

In Congressional budget debate, ideology returns

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 7, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The budget proposals put forward by GOP Congressman Paul Ryan attest to a fact that has been somewhat obscured in our nation's political life: Ideology is back.

The reason I say this fact has been obscured is that the Tea Party has not exactly been the kind of intellectually coherent movement the word ideology suggests. The ideology of the Tea Party has been "No." It is now clear that the people standing behind the Tea Party do possess a coherent ideological stance and that stance has a name: Social Darwinism.

The Republican Party is committed to the kind of laissez-faire capitalism that has brought as much ruin to America in the past as it has brought material benefit. The endless cycle of boom-and-bust that characterized the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century led to a series of progressive reforms, such as creating the Federal Reserve, to stabilize the economy. Those reforms were insufficient to protect America from the renewed laissez-faire exploits of the 1920s, which ended in the Great Depression and which led to the enactment of the social safety net we know as the New Deal.

The explosion of modern health care greatly improved the lives of ordinary Americans in the post-war years, but that health care was out of the reach of many older and poorer Americans who lacked the financial resources to procure it, which led to the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid.

You would think we would have learned by now that when you put the lazy back into laissez-faire capitalism, the system is unable to achieve certain important social goods, such as caring for the infirm, extending the availability of a college education, and guaranteeing a minimum income for seniors.

But today's Republicans and their Tea Party supporters have not learned anything from history. They are, like their forebears the robber barons and the Hooverites, too busy worshipping at the altar of the free market, indulging their superstitious belief that the "invisible hand" can create not only material wealth but a better society.

We Catholics know better. We can recognize that the free market, freed from philosophic examination and ethical concerns, does not promote a just society worthy of the dignity of its members. We know -- how can one not -- that there are needs the market cannot make, and individuals whose dignity cannot be measured by their ability to prosper in the free market.

We discern a variety of slavery in this worship of profit and can attest that often, too often, the creation of material wealth in such a system is precisely coincident with the creation of spiritual poverty. And, perhaps most importantly, we recognize that mutual selfishness is not the same thing as defining and seeking the common good.

Unfortunately, the president, confined by the need to ratchet down the ideological warfare and get a continuing resolution through Congress, has not as yet put forward a different ideological position. He must do so soon and

he has no better candidate for creating a narrative to explain his many policy initiatives than this distinctly Catholic idea of the common good.

Take the proposed changes in Medicare. Ryan wants to turn Medicare into a voucher program that will help seniors buy private insurance policies. But, of course, the reason Medicare has grown so expensive for the government is that seniors need a lot of health care.

It is difficult to imagine a business plan for an insurance company that will find profit in providing insurance to people who need so much health care. Does Ryan really believe the vouchers will keep pace with those costs? What happens if they don't? Will seniors have to devote more and more of their income to health care? Is that the best solution for a wealthy society such as ours?

The president's response should be simple: We have a moral obligation to care for each other and Medicare is an expression of that obligation. The fulfillment of that obligation also means that people do not have to spend their younger years worrying about saving for their health care costs when they get older.

Remove that worry, and you have improved the daily lives, to say nothing of the purchasing power, of all Americans. We are our brothers' keepers and fulfilling that noble role helps the entire society and helps the entire economy. That instinct to care for each other is also a part of the American national character.

The Democrats have had trouble articulating their ideology in the past several decades. They continue to present the image of a party that is little more than a congeries of interests: Don't touch NPR funding, I like NPR. Better not go after the environment, I like to hike.

Yesterday, former President Bill Clinton waded into the political waters to defend funding for Planned Parenthood and while his past behavior suggest why he may have a soft-spot for birth control, why did he not wade back into the political waters on behalf of programs that help the poor?

Where is the narrative? We know President Obama is capable of providing one. He did so in 2004 when he gave the keynote address to the Democratic National Convention, the speech that launched him onto the national stage.

Then he said:

For alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga, a belief that we're all connected as one people.

If there is a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there is a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for their prescription drugs, and having to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandparent. If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.

It is that fundamental belief -- It is that fundamental belief: I am my brother's keeper. I am my sister's keeper that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as one American family.

Those words launched Obama's career. That sentiment can sustain him in his current political battle, but he must join the battle of ideas before the GOP's superstitions take on the appearance of facts.

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