programs should return to normal. That is, the idea that we must rip apart the New Deal because of a demographic blip is absurd.

Finally, how "tough" are the choices needed to meet those entitlement expenses? Is it really a tough call as to whether we should create an additional and higher tax bracket for billionaires, or raise the retirement age for people who have worked in mines or in restaurants or on construction projects all their lives? That is not a tough call. Is it really a tough choice as to whether we should continue to reward those medical specialists who may do important work but whose specialties are less important to the general welfare the government is constitutionally charged with defending than the important work of primary care physicians whose remuneration is far less? Is it really such a tough call to decide whether we should continue plowing billions of billions of dollars into weapons systems to confront some future emergency while we ignore the fiscal emergency of the moment? China may some day prove itself a military rival, but it is clearly now an economic one, and the former prospect is robbing us of the ability to engage the latter.

The reason, the only reason, these choices are "tough" is because the Republicans - and a large swath of the American electorate, including some of our good Catholic folk - continue to worship at the altar of false gods of the market. It has been almost one hundred year since Msgr. John A. Ryan denounced what he called the "superstition" that everyone is entitled to a six percent return on investment. Ryan also called for what became known as the New Deal, as did the U.S. bishops, in 1919, when they used Ryan's writings as the basis of their proposal for social and economic reconstruction after the First World War. Now, it is time for Catholics to once again help shape the nation's social and political life.

If, in the next few months, as these budget battles commence and the political narrative takes shape, if your pastor or your bishop do not take to their pulpits to speak on behalf of social justice, and especially on behalf of the poor, speak to them, write to them, call them, and ask why? As recently as his newly released statement for World Mission Sunday, the Holy Father explicitly linked social justice to the Church's evangelization. Conservatives are never reluctant to contact priests and bishops on matters of concern to them? When will those who care about social justice do the same?

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