

A new direction for America?

Pat Perriello | Sep. 21, 2012 NCR Today

I want to talk a little more about how government is involved in our lives and whether we really want more or less government. I started this conversation in my recent blog "[Government in Our Lives.](#)" [1] It seems all the more important to address this topic after Gov. Mitt Romney's comments about the 47 percent of Americans who are dependent on government. It was [a column by Michael Grunwald](#) [2] in *Time* magazine that served as a jumping-off point for my thoughts on this topic. Relative to Mitt Romney, I believe Michael Grunwald's major point was that it is not only the 47 percent who receive benefits from government.

As I said previously, attacks on government spending invariably attack programs for the poor and needy. I believe Grunwald demonstrated that this constitutes only a small percentage of where government spending actually goes. Our government is currently structured so that all along the economic spectrum, subsidies, tax breaks and other programs are available. The major difference is the poor have no advocates. They are an easy target because they have no one to speak for them. Neither candidate in the campaign is addressing the plight of the poor, even though there has been a significant increase in the number of Americans in poverty. What will be the result if a Romney administration enacts additional spending cuts on the poor?

It is a legitimate question to ask whether economic conditions necessitate our cutting back on government spending. Can we no longer afford some of the generous entitlement programs we have enacted? What kind of adjustments need to be made in these programs in order to ensure their continued longevity? At the same time, one has to wonder about the effectiveness of austerity programs in Europe. Although conservatives have drowned out the call for additional stimulus, this is still an area that must be considered. It is interesting that the Federal Reserve has found it prudent to initiate additional stimulus as a way of reviving a stagnant economy. It still seems to be the case that short-term stimulus followed by long-term deficit reduction is required.

Over the long term, where cuts actually occur needs to be a broad-based discussion apart from the inflamed rhetoric of the campaign. I believe a balanced approach involving spending cuts and revenue increases will be necessary. This is especially true because those who espouse tax cuts have put us in a situation where we don't have enough revenue to meet our obligations. There can be no question that our economy was strong and growing during periods of higher taxes; for example, during the '90s.

What prevents our reaching a resolution of these issues is a conflicted stance toward government. On the one hand, we believe in small government and self-reliance, yet our expectation of government to come to our aid when necessary is equally strong. In the earliest days of our experiment in democracy, we find the people clamoring for better roads and bridges. It was just after Daniel Boone headed out to Kentucky that early settlers began to request major projects to improve their ability to travel to and from their new wilderness homes.

It was a conservative favorite, Thomas Jefferson, who made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 even though he was unsure about the constitutionality of such a purchase. Americans believed in the words of the preamble to the Constitution that it was the role of government to form a more perfect union. That goal, more than a rigid adherence to a strict interpretation of the Constitution, propelled the exploits of the young nation.

Some government efforts have, of course, been helpful, and some have not. Government has not always gotten it right, but neither is the answer to allow the free-market economy to operate unchecked. Clearly, that approach has also not worked perfectly. That is why we need to have a serious conversation about where we go from here.

I continue to believe that once the election is over, people of goodwill can come together and find a constructive resolution to the continuing impasse. They need to explore our existing and future resources and obligations and develop a blueprint for moving forward that is true to American values and involves all of our citizens working toward the common good. That blueprint needs to include shared sacrifice and a determination to protect the most vulnerable in our society from the worst excesses of capitalism.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/32213>

[2] <http://swampland.time.com/2012/09/18/were-a-nation-of-makers-and-takers-including-romney-and-me/>